“My job description is not respected. We clean up feces. And we clean up vomit. And that was really not in my job description.”
(staff member, Environmental Services)

“They’ll negotiate anything — child care or whatever — just to not give you that money...just because it’s a wonderful place to work doesn’t change how much you get paid.”
(staff member, Dining Services)

if Swarthmore is one of the richest colleges in the country, then why does it pay poverty wages?

An introduction to the struggle for real justice at Swarthmore College

published by the Swarthmore Living Wage & Democracy Campaign
fall 2004
"The meaning of Swarthmore is about adhering to immutable core values – educational excellence, intellectual seriousness, the intrinsic worth of every person, ethical consciousness, and social commitment."

(from The Meaning of Swarthmore: A Campaign for Swarthmore’s Future)

Introduction

In February of 2001, the Swarthmore Living Wage and Democracy Campaign (SLW&DC) presented a report to President Al Bloom and his senior staff, calling for increased wages and democratic involvement in decision-making for low-wage Swarthmore staff members. Since then, important victories have been won, but the truth is that many College employees still cannot meet their basic needs solely on the lowest of Swarthmore’s full-time wages.

This package of information is meant to introduce first-year students to the voices of staff, students, faculty, and alumni who have worked towards the implementation of a living wage at Swarthmore. Furthermore, it contains the essential information, from official College sources as well as from the SLW&DC’s work over the past four years, to bring you up to speed on the debate. We make no attempt at an ‘unbiased,’ ‘neutral,’ or ‘dispassionate’ report, but rather share with you the words of those who have been the most involved in and affected by this campaign for economic and racial justice; let their words and the facts serve as testimony to the unfairness of the current, inadequate and very real, compensation plan at Swarthmore College.

In compiling this package, we would like to note that we have intentionally left out the names of those quoted, save for members of the College administration. This is an intentional gesture, meant to recognize that we do not all speak from the same places of institutional power, and that there are varying consequences for speaking one’s truth, depending on one’s position in the College community. In this way, we hope to hold President Bloom and senior staff accountable to their words, while protecting the security of positions for those staff, students, and faculty who have chosen to speak out.
What is a living wage?

In brief, a living wage is a wage that allows wage earners to fully support themselves and their families on what they earn at one full-time job, without government assistance. At minimum, a living wage covers basic needs, such as housing, food, childcare, health care, and transportation.

While living wage campaigns are occurring in cities, municipalities, and campuses nationwide, specific living wage levels are a local matter, as they are based upon the costs of living in a particular area.

While many living wages are targeted at strict self-sufficiency levels, the SLW&DC has, in more recent semesters, advocated for a meaningful living wage that accounts not simply for the bare minimum needed to live, but also for the ability to save money, plan for future expenses, and pay for unexpected or planned necessities. That is, a true living wage should be a wage that allows for more than mere subsistence; it should, for instance, allow for savings toward education and the purchase of durable goods such as vehicles and washing machines, for the costs of medical emergencies, and for life responsibilities such as taking care of aging relatives.

"Spanish has no word for living wage but rather the expression salario digno or dignified salary, a Spanish word [that] has been undervalued for a long time. Raising the minimum wage is a matter of justice."

(faculty member, Spanish Department)
Low-wage Work in the USA

Did you know that...

The federal minimum wage of $5.15/hour, after adjusting for inflation, is 31% below its peak in 1968.
(Robert Pollin & Stephanie Luce, UMass Amherst, The Living Wage, Building a Fair Economy)

60% of American workers make less than $14/hour
(Economic Policy Institute, Washington DC)

67% of those requesting emergency food aid in 2000 were adults with jobs.

94% of Americans agree that “people who work full-time should be able to earn enough to keep their families out of poverty.”

19.5% of men earn poverty level hourly wages, while 31.1% of women do.
(Economic Policy Institute, 2000)

Average National incomes in 2000
(for those with any income)*:

White male: $29,696    White female: $16,216
Hispanic male: $19,829   Hispanic female: $12,249
Black male: $21,659    Asian/Pacific male: $30,445
Black female: $16,084   Asian/Pacific female: $17,313

(From US 2000 Census data)

*Racial categories reflect those of the US Census, not the author’s

“I used my Swarthmore education to make a career as an ancient historian, and I cannot help noticing, in the current century, the parallels to the last centuries of the Roman Empire, when civilization itself crumbled because the difference between rich and poor had become so great that for the vast majority of people, even within the empire, the rule of a civilized elite was no better than the rule of barbarians...

“You probably cannot do much against this trend, but you can at least see to it that Swarthmore is helping with the solution, not being part of the problem. A Swarthmore education will still be an excellent one even if budgetary restrictions require a certain amount of austerity; but if budgetary restraints convince Swarthmore to continue paying its employees less than what they need for essentials... the education in social awareness will be a hollow and hypocritical one, and Swarthmore will have done its share — perhaps not as small as we may think — to help bring down the civilization that it does so much to cultivate and to enrich.”

(alumnus, class of 1967)
“Work worth doing at all should be paid at an economically supporting level...A trained and efficient individual working at a job that really needs to be done should be paid at a level which supports life with dignity for the family. If one thinks that the job is not worth supporting at this level, one should consider the consequences of the job not being done at all. Remember, "The laborer is worthy of his/her hire."

(alumna, class of 1950; also a former staff member, Biology Department)

What is a living wage in Delaware County?

The following table was created by the Ad Hoc Committee in determining its living wage recommendations. Note that it is illegal to pay wages based on family size, however, the Committee found it important (and the SLW&DC agrees!) to look at the needs of a range of family sizes in determining what a living wage should be that would meet the needs of most employees.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Monthly Costs</th>
<th>Adult</th>
<th>Adult + 1 child</th>
<th>Adult + 2 children</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Housing</td>
<td>545</td>
<td>766</td>
<td>766</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Child Care*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Food</td>
<td>177</td>
<td>268</td>
<td>356</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Transportation</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>293</td>
<td>293</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Health Care*</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Co-pays &amp; Prescriptions</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>20</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taxes</td>
<td>360</td>
<td>460</td>
<td>494</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Durable Goods</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>203</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other/Miscellaneous</td>
<td>236</td>
<td>307</td>
<td>332</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Self-Sufficiency Wage:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Monthly</td>
<td>1,784</td>
<td>2,311</td>
<td>2,517</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hourly</td>
<td>10.29</td>
<td>13.33</td>
<td>14.52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hourly, adjusted for inflation (2003)</td>
<td><strong>$10.72</strong> (majority recommendation)</td>
<td><strong>$13.89</strong> (minority recommendation)</td>
<td><strong>$15.14</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The zeros in these columns do not reflect a lack of cost for these items, but rather that the Committee's recommendation includes these as benefits, and thus they are not calculated in determining a wage.

The College's current minimum wage is $9/hour (it was raised from $6.66 in 2002, largely due to campus pressure).
“In 1965 and 1966, I worked five hours a week running the dishwashing machine in Swarthmore’s kitchen. I remember that Curtis, a full-time co-worker, was only getting the minimum wage at that time - $1.25 per hour or $50 before taxes for a 40-hour week. I’m sure that Nick who was older, had longevity on the job, and as a cook, made more money, but I doubt if it was that much more. Nick told me, on one of his breaks, that he had worked two full-time jobs for the previous 12 years, in order that his children could go to college. Is this the price that a thoughtful, dignified African-American man had to pay back then to send his children to college - surely a parental effort that Swarthmore College holds in esteem? Has anything substantially changed for the workers at Swarthmore in 37 years?

“Leaving aside for a minute the question of the workers’ lives, let’s look at the effect on students’ education. If [the College] is run on the principle of exploitation of workers, this will be in conflict with the stated values of… Swarthmore, which has, at least nominally, placed a higher value on social justice than most colleges and universities. The effect will be that the institution will be in denial about that which is very close to the students’ lives, i.e., what are the working and living conditions of the people who make the institution run. This creates a loss of a sense of social reality close to home, which taints and distorts students’ every effort to understand reality in social sciences and literature.”

(alumnus, class of 1968)

_Swarthmore says:_

"Swarthmore seeks to help students realize their fullest intellectual potential combined with a deep sense of ethical and social concern."

(Swarthmore College Bulletin)

_SLW&DC says:_

“The implementation of a living wage is within the mission of the College… There is no benefit, no point to social and ethical concern without action that results from it.

To ignore the plight of our low-wage community members would be to create a disconnect between philosophy and practice. The charge to students to develop ethical intelligence strikes what we all know in our heart of hearts to be true: people earning $11 an hour or less can’t afford a car, a home of their own, medical co-pays, education and dental care. Without a living wage our mental energy would be wrongly spent on keeping ourselves convinced we should keep – even the relatively small cost of a living wage – in the College coffers.”

(staff member, Administrative Assistant)
Swarthmore says:

“The endowment is not currently in a position to provide funds for new things.”

(Sue Welsh, College Treasurer and VP of Finances)

“We can raise some amount, but it won’t be millions ... it won’t be easy and it won’t be quick ... I believe we shouldn’t look to fund raising...”

(Dan West, VP of Development)

SLW&DC says:

"Of course Swarthmore can afford to pay living compensation. The real question is not "Can we afford it?" but "How important is it?" Need-blind admissions and full-need financial aid are far more expensive than living compensation. We don't ask of these policies whether we can afford them; we ask, "How will we pay for them?"

(faculty member, Psychology Department)

How Will Swarthmore Pay for a Living Wage?

That’s a really good question! Probably the biggest opposition to the campaign comes from people who fear that their interests (be it faculty salaries, student financial aid, athletics or parties) will be jeopardized by any increase to the staff salary pool. There’s a general assumption that the money for staff salaries will have to be wrestled out of an already-tight budget.

Here’s the bottom line: what we’re asking the school to do is to radically reevaluate the way they treat and compensate staff. This would mean deciding that staff are a high enough priority that they have to come up with the money. Historically, when the administration decides something is important (large-scale events, financial aid packages or new buildings) they find the money to make it happen; they either find the money outside of the existing operating budget (i.e. through raising funds, spending a larger portion of the endowment, etc.) or they work carefully to make small reductions across the board, so that the community barely even notices.

The SLW&DC has all but begged President Bloom and the senior administration to come up with creative proposals such as those created in the past, but we have yet to see anything reasonable. This, however, does not mean that Swarthmore doesn’t have the money (remember, we have one of the largest endowments of any college or university in the country!), but that no one’s thought of a way to make it all work out! As always, it’s a matter of making staff compensation a high enough priority.
Economic Justice, Racial Justice, Gender Justice

How work is valued isn’t something that just happens. It has a lot to do with the type of work, what “skills” it requires, and it especially has to do with who does it. There’s a common statistic that’s out there that women make 80 cents to the man’s dollar. That means that for the same job, women on average get paid 20 cents less. That happens because of institutional sexism. It’s that who’s doing the job affects how the work is valued. Historically in the U.S., women’s work has not been as valued as men’s. In addition, the work of people of color has not been valued the way white people’s work has.

The lowest paid work in this country is sometimes called “care” work. It’s work that involves care of people or where they live—things like cooking, cleaning and childcare. That work is generally done by the most marginalized people in any community. In rural Pennsylvania, that work is often done by white women. Here, it’s often done by women of color and immigrants from Chester and West Philadelphia. Historically, professional domestic work has been overwhelmingly done by Black women. Until the 50s, the majority of Black women who were employed, were employed in domestic work.

The Senior Administration is*

- 8 people total
  - 7 white (87.5%)
  - 1 white woman (12%)
  - 1 person of color (12.5%)
  - 0 women of color (0%)

The Faculty is approximately

- 223 people total
  - 179 white (80%)
  - 78 white women (35%)
  - 30 people of color (13.5%)
  - 14 women of color (6%)

Grounds/Facilities is

- 42 people total
  - 38 white (90.5%)
  - 3 white women (7%)
  - 4 people of color (9.5%)
  - 0 women of color (0%)

Environmental Services (not including managers) is

- 52 people total
  - 3 white (6%)
  - 1 white women (2%)
  - 49 people of color (all Black) (94%)
  - 35 women of color (67%)

Dining Services is

- 62 people total
  - 42 white (68%)
  - 24 white women (39%)
  - 20 people of color (32%)
  - 13 women of color (21%)

*These statistics were compiled for an educational held in the Spring of 2002 which was co-sponsored by the SLW&DC & RAD (Radical African Dissent) and may have changed slightly over the past couple of years, however, the trends are still very much the same.
What becomes clear is that the lowest-wage jobs are done primarily by women, and, in Environmental Services, primarily by women of color. Whether or not it intends to, Swarthmore College participates in this trend. Note especially that while the faculty is 6% women of color and 80% white, Environmental Services is 67% women of color and 6% white.

Again, this is about RESULTS, not INTENT. This is a cycle that plays out; this isn’t about feeling sorry for or looking down of folks who do those jobs. It’s about asking, why are certain people in certain jobs, and why are some jobs valued more than others? Because while education programs are great, and some people may rise up to manager, someone will always be working the hourly-paid jobs, and that person needs enough money to live on.

“Through being involved in the fight for a living wage at Swarthmore, I’ve realized that no institution is without its politics of power. I’ve learned that even a Quaker College with an endowment of over $1 billion won’t always walk its talk. Despite all of the theories of inequality that we learn in our sociology, anthropology, history, political science, economics, women’s studies, black studies, etc. classes, even an institution like Swarthmore, that claims to care about social justice, will still put its bottom line first, not only remaining complicit in, but also actively perpetuating systems of racial, gendered, and economic injustice.”

(student, class of 2006)

Debunking Common Myths

Myth: Swarthmore doesn’t need to set its own wage floor – the national minimum wage already does that for us.

The income of a full-time minimum-wage earner supporting a family falls well below the federal poverty line. In fact, the minimum wage is arbitrarily set by Congress, does not take into account the cost of living, and is not systematically adjusted for inflation. In 1997, Congress set the minimum wage at $5.15 an hour – a rate far below the cost of living for many American families. Six years later, the current dollar amount remains the same, while the real value of the wage continues to fall. The federal minimum wage is not designed to, and does not, meet the needs of working families. It is imperative that employers examine the regional costs of living, rather than relying on outdated and insufficient national numbers, when setting wages.

Myth: Swarthmore should increase benefits, not wages.

Benefits are an important part of any compensation plan. However, a living wage is calculated based on what someone would need to live if he or she were already receiving benefits from his or her job. Even if a worker has excellent health benefits, she cannot pay her rent on less than a living wage. In the same vein, even if a worker makes a high hourly wage, he must also receive adequate benefits to meet his and his family’s needs. In this sense, benefits and wages are not competing forms of compensation, but are rather necessary complements in a targeted, cost-effective living wage plan.
Myth: “We’ll just be hurting those we’re trying to help.” If Swarthmore pays a living wage, it will have to fire existing employees or subcontract jobs. Current employees will face competition from a more skilled labor pool (also known as “qualification creep”).

There is no reason to believe that Swarthmore workers will lose their jobs as a result of earning a living wage. While studies of municipalities that have enacted living wage ordinances indicate that there was no loss of jobs, it is even less likely that jobs will be lost at Swarthmore. The work that low-wage staff perform on this campus is essential to its daily operation. For example, even when classes are cancelled due to inclement weather, workers in Sharples Dining Hall must report to work, as they are considered “essential staff.” Swarthmore cannot do without these employees without seriously impairing its ability to function. Unlike a private company, Swarthmore cannot cut corners by shutting down the new science center or cutting off the meal plan. Most importantly, it should be clear that a living wage is not about charity—it is about creating jobs that fairly compensate those whose hard work keeps the College running. Still, as the Ad Hoc Committee’s report states, the College ultimately decides who it does and does not hire; if it wishes to keep positions as entry-level (and non-subcontracted) it has the complete authority to do so. Moreover, “qualification creep” is a misleading term that, in the case of entry-level positions, speaks to a candidate’s years of experience, which may give that individual an advantage, no matter what the wage. By creating more higher-wage jobs, Swarthmore is doing just that—the work stays the same, and for the most part, so will the employees, though some will now be earning what they deserve.

Myth: Paying a living wage could make Swarthmore less competitive.

Some people might argue that if Swarthmore chooses to direct funds towards just compensation for all workers rather than continuing to build new facilities or to develop new programs and services for students that it will become a less attractive choice for student and faculty candidates. However, many Swarthmore students and professors choose the school based on both its Quaker heritage and its current stated commitment to social change and community. Given that Swarthmore currently boasts one of the most beautiful campuses in the nation, excellent facilities, and a broad repertoire of programs and services for students, its reputation can only be enhanced by confirming its commitment to creating a more just world through paying a living wage.

Myth: The living wage is a radical idea.

At its base, the idea behind the living wage is that people who work 40 hours a week should be able to live decently, support themselves and their families, and to make economic choices in their lives without working second (or third) jobs or receiving government benefits. This is common sense, and furthermore it is not even a new idea. Workers began talking about winning a living wage over 100 years ago, and at its inception, they won this battle with the federal minimum wage. Since the 1970s, however, the minimum wage has ceased to be an adequate wage, and so the current effort to secure a living wage is an effort to regain lost ground. One hundred and ten living wage ordinances have been put into place, while over 100 municipal and 30 college campus campaigns are actively working on this issue. While some victories have been won at large universities, Swarthmore could be one of the first liberal arts colleges to take this step. Furthermore, there is nothing radical about paying a wage that meets the basic needs of those who work every day to meet our most basic needs.

Myth: Swarthmore students are only educated in the classroom.

Swarthmore students are the kinds of students who could have elected to attend almost any college or university in the United States, but most choose Swarthmore because of its distinctive commitment to fostering an engaged community. Therefore Swarthmore students, like most people, learn as much from their environment as they do from their books and professors. In order to instill students with a sense of ethical intelligence,
the College must model in its processes a community grounded in democracy and in respect for all of its members.

**Myth: The Swarthmore College community does not support paying a living wage to all workers.** The College community does support the living wage. Over 1,200 people—mostly students—have signed a pro-living wage petition since 2001. Over 200 students, faculty, and staff attended a rally celebrating the new $9 an hour wage floor and urging the college to “Keep on Movin’ Forward” in the spring of 2002. Also in the spring of 2002, the faculty passed by a straw vote a resolution stating that the faculty “have always thought of the College as an ethical and human employer... We also believe the College should work now to develop a specific timetable for achieving a living wage.” This resolution resulted in the formation of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Living Wage, to which many students have written letters of insight and support regarding this process. Off campus support has come from members of local and national Quaker communities, groups of students working on similar issues, and an ever-growing network of Swarthmore alumni. We know that Swarthmore seeks to consider the interests of all members of our community when making important decisions and that it is rare that such a level of consensus be reached in such a large and diverse community. The widespread sentiment that the College must pay a living wage then only speaks to how pressing and central this issue is for the entire Swarthmore community.

**Swarthmore says:**

“I prefer to give [staff] food over money, because I know where the food’s going, but I don’t know where the money’s going.”

*(Linda McDougall, director of Dining Services)*

**SLW&DC says:**

“[Ms. McDougall’s comment] is a slur against the character of people simply because they’re low-wage workers.”

*(faculty member, History Department)*
Brief Chronology of the Living Wage

Fall 2000: Five months of on-campus research begin, during which students in the campus group Conscious Consumers meet with staff members on a one-on-one basis and in small group meetings to discuss their concerns about their jobs at the College. From these discussions emerge two primary areas of concern: wages and respect.

February 2001: The SLW&DC issues a report to College President Al Bloom and his senior staff, calling for increased wages and democratic decision-making involvement for low-wage staff members.

Spring 2002: The Staff Compensation Review Committee, while explicitly stating that its intention was not to implement or consider a living wage, recommends that the Swarthmore minimum wage be raised from $6.66 to $9 an hour. This increase, considered by the SLW&DC an important first step toward a living wage, is effective July 1, 2003.

April 4, 2002: The SLW&DC holds the “Keep on Movin’ Forward” rally on the National Student-Labor Day of Action. The campaign applauds the College’s first step toward a more just compensation system. But since many Swarthmore staff members still do not earn a living wage, the College must “Keep on Movin’ Forward.”

May 2002: After a faculty straw vote in support of the goals of the SLW&DC, President Bloom creates the Ad Hoc Committee on the Living Wage to determine what a Swarthmore living wage is.

Fall 2002: The Ad Hoc Committee begins meeting.

December 2003: The Board of Managers plans to form a subcommittee to explore the potential moral and budgetary implications of a living wage implementation. The Board also decides to vote on the final living wage proposal in the Fall of 2004.

February 2004: The Ad Hoc Committee on the Living Wage releases its preliminary report on what constitutes a living wage at Swarthmore, with a majority of the Committee recommending a minimum wage of $10.72, and a minority recommending $13.89 an hour. In addition to the wage increase, the Committee recommends a childcare benefit, full health coverage for employees and their families, and a plan to “decompress” wages (that is, to increase wages, in decreasing amounts, for those making above the new minimum wage). As per its charge, however, the Committee does not offer a funding proposal. Still, this proposal is viewed by the College community as one of the most creative and progressive in the country.

March 2004: After pressure from the SLW&DC, President Bloom creates a new committee by which to educate the campus on the issue, and to gather community sentiment. The new committee, however, only organizes one event, and fails to engage the community.

April 2004: A professor asks a dining services employee if she believes that staff members really care about a living wage. In response, she organizes an anonymous survey – the only action to effectively gauge opinion – which receives over 50 responses from dining services staff, all of which are positive.
**Swarthmore says:**

"This college, whether at the level of the Board, the faculty, Student Council, or its broader committee structure, has chosen to reply primarily on processes of consensus building to steer its course and guard its quality."

*(President Al Bloom)*

---

**SLW&DC says:**

“I remain concerned that the decision-making process on a living wage is excessively prolonged and that decision-making bodies at the college often have not, to date, acted in accord with Swarthmore’s principles of consensus and democracy.”

*(student, class of 2007)*

---

**Glossary**

**Self-sufficiency wage:** one that enables an employee to meet her most basic needs (ie. housing, food, health coverage, etc.), without government assistance, if she works a full-time job (may be combined with benefits).

**Living wage:** goes beyond a self-sufficiency wage to allow an employee to make basic economic choices that go slightly beyond day-to-day expenses, such as saving for a child's education, buying a car, or replacing broken appliances, etc.

**Benefits:** non-monetary aspects of compensation, i.e. health coverage, child care, ability to take classes, etc.

**Ad Hoc Committee on the Living Wage:** An official College committee created by President Bloom (after faculty pressure) to examine what a living wage for Delaware County would be and how to implement it. The Committee was not asked to create a plan to fund it.

**Swarthmore Living Wage & Democracy Campaign:** A campaign of students, staff, and faculty that initiated the push for a living wage on campus, as well as more inclusive decision-making processes.

**Budget:** The amount of money that Swarthmore alots each year to spend on compensation, academic programs, and other expenses.

“**Ethical intelligence**”: A term coined by Al Bloom, meant to convey students’ responsibilities to use their education towards somehow bettering society or the world.