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**HOW THE UNIVERSITY OF DELAWARE  
TREATS WOMEN AND AFRICAN-AMERICANS**  
*A feminist looks at diversity at The University of Delaware*

By Vivian Houghton

Although I have been a feminist for almost thirty years, I was not born into feminism. I grew up in a two-bedroom house in a working-class neighborhood in Browntown. As the oldest of six siblings, my first education in social realities didn't pertain to gender issues, it pertained to economics. Not only did I watch my parents struggle to pay the bills each week, I also learned to endure the sporadic poverty-baiting that some of the better-off kids at St. Hedwig's Parochial School directed at those of us who were less fortunate. All of this seemed normal to me. I accepted it as part of growing up.

I also considered it normal to get married soon after graduating from high school. Which is exactly what I did, in 1962. Unfortunately, although my husband and I brought into the world a beautiful daughter, our marriage didn't survive. After we separated in 1968, I enrolled at the University of Delaware while simultaneously supporting myself by working a variety of jobs, including waitress, barmaid and racetrack employee. It was during this period in my life that I discovered feminism. Having grown up watching the tough-spirited women in my neighborhood battle valiantly to make ends meet, and having subsequently embarked upon the life of a single mother forced to survive in low-paying "women's jobs" while at the same time going to college, I was drawn to that part of the feminist message that spoke about the need to defend working women's rights. I am as committed to this struggle as I was thirty years ago. If feminism does not stand up for the average woman, it is not worth defending.

I mention all this to explain why, as a feminist, I found the information in *The News Journal's* recent article on sex discrimination against UD's female faculty troubling but persuasive, although I thought the article could have drawn a more detailed picture of *all* the university's female employees, not just faculty. The numbers you quoted showed that women faculty are herded into the lowest tiers of faculty employment. Also, as your evaluation of the university's Women's Studies Program indicated, the UD administration is not beyond taking credit for serving the women's community with feminist courses while simultaneously underpaying the program's two female instructors and refusing to hire them full-time, thereby denying them status as regular faculty. If this isn't an irony for the books, I don't know what is.

However, this is only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the university's treatment of its female and other minority employees. Evidence of this is contained in a report published by the university's Commission on the Status of Women.

While women make up 32.3% of the faculty, they make up 93.8% of the far lower-paying secretarial staff. Although the university can argue correctly that the 32.3% figure for faculty is an improvement compared to twenty years ago, the fact that the majority of its female employees still hold traditional (and lower-paying) “women’s jobs” signals a problem of underlying structural inequity. For instance, although there are 172 more faculty members (956) than there are secretaries (784) at UD, there are 241% more woman secretaries (735) than there are woman faculty (309). As I discovered in recent conversations with UD secretaries, a secretary at the university starts at \$13,506 yearly and can theoretically work up to \$35,000, although rarely do secretaries achieve such a salary; the average salary for a secretary with ten years seniority is about \$25,000. Since UD is the state’s eighth largest employer with 3,340 full-time and 262 part-time employees, it is clear that UD’s ghettoization of women in its lower employment levels has done little to solve the state’s general problem of undervaluing its female workers, who on an average earn about \$5,500 less yearly than men.

Such are some of the economic realities of female employment at UD. Of course, to suffer under the burden of these realities, one must first be employed at UD, which, as a look at the Commission on the Status of Women’s report shows, is not as likely for certain groups as it is for others. Of UD’s 735 female secretaries, only 53 or 7.2% are black. The numbers for black female faculty are even worse: out of a total of 956 faculty members, only 14 or 1.5% are African-American women, and the majority of them are located in the least prestigious faculty positions. In general, the low number of blacks in the UD workforce has helped to sustain the university’s atmosphere as a nearly all-white preserve still haunted by its pre-integration past. This is of course not just an employment-related problem. It also is reflected in the school’s academic life. The campus’s student population is only 5% African-American, and the total number of black faculty, both male and female, is only 3%. What makes these numbers even more embarrassing for Delawareans is that UD’s failure to serve the state’s African-American population has occurred in the shadow of the state’s largest city, Wilmington, whose population is more than 50% black. Clearly, when it comes to diversity, UD is plagued with problems. Not only are its female employees relegated to the school’s least economically rewarding levels, UD apparently has no coherent policy for rectifying its racial imbalances.

This is not what the state’s taxpayers deserve from Delaware largest state-funded institution of higher education. As a supermarket cashier told a friend of mine after reading about UD’s pattern of sex-bias, “I expect that kind of thing from some businesses, but I thought the university was different. I guess I was wrong.”

Unfortunately, she was. This is doubly problematic because with more and more women entering the state’s workforce, and with African-Americans expected to make up 25% of Delaware’s population by early in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the state is clearly in need of creative thinking with regard to eliminating bias. Given that the dictionary defines a university as “an institution of learning at the highest level,”

**Delaware residents can only find it ironic that UD has not used this so-called learning at the highest level to eliminate bias on its own campus. Because of situations like this, many Delawareans, like other Americans, have grown cynical about the ability of “experts” to solve social-economic ills.**

**As we approach the year 2000, the University of Delaware is running out of time to act boldly with regard to solving its diversity problems. A school that promotes the virtues of education only does itself a disservice by acting uneducated when it comes to handling its own internal contradictions. If it cannot put its own house in order, how can UD expect to inspire young people with a belief that academic knowledge is a powerful tool for meeting the challenges presented by today’s rapidly changing world?**

**The university has award-winning poets and chemical engineers and sociologists and scientific researchers on its staff, many of whom have produced brilliant ideas in their fields. I’m sure that with the proper concentration, the administration could also come up with creative ideas for handling the fact that the campus’ racial problems and gender equity problems are not unrelated, but are part of UD’s overall failure to fully serve Delaware’s diverse communities.**