May 4, 2017

Dear students,

I write to express my pride in the Gettysburg College community.

This has been a challenging week here on our campus for many. YAF’s invitation to Robert Spencer created controversy about the balance between freedom of expression and our desire to create an inclusive campus environment. Our community responded to this in a variety of ways.

The Religious Studies Department and Peace and Justice Studies program invited Professor Todd Green to provide a presentation which offered a point of view counter to Robert Spencer’s, enabling students to compare and contrast these perspectives.

Those who attended Robert Spencer’s presentation listened respectfully and engaged in the question and answer period with intelligence and civility, unlike what has occurred on some other college campuses.

Students initiated a rally to demonstrate solidarity with the Muslim members of our community, an event that was attended by several hundred students, faculty, and staff. I thank those who planned and participated in this uplifting event. And I thank the many Gettysburgians who have offered personal support to the Muslim members of our community.

Students, faculty, staff, and alumni engaged in impassioned discussions about our institutional values. Although our community was divided on the decision to allow Robert Spencer to speak on our campus, I believe there was great value in those debates which demonstrated just how complex this issue is and how deeply Gettysburgians care about their institution.

Reflection is a hallmark of a Gettysburg College education, and I know that this week has led to a great deal of reflection regarding our philosophical, educational and operational responses to these events. There is no doubt that we will face similar controversies in the future. My hope is that as a community we will take the opportunity next fall to work towards an affirmative statement related to freedom of expression—a clear statement that defines what we are (or are not) willing to have said on our campus, a statement that we can embrace and use to guide us when a similar issue confronts us in the future. Our recent experience will surely inform us in the development of such a statement.

Although I have been on the receiving end of some harsh commentary from students and alumni—individuals about whom I care very much and for whom I have great respect—I have emerged from this week so proud of our community. Your passion, your activism, and your ability to engage in critical analysis, to communicate your perspectives effectively, and to engage in healthy debate have been truly exemplary.

I thank you all for that.

Sincerely,

Janet Morgan Riggs
President