

## MEMO

TO: FCR Colleagues  
FROM: Richard Baer  
Date: March 7, 1995

SUBJECT: **Diversity and Curricular Homogeneity at Cornell**

### I. Introduction

Carlos Castillo-Chavez reported at the February 8 meeting of the FCR on progress in affirmative action at Cornell over the past year. In discussing faculty hiring, he noted that "in a period of 18 years Cornell experienced a significant increase in its diversity."

With all due respect to the achievements of Prof. Castillo-Chavez and others who have worked in affirmative action, I would like to suggest that if we think of Cornell in terms of diversity of ideas, our affirmative action program has been only modestly successful, and in some respects it has not even begun to deal with the most difficult problems. It may well be the case that in terms of *ideas*, Cornell has less diversity today than twenty years ago.

Although my experience suggests that many departments in various colleges at Cornell lack adequate diversity of ideas and points of view, to illustrate my point, I would like to focus on the issue of diversity in two particular departments, both within the College of Human Ecology.

### II. Background

A little background information will make clear why I have singled out these two departments, even though I think the problem exists in many parts of the university. Over the past decade, perhaps as many as twenty students from HUMEAC's departments of Human Development and Family Studies and Human Service Studies have asked to talk with me about what they perceived as the extreme one-sidedness of their programs of study, and about what they viewed as serious religious and ideological discrimination in these departments. Most of these students got to know me through taking my course "Religion, Ethics, and the Environment," and some were majors in HDFS or HSS. During September of 1992 several students asked me if I would help them work for a more diverse academic climate in these two departments.

Over the following months, the students and I met a number of times and wrestled with what they considered the most serious problems. Then we contacted Dean Francille Firebaugh, Associate Dean Charles McClintock, HDFS chair Steven Hamilton, and HSS chair Connie Shapiro and asked to meet with them.

After some initial delays, we met several times to discuss our concerns about courses in HDFS and HSS. But neither the students nor I thought that these meetings were productive in terms of bringing about significant change.

### III. Summary of Major Concerns

(1) In many of the larger classes in HDFS and HSS (for example, HDFS 362 [Close Relationships Across the Life Span], HDFS 150 [Families and the Life Course], and HSS 315 [Human Sexuality: Human Service Delivery]) sensitive issues are dealt with but almost always from a single point of view--typically, very liberal, if not left-wing; strongly pro-feminist; decidedly pro-gay; clearly in favor of women working outside of the home instead of nurturing children; distinctly pro-

abortion; predominantly committed to government rather than private sector solutions to family problems; etc.

(2) Faculty in some of these larger courses typically present evidence in favor of these liberal points of view very selectively, and students are seldom exposed to existing social science data which supports opposing viewpoints. As recently as two years ago, the 10% figure for the incidence of homosexuality in America was still being quoted in lectures and assigned readings even though this figure has been known to be suspect for well over a decade. Various aspects of the Kinsey studies upon which it is based are methodologically shoddy and not acceptable to most first-rate social scientists. The best-supported figure today for the incidence of homosexuality in America is between 1 and 3 percent.

Data which faculty consider unacceptable on ideological grounds or which supports positions different from what faculty embrace is often simply omitted. For instance, students are seldom exposed to studies indicating that well over half of mothers with very young children prefer to take care of their children themselves rather than put them in daycare, but in many cases cannot do so because they are under economic pressure to take a job outside of the home. Students seldom if ever are exposed to data that show how the growing burden of local, state, and federal taxes over the past forty five years has been a major factor in pressuring women to work outside of the home. Rarely are students asked to consider the very substantial body of data which shows that children generally fare far better in homes with both a father and a mother present than in single-parent families.

Students routinely are taught (often the point is simply assumed) that government solutions to family and other social problems are preferable to private sector solutions. Sweden is often presented as the model country in this respect. Business, industry, the Republican party, and the military are regularly portrayed in a negative manner.

Rarely are students asked to reflect on any of the more sophisticated arguments ethicists, philosophers, and theologians have put forward against abortion, divorce, euthanasia, etc.

In the written materials dissatisfied students have produced over the past two and a half years they have detailed many additional examples of curricular and ideological homogeneity. They decry the ideologically tendentious approaches various professors take to highly controversial issues and believe that many of their courses are both monotonous and miseducative. Their experiences as students in HDFS and HSS are not unlike those of women, African Americans, and other minorities in the years before the civil rights and feminist movements brought about substantial changes in American higher education.

(3) When occasionally more conservative points of view are presented, this is often done in a distorted manner. Conservative and traditional Christian and Jewish perspectives are caricatured, and when visitors from time to time are asked to present a more conservative viewpoint they either are not given adequate time to do so (As one example, Bob Johnson from Cornell United Religious Work was asked to discuss a Protestant Christian perspective on marriage and human sexuality in 15 minutes!), or else people without adequate academic credentials are invited to make presentations with the inevitable result that the conservative position is made to seem even less credible to students.

(4) A substantial number of students report that because many of their courses are so monotonously homogeneous they are not being taught to weigh ideas carefully and to think critically about the various controversial issues which are treated in class.

(5) In a number of cases faculty in HDFS and HSS have treated conservative Christian students with less than courtesy and respect. Their ideas have been ridiculed in class, and when individual

students have objected or tried to present opposing ideas they have sometimes been treated in a rather brusque and unfriendly manner. In fairness, I should note that there has been some improvement in this area over the past two years, a change probably related to the meetings that were held between students and faculty and administrators during the 1993-94 school year.

(6) In many instances faculty simply push their own philosophical and ideological and moral assumptions on students with little chance for discussion and with virtually no exposure to alternative points of view. For instance, most faculty appear simply to assume the general correctness of moral and value relativism and teach accordingly. Again and again I find students from HDFS and HSS, including those who take my course "Religion, Ethics, and the Environment," uncritically embracing moral relativism. Hardly any of them are able to discuss the pros and cons of moral relativism in a coherent manner. This is particularly interesting in light of the fact that relatively few first-rate ethicists, philosophers, or theologians today are moral relativists. We are, of course, not blaming all of this on HUMEAC faculty, for most students have already received heavy doses of moral relativism from public schools and the media before they arrive at Cornell. At the very least, however, we can say that little is being done to help students become more reflective and critical about such philosophical positions. Prof. Jerome Ziegler's graduate-level course, Professional Ethics and Public Policy (HSS 658), I might add, is a refreshing exception to the point I am making.

To take another example, many of the larger courses in HDFS and HSS present materials which uncritically assume that the meaning and purpose of life is to be found in satisfying one's own desires and in one's own self fulfillment. These assumptions are not specifically discussed, defended, or evaluated, and students are rarely, if ever, exposed to the beliefs of traditional Christianity and Judaism which hold that the purpose of life is to learn to love God and to live justly and responsibly in relation to one's fellow human beings.

Or take a third example: the courses we have examined in detail seem to assume that freedom for human beings is mainly a matter of being able to make unhindered decisions about how one wants to live—that is, freedom means to live autonomously without external constraints. This is one view of freedom, but it is far removed from the view held by many conservatives and by traditional Christian, Jewish, and Muslim thinkers. Freedom for the Christian is found in being obedient to the will of God. Some secular philosophers believe freedom is found in living one's life according to what is good, and beautiful, and true. In our own political heritage we find sentiments like those expressed by (sorry, I can't find the reference right now), who refers to "those wise constraints that make men free."

Example four: when sex education is discussed in the courses we have examined, conservative and traditional religious views of human sexuality and the family are routinely caricatured or neglected, and "sexual liberation" is uncritically assumed to be a good thing. Negative impacts of no-fault divorce on children and family structure are rarely considered. Conservative secular and religious views are held to be outdated. They may have been acceptable to people long ago, but now we have science and reason and higher education, and these older views will probably appeal only to those who do not think very clearly.

(7) Faculty in HDFS and HSS claim that their classes are scientifically grounded and present issues fairly. But protesting students and I believe to the contrary that ideology plays a dominant role: the choice and treatment of subject matter are determined mainly by the liberal ideological commitments of faculty, and little effort is made towards either comprehensiveness or fairness. We, of course, realize that complete objectivity and fairness are not possible. On the other hand, the ideological bias in HDFS and HSS is so strong that it is not an exaggeration to say that many students are not receiving the kind of outstanding education they expected when they arrived at Cornell.

(8) Faculty in HDFS and HSS engage in what might fairly be described as extensive censorship

by omission. Obviously, Cornell faculty and administrators are too sophisticated to tell faculty members that they cannot express particular points of view on specific issues. That would violate their academic freedom. The censorship in HDFS and HSS is far more subtle than that: people who hold the wrong ideas simply are not hired. And we see no evidence that any serious effort has been made in these departments to broaden the marketplace of ideas with respect to traditional religious and conservative points of view by attempting to hire faculty who are competent scholars able thoughtfully and sympathetically to present such points of view. Diversity according to gender, sexual orientation, and skin color are a high priority in HDFS and HSS. But diversity of ideas appears to be unimportant to faculty and administrators.

#### **IV. What Has HUMEC Offered to Do?**

Discussions with Dean Francille Firebaugh, Associate Dean Charles McClintock, HDFS chair Steve Hamilton, and HSS chair Connie Shapiro have produced mainly the following results: (1) HUMEC faculty are being urged to be "nicer" (our term, not theirs) to conservative students and to students with deep religious convictions, and (2) HUMEC faculty and administrators will make some efforts occasionally to invite speakers to campus who will represent differing points of view.

Students have responded as follows: (1) Such a commitment to courtesy and academic respect is a positive move. On the other hand, if HDFS and HSS faculty are "nicer" to students but make few other changes, the situation will in some ways be even worse than it now is. At least today, Christian students and conservative students quickly become aware of the bias, lack of diversity, censorship, and discrimination that exist in HDFS and HSS and make adjustments of their own to these conditions. If a veneer of niceness and collegiality is added to the extreme one-sidedness of the curriculum, students may be less likely to become aware of how narrow the HUMEC marketplace of ideas actually is. (2) Inviting outside speakers to HUMEC is a step in the right direction, but it is by itself not adequate. Protesting students have also wondered who will guarantee that such a commitment to diversity will continue after protesting students have graduated?

#### **V. What Changes Are Needed?**

(1) Those of us who have wrestled for over two years with these issues believe that no serious improvement will take place in HDFS and HSS until faculty and administrators are willing to make a good faith effort to hire new faculty who will be able to present omitted viewpoints both fairly and sympathetically. We have suggested that the first stage should involve the hiring of three new faculty--two individuals who are competent to represent conservative Christian points of view and one who is competent to represent conservative Jewish points of view. Thoroughly competent scholars who meet these criteria are available. All that is needed is a commitment from the HUMEC administration to seek them out and hire them.

We do not believe that current faculty are able through their own teaching and research to redress the pervasive lack of diversity in HDFS and HSS, both because most of them are opposed to or even hostile to the missing points of view, and also because present faculty do not have the requisite academic background and experience.

To insist that current faculty are able to remedy the present situation is no more credible than to argue that women's studies or black studies need not hire women or blacks but can be adequately staffed by white males.

We do not envision that these faculty appointments would be mainly in ethics or religious studies, but rather in one or another of the social sciences with a special emphasis on some aspect of

human development and the family or on the delivery of human services. But the individuals filling these positions must be thoroughly conversant with more conservative and traditional religious perspectives on child nurture, human sexuality, marriage, abortion, divorce, etc.

(2) We want to stress that the College of Human Ecology at Cornell is a public, tax-supported institution. As such it has prima facie obligations towards fairness. It is an abuse of the public trust to use public tax monies to indoctrinate students in a narrow range of ideological viewpoints and to censor competing points of view. Although we will not attempt to make the case here, it could be argued that HDFFS and HSS as they currently operate violate the spirit of the First Amendment: Liberal, even left-wing, beliefs and values have been given a kind of establishment status, and competing conservative secular and religious beliefs and values are distorted or ignored.

It is our belief that if a sense of fairness and a sense of what constitutes a vital marketplace of ideas will not move faculty and administrators in HUMECE to diversify the marketplace of ideas, then pure self interest ought to do so. We say this, because we are convinced that when the general public eventually learns more about what is taking place in HDFFS and HSS they will begin to put heavy pressure on state legislators either to instigate change or else to reduce financial support for the college. Why, after all, should taxpayers sacrifice to support a college that routinely undermines their deepest beliefs and values, not by fairly winning in the marketplace of ideas, but rather through censorship, caricature, and indoctrination?

(3) We want to emphasize that in all our discussions with HDFFS and HSS faculty and with HUMECE deans we have stressed the following points: (a) We are totally opposed to any attempts to restrict academic freedom of individual faculty. Individual faculty should have the right to present truth as they see it; (b) We have tried very hard not to attack individual faculty or administrators as persons. We have attempted to be fair in our criticisms, realizing that faculty and administrators are our colleagues and mentors; (c) We are not trying to "Christianize" HDFFS and HSS or to make these departments politically and socially conservative. We are not advocating a winner-takes-all stance, but rather are urging a more diverse marketplace of ideas. Indeed, we believe that HDFFS and HSS *currently* reflect a winner-takes-all mentality, with little serious effort by faculty to diversify their ranks philosophically or to expose students seriously to solid research and writing that reflects beliefs and values different from those of the current faculty. We believe that the education students now receive in HDFFS and HSS is so narrow in scope that most of them will be ill-prepared to function competently as professionals who serve a broad range of people, most of whom will have beliefs and values and life experiences very different from those of the great majority of faculty in these departments.

We realize that HDFFS and HSS are now and will likely in the future remain mainly within the orbit of the social sciences. Our recommendation is not that faculty teach religion, philosophy, and ethics (although some exposure to these fields surely would benefit students), but rather that the marketplace of ideas be expanded within the general framework of the social sciences. At present, the curricula of HDFFS and HSS appear to us as largely ideology-driven. No curriculum will be ideology-free, but at least there can be good-faith attempts to diversify the curriculum by deliberately seeking faculty who represent different points of view.

## VI. Conclusions

In an odd sort of way, Cornell's affirmative action program may well have resulted in less rather than greater diversity at Cornell, at least in terms of ideas, beliefs, and values. Students benefit substantially from more women and minorities on the faculty, but it is my guess that insofar as most affirmative action hires tend to be left of center politically and socially, we have in some respects a more monolithic university faculty today than we did twenty years ago.

Thus it is my conviction that throughout the university, including HDFS and HSS, the attempt to achieve greater diversity over the next decade should focus more on ideas and less on skin color and gender.

Insofar as hiring faculty at Cornell is done mainly at the departmental/college level, I am not clear how FCR can or should be involved in the situation I have described. At the very least, FCR should be familiar with the conditions that now prevail. Insofar as faculty and administrators are concerned about the reputation and educational mission of the entire university, it may be appropriate to institute some kind of affirmative action program geared to remedy past discrimination, censorship, and exclusion in the realm of ideas.

Obviously, not every viewpoint and set of beliefs and values current in our highly pluralistic society can be represented at Cornell. But at the very least, those positions which have played a key role historically in America, which continue to be embraced by a very substantial portion of our society today, and which are represented by a substantial body of competent scholarship ought to be represented.

In the endowed colleges at Cornell, curricular one-sidedness can be faulted as being miseducative and monotonous. In the statutory colleges, another factor is relevant, namely that the public has a right to expect that when they foot the bills for higher education their money will not be used to indoctrinate students in a narrow range of ideology that is far removed from where most citizens are today. If our statutory colleges fail to understand this, it may well be that a better informed public will eventually pull the financial plug on them. And in my judgment they will have good reason for doing so.

It would be far better for Cornell if on our own initiative we could find some appropriate way to take necessary remedial action.