

# Staff wage issue not going away

The greatest part of human free will, so say the philosophers, is the capacity to choose the cause and direction toward which we are living. Ideally, we choose the objects and ends of our lives, according to what we think our mission is in the world.

This choice isn't really even a choice but a moral obligation, because the decision — explicit or implicit — not to choose is also a declaration of intents and purposes. This is true of individuals and is perhaps the greatest challenge facing mortal life: to pursue our ends while still allowing for chance and indecision, humor and affection, humility and resolve.

What is true of individuals must also be true of institutions. Swarthmore College is hardly devoid of grand enunciations about its meaning and purpose, from the "Meaning of Swarthmore" promotional video to President Bloom's favorite phrase, "ethical intelligence." It is the latter that I think merits consideration, with the potential to be the realized spirit of Swarthmore. I can see the cynics sniggering at this, and I would count myself among them to a point, but Swarthmore should definitely have an aim, and I feel this is as good as any.

What I think is often missed between alumni donations and building new science centers is that "ethical intelligence" is actually a very hard concept to realize. Without the hard work that is inherent in that realization, the phrase is just a trite emptiness to put on admissions brochures and bandy about at commencement in a self-congratulatory manner.

What the concept should involve, paraphrasing Al Bloom's commencement speech of two years back, is to think critically about and always be aware of the complexities inherent in a decision but to retain the will to act ethically and come to the right decision even despite the fog of intricacies and inconsistencies. It implies inclusiveness, acceptance of difference, humility and a communal commitment to a greater objective good, which is to be reached by working together. This ethical decisiveness has been markedly lacking on this campus of late, and here I am referring to Swarthmore's failing drive toward securing a living wage for all college staff. I know this issue is a complex one, and I am not going to be simply moralistic about it, but I do believe that it is at the very heart of our community and should be treated with the respect and care that it deserves.

This is where the "ethical intelligence" ideal comes in. This is a decision that reflects on the moral character of this institution and thus should not be decided merely based on the direction of market forces, the sensibilities of influential alumni, speculations on what would happen to the college rankings, or what Swarthmore's peer institutions are doing. Instead, it should be a decision that, although taking into account practical complexities and other issues, should be based on the values and reflections of concerned members of the community. While it is granted that the 2,000-plus members of the Swarthmore community cannot be actively in on the decision, it should not be a closed-shop administration deal, without any real discussion or engagement of the issues beforehand or even afterwards. If Swarthmore decides this issue without meaningful broad-based consultation with faculty, students and especially different groups within the staff, something vital would be lost from this institution.

If the administration continues to act independently and single-mindedly on the issue of granting a living wage, it must be recognized that "ethical intelligence" can no longer be used in a description this college. Otherwise, there would be a hypocritical disconnect between what students are expected to learn and what the alma mater teaches through its actions. If "ethical intelligence" is to radiate from Swarthmore and be inculcated to every student that enters this august institution, there needs to be a greater commitment made for inclusion and a general community solidarity toward finding the right answer together.

Come June, I'd like to leave this place feeling like Swarthmore is somehow different, somehow special. It's true we learn a lot here, but I hope we can feel that this place makes us into better people. If that aspiration is to become a reality for all students who pass by these hallowed halls, Swarthmore must put its money where its mouth is and address issues central to the community in an inclusive and ethical manner, no matter the repercussions.



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## In Search of Values

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