

April 1, 1992 (Vol. 7, no. 15)

Dear Colleague:

"Diversity" is the goal of the University--a curious goal when one pauses to think, for a University like ours is already extremely diverse. Any day, people on different parts of the campus are studying diffusion creep in Perovskite, the Golden Notebooks of Doris Lessing, perturbations of the Westerlies, Sufism, the Wisconsin legislature--theory and practice, Marxism, the sociology of basketball recruiting, the meaning of Existenz, how to calm a hysterical child, etc. And if each language represents a unique world-view, then on this campus there are some forty languages and world-views to choose from--Hausa, Turkish, Korean, Latin, Cantonese, and so on.

To entering freshmen, the University can seem a monster precisely because it is such a bewilderingly complex and diverse place. What many of them seek is a greater degree of order and homogeneity. And if this is true of privileged middle-class students, it is all the more true of minority students. University policy is thus at odds with the deepest longing of minority students: the one pushes for diversity, the other pushes for the comfortably familiar--for a less rich, less diverse environment.

Diversity, like cosmopolitanism, has two meanings, one geographical, the other personal. Geographically, the addition of new programs on the lifeways of the Puerto Rican, Chicano, Asian American, etc., increases the overall diversity of the University. Personally, however, students enjoy diversity only to the degree that they willingly sample the University's vast offering of "worlds" and "thought patterns." Just as Jerusalem is a highly cosmopolitan city and yet has very few cosmopolites, so our University can be an extremely diverse place and yet be filled by more and more students who seek homogeneity.

The University has a long history going back all the way to monastic schools and the Athenian Academy. The character of the University has undergone radical changes through this period. Nevertheless, one assumption has remained constant until our time, namely, students who enter a University seek to broaden their horizons, move out of the limitations of their parish (or hometown) for the invigorating (and no doubt at times chilling) air of the world stage. In the last twenty years or so, this assumption is being strongly challenged. More and more students are entering the University determined to retain as many of the habits of childhood and hometown as they possibly can. For these students, what they already know rather than what they can know is the source of pride. Pride for minority students now, as for the idle rich in the past, lies more in the reassuring presence of an heirloom than in the power to negotiate the present and invent a future. What has gone wrong?

Best wishes,

