

Report to the February 9, 2000 Faculty Senate Meeting
on the Social Sciences Forum held on February 7, 2000
by Dean Walter Cohen

About 45 faculty met on Monday to discuss the report of the social sciences task force. A number of those attending either had served on the task force or had helped develop one of the interdisciplinary proposals recommended in the report, but the majority had not. The co-chairs of the task force, Phyllis Moen and David Easley, briefly discussed the work and findings of the task force. I then summarized the preliminary, favorable administrative response--an upgraded commitment to CISER (already a reality), a small grants program through the Research Office to encourage pursuit of external funding (which we will also go forward on), a social sciences coordinating committee, and support for the three interdisciplinary areas presented in the report-- social adaptation and decision research; wealth, poverty, and international development; and life course transitions and social policy. We took no position on promoting collaboration across units, though this is surely something we will support. For purely financial reasons, we gave a more reserved, though not blankly hostile, response to proposals for funding a considerable number of research scientists, postdocs, internal fellowships, endowed chairs, and research centers.

Discussion focused on the three targeted interdisciplinary areas. Though some faculty argued that these areas adequately captured the range of the social sciences, a number of speakers, without denying the interest or value of these proposals, argued that each would benefit from intellectual broadening; that it was important to find a way to encourage work in other, equally important areas that remained unrepresented; and that a focus on a limited number of topics might lead to underfunding of many other critical sectors of the social sciences. Collaborative work is especially difficult in some of these areas--which may partly explain the absence of submissions to the task force. An intellectually appealing if pragmatically daunting proposal was for each interdisciplinary area to have built into it fundamental challenges to its assumptions and methods, without, however, allowing those challenges to prevent work in the area from going forward.

There was interested if somewhat skeptical discussion of a social sciences coordinating committee. The idea of a regular link to the provost's office was attractive, but there were various concerns about criteria for membership, about the selection process, perhaps about the role of the committee in identifying promising research areas, and certainly about the ability of the committee to improve faculty quality through involvement in hiring and promotion.

There was considerable interest in a society for the social sciences, on the model for the Society for the Humanities. In response to this suggestion as well as other potentially expensive proposals, I replied that we were not yet prepared to come down one way or the other.

Overall, though it would be hard to describe a consensus viewpoint, the suggestion that we go forward but slowly enough to address the concerns that were raised probably comes as close as any to grasping the general tenor of the meeting.

My intent now is to discuss these responses (including the big-ticket funding proposals) with the provost's staff, to urge the authors of the three interdisciplinary proposals to broaden their disciplinary and methodological range, and to solicit more general suggestions on how we might create a social sciences coordinating committee that would promote the visibility and stature of the social sciences, and that would accordingly be welcomed by most social scientists at Cornell. I strongly encourage any suggestions you may have. My hope is that we will have some firm decisions by the end of the semester.