

February 14, 2010

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## Haverford Tables Resolution on Commencement Honors

**By Andrew Thompson**

Faculty debated the resolution passed at Spring plenary regarding the optional removal of a student's honors from the commencement program at their April 22 meeting. At the meeting, said Provost Linda Bell, the faculty recommended that President Dr. Stephen G. Emerson '74 "continue the dialogue and discussion with students to try and understand what it is that's motivating this sentiment and this feeling in the student body."

As of Thursday morning, President Emerson said that he was "still waiting on additional input," and there would be a formal written response to the resolution. However, as of press time, President Emerson had not yet released a definitive response.

"The faculty had a lively and contentious conversation," said Bell. "There was also an expression of concern for the issue of student governance. We are very aware of the fact that the institution of plenary took place, and there was a sense of trying to reconcile a very strong feeling across a majority of the faculty, that we should proceed as we were proceeding, but that we should recognize that a large group of students felt otherwise."

Bell said that the faculty decided future dialogue should strive to "understand how we treat performance and grades and accomplishment in general," and whether Haverford "as an institution, differentiates [performance] appropriately or whether we are perhaps causing students to be self-effacing in their accomplishments."

President Emerson echoed the faculty's response for more dialogue. "We continue to receive email and conversation from faculty after the meeting, in the spirit of having a dialogue...It's come up enough times over the years that it's worth more discussion, and we'd like next year to start the process a little earlier."

"It's a very textured issue and conversation we've had two years in a row. We fully understand the motivation for the proposal, [the sense that] having college honors be public [goes against] our thoughts of humility," added Emerson. "[However,] it's easy to practice humility when there's nothing public to be humble about."

Director of Communications Chris Mills '82 said it was important to keep in mind that the faculty was not unified as a group on the issue. "Every point of view is possible, as it relates to the underlying issue, this year, last year, student governance, who's in charge; for every point there was a counterpoint, so I wouldn't want to characterize it as the faculty position. It was an amazing conversation."

Students' Council Co-Presidents Harrison Haas '10 and Will Harrison '10 attended the faculty meeting. The resolution presenters, Ethan Alguire '09 and Joe Anderson '09, had presented the resolution at the previous month's faculty meeting and thus were not present this time.

Will Harrison and Harrison Haas agreed that there was a need for more dialogue, and Harrison Haas said that the students and faculty "were basically talking past each other."

Said Will Harrison, "We looked into trying to organize some sort of meeting with interested students and faculty. While it

didn't come to fruition, we were essentially told that we were probably going to get very few faculty to attend."

Harrison Haas added, "If they're calling for more dialogue, there really needs to be more dialogue. We can't just call for it from both sides, something needs to happen."

"I think we're a little disappointed that there wasn't more discussion in the three and a half months since Plenary," said Will Harrison, "but I do know commencement and honors committees talked about it at least once."

Professor Anne McGuire, Chair of the Committee on College Honors, did not respond to a request for an interview. Professor Kim Benston also did not respond to an interview request, and while Professor Mark Gould responded, an interview could not be scheduled before press time.

"I really hope we're able to get across what students felt about this, and I really think there are some very interesting ideological points to be addressed here," said Will Harrison.

Harrison Haas did his best to sum up the student and faculty sides of the issue. "Students see a culture of humility at Haverford, we don't talk about grades, it's very much learning for learning's sake, and grades are secondary. The faculty don't necessarily disagree with that, but they think along with that, Haverford should be a place that recognizes excellence, recognizes distinction, and should be willing to separate those who do exceptionally well from the rest," he said.

Added Will Harrison, "We shouldn't be afraid of achievement, we should be proud of it. I can't speak for the faculty, but I think we get the sense that...some faculty members might go against this idea of sobering academic achievement."

"On the student side," he said, "the sense I got at plenary was that if a few students don't want their names in there, why should we force them to do it, it's a personal thing."

The fact that this year's resolution made publishing commencement honors optional, rather than the mandatory removal from the commencement program as last year's resolution had dictated, opened a new concern that students would feel stigmatized about publishing honors.

"If [students] had the option of opting out...They would be pressured out of [publishing honors] even if they would otherwise want to," said Emerson.

Will Harrison said in response, "That's the one [concern] where I've heard the most student understanding, at plenary too."

However, Harrison Haas said that he hoped students would be understanding, "especially since people's families might want to know [about honors]."

Harrison Haas was concerned there would be a lack of explanation, should the resolution be rejected. "I really hope that if this is rejected, that there is a thorough explanation for why this is, and there's also mention that the faculty want further dialogue. Otherwise, two rejections out of plenary with almost no explanation is insulting," he said.

Both Co-Presidents emphasized that the fight was over the resolution, and not out of disrespect for the faculty. Said Will Harrison, "We in no way intended this to be an affront to the faculty or to say that we don't appreciate the hard work that they do."

Harrison Haas added, "It is in no disrespect to the faculty or any staff, who work so hard to support students over their four years here."

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