

Students' Actions in Crisis: Responsible and Sensitive

by Bob Goodson

I'm getting very tired of hearing students, in general, and white "radicals" in particular dumped on for their actions during the crisis. We've been told, either directly or by implication, that we acted with a "short mentality," that we were "intimidated to the point of inaction," that we acted in "bad faith," and most recently that we were "intimidated to the point of inaction." While admitting that I might have a biased viewpoint, I think that in the whole, the actions of the students in general, and the white radicals in particular, demonstrated a willingness to openly communicate with and trust the faculty, and a sensitivity to the feelings and mood of other campus groups without compromising their support for a cause they thought was just.

Apparently, all the accusations arose because the students voted several times not to resume academic business until the crisis was resolved. But to expect the students to go about business as if nothing had happened simply ignores the existing realities of the situation.

One of the first motions passed by the student body was an approval of the substance of SAAB's demands. It might add parenthetically that how anyone can logically conclude that this vote demonstrated that "the blacks intimidated the students with

the threat of suspension of studies" completely escapes me.) It seems clear to me that the majority of the students supported SAAB's demands "as proposals" for the same reason the faculty did — because they thought that the demands were right for the situation.

If after voting their support, the students had proceeded to ignore the whole crisis and go to class as if nothing were happening, their involvement in the substance of the demands would have been extremely questionable. (The article by Dr. Taylor in *The Phoenix*.) Thus if the students had voted to resume academic business it would clearly have been a repudiation of their stated support for SAAB. Furthermore, it would have irreparably split the student body along racial groups, which would have been a much greater disaster for the situation than the "disruption" of two days of classes.

DISRUPTION

Furthermore, to designate as "disruptive" a disruption of events according to the simplistic line of the Student Coordinating Committee, "the institution reacting for a suspension of academic business" should not be taken as a statement of the student body's feeling on the question of academic business and not as an attempt to direct that classes not be held. Moreover, no attempt was made to stop those who wanted to attend class from doing so. Finally, it should also be remembered that a good number of students were deriving all their enjoyment in solving the crisis, and it really doesn't seem possible to study during that week. Thus to say "let hold" because the students "voted" to resume academic business is a gross simplification of a complex situation and accomplishes little except the creation of bad feelings.

The Radical Caucus was probably the most uncoordinated, unorganized and unhelpful organization during the crisis. This is basically a common bias on people's willingness to deal in stereotypes instead of reality. Let's consider several of these virtues that we've been hearing so much about recently.

(1) Tolerance and open communication: All of the RC's meetings were open to anyone who wanted to attend. Moreover, any student who attended a meeting was considered a member with voting participation in any decision by the group. The discussion allowed equal opportunity for expression of views by anyone if attendance and were not dominated by any small clique.

(2) Trust: Many members of the Radical Caucus felt that some red

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Important questions regarding policy-making at Swarthmore had been raised by the office. However, they were willing to not interject these considerations into the negotiations then taking place between SAWS and the faculty. That is, they were willing to accept the proposals of the students that the general question of the governance of the College be postponed until sometime "early in the second semester." (Please see supplement, January 14). This is what they were saying. "We trust the faculty to establish a period early second semester in which the whole question of policy making at Swarthmore will be considered, and therefore will not press the issue now." For some reason everyone has chosen either to ignore or to distort an important fact: this decision often neutralizing the actions of students during the crisis.

(2) Good will and sensitivity to the feelings of other groups: on January 13, students discussed the possibility of a vigil outside Thursday's faculty meeting, together with a "interference" statement to the faculty. The statement urged the faculty to accept the existing SAWS position and "affirmed that when this was done students would return immediately to academic business." (Please see supplement, January 14).

The intent of the statement was to assure the faculty that the radical

action was not planning to agitate on issues of general student power; the issue before them was the statement of action with the RC's willingness to postpone the question of student power clearly demonstrates the "good will" of that group. Moreover, by two-thirds majority they tentatively decided not to hold the vigil or for fear of antagonizing the faculty. This demonstrates how sensitive they were to the mood of the faculty and how willing they were to modify its actions in response to that mood.

Thus the Radical Caucus was not a bunch of wild-eyed radicals setting around in T-shirts making Marxist speeches and waiting for the right moment to storm Harvard Hall and seize control of the school. Instead they were a group of politically aware students with commitment to a cause but still willing to consider all possible viewpoints and discussing all possible ramifications of any actions before they took them.

I am primarily open to attack concerning my case. Obviously, if actions of no group are perfect, no all-campus groups made certain mistakes and antagonized other groups by certain actions. But is it simple to label the students as "irresponsible" acting in "bad faith" in respect to irresponsible. The students reacted at least as well as any other group on campus to an emotionally charged situation.