COMMENTS BY JOHN FORD AT FACULTY SENATE MEETING

February 10, 1999

John Ford, Robert W. and Elizabeth C. Staley Dean of Students: "I am on leave this semester working at the University of Chicago as an American Council on Education Fellow. I was delighted to accept Bob Cooke's invitation to speak at this Faculty Senate meeting today because I want to encourage faculty support and participation in efforts to make this a better community for our student body. We must not let differences in gender, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, class, or race divide our community. Building learning relationships, respect, and friendships across all of these differences merits our attention. But, because of the incidents last fall, my remarks today focus mainly on our commitment to minority students.

"Last semester there was a wave of racial harassment incidents targeted at our students of color. These racist e-mail messages, phone calls, late night street confrontations, and suspected arson attempts provoked fear and outrage on the part of many students, faculty and staff. These events prompted the administration to establish a hot line for harassment incident reporting, improve campus lighting, establish education and staff training programs, and enhance police patrols. Vice Presidents Susan Murphy and Hal Craft and Associate Vice President LeNorman Strong should be commended for their leadership in bringing about these and other campus-wide responses from the administration.

"But as the racial harassment crisis subsides, more faculty leadership is needed to help make this a more cohesive campus community for our diverse student body. Why? Because we need to make sure this is a good place for all of our students. Unfortunately, Cornell is gaining a national reputation as an uninviting place. Let me give you three examples.

"In December I received a call from Moses Jones in the U.S. Justice Department. He said that he had recently received several complaints about racial harassment at Cornell and that he was calling to offer assistance in providing campus education and staff training to prevent and control racial harassment.

"A few days after that, I got a call from a Cornell alum who is a guidance counselor at a New York high school from which Cornell has accepted many graduates. She said that she was getting calls from parents of currently enrolled Cornell students who were asking her if she thought they should take their sons and daughters out of Cornell to protect them from the racial harassment and late night stalking occurring on campus. These parents also asked her whether the high school was doing the right thing by encouraging qualified minority students to come to Cornell.

"Last week I had lunch with Lucinda Katz, the Director of the University of Chicago Laboratory School, where I was a student from kindergarten through the twelfth grade. Lucinda introduced me to several members of her staff, including the placement director who told me that many of their graduates over the years have had difficulties adjusting to racial tensions as students at Cornell because their experience with diversity at the Lab School had been so much better. My own experience at the Lab School gave me a lasting optimism about what can be done to foster and maintain a positive climate for a diverse student body where faculty, staff, and students embrace this as part of their education.

"The need to enhance our national reputation as a university which welcomes our diverse student body is not the only reason for increased faculty support and participation in efforts to improve the campus climate. According to Carol Geary Schneider, President of the Association of American Colleges and Universities, teaching college students how to function in a diverse society has become essential, not elective. 
"A review of the research literature entitled, 'Diversity Works: the Emerging Pattern of How Students Benefit,' was published by the AACU in 1997. That report suggests what works in campus diversity efforts. For example, here are a few excepts,

'The literature suggests that diversity initiatives positively affect both minority and majority students on campus. Significantly, diversity initiatives have an impact not only on student attitudes and feelings toward intergroup relations on campus, but also on institutional satisfaction, involvement, and academic growth.'

'Mentoring programs, involving both student peers and faculty, consistently result in improved adjustment, retention, and academic success rates for their participants.'

'Specialized student support programs and campus community have been pitted against each other. However, research results suggest that institutional commitment to both contributes to the educational success of all students. These findings underscore the capacity of individuals, groups, and institutions to thrive through acknowledgment of multiple affiliations and identities on campus.'

'Contrary to widespread reports of self-segregation among students of color on campuses, the research finds this pattern more common of white students. Students of color interact more with white students than the reverse.'

'The evidence continues to grow that serious engagement of issues of diversity in the curriculum and in the classroom has a positive impact on attitudes toward racial issues, on opportunities to interact in deeper ways with those who are different, on cognitive development, and on overall satisfaction and involvement with the institution. These benefits are particularly powerful for white students who have had less opportunity for such engagement.'

"What should we do at Cornell? I suggest that we consider each of the following initiatives. Students should be required to work with people different from themselves in classes or possibly in required discussion groups. We should develop a university-wide diversity course requirement. We should support existing programs, including the ethnic studies programs and the ethnic-theme program houses. We should participate in a new initiative, led by Professor Robert Harris and The Reverend Robert Johnson, that will engage students, faculty, and staff in every department in discussions of race and diversity. A fine example of this was set by the Johnson School's climate survey last spring which led to a day of Dialog on Difference this fall. Both were designed to find out how comfortable various groups were at the School so that efforts could be made to improve the climate.

"Faculty leadership and participation in any or all of these kinds of efforts will follow in Ezra Cornell's footsteps when he said that he wanted Cornell to be a place where African American students could study and learn, no matter what anyone might say in opposition.

"All of us need to consider these issues and work to help Cornell embrace all of our students. Thank you."

Acting Speaker Hines: "Any brief comments or questions for Dean Ford? If not, then let's move on to the Resolution on Campus Climate and I will ask Kerry Cook of the University Faculty Committee to introduce
this resolution."