Student group holds discussion on living wage for staff

Swarthmore Staff Wage Study Group seeks to encourage wages for staff that would allow self-sufficiency

BY GABRIEL HETLAND

About a dozen students from the Swarthmore Staff Wage Study Group (SSWSSG), along with several staff and faculty members, met in a Parrish classroom with members of the College Budget Committee (CBC) in mid-December to discuss the issue of a living wage for Swarthmore’s staff.

While the Stockholmvocracy was occupying center stage, student activists and staff members were concerned about another battle, which also touched on the issue of who gets to participate in making decisions affecting the college.

Currently, the college sets staff wages by looking at national and regional labor market statistics. The hourly wage of a Sharples card checker or a dorm housekeeper is calculated based on what is employers pay to workers in similar positions in the area and around the country. The college justified the wages here by pointing to similar rates elsewhere.

The lower-wage job categories in Swarthmore’s fiscal year 2002 pay scale have hiring minimums ranging from $5.38 to $6.21 per hour; many Sharples workers, even those who have worked at the college for a number of years, earn between $7 and $8 per hour.

At the December meeting, students and staff from SSWSSG told the CBC that such wages are not enough to live on. Members of the group talked for over two hours with Associate Vice President and Director of Human Resources Melanie Young, Dean of Finance and CBC Chair Paul Ashton and others from the CBC about creating a “living wage” for Swarthmore’s staff.

Members of SSWSSG say that current wages are simply not adequate to maintain a decent for a family, given that staff members must pay for food, housing, transportation, taxes, and health and child care.

Following criteria put forward by Women’s Association for Women’s Alternatives (WAWA), an organization based in the borough of Swarthmore, group member Sam Klaiber ’00 defined a living wage as one that “allows a person to be self-sufficient, to meet all her needs without government support.”

The particular wage that allows for self-sufficiency is variable, noted Blair, and depends on the size of the family as well as the regional and local costs of living. As such, it is difficult to pinpoint a specific dollar amount that would give all workers self-sufficiency, but estimates of such a wage range from $8 to $10 per hour. Blair cited WAWA’s 1996 Self-Sufficiency Study, which found that a single parent would need to make about $13 per hour to achieve self-sufficiency.

Defenders of Swarthmore’s policies have asked what the college can reasonably be expected to pay given the current level of market wages, even if the wages it offers are not sufficient to live on.

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Swarthmore has taken the lead among small liberal arts colleges in creating and maintaining a diverse campus, it should set examples in other areas, they said, rather than failing behind the argument that the market demands wages that are insufficient for living.

Besides the immediate goal of increased wages, the meeting raised more long-term issues about participation in decision-making structures and creating a more democratic workplace.

Blair noted that this coming month will be very busy, as the CBC must complete its budget before the February meeting of the Board of Managers.

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Students campaign for staff living wage

BY GABRIEL HETLAND

After conducting 60 to 80 interviews with staff members during September and October, members of Swarthmore Living Wage Campaign (SLWC) say that college staff believe the college is not paying them enough and that a living wage is needed.

Talking with staff members in one-on-one meetings, SLWC members found much of the staff is concerned about salaries, representation and respect. According to the group, staff said they feel that their wages are too low to live on, reflect a lower priority and lack of respect given them compared with students and faculty. Student financial aid and faculty salaries are at model levels, noted SLWC, while staff wages are still calculated based on a pure market system, and do not always meet target increases.

SLWC members late Winter ’05 and Mariah Montgomery ’04 said staff feel as though students, faculty and especially the administration often fail to treat them with dignity when discussing the college’s estimates and policies, despite the role they have in keeping the campus running.

Weissler said Swarthmore has what he characterized as a “moral imperative” to give their staff the respect he feels they deserve and which the college, he said, has the capability of providing. Following the interviews, SLWC began discussions with members of the Human Resources department and the College Budget Committee. Students and staff also began holding regular meetings to work on the campaign, which will include staff members sometimes attended.

Weissler, Montgomery and other members of SLWC stressed that the campaign has been a joint effort between staff and students from the start. The students involved see it as their role to bring staff grievances to light, then finding our ways in which they can be helpful in sparking change.

As a part of this effort, an educational teach-in will be held Feb. 6, at 4 p.m. in the Hicks Mural Room. The event is primarily aimed at students, though group members said all are welcome to attend. SLWC has also composed a petition to President Al Bloom that outlines the group’s reasons for seeking a living wage. In the coming weeks, students and staff from SLWC will also be meeting with Bloom and the senior staff, as well as with Student Council.