

## Idle chatter is cheap

*UNL minorities need action, not talk*

When the NU Board of Regents met Friday, it heard four hours of testimony on the plight of minority students at the University of Nebraska.

Among the problems cited by those who testified is a hostile climate at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln.

"The vast majority of minorities who succeed (at UNL) do so in spite of the system rather than because of it," said Miguel Carranza, an associate professor of sociology at UNL who chaired the Chancellor's Commission on the Status of Minorities for two years.

Persistent talk of changing the campus climate to be more receptive of minority students apparently has had little effect. In typical form, after the four-hour open forum, the regents announced that a committee would be appointed to study the issues raised.

It seems that the university's quick answer to tough questions always is to talk about them.

But one UNL college has gone beyond talk.

The law college has implemented a system to ensure that first-year minority students don't feel isolated from others of the same ethnic background.

Dean Harvey Perlman said non-minority students are placed in their first-year classes randomly, but minority students are grouped together on the basis of race.

That means all African-American students are placed in the same classes, all Asian students are placed in the same classes and all Hispanic students are placed in the same classes.

Perlman said the college adopted the policy to help minority students overcome feelings of isolation in the college, which is composed predominantly of white students.

The policy, which Perlman said is still under review, has been criticized as possibly being illegal.

But Perlman defends the policy by saying, "It seems clear to me that in cases that exist, some race-preferential programs — people given a preference on the basis of race — are suspect, and some are not.

"I'm not giving anyone a preference."

In that respect, Perlman is right. All students are required to take the same classes and complete the same amount of work.

But the policy does have its drawbacks.

Part of the goal of creating a diversified campus is to give students the chance to interact with people from other ethnic backgrounds. While the policy does not discourage non-minority students from interacting with their minority classmates, it does make such interaction less likely and it may prevent different groups of minority students from interacting with one another.

The policy also carries the sting of "separate but equal." It implies that without such groupings, minority students would be unable to compete with their non-minority counterparts. The minority students are not given a choice regarding the separation; they simply are shuffled into it without consent.

But the negatives of the policy are outweighed by its benefits, because the detractors assume that the campus environment is acceptable to both minority and non-minority students. It is not.

The policy is intended to give minority students in the college the same advantages that non-minority students have — classmates who have similar backgrounds.

No one can argue that isolation in the classroom damages the learning atmosphere. Grouping minority students together at the very least gives them a friendly face to turn to. At the most, it will prevent the minority viewpoint from being drowned out.

The policy does not presuppose that minority students could not succeed without such treatment. Instead, it gives them an environment in which success comes as easily as it does for non-minority students.

Until UNL overcomes its hostile atmosphere for minority students, the few programs that do address minority students' concerns should not be condemned prematurely.

The regents should pay close attention to the law college. Its program is one creative example of how UNL has attempted to step beyond well-intentioned talk.

—J.P.



GARY LONGSINE

## Not all generalizing wrong

**S** crawled on the bathroom wall, I saw: Abstract is not synonymous with ineffable. Obviously the etchings of a math student in stage 1: Denial.

Synonymous it shouldn't be. However, the tertiary definition of abstract — "hard to understand" — has become its most popular, because there are so many people who can't, or won't, eff things.

The secondary definition of ineffable is "not to be uttered — taboo." In today's world, it is taboo to generalize. This is evident most clearly in discussions of how to be politically correct.

In classrooms, coffeehouses, editorials all across the country, you can witness the phrase that, when first uttered, gave birth to the PC movement: "I don't think you can say that; it's a generalization."

Generalizing has been saddled with a pejorative sense on par with racism, sexism and communism.

Abstract thought requires generalizing. Don't let the champions of dogmatic political correctness deter you from abstracting. Let abstraction prevent you from ineffing.

Allow me to generalize: Velcro doesn't stick to cats.

In actual cat testing, Velcro failed to stick. No large cats were tested, all were domesticated and unwilling, but I claim that even a willing cat will not stick to Velcro.

Velcro doesn't stick to cats. Any cats. Ever. I know this having tested a finite number of cats — one, to be precise. I am quite certain of this fact. I know it and you should know it, but maybe you have doubts.

Maybe you're thinking, "Hey, Gare, you can't say that, because somewhere in the universe there might be a cat that sticks to Velcro. Unless you test all cats, everywhere, you're generalizing."

Damn right, I'm generalizing, and proud of it. Millions of years of evolution aren't going to be wasted by this neural network.

A universe in which generalizations didn't work would be a very different place. But people are dedicated to stamping out generalizations because it's easier than thinking.

Psychology shows us that natural stages of development are associated with the cognitive process. Regardless of whose model you use, it generally is accepted that humans progress from an early struggle with sensory/motor coordination, through various stages to some sort of concrete reasoning ability. Some, but not all, then develop abilities to handle abstract



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thoughts comfortably and routinely.

This is a direct result of the evolutionary process that has made humans what we are. Our brains are designed by natural forces to recognize patterns, to generalize, to think abstractly, to use inductive reasoning.

If you have doubts, look at the sketch of me that accompanies this column. This flattering caricature is not me, nor is it a photographic depiction of me.

In fact, the simple lines here contain scarcely enough information to identify the drawing as a person, one might think. The most sophisticated computers would have trouble with that. Nevertheless, your brain is quite capable of recognizing this sketch as me. None of you will confuse it with a drawing of George Bush.

Even the photo normally appearing on this page tests your brain's talents, as it is merely a grainy patch of dots in black, white and gray.

One of the early roots of PC lies in cultural relativism. This was a theory developed by anthropologists who realized that European culture wasn't the only form of civil society. A cultural relativist believes that no culture is superior to any other.

Cultural relativity gets part of its name directly from Albert Einstein's theory of relativity. It says that many heretofore "objective" physical events

are characterized only relative to observer position.

This was very loosely translated into popular culture as "Everything is relative." Unfortunately, the idea doesn't translate well from general relativity theory to cultural anthropology.

Anthropologists, reacting to centuries of abuse in the name of science and living in a time infatuated with the bold new idea of relativity, overreacted. They claimed that one cannot make any moral statement about a culture that one is not a part of.

I can and do. Beyond that, I am morally compelled to make certain evaluations. I claim, for example, that female circumcision, as practiced by certain African societies of which I am not a member, is immoral.

One does not need to believe that a cultural element is morally justifiable to study it objectively. Likewise, one does not need to abandon the objective study of the world around them to feel comfortable with one's political morality.

There is a real problem that people are trying to solve by stamping out generalizations. It is that, in general, people can't recognize the difference between a system and a model of a system. Furthermore, they cannot tell when they themselves are making a statement about the system, or about the model of the system.

This blurred distinction leads some people to make unfair, hateful and harmful generalizations. They also tend to be poorly formed generalizations or over-generalizations.

Other people perceive that generalizations are the root of x-isms. Racism is not the result of stereotypes about x-colored people. Unfair stereotypes will be believed by those who already are racist. They will be questioned and rejected by those trained to engage in skeptical inquiry.

Political correctness is not the only form of dogmatism used to counter a natural human trait such as generalizing. Other real problems have been attacked in the same, concrete way.

Instead of encouraging responsible abstract thinking, people are discouraging abstract thinking altogether. Rather than engage in rational analysis, people spew forth politically correct dogma.

A singer named Laurie Anderson says, "Language is a virus."

If that's so, political correctness is a social disease. Understanding is a vaccine.

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