

Remarks on the Clark-Khurana Committee Report, Faculty Meeting, October 3, 2017

[These remarks were delivered from handwritten notes, not a full script. Furthermore, the Parliamentarian, literally one minute prior to the meeting being called to order, urged great brevity on the speaker personally, so some of the notes were condensed and several paragraphs crossed out, which then required ex tempore transitions. This is the best reconstruction of what was said.]

It's good we are discussing this vexed topic today. The Clark-Khurana Committee would not exist were it not for Prof. Lewis's motion made last December [2016], when I spoke of the statutory power of discipline resting with the Faculty.

The Clark-Khurana Committee presents a narrative both explicit and implied. Explicitly, there exist problems with some of these organizations and some new action is required. Yes. There is also an underlying narrative. It goes something like this. "Most, or many"—the Report cannot make up its mind on that score and it names no names—of these organizations are not only exclusionary in the sense of not admitting every student who wishes to join, they are places where misogyny, racism, and class prejudice are fostered and practiced. From the Report: "While the larger issue of selective membership on campus is worth further discussion, our committee's charge was to address those groups whose members and leadership are committed to practicing discrimination against their fellow students on such bases as gender, race, and class." Acts demeaning to women have occurred at at least a few of these clubs. The kind of racial slur mentioned in the Report is abhorrent. Some of these clubs have dues not purely nominal.

However, the Report estimates that up to one-quarter of undergraduates belong to these organizations, and more women than men. Given that first-year students don't often belong, that pushes up the fraction to closer to one-third of students in sophomore through senior years. The Report implies that these students are undermining the educational mission of the College.

Are one-third of our students in sophomore through senior year going to private spaces to practice misogyny, racism, and class prejudice? Is that why these organizations exist and attract many students? These are the students we accept and teach and whom we graduate. The College does not require students to live in the Houses, but more than 98% of them, including more than 98% of those who join these organizations, live in the Houses and participate fully in House life. The nature of some of these organizations is evolving and for some of them quite quickly. It would be unfortunate to take a sudden and absolute action regarding these organizations.

I would ask colleagues to consider what the Report implies about these organizations, and to consider that the story of the students in these organizations is more complex and often far more benign than what the Report does imply.

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