

TO: The Faculty

March 27, 1978

FROM: Roger Lane

RE: Our Policy on "Diversity"

I would like before our next meeting to raise the larger issue of which I think the controversy over CFA is only a part. I am concerned not so much with the committee's activities as with the persistent lack of clarity with which the community as a whole has approached the issue of black students at Haverford, past and future. (The concern is with native blacks, not Africans or Hispanics, because it seems that for whatever reasons our experience with the last two groups has not been so tragically wasteful as with the first.)

The issue does not require guilty rhetoric or moralizing so much as hard thought, based when possible on hard information.

I assume that the goal of diversity, as it applies to the increase in black faculty, is or should be at least primarily directed towards making the careers of our black students more rewarding than they have been. While we as a faculty are indeed somewhat parochial, I hope we have not yet reached the point at which our social, and intellectual contacts are limited to those down the hall or across the campus. There is a price to be paid for extraordinary procedures such as "targeting"; agree or not, strong moral reservations are felt; the existence of fears and jealousies, too, must be acknowledged as part of our condition. Perhaps the price is worth it--but only if the activities of CFA are seen as one of a set of clearly defined means towards a clearly realistic end. Without harder thinking about the place and condition of our black undergraduates, we are in danger of losing sight of the end while wrangling over the means.

My strong feeling is that for many years we have taken numbers of promising young black people, the best and brightest, and introduced them to failure and defeat at an appalling rate.

Under these circumstances it is in some sense arrogant as well as foolish to speak of our "moral obligation" to even larger numbers of potential black applicants. We are a small and otherwise limited institution of limited means. We do rather well at providing an elite liberal arts education. We should not, only partly because we cannot, do much to change the character of what we provide. But we should recognize that a great many alternatives exist for today's black students. Neither Haverford nor its type of education is essential to the cultivation either of genius or good works. (Aryeh has pointed out that Plato, for example, would have been outraged at our language requirement.) What we have done, much too often, is strangle potential artists, poets, and entrepreneurs in our requirements, and isolate potential community activists on our suburban campus. At the same time, with reverse snobbism, we have dismissed, e.g., the middle class products of Quaker and other private schools as not truly "representative" enough for us.

We can and I believe will graduate more blacks in the coming years, as will most comparable institutions. But the first step in this process should be action to improve dramatically to improve, the success rate of those matriculants who have a solid chance of taking advantage of what we do best. This requires knowledge we do not now have.

First we need to know where we are and have been.

What is the number of black students who have matriculated here over the past 6, 8, or 10 years? What is the ratio of applicants to admissions, and what has Admissions been looking for? What is the ratio of admissions to dropouts? What are the dropouts doing? (This is the constituency which haunts me.) What are the graduates doing? (A white graduate cabdriver may be enjoying personal satisfaction--a black graduate cabdriver is a serious social loss. We do not yet live in a single-standard society.) One of our best sources, in answer to the question "Why--given the spectrum of opportunities--should a black student come here?", tells me that the answer is: to get a 3.5 average, minimally, and go on to a strong graduate school. On that basis, then, what is the success rate?

Having assessed our own position, we then need to look outside. Too often, in addressing problems at Haverford, we act provincially, as though we were the only liberal arts college to have faced them. In fact we rarely innovate. Sometimes, inefficiently, we succeed in reinventing the wheel. More often we re-discover painfully that horses cannot fly. What is needed in this case more than most is comparative information; there is much experience on which to draw.

What are comparable places doing? Which, in particular, have a better rate of success and why? Some of the relevant questions might be: Is an urban environment important--or a rural, as at Oberlin? An involvement with a nearby black community? A "critical mass"? Of what size--absolute or relative? How important is counselling--and of what kind? Everyone to whom I have talked says that more black faculty will help; no one thinks they will help much. What difference have black professors made at Amherst? Why was the ambitious Wesleyan experience a disaster--or was it? Why has Brown been relatively successful--or has it?

Some of these questions surely have answers, helpful ones; others may prove unanswerable. We may decide, too, that special circumstances here allow us to transcend the experience of others. Some things we can do to correct. Some handicaps may prove insurmountable. But until we have wrestled with the problem in some systematic way we have not fulfilled our obligation. The Minorities Coalition has done its part--it has told us that its constituency is hurting. We as scholars have not yet done our part--which is to deliberate on the basis of the best information we can get.

Ultimately we should be able to make some realistic projections about how many black students, and what kinds, we have a reasonable chance of attracting, --and holding--over the next decade. Only then, and with this in mind, can we make a realistic decision about the number of black faculty we can expect, and the means of attracting them, and the price we are willing to pay.

Perhaps CFA--it certainly has the qualifications--can conduct the studies needed. But until some effort has been mounted our "moral commitment" will remain something less than empty. We may pay the price without reaping the benefits. In an atmosphere of disappointment and recrimination, we could end by blighting adult as we have so often undergraduate careers.

Roger Lane