

W E S L E Y A N U N I V E R S I T Y

MIDDLETOWN, CONNECTICUT

5/5/89

To: The Members of the Wesleyan Faculty and Student Body

From: The Committee on Human Rights and Relations

Attached you will find a copy of the Committee's report on its 1988-89 project, a study of the situation of racial minority-group students on our campus. This study was recommended by the CHRR and mandated by the SAC in response to what was perceived as a nationwide crisis in race relations.

We present the report to you with a real sense of urgency. Looking back over the last few years, we can detect a real deterioration in the well-being of minority students at Wesleyan. We have also gained insight into the awkwardness and misunderstandings that white students and faculty encounter in their relations with people of other races.

In our report we analyse some of the factors involved in this deterioration and recommend steps to turn the situation around. It is our hope that by focusing on particular problem areas as well as on general matters of mood and atmosphere, we have contributed to making Wesleyan a better place for all of us to live, work and grow.

To: The Wesleyan Faculty and Student Body
From: The Committee on Human Rights and Relations
Re: Report on the Committee's Study of Race Relations
Date: May 1989

I. History and Mandate of the Committee on Human Rights and Relations

In May of 1980 the faculty asked the Student Affairs Committee to create a task force to examine sexual abuse on campus. In the fall of 1980 the SAC established the Committee on Human Rights and Relations and directed it to address not only sexual abuse but also racial abuse and other forms of interpersonal abuse. During the 1980-81 academic year the CHRR undertook the assigned study of sexual abuse and presented its first report and recommendations in May 1981. During the next seven years the CHRR reviewed the subject of racial abuse, the experience of gay, lesbian and bisexual students at Wesleyan, and then sexual abuse again.

II. The 1988-89 Agenda

In the spring of 1988 the CHRR recommended that its agenda for the 1988-89 academic year include a fresh examination of race relations at Wesleyan, on the grounds that the well-being of minority students at institutions of higher learning has increasingly become a matter of national concern. During the last two or three years, instances of racial abuse at colleges and universities have been reported and extensively discussed in the media. As a result, many institutions have had to reassess their progress toward achieving racial harmony and justice, and to adopt new initiatives to reaffirm their commitment. Although Wesleyan has done better than most educational institutions in the areas of race relations and minority advancement, and is often praised for consistently renewing its efforts, the CHRR felt there was a danger of Wesleyan's becoming complacent and forgetting that it must maintain its dedication to providing an environment in which all its students can grow and flourish.

When the Student Affairs Committee endorsed the CHRR's recommendation in April 1988, it noted that the issue of race relations at Wesleyan had not been examined since the 1982-83 academic year. Before beginning its work, the 1988-89 CHRR determined that most of the recommendations made in the 1982 CHRR report had been carried out: talks had been held with various departments described by minority-group students as displaying negative attitudes toward them, and with departments viewed as important service departments that students from racial minorities would have to pass through in order to enter certain fields; the Career Planning Center had very successfully carried out the recommendation to pay particular attention to the needs of minority students for job, career and graduate study information and counselling; the Dean's Office had organized special orientation programs on racial issues for the residential

staff; race-relations workshops had been held with the Student Services and Career Planning staffs; meetings had been organized with the WESU staff and the Board of House Presidents. The recommendation that the faculty study ways of integrating study of racial issues into the curriculum had not, however, been taken seriously, except by individual faculty members.

The work of the Committee this year coincided with quite a number of other campus activities focused on race relations, some of them a direct response to the kinds of tensions the Committee had set out to study. In December SOAR (Students Organized Against Racism) sponsored a well-attended forum on race relations, and in March it held a Racial Awareness Week, including a Free University Day, for which faculty members were encouraged to include pertinent material on racial questions in their teaching. There were also events sponsored by the Tri-Minority Council and by other student organizations, including lectures and workshops. Student publications carried numerous articles and letters on race relations that both expressed and generated a good deal of passion. In the spring President Chace established a task force to formulate an official institutional policy on racial harrassment and abuse.

III. The Process

The CHRR's initial objective was to acquire an understanding of the factors that affect how minority-group students feel about being at Wesleyan and how well they can function academically and socially.

The Committee first reviewed the technique used for the CHRR's previous study on racial abuse. The procedure adopted for that study had been based on three assumptions:

- 1) the success of any attempt to gather such sensitive information would depend in large measure on how it was done;
- 2) the three main racial minorities (Asian/Asian American, black, and Hispanic students) should be approached separately;
- 3) the information-gathering should be coordinated and supervised by a professional facilitator of the same race as the student group, and without close organizational ties to Wesleyan.

Because this approach had resulted in such gratifyingly open and productive discussions in the past, the Committee decided to use it again. The meetings for the three minority groups, held at the beginning of the second semester, employed a structured group process designed to elicit a large number of responses and insure that all students had full opportunity to participate. At the beginning of the session, hired facilitators asked the students to write down, without prior discussion, as many answers

as they could to the question, "What do people do at Wesleyan that is racist?" They were encouraged to interpret the question broadly. Each student was then invited to present his or her responses to the group. The responses were recorded on large sheets of paper posted around the room. After some time during which the facilitators helped the groups to clarify vague or ambiguous statements, the students ranked the responses according to two criteria, stated as questions: 1) which five of the responses suggest issues that are most important to you personally? and 2) which five of the responses represent problems that Wesleyan is in a good position to do something about?

The 311 recorded responses (duplicates within each group were eliminated) covered most aspects of the Wesleyan environment and of student experience, including the admissions process, classroom situations, social gatherings, peer relationships in dormitories, encounters in Middletown, institutional policies, the curriculum, academic structures, student organizations, and student-run events. At a joint meeting in April the three minority groups looked over each other's responses and considered their assignments of priority once more.

Following a suggestion made at the minority meetings, the Committee organized a similar meeting for "majority" students, to elicit their perceptions of race relations at Wesleyan. Of 200 randomly selected students invited to participate, 14 actually attended the March meeting, which yielded 52 additional responses to the same question asked at the other meetings.

The Committee also sent an open-ended questionnaire (see Appendix I) to all faculty members and students, requesting comments on race relations today and information on specific instances of racism or insensitivity. Twenty-two questionnaires were returned.

As a final step in its fact-finding, the Committee members made themselves available at a meeting in late April to which all members of the three minority groups were invited. Ten or twelve students attended, and engaged in a thoughtful give-and-take with the Committee. They showed particular interest in the question of who would be accountable for seeing that the Committee's recommendations were acted upon; they also expressed the hope that the Committee's final report would convey a sense of how difficult they find their academic and social position, surface appearances notwithstanding.

To organize the responses given at the minority-group meetings, the Committee identified six general topics with sub-topics (see Appendix II). While the headings themselves may appear rather abstract and relatively innocuous, the specific responses subsumed under them, and the issues that they raise,

are often strongly stated, provocative, and controversial.

The twenty-two returned questionnaires were also grouped according to topic. Four discussed the hiring and promotion of minority faculty; three offered general comments on strains and tensions among the races; eight reported instances of racism or insensitivity; three reported no observed negative interactions among the races; and four expressed objections to what was perceived as a negative slant to the Committee's request for information.

As the Committee studied the wealth of information yielded by the workshops and the questionnaire, it tried to be alert to both race relations in general and the more specific issue of racial abuse. It was aware that focusing on how the races are getting along with each other might lead it to minimize or even overlook the question of whether, and to what extent, members of minority groups are victimized, or feel they are victimized, because of their race. For although good relations may make victimization less likely, racist practices, both subtle and overt, still need to be identified and dealt with.

IV. Findings

The topics that both minority and majority students raised during the workshops revealed a number of overlapping experiences and concerns. The chief issues and problems were:

A. Academic Issues

1) A perception that the curriculum under-represents, neglects, or excludes the cultural experience of racial minorities.

2) Feelings on the part of minority-group students that other members of the institution do not support them academically. This perception leads to a sense that they are isolated and lack full access to educational resources and the related services.

B. Student Services

3) Minority students' feeling that their greater visibility thrusts them into a variety of uncomfortable situations, e.g., that Public Safety officers treat them differently from other students.

C. Peer Relationships

4) A sense of tension in peer relationships at both the individual and collective level. Minority and majority students are aware of difficulty interpreting each other's social signals,

and minority students feel the others do not have insight into the historical and social complexities that make communication difficult. Opportunities for engaging in constructive dialogue are felt to be lacking.

5) Confusion and anger felt by minority students when other students appropriate the language and rhetoric of historically disadvantaged groups, e.g., when fraternity members bid for sympathy by claiming to be "victims of stereotyping" or "an oppressed minority."

6) A pervasive sense on the part of minority students that they are subjected to insensitivity, inattentiveness, and neglect. While the more blatant and extreme manifestations of racism seem to be on the wane, the prevailing uneasiness is felt to be difficult to combat.

IV. Felt Obligations

7) The sense that the institution places considerable burdens on minority students, expecting them to participate actively in recruitment and educational efforts both in and out of the classroom. The students feel that they are often expected to represent "the" viewpoint or experiences of their racial groups; that they are "on display" at all times, "educating" their fellow students and the faculty.

V. Stereotypes and False Assumptions Based on Race

8) The feeling on the part of both minority students and majority students that the latter are naive or lack knowledge about minority cultures and racial minority groups' past and present realities. Members of the Wesleyan community seem poorly prepared for open discussion, reciprocal learning and intellectual growth through exploration of racial issues. Majority students feel misunderstood when they venture into both formal and informal discussions of minority experience and into the disciplines associated with their study; minority students feel that "their" material is being treated condescendingly and superficially.

9) Suspicion and mistrust on the part of majority students as to how admissions and financial-aid policies are applied to minority students. Minority students feel their integrity is being questioned when such suspicions are expressed.

10) The impression on the part of minority-group students that their behavior is judged on the basis of their racial identity.

VI. Institutional Policies and Practices

11) The perception on the part of the larger community that members of racial minorities receive "preferential treatment" that gives them unfair advantages.

12) The observation that Wesleyan's faculty and professional staffs have few members from minority groups.

The Committee noted that although many of the three minority groups' concerns overlapped, each group seemed to emphasize certain issues more than others. Black students were particularly aware of distinctions made by non-blacks on the basis of skin color; they reported being mistaken often for "townies" or treated as though their presence were a threat to white students. The Hispanic students commented more often on cultural stereotypes, such as the assumption that they were native speakers of Spanish. Asian and Asian-American students seemed unsure as to the sense in which they should be considered a minority, and they resented assumptions about their prowess in mathematics and science and lack of interest in the social sciences and the humanities, except music.

V. Conclusions

Although a real willingness exists at Wesleyan to address the issue of race relations in a thoughtful way--as evidenced by the generous participation of the "majority" students who attended the CHRR workshop, by some of the written responses to the Committee's questionnaire, and by the widespread interest in campus events focused on race relations--minority students at Wesleyan still do not feel at ease and unself-conscious. Since the CHRR study of 1982, there seems to have been a substantial erosion of majority sensitivity about matters of race, accompanied by growing indifference to past and present racial injustice. The absence of overt acts of racism does not make this situation any less worrisome.

Educational efforts must be initiated to combat the desensitization and backlash that our community is experiencing along with the society at large. Such efforts should take place both inside and outside of the classroom. Academic treatment of racial issues should be approached through a number of disciplines, to allow for the broadest possible analysis.

Minority students actually do have an inordinate burden imposed upon them when they are expected to educate the Wesleyan community both formally through organized activities (e.g., admissions programs, open houses, orientation events) and informally through their interactions with other members of the institution. Moreover, as these students are painfully aware, their extra commitments may sometimes--even often--interfere with their academic work, a situation that unfortunately does nothing to dispel negative preconceptions about their academic ability.

Steps must be taken to eliminate minority students' feelings of being isolated within the academic environment. Ways must be found to help them establish relationships with faculty members who can serve as mentors. What the students see as a lack of academic attention to their cultural realities, histories and traditions can be corrected. Certainly it is unforgivable when minority students' academic and career choices are called into question because they do not match preconceptions about their abilities or interests; it is equally unforgivable when certain choices seem to be encouraged precisely because they do match such preconceptions.

Peer relations between minority and non-minority students appear to be deteriorating. Hostility, suspicion and resentment directed at members of racial minorities often seem to coalesce around the concept of affirmative action. As an institution, we need to continue to express explicitly and substantively our commitment to affirmative action; but we must also stress the underlying concepts and principles of affirmative action. It is intolerable that minority students should be accused of getting a "free ride" on financial aid or "unfair advantages" in academic competition. Our institutional message must be unambiguous: affirmative action is not an issue of quotas, nor does it stop with the admissions process. It is crucial that "majority" students come to understand that minority status is connected with specific historical experiences and specific current realities, and that attempts to appropriate that status are perceived by minority students as hostile acts, invalidating their identity.

The lack of minority faculty and staff is really a matter of great concern. Aggressive attempts must be made to hire minority faculty and administrative staff whenever positions become available. Hiring efforts should not be confined to those disciplines in which it is "natural" to have minority-group members (e.g., Asians in Asian Languages, Hispanics in Latin American Studies). In this connection, the Committee applauds Wesleyan's initiatives aimed at encouraging minority students to pursue academic careers (i.e., through the Ford, Mellon and Hughes grants). But for the present the majority faculty must be made aware that it also bears an important responsibility to mentor minority students.

Although progress in race relations has been slow, the Committee believes that real progress is possible at Wesleyan, so long as the institution maintains its commitment to providing an environment that will be hospitable and educationally challenging to all students. While the Committee feels that it should not dictate future CHRR agendas, it is convinced that the issue of race relations requires sustained attention and periodic review. Indeed, the Committee thinks that such attention and review

should not be confined to the CHRR; trustees, faculty and administration need to be drawn into an institution-wide discussion of racial issues as they affect all constituencies in the University.

During this year's discussions of race relations, a subject that came up a number of times was the situation of Jewish students at Wesleyan; it appears that the general desensitization seen at work in inter-group relations is also affecting negatively students not usually classified as a minority group. Perhaps the time has come to examine the larger question of ethnicity in our society.

VI. Recommendations

The CHRR presented the following recommendations to the SAC:

- 1) The presidential task force mandated to formulate the institutional policy on racial harrassment and abuse should consult with current CHRR members and with next year's Committee. The Committee believes the information it has gathered will provide useful background for the task force's deliberations.
- 2) The Dean's Office should propose to the the CHRR a mechanism for assessing the well-being of minority students every four years and reporting its findings to the CHRR.
- 3) The academic and curricular concerns expressed by the minority communities should be placed on the agenda of the Educational Policy Committee. This recommendation receives particular stress because it was not carried out after being made in 1982.
- 4) The President should encourage the faculty to establish mentoring relationships with minority students and to develop ways to promote academic excellence and a sense of intellectual and cultural self-confidence among minority students.
- 5) Student Services staff members should participate in a program designed to increase their sensitivity to racial concerns and insure closer attention to the support and advising of minority students.
- 6) Public Safety personnel should participate periodically in sensitivity-training workshops.
- 7) Student Services staff should explore extra-curricular educational formats and programs aimed at engaging students and student groups in productive dialogue on race relations. The cooperation and interest of the Wesleyan Student Assembly, and of established student groups such as the Board of House Presidents, student publications staffs, and others, should be enlisted.

8) The Dean's Office should reevaluate and expand current efforts to address race relations with the Residence Staff and in the New Student Orientation Program.

9) The Dean's Office should develop an orientation program for minority students planning to take part in foreign-study programs to address in detail racial and cultural attitudes likely to be encountered abroad.

10) The agenda of the CHRR for the 1989-90 academic year should include a review of the situation of Jewish students at Wesleyan.

This report represents a summary of the CHRR's efforts to gather qualitative information and to grapple with an extremely complex and pressing issue. We are grateful for the heartfelt cooperation we have received from minority students, and for the willing contributions of "majority" students and faculty members; all have been generous in sharing their perceptions and thoughts with the Committee. It is our hope that the entire Wesleyan community will consider with openness and good will the issues raised here. We are also hopeful that all its members will take a renewed interest in the exploration of solutions. We believe strongly that the responsibility for addressing the issues rests with all of us, not only with the groups specifically mentioned in our recommendations.

We welcome your comments, criticisms, questions and suggestions.

- Gordon Agress '89
- Philip Baskerville '92
- Carol Grant
- Oliver Holmes
- Janina Montero
- William Stowe
- Melinda Weekes '89
- Krishna Winston

APPENDIX I

February 28, 1989

COMMITTEE ON HUMAN RIGHTS AND RELATIONS
Wesleyan University

TO: Wesleyan Students and Members of the Faculty

FROM: The Committee on Human Rights and Relations

Subject: A REQUEST FOR INFORMATION CONCERNING
RACE RELATIONS AT WESLEYAN UNIVERSITY

The Student Affairs Committee has asked the Committee on Human Rights and Relations to undertake a review of race relations in the Wesleyan community.

As a first step in carrying out this mandate, the Committee on Human Rights and Relations seeks to understand the nature of race relations on campus and the individual experiences and attitudes they may reflect.

To help us develop a better understanding of the current situation at Wesleyan, we ask that you share with us any incidents or situations that you feel are significant. We are interested in your overall perceptions of race relations today and especially in any specific incidents you have witnessed in which racism, insensitivity or overt discrimination seemed to play a part. We would appreciate somewhat detailed descriptions of any incidents of which you have personal knowledge. It will be very useful if you can include such information as the time and setting of the incident and the relationship of the principals (e.g., roommates, instructor-student, strangers). Please feel free to add any other observations that may contribute to a more complete understanding of the incident.

Members of the Committee will treat your communication with strict respect for its confidentiality. If you would like to discuss your observations or concerns with a member of the Committee on Human Rights and Relations, let us know in a separate letter or by telephone, so that the confidentiality of your written report is not compromised. Please return your statement on the attached page no later than March 10, 1989 to:

The Committee on Human Rights and Relations
Box at Wesleyan Station

Thank you for your interest and concern.

Appendix IICategories Used to Organize Workshop ResponsesI. Academic Issues

1. Curriculum
2. Relations with faculty members
3. Lack of minority faculty
4. Academic support

II. Student Services

1. Public Safety
2. Counselling (academic and psychological)
3. Financial aid
4. Residential life

III. Peer Relationships

1. Students (individual)
2. Student groups and organizations

IV. Felt Obligations

1. Classroom
2. Institutional
3. Wesleyan community
4. Larger community

V. Stereotypes and False Assumptions Based on RaceVI. Institutional Policies and Practice

1. Admissions standards and "quotas"
2. Faculty hiring