

Campus Climate: The View from Akwe:kon

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Introduction

Over the past year numerous events and incidents have greatly eroded my belief that the Cornell community values and welcomes diversity in race, gender, ethnicity and sexual orientation in its students, staff and faculty. I have tremendous affection for Cornell and that makes these feelings of disillusionment especially painful. I arrived here as an undergraduate transfer student the same year that Frank Rhodes came to Cornell. I was embraced and nurtured by an incipient American Indian Program and my years as a student at Cornell, while challenging, were successful. In 1987 I returned to Cornell as a newly hired assistant professor in the College of agriculture and Life Sciences. I felt as though I had come home. Over the next ten years I formed close working relationships with faculty, staff and administrators across campus that reinforced my sense that this was a place where I belonged and one in which I could work productively. However during the five years of my tenure as director of the American Indian Program I gained another perspective on Cornell. I want to share with you what the institution looks like from a very different vantage point. I cannot speak for all people of color on campus. I can only tell you what I have witnessed and experienced as the director of the American Indian Program.

Many under-represented minority students, faculty and staff have felt under siege at Cornell from a barrage of attacks that seem to question our right to be on campus, to congregate, to be visible, to direct our academic units and to determine our intellectual directions. For me the situation came to a crisis last November. The American Indian Program was in the midst of recruiting for the fall '99 class : talking to potential applicants and their families, following up with phone calls, deciding on last minute recruitment trips, planning for a phoneathon to encourage students to complete their applications. But hanging over everything was the extraordinary distress of many of our students because of a series of racial/sexual harassment incidents, some of which had been directed at residents of Akwe:kon. In addition a suspicious fire in the dead of night at Akwe:kon further contributed to students feeling unsafe. I had talked personally with students and knew that the atmosphere was painfully tense. For the first time I felt uncertain about bringing Native American students to Cornell. I realized that I wasn't even questioning if they would be welcome or successful. I was concerned for their physical safety and emotional well being.

Why would a few ugly incidents cause me such concern? These events did not occur in isolation: but they contributed to an environment that felt increasingly hostile to me in November 1998. The climate of Cornell as experienced by any one individual is a complex integration of public and private relationships, professional activities and everyday happenings that occur across the campus. At some point each of us makes an assessment about how we fit in here and how welcome and accepted we feel. I describe below specific incidents around the ethnic program houses, the Cornell Review, the Humanities Report and finally the racial and sexual harassment incidents last November. I want to try to provide some insight on why I perceived Cornell as hostile and why I struggled last November with recruiting Native American students to come here.

Program Houses

The ethnic program houses on campus, Ujamaa, Latino Living Center and Akwe:kon have been the focus of controversy for several years. Since the majority of students who live in these three houses are under-represented minorities, some members of the Cornell community have alleged that the very

existence of these program houses is a form of Cornell-sanctioned racial separation. When President Rawlings moved to prohibit first-year students from living in any Program house, student protests erupted across campus. Akwe:kon residents were at the forefront of the protest and several were involved in a hunger strike.

In fall '96 I was asked to participate on a campus-wide committee that examined the role of residential communities in the education of Cornell students. One of the charges of this committee was to make recommendations on the Program houses. I learned a great deal on that committee. There is problem of diversity in our residential communities at Cornell but ethnic program houses are neither the cause nor the solution. In '96-'97 only **180** of 829 underrepresented minority students living on campus resided in one of the three ethnic program house. (These 180 students made up 87% of the residents of those three houses.) However, 75% of the **1,538** students in traditional halls on west campus were white. Our work group concluded that the problem of diversity was actually the large number of white students congregating in the residential communities of west campus. The overwhelming numbers of white students who belong to fraternities and sororities further compound this problem. Even if every minority student was taken from the three ethnic program houses and randomly assigned to a residential hall, it would have had no impact on the homogeneity of Cornell's west campus.

So why did the "problem" of separation get laid at the door of three ethnic program houses where just 180 minority students lived and not with the more than 3500 white students who lived in equally racially segregated housing on west campus and within the Greek System? Minority students have borne the brunt of this conflict, with their right to choose with whom they will live characterized as separatist. Every white student at Cornell exercises this right without question and no one accuses them of fostering separation of the races. The failure of Cornell to fairly face this issue haunts us today. It has had a corrosive effect on students of color who feel threatened and maligned simply by choosing where to live and with whom.

Cornell Review

In fall 1998 a cartoon in the Cornell Review portrayed Akwe:kon as a casino with stereotypical caricatures of Indians. Akwe:kon is a powerful symbol of Native presence at Cornell. It was designed and constructed to embody and represent the worldview of the Iroquois, our intellectual contribution to humanity's journey to live in peace and govern ourselves democratically. The exterior of the building has several wampum belts that represent Haudenosaunee political thought and history over several hundred years. The small wall in front of the house facing Triphammer Road is a replica of the Two Row Wampum Belt produced more than 300 years ago that symbolizes the agreement between Europeans and Haudenosaunee to live together in peace and mutual respect. The word "Akwe:kon" means "all of us" and we have always welcomed non-Indian students in our residence house. Every time I pass Akwe:kon I feel tremendous pride. It has been a powerful affirmation for me that I have a place here at Cornell that allows me to strengthen and cherish my Iroquois heritage and still be a respected and welcome member of the larger Cornell community.

The portrayal of Akwe:kon as a casino and Native Americans who live and work in it as ignorant, greedy Indians cut deeply. The name of the paper in which the cartoon appeared, Cornell Review, gave the appearance of sanction by the university. I felt betrayed and incensed. What kind of community did I really live in? There has never been any meaningful Cornell response to the repeated racist attacks of the students who publish this paper. Every time AIP students put the name "Cornell" on a tee shirt, the design has to be approved by someone in Day Hall to make certain that it does not in some way compromise Cornell's reputation. But racist, inflammatory drivel in a paper with the Cornell name is not subject to the same institutional constraints. I believe the only reason this paper continues to publish is that the Cornell community - students, administrators and faculty - tacitly sanction and support it.

Humanities Report

In July 1998 I received a copy of a report prepared by a committee in the College of Arts and Sciences that was charged with making recommendations on how to strengthen the various humanities departments/fields in the College. The report contained several very controversial recommendations. Among the most controversial were those related to ethnic studies at Cornell. The report cited two problems: 1) ethnic studies were not an integral part of the larger curriculum and 2) efforts to recruit and retain ethnic and minority faculty were inadequate. The committee made six recommendations regarding ethnic studies including two that elicited intense reactions: 1) house all ethnic studies programs in the same building, located on or adjacent to the Arts Quad; and 2) find ways of increasing cooperation and coordination of efforts within Africana Center and between it and other departments programs and centers. There were several references to the particular problems of Africana, including the "policy of self isolation adopted by some of its leading figures."

No one on this committee had ever approached me or any of the faculty who teach American Indian studies courses regarding these problems. I soon discovered that not a single faculty in any of the ethnic studies programs had been approached or even knew that this report was underway. How did this committee identify the major problems facing our departments and units and then develop recommendations for addressing those issues without ever including the affected people in the discussion? Discussions on moving the American Indian Program required at the very least my consultation and input.

The impetus for this report, its writing and the subsequent events and actions embody the most blatant forms of racism, intolerance, paternalism and hostility to people of color at Cornell. Today, almost a year later, the anger from it still rises from me with painful intensity. I will not repeat the many arguments and concerns that students, faculty and staff voiced concerning this report. They are well documented elsewhere.

But I will describe one event in this episode. Dean Lewis arranged for a campus forum to discuss the ethnic studies portion of the report on October 28, 1998. More than 400 students, staff and faculty jammed Hollis Cornell Auditorium. Faculty from Africana wrote a joint response to the report and distributed it at the meeting. Four of their faculty gave oral presentations detailing their objections. The Graduate Student Radical Caucus in the English Department provided a written response to the report and distributed it at the meeting. One after another, minority faculty and students addressed the dean and the committee that wrote the report to explain why we found the process and the outcome of the report so offensive and unacceptable. I have never participated in a public event at Cornell where outrage and pain were so palpable, articulate and openly displayed.

Two weeks later Dean Lewis announced that no further forums would be held because "they were not a productive way to deal with ideas and proposals contained in or stimulated by the report." As far as I know no one from the committee or the Dean ever responded to any of us. No one apologized or accepted any responsibility for the report and its aftermath. No one from Day Hall intervened in any way or contacted us individually or as a group. The message I heard from this was very clear: ethnic studies programs and their faculties and students are marginal, unimportant and unvalued members of the Cornell community. We can be provoked and publicly demeaned and when we respond with passionate, directed anger, we will be dismissed and ignored. We are so invisible and inconsequential at Cornell that our most public and intense displays of opposition will not be heard or responded to.

Harassment Incidents and the Fire at Akwe:kon

In the fall of last year there were a series of emails, threatening phone calls and incidents of physical

intimidation and harassment directed at students of color. The phone and email messages contained racial and sexual slurs urging students to leave Cornell. At least two female students of color were harassed at bus stops in the evening hours by white men. On November 2 fire was discovered at 1:00am on the exterior wall of Akwe:kon. Environmental Health and Safety refused to take seriously the possibility that the fire had been deliberately set until it was too late to test for the presence of inflammatory materials to determine if it was arson. During this period I spoke almost daily with students who could not sleep or concentrate on their coursework. If you have never been the target of racial or sexual threats it is difficult to understand how debilitating they can be. They take an enormous toll, affecting your sense of safety, control and self-worth. But probably the most harmful impact was that our students felt that no one outside Akwe:kon, Ujamaa, or the Latino Living Center knew or cared about what was happening to them. This was when I began to question if I could in good conscience recruit Native American students to Cornell.

Faculty Responsibility

Faculty must take a leadership role in changing the very negative atmosphere that surrounds Cornell. The hostile climate that so many of us experience is not the result of actions by "others." It happens when even well intentioned people - students, staff, faculty and administrators - refuse to critically examine how we conduct the daily operations of this university. Over-turning racist and sexist attitudes and actions require thoughtful, deliberate work from the faculty in all colleges.

We had our largest entering class of Native American students this fall. They are an outstanding group of students who have come here with high expectations of the Cornell experience. I hope I made the right decision to encourage their enrollment here.