

What Can Faculty Do To Improve Campus Climate?

by Ron Booker, April 24, 2000

Over the past several years this campus has been plagued by a series of bias-related incidents. There have been harassing messages directed at students of color, gays and lesbians students, reports of minority students being refused access to services, and a suspicious fire at one of our ethnic program houses. Not surprisingly, in the face of this harassment many minorities are asking if they made the right choice in coming to Cornell. While we may express sympathy for the victims, sympathy alone is not enough. At Cornell we take pride in the role faculty play in the governance of the university. This role must also include a commitment on the part of the faculty to work with the students, administration and staff to create a safe and welcoming environment for all members of our community.

In order to create a more welcoming environment a starting point is to begin to understand the experience of minorities at Cornell. Consider the first impression a minority undergraduate might have of Cornell. Like many other students they are faced with the challenge of adjusting to life in rural, upstate New York, often far from friends and family. For many minority students, this is the first time they have experienced living and learning in a diverse community. This transition can be difficult for many of these students since Cornell's diversity often challenges the religious, moral, and social values they bring to their home communities. This adjustment is further compromised given the campus environment appears impersonal, and perhaps even hostile at times. This perception is heightened by the recent bias-related incidents, but it neither begins nor ends there. What many minority students view as more subtle forms of racism also must be considered. These include cartoons and articles in several campus publications that mock Cornell's ethnic program houses, and in some cases individual members of our minority communities. This year several students launched campaigns calling for the elimination of minority-designated seats in the student assembly and the end affirmative action in admissions. It is activities such as these that contribute to the feeling on the part of some students that our community does not welcome minorities. Of course, those that call for an end to Cornell's ethnic housing programs and to affirmative action argue that they are not motivated by racism. However, it is not difficult to imagine why few in the minority community are convinced by these denials. The result, many on this campus call for the University to move against those groups that oppose minority serving programs and the University's affirmative action program. Over the years members of our minority communities have been disappointed by the University's lack of response.

What can the faculty do to help make this campus a more welcoming environment for minorities? First, we need to demonstrate that the faculty considers the status of minorities on this campus to be a priority. Since September the faculty has challenged the central administration over a number of issues including eCornell, faculty salaries and Computer Science. Some students ask how it is possible for our faculty to respond so vigorously to these issues while saying little or nothing about the problems facing minorities on this campus. The faculty's response can not be limited to a few resolutions from the Faculty Senate or to the efforts of a few, dedicated faculty. The only way we can send a message to the Cornell Community that we are committed in creating a welcoming environment is through a sustained effort in which the majority of the faculty participate.

While Cornell is committed to the diversification of its student body there seems to be less concern for what happens to minority students once they arrive on campus. This university takes pride in the fact that the vast majority of the students of color we admit leave with a Cornell degree. However, if we look a little deeper we may find that many minority students leave Cornell less than satisfied. This is especially true of minority students interested in pursuing careers in medicine, science and engineering. We were able to successfully recruit these minority students because of our Cornell's strong programs in science and

engineering. However, within a year or two of their arrival, many minority students are forced to switch from the sciences and engineering to an alternative major due to poor performance in our introductory (weeder) science courses. Underrepresented minorities admitted are more likely to be 'at risk', not because these students are not smart enough, but rather because their high schools have failed to provide them with the skills they require to handle many of our fast paced and competitive introductory science courses. It should be noted that our population of 'at risk' students is not limited to students of color it also includes transfers and rural students. Despite the obvious problems these 'at risk' students have encountered, Cornell does an inadequate job of addressing their needs. It is not uncommon for faculty in the sciences to acknowledge the poor performance of at risk students. However, with a few exceptions faculty appear to have little or no interest in developing effective strategies for helping our 'at risk' students. As a first step as educators we need to examine the effect of our teaching styles and the classroom environment we create has on the performance of 'at risk' students. In consultation with students and the administration we need to consider what Cornell can do to help all of our students improve their learning skills and to excel in their chosen fields of study.

Efforts to diversify this campus can not be limited to the student body. While there has been considerable progress made in increasing the number of women faculty, the same can not be said for underrepresented minorities. Between 1993 and 1998 we have experienced a net gain of only four underrepresented minority faculty at Cornell. The explanations for Cornell's lack of success range from intense competition for a few qualified minorities to the fact that Cornell's location in rural upstate New York makes recruiting minority faculty difficult. I am convinced that if we are truly committed to faculty diversity we can overcome these obstacles. The lack of qualified minorities in some fields should not be seen as an excuse for a lack of action. It means that when a search is underway that the faculty must be proactive. An effort has to be made to seek out and encourage qualified minorities to apply. When underrepresented minorities do apply we must act affirmatively. On several occasions departments have failed to offer a job to a minority candidate because the applicants research interest of the minority applicant did not fit the departments search image. Given that in many fields minorities are grossly underrepresented then it is understandable that there is less of a chance that we will find minority candidates that fit our initial search image. The lack of minority representation in most fields requires that we act aggressively when it comes to increasing faculty diversity. As a first step the faculty must work with the administration to design and implement a program that will provide departments and programs with the flexibility to recruit and hire underrepresented minorities. This initiative should also include incentives for departments and programs in which the number of minorities are grossly underrepresented to establish programs for increasing the participation and retention of minority undergraduates and graduate students.

Our rural location will continue to be reason for our lack of success in recruiting minority faculty up until the point where we have managed to attract a critical mass of minority faculty to this campus. As our community of minority faculty grows we will find that it will become a powerful recruiting tool. I am also convinced that by increasing faculty diversity will have a positive effect on Cornell's ability to recruit and retain minority students.

Initially when I was asked to contribute to this series it was clear the focus was to be on the experience of underrepresented minorities. However, it is critical that we recognize that what is so often referred to as 'campus climate' impacts not just minorities but each and every member of this community. Each year seniors at Cornell and a number of our peer institutions participate in an in depth exit interview. Some questions are designed to gauge the students' view of campus climate. The survey results suggest that Cornell is facing a serious problem. Compared to the other Ivies the average Cornell undergraduate is dissatisfied with the current campus climate. In general our students are dissatisfied with Cornell's large class size, the amount and quality of their interactions with faculty outside of class and the effectiveness of

our administrative and support staff. Our students also complain about an environment which places too much emphasis on competition for grades as opposed to scholarship and a healthy learning environment. Most disturbing was the response of our students to a question asking if they would recommend Cornell to a neighbor or a relative. Cornell had the lowest percentage of undergraduates of any Ivy institution responding in the affirmative. These findings require our attention.

In large part our sense of community is based on the atmosphere that exists at our workplace. The lecture hall and laboratory defines workplace of our students. As faculty we are primarily responsible for determining the nature of the environment that exist with in our classrooms and laboratories. I ask all faculty to spend some time consider how they conduct their themselves influences the working environment of our students. This requires that we need to put in place programs that increase the amount and quality of interactions between faculty and students. At the same time we need to provide incentives for faculty to be effective teachers and advisors. An obvious starting point will be to tie faculty performance in the area of teaching and advising to tenure and promotions and salary improvements.

Cornell brings together young people from small farming communities, urban America and around the world to learn how to live and work together. While this diversity does offer us a number of challenges it offers even more advantages. If Cornell is committed to training future leaders we must create a learning environment that reflects the diversity of our greater society, the society that students will encounter once they leave this campus. I believe that Cornell has the potential to create a living laboratory that is second to none. As faculty we must accept the challenge of creating a campus which promotes the concept of learning across differences. If students are successful in developing these strategies they will reap the benefits of their efforts after they leave Cornell. However our success depends upon the efforts of the faculty. What can we do as faculty to improve campus climate? First and foremost, we must recognize that our role as faculty within this community has to extend beyond the classroom and the laboratory. We need to encourage a greater number of faculty to interact with students outside of the classroom, to go out and meet students where they live in an attempt to learn more about how the academic environment that we create affects our students. As faculty we can not simply assume that all of our students will understand the benefits they derive from living and learning in a diverse community. If we are to succeed in our effort to learn across differences then the faculty must participate in the effort of teaching the benefits of diversity.