

THOUGHTS ON THE CAMPUS CLIMATE  
FROM THE  
PERSPECTIVE OF WOMEN UNDERGRADUATES

Prepared by

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### Introduction

Responding to Dean J. Robert Cooke's request to comment on the climate for undergraduate women is a challenging task. Women are now more than 45% of the undergraduate population and represent every racial, ethnic, religious, political, socio-economic, national, intellectual and sexual orientation background. To assume that the climate experienced by the affluent white female from a private school in Manhattan is equivalent to that of the first generation Latina from El Paso or the only African American female in an engineering class is, of course, ludicrous. Yet, it also is important to recognize that the female perspective and experience can be, and often is, different than that of men. I applaud Dean Cooke for including this material as background for the climate discussions among the faculty.

Information for this document is drawn from several sources. The Office of Institutional Research and Planning (IRP) conducts surveys in concert with our peer institutions in the Consortium on Financing Higher Education (COFHE) to assess students' satisfaction with and their assessment of the impact of their educational experience. A survey of seniors (COFHE Senior Survey) was done in the spring, 1998; a different survey was conducted in spring, 1999 for freshmen and sophomores (COFHE Cycles Survey.) Data were analyzed by Cornell college, racial/ethnic group and gender. Highlights of those data will be reported here; complete copies of the surveys can be obtained from the IRP Office in Day Hall.

In addition to the quantitative data, anecdotal and personal information is presented. These latter perspectives come from a discussion I had in the spring of 200 with several senior women leaders in the athletic, academic, social, political and service arenas to discuss climate on campus. Their voices are combined with those of other women in various panel discussions and individual meetings I have in my years as a Cornell administrator. I have not included research on different learning styles for men or women or different communication patterns that can exist. Instead, this information is the Cornell student voice. What is presented here can best be described as suggestive, rather than definitive. Hopefully, the information will serve to stimulate important conversation, further investigation, and where appropriate, change.

### Survey Results

Considerable information about Cornell, from the perspective of women, is available through the COFHE Senior Survey and the COFHE Cycles Survey. In many cases, the questions and responses of the women parallel those of men. When appropriate, differences (i.e., statistically significant differences) between men and women are noted. Most of the specific data reported below are from the COFHE Senior Survey, unless

otherwise noted.

- Overall, female undergraduates are satisfied with their undergraduate education (4.1 on a 5.0 scale); in fact, their satisfaction is higher than that of men (3.96).
- Female undergraduates are very likely to encourage a high school senior who resembles them to attend Cornell. (4.07 on 5.0 scale), and again, are more likely to do so than men (3.89).
- They also are generally quite satisfied with the overall quality of instruction (3.28 on 4.0 scale) and more so than men (3.13)); Their satisfaction with humanities and arts courses (3.29) and social science courses (3.28) is quite high, and surpasses men, while their satisfaction with engineering courses (3.06) or natural science and math courses (2.89) is not as high (and does not differ from men).
- Female undergraduates are generally satisfied with the out-of-class availability of faculty (3.12 on 4.0 scale) and again, more so than men (3.02). However, their satisfaction with advising is much less (2.83 on 4.0 scale for advising in the major and 2.15 for pre-major advising.) In this last category, female undergraduates are significantly less satisfied than males (2.31), who also are dissatisfied with pre-major advising.
- Female undergraduates are dissatisfied with the ethnic/racial diversity on campus (2.73 on 4.0 scale) and with the climate for minorities (2.58), and in both of these cases they are more dissatisfied than men are. They also are not satisfied with the sense of community on campus (2.42 on 4.0 scale).
- Female undergraduates are generally satisfied with campus security (3.28 on 4.0 scale), but they are less satisfied than men are in this area (3.36).
- While enrolled, female undergraduates generally found the following easy to do: be themselves (3.4 on a 4.0 scale); have their ideas taken seriously by students (3.3); be taken seriously by professors (3.24); find friends who share interests and values (3.16); and feel accepted as part of the university community (2.95). In each of these categories, there was no significant difference between men and women.
- During their college career, female undergraduates believe they have changed as a result of their college experience (4.1 on a 5.0 scale) significantly more than men (3.88).

Upon reviewing these data, one gets the overall impression that female undergraduates generally are quite satisfied with their opportunities and experiences and are gaining a great deal from their education at the university. There are, however, a number of specific areas of concern that must be addressed.

### The voices of students

This general tone of satisfaction among women was repeated by those who participated in the discussion this spring, and to a person, the women reported no overt discrimination based on their gender. However, as the discussion ensued, a number of very specific, and important, issues emerged.

Several of the women commented about the lack of women role models in the academy, and while the examples cited may be specific incidences, the students agreed they were representative of a broader concern.

- In a freshman government class, 14 graduate students served as teaching assistants, representing incredible diversity in terms of national origin---every one, including the professor, however, was male. This student wondered if women did not have a place in the serious pursuit of study in this major.
- Virtually all of the professors for the required courses taken by an ILR senior were taught by men...where are the women, she asked?
- Many guest speakers are brought into business courses in CALS, bringing great real life experiences in entrepreneurship, business management and leadership rarely has this senior woman heard from a female in those guest speaker series.
- A female science senior could not recall a single class in her major that was taught by a woman.

For all these women, the lack of women in the classroom, as professors or guest speakers or teaching assistants, left them with few academic role models. In the students' minds, this absence limited their vision of what might be possible in the academy, gave them few people to talk with about pursuing the rigors of an academic career or about balancing the competing challenges of family and career, and overall, left them feeling incomplete in their education.

This sense of incompleteness was echoed as the students discussed the curriculum. There was great support for the breadth and depth many had experienced through women's studies, but each of the students asked for more complete inclusion of the female experience or accomplishment throughout all their courses. Some acknowledged that faculty members were trying to diversify their material, but too often it came across as 'women's week' or some other token presentation. Those students who cited successful initiatives talked about the inclusion of women authors, or political leaders, or scientists or artists or business leaders as a regular part of the readings, perspectives and issues that were addressed.

The women also commented on the differences in the tone and tenor of the classroom when women were instructors. While not wanting to generalize or stereotype, the students believed that those faculty most willing 'to open themselves up to be real people' were women. They were the ones making reference to family; they shared more personal perspectives; they were more likely to acknowledge the barriers that existed and had been conquered, or those that remained. All of this discussion, while seeming to be 'soft stuff' to many, created an atmosphere which the students found to be more open, welcoming and inclusive, thus encouraging the students to interact with the faculty after class, in office hours, over meals. That is, a personal connection was made.

The students also talked about their experiences outside of the classroom, and their concerns in this domain. One student, a most successful varsity athlete, was delighted with the support she has received from the athletic department. However, she has experienced less support from the faculty and especially in comparison to the male athletes. "Star male athletes are acknowledged and the success of those teams are often noted; women's athletics are invisible. Faculty also seem more willing to be flexible with the male athletes and their scheduling challenges than women." Whether this is an isolated perspective or not, I am not aware...but her voice raises important questions.

Another concern women have expressed over the years relates to career options. While not wanting to stereotype women as being the only ones interested in non-profit careers, they often are interested in pursuing careers that address the lives of others. Students believe that too seldom are speakers brought into class, career panels established, or recruiters invited to campus who represent anything beyond the

corporate sector. To paraphrase one student, "If it weren't for the Peace Corps or Americorps, I am not sure I would know of any other alternatives." This general dissatisfaction is reflected in the responses of the women on the COFHE Senior Survey.

A final topic of concern can best be characterized as simple affirmation for women on campus. Over the years, many students have commented on the basic lack of acknowledgement of their presence in the classroom. This belief is created because some faculty members do not address students by their name, even in smaller classes. Other faculty members constantly confuse the handful of women who are pursuing a specific major not remembering which one is which makes the students feel as if they have no individual merit or are not valued as members of the academic community.

### Conclusion

In this last generation, women undergraduates have experienced significant change---in their enrollment on campus, in the diversity among themselves, in their opportunities for leadership and engagement in the co-curricular parts of life and even in the curriculum they study. These positive changes are reflected in their accomplishments and their general reaction to their educational experience. Yet, this progress cannot be taken as the conclusion of all that there is to do. Diversification of the professoriate and graduate student population is still needed; broadening of the curriculum throughout all disciplines remains to be done; and continued affirmation of women's experience and perspective is needed throughout the academy.