

Is it right to be correct?

By KAREN CLARK
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SANTA CRUZ — Somewhere in the bowels of the legal system, a lawsuit stemming from a fight over food at UC Santa Cruz is working its way to trial.

At issue is a letter written by UCSC Budget Director Victor Kimura accusing Crown College administrators of racism for not participating in a special Asian dinner served on the night of Dec. 7, 1988 — Pearl Harbor Day. The fallout from this so-called "Asian Food Affair" still permeates the campus.

Bubbling beneath the surface is a more murky matter: Are you fair game to be labeled a racist for not being "politically-correct?"

"If you're not with the theme of the day . . . , you're wrong and should be damned," said Professor David Huffman, a member of the Crown College faculty who teaches computer science.

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There has been a polarization to this Asian dinner debate from the beginning. Color-blind vs. color-active. Politically correct vs. politically incorrect. Us vs. them.

"The position that is held by many people at Crown College is the way to deal with racism is to attempt to treat everybody the same," said Michael Rotkin, a member of the Merrill College faculty who teaches community studies. "That idea doesn't work."

One thing nearly everyone agrees on is that this lawsuit, which could cost the University of Califor-

nia millions of dollars if it loses, started with a trivial affair.

A dinner.

After-dinner talk of racism led to a letter, which led to more recriminations, which led to a chancellor in hot soup with Crown, which led to a provost's resignation, which led to more recriminations, which led to a lawsuit.

And, more than two years later, feelings of ill-will remain on campus.

Some Crown faculty members never forgave Chancellor Robert Stevens for failing to rally to their defense when charges of racism were leveled at them.

The same faculty accused Merrill of fomenting dissension.

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UCSC

At The Crossroads

Sunday Conflict on the hill: Does anyone really know what all the fighting is about?

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Battling over political correctness

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They said Merrill, home of the ethnic theme dorms, was just too politically correct for its own good.

"The (Merrill) faculty sees themselves ... on this issue of dealing with and helping correct injustice in the world (as) having the high moral ground," said David Kaun, a Crown faculty member who teaches economics.

Stevens said the issue didn't have anything to do with political correctness: It simply was a situation that got out of control, despite his efforts to downplay it.

A 'silly mistake'

"It was a silly mistake, but not a major mistake," said Stevens about Crown's decision not to serve the food. "I was trying to pour oil on troubled waters."

The chancellor called Kimura's letter "inflammatory" and one that did not help the situation. He also blamed some of the Merrill staff and faculty for their attempt to keep the trouble brewing.

"The tradition of a lack of civility on this campus" didn't help, said Stevens. "I regard it an error of judgment by a number of persons who behaved thereafter without a great deal of common sense."

The issue of political correctness was tackled in a recent column in Santa Cruz Magazine by Roz Spafford, a Kresge College member who teaches writing.

Spafford's perspective is formed not only by years of living and working in Santa Cruz, but also by her association with Merrill College, where her husband, John Isbister, is provost.

She called Crown professors' attempts to portray themselves as the victims in the Asian Food Affair a "rhetorical flip."

"It's very hard for me to see the white Crown faculty as the victims in this case, although I know they've taken it very hard," said Spafford.

The issue behind the lawsuit isn't one of political correctness, she said. It's one of free speech: Budget Director Kimura's right to his voice his opinion in a letter.

Spafford said Merrill and Crown have different philosophies in achieving racial equality. Crown's is one of color-blindness, treating everyone the same.

"The Crown faculty certainly has a right to their opinion ... but many, many students of color feel that practice erases them," she said. "If students are saying, 'Listen, your color-blindness erases me,' then I think the students need to be listened to. Otherwise it becomes paternalistic."

Merrill vs. Crown

To understand what's going on between Merrill and Crown, a little history is in order.

Crown was created as the so-called science college. Originally its faculty were predominately scientists who spent more time in their labs than in their Crown offices.

During a campus reorganization more than 10 years ago, economists joined the scientists at Crown.

Merrill, meanwhile, picked a Third-World theme as its emphasis.

Eventually it attracted many of the ethnic-minority students — in part because it created theme dorms, was open to alternative ideas for courses and programs, and had people of color as professors and staff members.

An example of theme dorms at Merrill would be the voluntary grouping of African-American students and those who are interested in that culture so they can feel comfortable and learn from each other.

Many at Crown thought this was a step backward in race relations; it was one of several areas of conflict between the two colleges.

"There was a lack of respect for years between Crown and Merrill staffs, but they got along," said Ralph Hinegardner, a Crown faculty member who teaches biology. "On some issues, Crown saw Merrill as flaky, and Merrill saw Crown as conservative. They didn't respect each others' point of view all the time."

But many of the Crown traditionalists, he said,



Dan Coyro/Sentinel

A lawn and some differences in philosophy separate Merrill and Crown colleges.

cally correct. Merrill looked at them as backward racially."

Professor Edmund "Terry" Burke, a Merrill faculty member who teaches history, said Crown's aversion to taking steps to achieve racial justice was outdated.

"Most of the Crown faculty is either in science or economics, and in either case they're not very much in tune with real-world issues," said Burke. "They're not in courses where one has to deal with issues that spring up."

Stevens said this tension between the colleges added to the problem.

"A good deal of freight unrelated to the event got loaded onto it," he said. "The behavior of many people was unrelated to Asian food."

Professor Maria Eugenia "Gini" Matute-Bianchi, a Merrill College faculty member who teaches education, said, "You can't merely say, 'Treat everyone alike.' You can't de-race this society."

She said some Crown professors "don't understand what it's like to stick out" when they deride the idea of theme dorms. "We need to be sensitive to what it must be like for these (minority) students coming in."

But, said Matute-Bianchi, the name-calling between Crown and Merrill has to stop.

"I think the more we put labels on people and polarize it, ... that's terribly unfair to the Crown faculty that really is struggling with these issues," she said. "I think as faculty members we have a responsibility to show some maturity, some wisdom, some leadership in trying to find some common ground and discuss it."

not be 'politically correct,' said Professor Joel Yellin, a faculty member who teaches math and computer science. "The Asian Food Affair made that situation worse."

Yellin said there are people at UCSC who want to "sensitize the science faculty to encompass issues of race and gender in their classes."

This, he said, is a threat to academic freedom that impairs the effectiveness of education and "ultimately it's disrespectful to students to say they have to be protected from a way of thinking that's considered 'dangerous.'"

Political correctness at UCSC, according to Yellin, has degenerated to the point of some people thinking that only "as long as I agree with your free speech, (do) you have the right to it."

In fact, charged Yellin, some espouse the right of oppressed groups to have "greater license to say and do things. ... They're actually arguing that people who disagree with them don't have a right to speak, and that's unacceptable."

Crown Professor Kaun agreed the nature of the discussion hasn't always been conciliatory.

"I think that some people ... believe that the way to solve problems is through confrontation," said Kaun. "I personally believe that may be appropriate in some circumstances, but rarely is it the appropriate way in an academic community."

Rotkin from the Merrill staff said, however, that his goal is "to respect the diversity of our society."

"Merrill doesn't have a monopoly on the truth," said Rotkin. "Many of the faculty in Crown College think even trying to raise these issues is divisive. ... Racism will go away if we ignore it, that's really the base of their program. But it's not going to go away."

Crown administration."

Cho said former Provost Musgrave "misunderstood what people meant when they were saying racism. She's from a time when segregation was beginning to break down, and people were talking about things in terms of equal opportunity."

"But we students ... define it in a deeper sense," said Cho. "We call it institutional racism. In a society in which a structure has created huge barriers ... to say equal opportunity means to say the status quo, but not any more."

Professor Huffman from Crown said he has found it difficult to defend himself when "bothersome" terms like institutional racism are leveled.

"That's a charge for an individual that's very hard to protect themselves against," said Huffman. "Sometimes the furor with which some of these charges are thrown, there's a recklessness at least as bad as the original act itself."

Spafford said so-called "politically correct" people are the first "to admit their own racism. Some think it's (being called racist) a slur and it means you're an awful person. I think it means we grow up in a society that's racist and our institutions are racist and, of course, we absorb it."

Discussing such problems, said Spafford, is the key to resolving them.

"I'm actually very sad, and I know many people are, about the pain Crown people obviously have felt," said Spafford. "I have heard from students that actually a lot of discussion did happen. Maybe on some level staff and students had good discussion, but among the faculty there still is a lot of pain and anger."

Charges of political correctness being behind the Asian Food Affair may stem from these feelings, she said.

"Labeling something politically correct obscures more than it illuminates," said Spafford. "There are tensions between people whom we try to include in the university. Many people are unsure how to do that."

A life of its own

Professor Wally Goldfrank, a Merrill College faculty member who teaches sociology, said the Asian Food Affair has taken on a life of its own.

"The incident in itself is perfect for a symbol because nobody argues it was like the LA police beating people with sticks," he said. "But to many Japanese-Americans it was a reminder to some imputed minority status. It poisons the air."

Crown faculty members, said Professor Huffman, resented the broad labeling that came out of the dispute.

"The tragedy in this is the grouping together of people and giving them a negative attribute without looking at them individually," said Huffman. "Even the most conservative people ... weren't saying we're not in favor of affirmative action."

"We just don't go around waving flags about it all the time."

Despite its efforts, Merrill may not have all the answers, he said.

"I think there can be all kinds of experiences that can work ... for ways of people learning to get along with each other," said Huffman. "The issue today is to create equal educational opportunities regardless of where they came from."

Ralph Abraham, a Merrill College faculty member who teaches mathematics, said "there is a lot of racism on campus" and the faculty, staff and administration has too many white males.

And, he said, "Although Merrill has made efforts to be politically correct (on this issue), somehow that may be superficial."

On the other hand, said Abraham, "Crown College had made less effort to be even superficial about it."

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dents and those who are interested in that culture so they can feel comfortable and learn from each other.

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But many of the Crown traditionalists, he said, would have been labeled liberals in the war against racism during the 1960s.

"People in Crown College ... I think they had their race relations burnt into them in the '50s and '60," said Hinegardner. "Their views of race relations may have stopped at that point."

"So the ideal to them would be every race mixing together and treating everyone the same. Skin color is irrelevant. Sex is irrelevant."

This ideal, espoused by former Crown Provost Peggy Musgrave, said Hinegardner, "wasn't quite up to date, according to Merrill. They weren't quite politi-

the idea of theme dorms. "We need to be sensitive to what it must be like for these (minority) students coming in."

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PC battle rages

Some among the Crown faculty said the root of the Asian Food Affair was this long-standing disagreement over how to handle race relations.

But after the Kimura letter and subsequent attacks on Crown's desire to meet the needs of minority students, a more ominous picture emerged, they said.

"Many people feel there is a weight of opinion that prevents them from speaking out when they would

discussion hasn't always been conciliatory.

"I think that some people ... believe that the way to solve problems is through confrontation," said Kaun. "I personally believe that may be appropriate in some circumstances, but rarely is it the appropriate way in an academic community."

Rotkin from the Merrill staff said, however, that his goal is "to respect the diversity of our society."

"Merrill doesn't have a monopoly on the truth," said Rotkin. "Many of the faculty in Crown College think even trying to raise these issues is divisive. ... Racism will go away if we ignore it, that's really the base of their program. But it's not going to go away."

Is racism institutional?

Hae Min "Amy" Cho, president of the UCSC Student Union Assembly and a Crown College student during the Asian Food Affair flap, said she found the college an oppressive place.

"It was mostly their (racial) ignorance, which wasn't abrasively offensive, but it was enough to make me uncomfortable in the dorm," said Cho. "There was a lack of consciousness about it that could have been helped by any effort from the

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Professor Goldfrank of Merrill said the Asian Food Affair isn't about being politically correct, it's about racism.

"Most white people don't know how racist we are," he said. "However well-educated and informed, there are ways of being racist that people just aren't aware of."

Goldfrank said UCSC, like many universities, "is going through a long-overdue adjustment process of trying to reflect the racial and ethnic makeup of the state as a whole."

"People are going to get bruised in the process."

Professor Kaun chafed at the idea Crown's attempt to deal with minority issues are outdated and therefore suspect.

"We're not any more racist than the next people," said Kaun. "(Merrill) is not more dedicated to this than anybody else. They just claim they are."