Swarthmore College

A Community of Purpose

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SWARTHMORE COLLEGE
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CRISIS AND CHANGE

Institutions can seldom identify a specific moment when they changed direction, but it's arguable that the Swarthmore College we see today—rigorous, creative, accessible, diverse, and committed to civic and social responsibility—issued from the eight-day crisis that rocked the institution in January 1969.

The crisis had its roots in months of campus discussion about the small number of black students (just eight) who entered in fall 1968. But it began in earnest with the nonviolent occupation of the Admissions Office on January 8, 1969, by members of the Swarthmore Afro-American Students Society (SASS). They demanded a comprehensive college commitment to black admissions and to the support of black students on campus.

The occupation continued through eight days of intense faculty, student, and administrative meetings—talks that sought to balance the "non-negotiable demands" of the black students and what President Courtney Smith called "the responsibility of academic institutions to provide a model for rational decision-making."

Just as it appeared that consensus would be reached, the sit-in abruptly ended with news of the sudden death of Smith, who suffered a heart attack in his office on January 16. Although it took another twenty years for its full effects to be realized, a different college emerged from this shock.

"On the surface, the crisis was about black admissions at Swarthmore," writes Clinton Etheridge '69, then chairman of SASS. "However, at a deeper level, it was really about the relationship of Swarthmore College to black America and to the American dream.... [We] were trying to do at Swarthmore what Martin Luther King was doing on the national level. Dr. King was striving to make the American dream as relevant and meaningful to black Americans as to white Americans; SASS was trying to make Swarthmore as relevant and meaningful to black students as to white."

Etheridge says that he and SASS "had high expectations of the college, with its strong Quaker heritage of social justice."

Etheridge was not the first to point out that Swarthmore was slow to honor with its actions the legacy of courageous abolitionists such as Lucretia Mott, who in 1838 walked hand in hand with black women out of the abolitionists' Pennsylvania Hall as it was sacked and burned by a pro-slavery mob.

There had been several previous challenges to the college's unwritten color bar. In the early twentieth century, Professor Jesse Holmes and Dean Elizabeth Powell Bond had both spoken in favor of admitting African Americans. The memoirs of an alumnus from 1915 recount a second-hand story that, in 1905, a light-skinned African American was admitted on the basis of his academic record and a photograph, but, after his race was discovered, despite much soul searching by the college administration, he was sent away.

About 1921, Dean Elizabeth Bond (by then retired) and Hannah Clothier Hull, the wife of faculty member William Isaac Hull, approached President Frank Aydelotte with a proposal to integrate Swarthmore. Representing the race relations committee of the Philadelphia Yearly Meeting, they had identified a qualified black student and had scholarship support in hand. Aydelotte replied that he could not take on the race issue when he had so many other pressing matters before him.

In 1932, a highly accomplished male black student from a Philadelphia high school applied for admission. But for his race, writes former dean Everett Hunt in his memoir, "he was a logical candidate for an Open Scholarship." The application was forwarded to the board of managers, and their decision reflected white stereotypes of race and sexuality. "Negro students could not yet be admitted to a coeducational college like Swarthmore," Hunt later wrote, noting that board members quietly arranged for the young man to attend Dartmouth.

Following student agitation and a change in administration from Aydelotte to John Nason, the board announced in April 1943, apparently without noting its own hypocrisy, that the college had never adopted a policy barring blacks and thus did not need a new policy to admit them. The first African American student, Dorothea Kopchynski, was admitted in July 1943.

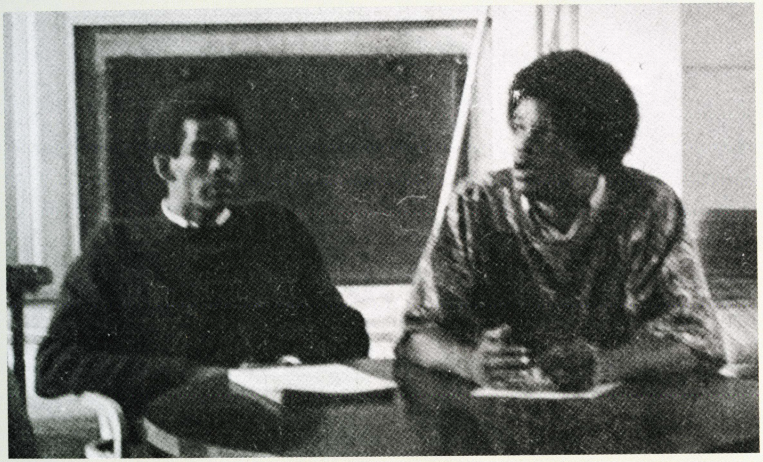
Very few African Americans attended Swarthmore until the 1960s. Maurice Eldridge '61, one of the few,

looks back with the perspective of a longtime Swarthmore administrator and close confidant to two presidents. "Swarthmore has come a long way as an institution since those days," he says, "but not without cost to those who helped integrate the college in the '60s and '70s. Like me, they found a college that was not yet ready for them—and not ready to believe that there was racism afoot at both the individual and institutional level—in the classroom and in student life. Like me, they found that they had to carry a double load: to learn and to teach."

Following Smith's death during the Admissions Office occupation, there was no shortage of blame. Some members of the faculty and even more alumni contended that militant blacks were responsible for the president's heart attack, but they were not. Smith's biographers Darwin ['69] and Donna Stapleton quote a postmortem examination that was not revealed at the time: Smith had severe but undiagnosed atherosclerosis of his coronary arteries. "Unknown to all," they write, "and least of all to himself, Smith had been living with serious heart disease for some time."

Gilmore Stott, Smith's friend and assistant (who was at his side when he died), reflected on the crisis in a 1998 talk: "My personal thought is that differences in perspective on those events, and on Courtney's sudden and tragic death, will never be utterly resolved."

He then provided his own perspective: "I remember the night before the sit-in, and student leaders I knew well came down to the Stott house to talk. In substance, I said, 'Courtney wants the changes you want.' When they finally left, quiet and orderly, they said to me, 'We know that, but we think direct action will be productive.' What was productive and by whom I won't argue, [but] notice something about this.... Whereas in some institutions so-called negotiation took place between administrators and *armed* student activists, nothing of this kind happened at Swarthmore.... When escalation threatened, Courtney and his staff reached a bold accommodation ... and our president knew he could carry the board and faculty. When that last morning he bent over his desk, he had already succeeded."



Top: In a series of photos that appeared in the *Phoenix*, Deans Robert Barr and Fred Hargadon leave the Admissions Office in January 1969 after it was occupied by black students demanding that Swarthmore make a greater effort to recruit, admit, and support African Americans.

Middle: Clinton Etheridge '69 (left) and Don Mizell '71, shown here at a press conference, were among the leaders of the Swarthmore Afro-American Student Society (SASS).

Bottom: Led by John Braxton '70, a student panel convenes a plenary meeting in Clothier Hall. Faculty and student groups met constantly during the crisis to discuss the situation and search for a consensus solution.

Opposite: Solitary figures sit in silence after learning of the death of President Courtney Smith.