Separate Unequal

SEGREGATION ON CAMPUS

BY KENNETH LEE

"We're facing a historical struggle today.... This is an issue of justice," thundered the Rev. Al Sharpton. "We've faced 400 years of racism and barbarism!" A crowd of 500 roared approval and burst into chants of "No Justice, No Peace!"

Sharpton makes a living by delivering jeremiads against racism and oppression. Yet this rally was unusual. It took place not in Bensonhurst or Harlem, but at Cornell University, which prides itself on its racial sensitivity.

Sharpton's speech provided the climax to a month of rallies, hunger strikes, and protests at this Ivy League school. The maelstrom started when school administrators decided to prohibit freshmen from living in the school's three ethnic dormitories: the predominantly black Ujamaa; the Latino Living Center; and Auwe:Kon, an American Indian house. Many minority students opposed this rule, claiming that minority freshmen would lose their racial identities if they could not reside in these ethnic dorms. As one black student put it, "I don't want to be white."

It's difficult not to sympathize with the minority students. College life can be unsettling, and associating with similar people can provide security at a predominantly white university. Many minority students say that residing in an ethnic dormitory is like living with a "family."

Yet racial separatism on campus is rife with ironies. The American university is supposed to be a place where individuals from diverse backgrounds can engage in intellectual pursuits free from "real world" problems of race. But in fact, race is paramount on many college campuses, and tensions run high even—or especially—at elite Northern schools where students and faculty are supposedly more open-minded. Justin Samuels, a black student from Alabama, said, "I come from the South, and the race situation is far from perfect there, but it's not [as bad as] here" at Cornell.

The same universities that enact affirmative action programs to foster diversity and mutual understanding also encourage self-segregation along ethnic lines. Their motivations arise partly in response to intimidation, and partly from well-intentioned but misguided liberal paternalism.

Cornell is a particularly telling example. At times, the school has facilitated racial separatism under pressure from threats and building sit-ins. Ujamaa, for example, was established in the wake of the infamous 1969 building takeover by armed black students. (Notable professors Walter Berns, Thomas Sowell, and Allan Bloom all left Cornell soon after this incident. Black Republican presidential candidate-to-be Alan Keyes, then an undergraduate, opposed the building takeover and left after being threatened by fellow students.) In 1994, Cornell erected the Latino Living Center after protesters stormed the main administration building, injuring several campus police officers. Now in 1996, after students rallied with Sharpton, Cornell has backed off from its plan to disallow freshmen in the ethnic dorms.

But although protests have figured in the establishment of ethnic dormitories, Cornell's liberal paternalism has played a larger role in encouraging ethnic segregation. Ethnic theme houses received the administration's full support until the New York Times' reporting embarrassed the school. And these dorms represent only a fraction of the campus's institutional separatism. From the moment minority students are accepted at Cornell, the school isolates them and treats them like delicate commodities. Minority engineering students, for example, have separate study lounges. A Minority Affairs Office exclusively serves minority students. Ethnic studies depart-
ments segregate the students academically. The university even publishes a separate yearbook for graduating minority students.

Soft-hearted liberal paternalism explains some of these actions. Administrators truly want to make the school more hospitable to minority students, and many also see racial consciousness as the healthy expression of a multicultural community. But a more insidious rationale also exists. Minority students drop out at higher rates than whites, and critics have attributed this to affirmative action programs that admit underqualified students to challenging schools where they are likely to fail. (See "Race and University Admissions," page 61.) So by paying special attention to minority students, universities hope to retain more of them and quell criticisms of affirmative action. A particularly egregious example is Cornell's pre-freshman summer program: All accepted "underrepresented minority" students attend classes at Cornell the summer before their freshmen year—all expenses paid. This summer school gives minority students an edge over their peers in terms of experience and course credits, increasing their retention rates. College administrators vehemently deny this motivation, but many white students are skeptical and resent such preferential treatment.

These separate-but-equal policies may suit Cornell's purposes, but they have several negative effects on the student body. First, they demean minority students and reinforce racial stereotypes. Secondly, by isolating minority students they foster racial consciousness and a victimization mentality, encouraging minority students to view everything through the lens of ethnicity and blame white racism for all ills. Those minority students who come to Cornell uninitiated to racial group-think are introduced to it by the school itself.

Take Myisha Frazier for example, a freshman and a black resident of Ujamaa from a predominantly white high school. (According to an internal Cornell document, most minority students come from predominantly white suburbs, not urban ghettos.) She says that students of different races go along reasonably well at her high school: black and white students "ate together at the same lunch tables."

Frazier admits she was surprised at first by the level of separatism at Cornell. Why, then, did she decide to live in Ujamaa in her freshman year? In the spring of 1995, after she was accepted, she visited the campus during "Minority Hosting Week" and stayed at Ujamaa. (Non-minority students visit the campus during the "regular" hosting week and stay in a traditional dormitory.) The racial segregation that Frazier experienced even before matriculating set the tone for her college career, if not for the rest of her life.

Is it any wonder that most white students graduating had little contact with minority students and that they are genuinely perplexed by the separatism on campus that seems at odds with the original goals of the civil rights movement? White students also tend to resent the double-standards tolerated for minority students—Cornell, for example, paid money to bring notorious anti-Semitic, anti-white speakers like Leonard Jeffries, Sister Souljah, and Conrad Muhammad. Minority students, in turn, perceive this resentment as proof of white racism on campus. A vicious cycle begins, and the campus becomes polarized.

Cornell now has an even bigger problem: the University's ethnic dorms face an investigation by the U.S. Department of Education for possible violation of the 1964 Civil Rights Act. The Department of Education has initiated the investigation at the prodding of Michael Meyers, executive director of the New York Civil Rights Coalition.

Meyers, who became the youngest assistant director of the NAACP in 1975, is one of the few remaining black civil rights leaders who opposes racial separatism and black nationalism. He has called on Cornell President Hunter Rawlings to dismantle the ethnic program houses. "By treating minority students as surrogates for their communities rather than as individuals, ethnic dorms foster racial group thinking and defeat a university's mission to broaden all students' horizons," says Meyers. He also notes that Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964 bars recipients of federal money from even indirectly implementing policies that subject any person to exclusion or discrimination by race or ethnicity.

Cornell denies that its ethnic program houses violate any law. "Cornell neither assigns nor prevents anyone from living in [the program houses] because of race or ethnicity," says Henrik Dullea, the vice president of university relations. "All of us need to work to improve the level of [racial] interaction at Cornell, but this is separate from a legal question."

Meyers, however, scoffs at Cornell's defense, which he calls a "cynical evasion of civil rights law." "If Cornell were a Southern university standing behind white students who chose to live in segregated dorms, the feds would demand immediate desegregation," he argues.

After all, if personal interaction is the key to decreasing ignorance and ameliorating racial tension, Cornell has pursued a bankruptcy policy. Unfortunately, many minority students don't see such failed policies as the cause of racial tension. Cornell teaches them instead to attribute the tension to white racism. Myisha Frazier, the freshman who went from a racially integrated high school to Ujamaa house at Cornell, now comments, "Cornell is a microcosm of the real world. We live in a racist society, and so there'll be racists at Cornell."

Other minority students are more blunt in claiming victimhood. At the Sharpton rally, students repeatedly denounced "white supremacy" on campus without citing any specific examples. One student speaker shouted, "Ujamaa is not a program house. It is a de-programming house that fights Eurocentric ideology by instilling Afrocentric ideas and trains us for the war of liberation of our people.... [Cornell] President Rawlings is trying to deny our constitutional, democratic right to freely associate with each other."

This student apparently did not realize the irony of his statement: the Constitution, and democracy as we know it, originate from a distinctly Western, "Eurocentric" tradition. The student's ignorance, of course, is not surprising, given that liberal arts students must take a class in multiculturalism—but not in Western civilization—to graduate from Cornell.

If Cornell was the only school plagued by self-segregation, there would be little to worry about. Unfortunately, racial separatism is the rule, not the exception, at most colleges. And that is something to worry about.

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