Statement on Racism and Race at Cornell

I am a faculty member in the English Department and the American Indian and Indigenous Studies Program and a former director of that program.

First, I want to acknowledge Cornell is on the homelands of the Cayuga People, one of the six nations of the Haudenosaunee Confederacy. And I want to acknowledge my support for Black Students United and for all the underrepresented students, faculty and staff at Cornell.

I want briefly to suggest how a Cornell education is linked to issues of racism the campus is now forced to confront once again, problems that are certainly not new to faculty, like myself, and students in the programs and departments who teach and learn about these issues daily, and have confronted them on the ground for a long time, with only minimal support from the administration or for that matter from the majority of the faculty.

We should recognize that the Cornell curriculum needs substantial reform so that the voices of underrepresented scholars, students and faculty, can be clearly heard and so that all Cornell students receive a multi-perspectival education that includes exposure to the ideas being generated by Africana and African American Studies, American Indian and Indigenous Studies, Latina-Latino Studies, African American Studies, Feminist, Gender and Sexuality Studies, and Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Studies. This means, among other reforms, instituting a robust diversity requirement in the University, hiring faculty across the disciplines not only from underrepresented groups but also those with underrepresented intellectual positions that question the dominant Eurocentric curriculum and the social and political status quo.

By way of ending, I want to offer a quote from Emily Dong. Emily is an undergraduate student at Cornell, whom some of you know. She is also a student whom I’ve had the pleasure to teach in Indigenous studies. Emily was one of the organizers of the Save Our Programs protest and the People’s School last year. The school is one possible model for the kind of curricular reform I am thinking about, which is an education for social justice. Emily said: “Right now, for the most part, a majority of what constitutes diversity at Cornell becomes something that’s roped back into Cornell’s branding. The kind of pat-on-the-back, multi-cultural institution that it is in this neoliberal age.” I agree.

Without a curriculum that makes underrepresented knowledge a significant part of its agenda, the work of task forces and diversity training cannot be sustained and will simply become a part of Cornell’s branding, its PR. These initiatives need a ground to grow in.

At the present moment, Cornell is not nourishing this ground, financially and intellectually. It needs too. It needs to start thinking from a different place about issues of race, gender, class, and sexuality if it actually wants to become a school for “any person, any study.”

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