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**"WOMEN'S STUDIES/MINORITY STUDIES:
A NECESSITY FOR US ALL"**

Keynote Speech for the 10th Anniversary Celebration Given By
Spelman College President Johnnetta Cole
Thursday, February 22, 1990, Swasey Chapel

I appreciate the opportunity to participate in your celebration -- a celebration of 10 years of Minority Studies/Women's Studies at Denison. But I cannot just celebrate by jumping up and down and shouting: yeah, yeah, yeah! I've got to say something meaningful, and that's no minor task!

First of all, let us acknowledge that your efforts over the past 10 years, in terms of curriculum reform, must be applauded. You took certain steps 10 years ago. In doing so you were ahead of many institutions and many individuals.

Remember, it was only a couple of years ago that former Secretary of Education Bennett chastised Stanford University for daring to include in their core curriculum the realities of those who hold up at least half the sky (women), and those we call minorities. Perhaps we call 60% of the world's people minorities to hide the fact that we are the numerical majority in the world. The then Secretary of Education was vigorously protecting the three "W's" of American education: Western, white and womanless.

June Jordan, writing in her 1981 publication, Civil Wars, said of her undergraduate years at Barnard:

"...no one ever presented me with a single Black author, poet, historian, personage, or idea, for that matter. Nor was I ever assigned a single woman to study as a thinker, or writer, or poet, or life force. Nothing that I learned, (there), lessened my feelings of pain, confusion and bitterness as related to my origins: my street, my family, my friends. Nothing showed me how I might try to alter the political and economic realities underlying our Black condition in white America."

Yes, we can say that you were ahead of the times. Indeed, in our nation today we seem to be going in reverse. These are times when tolerance, not to mention respect for differences is particularly low. From many quarters of our country comes the message: all people of color are in the category of "other" in relationship to white Americans; the proper place for women is in

the house; heterosexuality is the only "normal" way; and the poor are that way either because they prefer it to being "normal" middle and upper class folks, or their plight is, for a host of other reasons, their own fault.

It is 1990 and still white supremacists openly scream "kill the niggers." Racial incidents on our college and university campuses continue day after day and grown men and women maintain that they are protecting unborn life by bombing abortion clinics.

It seems clear then that such a climate of intolerance demands that we in the academy redefine our sphere of inquiry to more seriously include a concern for all of us. Such a climate also requires that we rededicate ourselves to analyzing and understanding such violent reactions to difference. And surely, such a climate of bigotry requires that we reinstall into our departments and programs the kind of activist component that would make us among the leaders of community responses against racism, sexism, anti-semitism and all forms of bigotry.

In celebrating a curriculum that claims to explore the realities of the human condition, I challenge us to do just that. Let us not continue to do the half-way reforms that have characterized a good deal of the curriculum changes of the past. For example: In the 1960's, Black Studies was a response to the near absence of the perspectives and experiences of African Americans in our curricula.

But notice how often Black Studies concentrated on the experiences of Black men! And how often Women's Studies has focused on the experiences of middle class white women! And thus one could pose the question: Where are the women in Black Studies? And where are the Black folks in Women's Studies?

Thus as you celebrate 10 years of a Women's Studies/Minority curriculum, I urge you not to go half way, not to do some of the task. Your core curriculum must reflect the realities of all women and all folks of color. For if you have seen one of us women, or one so called minority, you have not seen us all. We are as diverse as any other group of people. For while we are bound by shared oppression, we are also divided by differences in race, ethnicity, class, age, sexual preference, religion, geography and physical ableness.

The task is a truly tough one then -- for the realities of each of these folks must be captured without trivializing or homogenizing what are in fact very serious and diverse streams of the human condition. But as one says in Spanish: !Vale la pena! (worth the effort!).

I think that understanding and respecting differences among us is one of the questions of the 21st century. In our colleges and universities, in our society and in our world, either we learn to deal with diversity or we will be "unified" in our destruction!

Because it is difficult to bring such diverse voices into the curriculum, let us be clear about why we must do it. Very simply, because excellence requires it! There is an enormously destructive myth -- that excellence in education is impossible if there is diversity. I am convinced that excellence in education is only possible if there is diversity: diversity in the content of the curriculum; diversity among the students, faculty and staff who make up an academic community; and finally diversity in the pedagogy of our academies -- the kind of dynamism which can flow from diversity in who is teaching and learning and what is being taught and learned. I want to develop each of these three points:

First, excellence in education requires the incorporation of diverse perspectives and experiences in our curricula. For excellence, we need our students to confront, explore, wrestle with Shakespeare and Robert Frost. But they should do no less with the works of Chinua Achebe, Maxine Hong Kingston, and Jose Marti. They need to read Joy Hargo and Paula Gunn Allen on Native American women's realities; the works of Audre Lorde and Adrienne Rich, and the powerful words of Gwendolyn Brooks and Toni Morrison.

To make this point about diversity in the content of what we teach, I want to draw on an exciting passage from a speech recently delivered by Dr. Beverly Guy-Sheftall of Spelman College. "Students come to us having learned a particular perspective on the world, having been taught to see and analyze the world in particular ways and having been taught that there are normative experiences, and that they are those of white, middle-class, Christian, Western men, and to a much lesser extent, women of the same group. One of our most difficult challenges ... as faculty and administrators is ... how to foster in our students the ability to CENTER (their own) experiences. How do we help our students to overcome years of

notions of what is normative, which is in many ways the antithesis of who they are as human beings? ...This is not merely an intellectual process -- providing students with the appropriate content. It is also about coming to believe in the possibility of a variety of experiences, a variety of ways of understanding the world, a variety of frameworks of operation without imposing, consciously, or unconsciously, a notion of THE norm.

Dr. Sheftall then says: "Let me explain that CENTERING in another experience, even when it means centering in your own experience, does not mean that one has to invalidate someone else. One does not have to decenter the experiences of men in order to center women or decenter the experiences of Euro-Americans in order to center African Americans or decenter Europeans in order to center Africans. How is this possible one might ask?" Dr. Sheftall offers three African American cultural practices, one from the visual arts, one from linguistics, and the other from music, which provide us with the frameworks to be able to do this.

The first is the distinctive practice of African American women's quilting. Traditionally, Black women quiltmakers operated from a different aesthetic sense than Euro-American quiltmakers. The colors of their stripes are different from the colors in the rows of blocks or designs. And two distinct movements can be seen -- one along the stripes, the other within the designs. They don't seem to be interested in a uniform color scheme. Contrast, rather than uniformity or symmetry is used to structure and organize. There is also the African American linguistic practice of GUMBO YA YA, the Creole phrase for "everybody talks at once." In a book called Jambalaya, Luisa Teish describes what for her was a family norm, mainly passed on through generations of women in the family. When she returned home to New Orleans to visit and was met by her family at the airport, they all crowded into the car and everyone talked at once -- gumbo ya ya -- and it went on for days. To an outsider this would be labeled chaos or the absence of communication. How can anyone be listening to everyone else at once while they are also themselves speaking? But we know as African Americans that this is possible. Finally, the notion of polyrhythms is also characteristic of Black musical traditions (African and African American). Jazz is referred to by Professor Ojeda Penn as an expression of "true democracy" because each musician has to listen to what the other is doing and know how to respond while each is at the same time required to work on his/her own improvisation. Each person is

allowed to be an individual, to go his or her own way, and yet does so in concert with the group -- one is an individual then within the context of the community. What a shame to rob students of these different voices, different ways of seeing, different ways of being!

Second, excellence in education also requires that the very participants in the process bring to the academic table different ideas, different perspectives, and different experiences. With respect to the need to diversify our faculties, we know that even on the most progressive of campuses, it is difficult to instantly bring about a more multi-racial/multi-ethnic composition. I hope that we also know that taking a business as usual procedure will never bring color to our all white faculties. And so, we must be creative, we must demand of the white American teachers who are there that they struggle to bring folk of color to their campuses. But they must also struggle to raise their own consciousness and engage in the kind of study and human empathy that will permit them to teach, as my mom would have said, "as if they had a touch of color."

Anthropology has taught me the power of empathy. And thus, I think that with enormous hard work, men can come to empathize with the realities of women; Gringos with the realities of Hispanic folks; and White Americans with the realities of Black Americans.

In terms of increasing the number of students of color that we attract and graduate, American education has a long way to go. It is helpful here to turn to the words of the President of Kennesaw College, Betty Siegel. Her ultimate concern is the creation of communities of diversity in the academy. Most immediately Dr. Siegel argues that we must seek to increase the number of Black faculty and students on our campuses. Toward that end, she argues that we must affect every aspect of the academic environment. Here are her words:

"Enhancing minority participation in higher education is not just a matter of establishing special scholarships for minorities or offering undergraduate degrees in Black studies or improving the relationship between white and Black students. American higher education must come to grips with the fact that virtually every aspect of the collegiate experience has been tainted by a subtle bias against minorities -- that it has been unintentionally disinviting."

When our curricula reflect the diversity of perspectives and experiences which constitute the human condition, and when those who teach and learn in the academy mirror that diversity, there is a third need. It is this: Excellence in education requires attention to, experimentation with, and diversity in pedagogy.

Of course we need to be concerned with what we teach -- that's scholarship. But we also need to be concerned with the process by which we teach -- that's pedagogy. You see, I think we need to develop liberatory classrooms. In an article in the Women's Studies Quarterly, Carolyn M. Shrewsbury wrote about such classrooms.

"The concept of a liberatory environment suggests a new way to be with one another in the classroom. A classroom characterized as persons connected in a net of relationships with people who care about each other's learning as well as their own is very different from a classroom that is seen as comprised of teacher and students. One goal of the liberatory classroom is that members learn to respect each other's differences rather than fear them. Such a perspective is ecological and holistic. The classroom becomes an important place to connect to our roots, our past, and to envision the future. It is a place to utilize and develop all of our talents and abilities, to develop excellence that is not limited to the few. The classroom becomes a place in which integrity is not only possible but normal. The web of interrelationships in the classroom is seen to stretch to the local, regional, and global communities, and potentially, even beyond the boundaries of our earth. You see, changing the process of how we teach is often more difficult and risky than changing the content of what we teach.

Process and content are in fact inextricably intertwined -- and thus we struggle for cooperative, integrative and democratic approaches to learning that will empower our students to create personal and societal change."

And so, colleagues, as you continue, 10 years into it, to take on the difficult but do-able task of diversifying and democratizing your curriculum; take comfort in the fact that excellence is the reward, and that what you are doing is in the interest of all of us.

I want to end with the words of a great Black woman whose very name stands in opposition to false images: Sojourner Truth, the great 19th Century soldier in the battle for the rights of Black people and women.

"My friends, I am rejoiced that you are glad, but I don't know how you will feel when I get through. I come from another field -- the country of

the slave. They have got their liberty -- so much good luck to have slavery partly destroyed; not entirely. I want it root and branch destroyed. Then we will be free indeed. I feel that if I have to answer for the deeds done in my body just as much as a man, I have a right to have just as much as a man. There is a great stir about colored men getting their rights, but not a word about colored women; and if colored men get their rights, but not a word about the colored women theirs, you see the colored men will be masters over the women, and it will be just as bad as it was before. So I am for keeping the thing going while things are stirring; because if we wait till it is still, it will take a great while to get it going again. I want women to have their rights."

"Then that little man in black there, he says women can't have as much rights as men, because Christ wasn't a woman! Where did your Christ come from? Where did your Christ come from? From God and a woman! Man had nothing to do with Him...."

"If the first woman God ever made was strong enough to turn a world upside down all alone, these women together ought to be able to turn it back, and get it right side up again! And now they are asking to do it, the men better let them."

"And a final message: Sisters, I ain't clear what you be after -- If women want any rights more than they got, why don't they just take them and not be talking about it?"