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[Memo from Alice Ilchman to Parents, March 24, 1989]

Alice Stone Ilchman
Sarah Lawrence College

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Recommended Citation

Ilchman, Alice Stone, "[Memo from Alice Ilchman to Parents, March 24, 1989]" (1989). *Complete protest and activism collection online*, Sarah Lawrence College Archives. 42.
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SARAH LAWRENCE COLLEGE

March 24, 1989

THE PRESIDENT

To: All Parents
From: Alice Stone Ilchman

As many of you know, the College has just emerged from a week of protests concerning racial issues. Approximately 125 students, led by the Concerned Students of Color, took over Westlands on Monday morning, March 13, and continued the sit-in through Friday afternoon, March 17. It was an unsettling period for most members of the College community, regardless of their individual views and positions.

A small negotiating team of faculty and administrators is meeting with a group of students to work toward a resolution of the issues. Several of the students' demands are central to the College's agenda -- such as the goal to increase the number of minority faculty and to bring more multi-cultural and non-European perspectives into our curriculum. Here the differences are largely of timing and degree. But at the core of some of their other demands are differences of opinion about our organizational structure, the use of space, and claims upon the College's scarce resources. These will be more complicated to address. Underlying all the demands is an assumption that American society, and the College as a microcosm of that society, have not fostered a true pluralism of opportunity and support for the broad range of diverse peoples.

Working out the claims upon the College and its resources to support opportunities for particular groups of students and faculty and for all students and faculty is the task of the days ahead. These conversations must go on in an environment that recognizes that the College exists to promote and encourage free inquiry and the free exchange of ideas. Such an environment depends on trust and openness, a respect for each other's ideas, and a toleration of differences in views that cannot be reconciled.

In the coming weeks, we will be studying the issues underlying the demands of the Concerned Students of Color in all the forums in which the College conducts its business -- in the committees of the faculty, in student government, in administrative offices where responsibility is placed, and within the Board of Trustees. We believe it important to take into consideration the full range of views and concerns of all members of the College community. Not all change is appropriate; not all change can meet the expected pace. Colleges are places where we think things through, where coercion is an unwelcome intruder. Seeking to make our College better and stronger -- and hence providing a constructive mirror to our larger society -- is not just an agenda for the spring, but for the years ahead.