

# **Swarthmore is on the verge of a groundbreaking decision...**

## **We can't let a Living Wage be derailed!**

*Four years ago the Swarthmore Living Wage and Democracy Campaign (SLWDC) began advocating that the college pay a living wage to all of its employees. Two years ago President Bloom – in response to a faculty initiative – charged a committee of faculty, staff, and students to study the local cost of living and propose a compensation plan that would meet workers' basic needs. This February, the President's Ad Hoc Committee on the Living Wage presented the community with a detailed recommendation. This groundbreaking proposal included the following: a majority recommendation of a \$10.72 minimum wage (along with a minority recommendation of \$13.89), full HMO coverage and the creation of a childcare subsidy for low-wage workers and their families, and a comprehensive plan to address the negative effects of wage compression by providing diminishing wage and benefit increases up the pay scale. This proposal – the result of a year and a half of comprehensive research and discussion – is the most innovative and progressive of its kind!*

*Many students, staff, and faculty expected the administration to gather feedback from the community, and to advocate some version of this proposal to the Board of Managers. However, in recent meetings, the administration has suggested pursuing an alternative, less expensive plan that may not even include a wage increase. This plan, designed to garner positive press, fails to adequately meet workers' needs and does not take into account community sentiment. Essentially, it suggests that the administration was never committed to its own process, and that the work of the Ad Hoc Committee was merely intended as an 'educational experience,' rather than a step towards just and necessary change.*

**Why can't we implement the Ad Hoc Committee's living wage proposal as written?**

**We can!**

## ***Debunking common myths...***

***Myth: Swarthmore already pays close to a living wage for single employees.***

***We should just target benefits to families.***

Some people say that if you count the Benefit Bank (a subsidy, roughly equivalent to a dollar an hour, that can be put in a pre-tax account for healthcare or childcare, or taken as wages), Swarthmore's minimum wage is already close to the Ad Hoc Committee's proposed \$10.72 floor. However, this shirks the issue of an institutional commitment to a living wage. Moreover, the Benefit Bank is not secure and is not subject to cost of living increases. Last year, it was nearly eliminated. And changing the way that benefits are distributed makes the Benefit Bank even more vulnerable. A plan that only creates benefits for families without securing a living wage for everyone would be unfair and divisive.

**Myth: The proposal isn't financially feasible – the budget's too tight and alumni won't give.**

The Ad Hoc Committee's proposals range in cost from \$750,000 to \$2 million. Given that Swarthmore College's annual budget is approximately \$85 million, we believe that funding this proposal is not an issue of feasibility, but rather one of priorities. Historically, the College has found the money necessary to pay for projects that it prioritizes, such as the construction of the new science center and the implementation of need-blind admissions. Moreover, the College annually writes hundreds of thousands of dollars into its budget for new projects. While the SLWDC has been eager to initiate a conversation about what students can give up to help pay for the Committee's proposal, the administration has been unwilling to seriously engage this possibility as a significant funding source. The administration has repeatedly said that alumni will not donate towards a living wage, while refusing to systematically assess alumni interest. Faculty members have expressed interest in contributing part of their yearly raise, but the administration has also refused to consider this possibility.

**Myth: The community doesn't support the Ad Hoc Committee's proposal.**

We know that the Swarthmore community supports a living wage in principle. This has been demonstrated over the past four years through a petition garnering over 1,200 signatures, well-attended rallies, a faculty straw vote, and the expressed sentiments of the administration. What is in question is the community support for this specific proposal tied to its concrete budgetary implications. The administration's community input process has so far not included any assessment of support. The only such assessment that we know of was an anonymous survey distributed by a dining services worker among her co-workers, which garnered 48 responses, all of which were pro-living wage.

**Myth: Wage Compression is not a problem.**

Wage compression has been repeatedly identified as a problem by staff members, the director of Human Resources, and two committees studying compensation at Swarthmore. Any attempt to dismiss this problem encourages division and opposition to the entire proposal. For instance, most Environmental Services workers will see no wage increase if the \$10.72 minimum is implemented with no decompression. Many on the Ad Hoc Committee argued that people could not meet their basic needs on less than \$13.89/hour, hence the range of wage floors in the Committee's proposal. Implementing the decompression plan will create a balanced wage structure and will allow a significantly greater proportion of employees to meet their needs.

**Myth: Qualification creep is an insurmountable problem and only hurts those we're trying to help.**

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, 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.



**Questions? Comments? Concerns?**

**Ask Al Bloom! or the SLWDC ([swatlivingwage@yahoo.com](mailto:swatlivingwage@yahoo.com))!**