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Report of the Institutional Diversity Task Force

Sarah Lawrence College

September, 2005

Introduction

Our task force was empanelled by the General Committee of Sarah Lawrence College in the aftermath of a series of discussions about race and diversity on campus that occurred during the 2003-04 academic year. These discussions, and the incidents and turmoil associated with them, were serious enough that they suggested a structural crisis. We as an institution were forced to confront the alarming possibility that we were failing to meet the needs of our students of color, and that, moreover, many of these students had grown skeptical of the very idea of an inclusive liberal-arts education. In response, the College took the almost-unprecedented step of suspending classes for a day to engage in a teach-in the spring of 2004 centering on the way vexing and painful issues arising out of the racial complexity of society were recognized, or not recognized, and addressed, or not addressed, at the College, and in the country at large.

It was decided after this teach-in that an ad-hoc body was necessary to examine the circumstances, both structural and incidental, that led to the teach-in. We as a task force were constituted as this body, and we have responded to these circumstances by adopting points of view that are important to understanding the following report. Most significantly, we have let ourselves be governed by the imperatives of transformation rather than by those of amelioration and redress. In conducting our research and in our writing, we have not embraced diversity

simply for its own sake, or as a reaction to past events on campus, but because we have concluded that it is only by welcoming diversity that we can forge a deeper and more inclusive learning community. We subscribe to the idea that a sense of common purpose and shared knowledge requires the opportunity for self-directed learning be made equally available to all members of our student body; and to the idea that a frank understanding of what makes us different from one another leads not to fragmentation but, instead, to a deeper appreciation of our humanity and our shared conditions.

We have seen the problems that led to the teach-in not as accidental or temporary phenomena but as symptomatic of deeper tensions—tensions not unique to Sarah Lawrence but ones that pose a particular and excruciating challenge to the College, given its progressive ideals and history. We have also construed our mandate as broadly as possible, and have not only analyzed issues of diversity as they effect institutional life at the College but have understood these issues as presenting a precious opportunity for Sarah Lawrence both to reaffirm its basic values and to re-imagine its future in a rapidly changing America.

The premises of the following recommendations are, therefore, that the reasons for developing the Sarah Lawrence community in such a way as to reflect the diversity of our society are compelling and profound, and that the development of a diverse, multifarious community is essential to the mission of Sarah Lawrence, to the ideals of a humanistic, pedagogically progressive education on which the College was founded. If Sarah Lawrence is to flourish in an increasingly complex world while maintaining its internal integrity and its historic mission, diversity has to be recognized as a constitutive quality of the College, as part of its essential nature; and a failure to make the College sufficiently diverse and inclusive has to be recognized as a fundamental rather than an adventitious failure. While attempts have been made

in the past to address diversity issues on campus, the results have been inconclusive and unsatisfying. A more systematic and sustained initiative is therefore required.

We hope that by framing the College-wide conversation about diversity in the deepest terms possible, and that by entertaining first-order questions about the nature and purpose of a Sarah Lawrence education, we can create a salutary climate for the examination of these crucial issues. A clear-eyed commitment to the creation of a diverse educational community at Sarah Lawrence will allow the College to reinvigorate itself, and to reaffirm its core values. The recommendations, discussion, and appendices in this report will, we hope, inaugurate an exciting, enlivening era in the history of the College.

Recommendations

The Diversity Task Force recommends that a sustained campaign to increase the diversity of the College's faculty, staff and, especially, our student body, become one of our central institutional commitments over the next decade. The goal of this diversity initiative will be to have persons from all major segments of American society present throughout all aspects of life of the College in roughly the same proportion as they are present in the society as a whole. While the articulation of such a goal in the language we have used is inevitably imprecise, we believe that stating our goal in this way provides an heuristic device by means of which institutional energies can be focused and institutional inertia can be overcome in an area so crucial to the future of the College. To this end, we recommend specifically:

1. That the College initiate an on-going, campus-wide conversation on the importance of institutional diversity, and on the steps that can be taken in all aspects of College life to realize the goal of the diversity initiative; that concrete goals for sustainable diversity and a specific timetable for their accomplishment be set by the College, these goals and timetables including but not limited to an immediate priority placed on recruiting and retaining a more diverse student body, arriving within the next five years at what is sometimes called a "threshold of diversity" —where the fact of diversity is felt and welcomed in all aspects of College life—and establishing a set of quantifiable indicators that will allow us to measure our progress toward the goal of the initiative.

2. That the College, in consultation with the President and the Board of Trustees, create a senior administrative position, at the level of an Associate Dean of the Faculty, with primary responsibility for overseeing all diversity initiatives.
3. That a substantial increase, ten per cent or more, be made in the financial-aid budget over and above regular increases for at least five years, which funds will be used specifically to recruit a more diverse student body.
4. That all relevant hiring and recruiting committees continue to build on and enhance the diversity of our faculty and staff.
5. That the importance of diversity to the College's mission, the concrete goals and policies adopted, and the current success in realizing these goals and implementing these policies be displayed prominently and clearly in the literature and media with which the College presents itself to prospective students and the public generally.
6. That a Permanent Faculty and Staff Committee on Institutional Diversity be created whose tasks will include devising more specific policies to realize the diversity initiative; evaluating current efforts at recruiting, admitting, and retaining a diverse student body, faculty, and staff; monitoring the implementation and success of specific policies and initiatives; and serving as a central clearing house in which a variety of decisions can be examined for their impact on institutional diversity.

7. That a Multicultural Summer Institute, initially funded externally, be established, which would offer several weeks of intensive academic and leadership training, provided by regular Sarah Lawrence faculty and resulting in course credit, and in which selected admitted students could enroll free of charge.
8. That a thorough evaluation be undertaken with all deliberate speed of current efforts at recruiting a diverse student body, and that the resulting recommendations be adopted and adequately funded.
9. That a similar thoroughgoing evaluation be made of the current admission process to determine whether there are ways to increase our admission and yield of a diverse student body.
10. That the College seek immediately to involve more faculty and alumnae/i in recruiting students of color, both by representing the College generally and by specific personal contact with admitted students.
11. That funding and support for multicultural student activities and planning on campus be increased, with the eventual goal of creating an intercultural community center with its own staff, programming budget, and space.

12. That funding be increased for the Community Partnerships Office and Service Learning Program in an effort to forge a more consistent connection between the College and its surrounding communities.
13. That targeted fundraising be conducted with the explicit aim of supporting the diversity initiative as a central component of the next capital drive, and also with foundations to support specific initiatives such as the multicultural summer institute or the intercultural community center.
14. That a new program of faculty-leave grants for the development of courses related to diversity themes be created.
15. That student-life funds be increased, specifically to promote student participation in activities related to diversity in surrounding communities, and in national organizations and conferences, so as to increase the visibility of the College in these environments.
16. That Sarah Lawrence establish relationships or strengthen existing relationships with specific area high schools to serve as feeders to the College.
17. That the current summer writing program be expanded to target specific area high schools in order to encourage their student to see the College as both a resource for their current undertakings and an option for undergraduate and graduate study.

Discussion

While interpretations of the nature and ubiquity of the problems that led to the teach-in on racism in the spring of 2004 diverge widely, the reality of the alienation students of color were expressing on campus seems beyond question. Many reported feeling increasingly conscious of their skin color and socioeconomic background. Many felt themselves to be token authority figures in race-related class discussions. Students of color were so troubled by commonplace, but in the Sarah Lawrence environment surprising, ethnic and racial insults that a number of them organized their own forum on diversity at the end of November, 2003. In an uncoordinated but nevertheless substantial effort, a block of students of color applied to transfer out of the College. There were reports too widespread to ignore of racially insensitive comments, ignorant attitudes toward security personnel, friction in dormitories, and, even, tension between faculty members.

We spent six months studying Sarah Lawrence, comparable institutions, and more general trends in higher education and in society, and we kept the emotions and frustrations that led to the teach-in in mind while preparing this report. We felt responsible for finding ways to ameliorate and to prevent in the future the problems outlined above. We were particularly worried that students of color did not see themselves as full citizens in their educational community.

But we also recognized that we had an obligation to search for dynamic approaches that went well beyond amelioration, and that would insure that Sarah Lawrence finally freed itself from the cycles of concern, sympathy, controversy, and subsequent inertia that have characterized institutional response over the past decade to these persistent and painful issues of

equality. The following discussion is intended to give readers of this report a brief synopsis of the considerations we entertained and the imperatives we embraced in formulating our recommendations. The appendices that follow the discussion provide further information about how our thinking was shaped.

According to the Census Bureau, over the next fifty years the United States will become a “majority-minority” society—that is, a society in which no single racial group (as such groups are conventionally understood) will constitute a demographic majority. We as a task force feel that long-range planning for the College has to take this enormous fact into account, for both practical reasons and reasons of principle. Practically, if Sarah Lawrence is to continue competing for the best students, we have to maintain our reputation for responding to the conditions of society in ways that are as relevant as they are pedagogically unique. Our necessities dictate to a certain extent our need for change and invention.

The central attraction of Sarah Lawrence is its reputation for pedagogical innovation. We as a task force feel that the College will endanger this reputation if it does not find ways to respond to the diverse society and diverse student pool we are facing, and will also do so if we respond haphazardly in the future, proximate or otherwise, to changes that have already overtaken us. Bluntly put, to the extent that we appear an island of white privilege in an increasingly fluid and diverse society, we risk seeming not only unjust but also unattractive, quaint, and irrelevant to the best students, students who might otherwise find us highly attractive. We also make ourselves less attractive to alumnae/i donors, to grant-giving organizations, and to the kind of gifted and dynamic faculty we have heretofore been able to hire. And we run the added risk of perpetuating divisions on campus that will only widen as society continues to

change, and that will compromise the enthusiasm and commitment necessary to the success of our complex, fragile pedagogical practices.

There are other practical considerations behind our recommendations. A wide body of research supports the finding that students learn more and better in more diverse settings. The broader range of perspectives and the variety of questions, experiences, and conceptual frameworks that a diverse faculty and student body bring to bear restore to academic subjects their full complexity and interest. This has been shown to be true not only with subjects that relate directly to social identity but in the humanities, sciences, and social sciences generally.¹ This evidence is so persuasive that it furnished the grounds on which a relatively conservative Supreme Court upheld the principle of affirmative action in the recent University of Michigan cases.² Given the force of this evidence, it has been hard for us to avoid the conclusion that Sarah Lawrence, to the detriment of its own interests, has fallen behind in responding to the practical value of embracing institutional diversity in all its aspects.

Even more important than these practical considerations, though, are the considerations and imperatives of value and meaning that we as a task force have grappled with, and that we would like the College community also to grapple with. We cannot as an institution dilute our commitment to preparing our students to engage in society, and through their art, their activism, and their professional ambitions exercise in the world the capacity for critical and constructive

¹ Patricia Gurin, Eric L. Dey, Sylvia Hurdato, and Gerald Gurin, "Diversity and Higher Education: Theory and Impact on Educational Outcomes," *Harvard Educational Review*, 72 (3), 2002, pp.330-366; Patricia Gurin, "The Compelling Need for Diversity in Education," *Michigan Journal of Race & Law*, 5(1), 1999, 363-425; and Gary Orfield, ed., *Diversity challenged: Evidence on the impact of affirmative action*, (Harvard, 2001).

² This line of argument led the US Military and many major US corporations to submit amici curiae briefs supporting the University of Michigan in the recent affirmative action Supreme Court Cases, *Gratz v. Bollinger* and *Grutter v. Bollinger*. For evidence concerning the relation between diversity in higher education and civic participation, see Patricia Gurin, Biren (Ratnesh) A. Nagda, and Gretchen E. Lopez, "The Benefits of Diversity in Education for Democratic Citizenship," *Journal of Social Issues*, 60(1), 2004, pp.17-34. For a synthetic overview of the evidence about the transformed nature of work and the specific need to engage with diverse others in order to succeed, see Cynthia Estlund's *Working Together* (Oxford, 2003).

thought inculcated here. We cannot tolerate an educational environment in which our students of color are not being well served, and are not developing as fully as the student body at large. It makes, therefore, straightforward pedagogical sense to try to produce on our campus a rough image of the society our students will confront. Nor can we, like more lavishly-endowed institutions, rest on our past achievements (though many of those institutions are hardly resting: cf. Harvard's diversity initiative in faculty hiring, as reported in the *Times* this past spring). But Sarah Lawrence is well situated to allow a diverse group of students to encounter one another in an environment that enables them to understand both their differences and their similarities, and thus prepares them to participate in the society of the future

Sarah Lawrence inspires great loyalty in its students, faculty, staff, and graduates, and it does so because the College takes its humanism seriously, very seriously. We look upon the bitter injustices—social, economic, racial, and sexual—of the world with something much more than disdain. We not only profess our values of tolerance, fairness, and inclusiveness but embody them in our institutional structures; in our discourse; in our relationships within our discursive community; in the absolute respect we give to the individual student by placing her or him at the center of the learning process; and in the image we present to the world. But in these exigent times we can no longer merely linger in our manifest good will. To keep Sarah Lawrence's progressivism fresh and perennial, and to insure the survival of its values through the changes that are now upon us, we have to come up with a cohesive, forceful, and exhaustive response to the burden of difference and the growing fractiousness and inequity in the world. The diversity initiative will allow us to do precisely that.