

## Mitchell's Musings 10-12-15: Climate Problems

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No, this musing is not about global warming but rather about "climate" as it has been used in the context of universities to characterize the atmosphere for women and minorities. And, yes, I am well aware of the abuses that have occurred in the name of climate used that way in the form of excesses regarding "microaggressions" and "trigger warnings" on syllabi.

Two items appeared recently in the *Los Angeles Times* regarding climate in the sense above at UCLA. One involved a fraternity and sorority party in which party goers allegedly appeared in blackface.<sup>1</sup> (Exactly what happened is not completely clear at this writing.) The second involved a survey undertaken by the consulting firm Korn Ferry regarding problems in the climate for women faculty at the Anderson Graduate School of Management (at which I had a full-time, and then a half-time, appointment before I retired in 2008).<sup>2</sup> I want to focus on the latter case but both stories connect climate to students, a fact which led to this musing.

In the case of the Anderson School, the Korn Ferry report has circulated to faculty members, but is not supposed to be a public document. However, it is evident that the *LA Times* has seen the report. It has been distributed to faculty by email and thus is an easy "leak." I will nonetheless not reproduce it here since it is not supposed to circulate. But in general terms the Korn Ferry report largely discusses intra-*faculty* relations at the School. In addition, as noted above, there is material concerning the atmosphere in MBA classes emanating from *students*.

In essence, the report describes a macho atmosphere in classes which can make life difficult, especially for junior female instructors. Management schools tend to take student ratings of instructors seriously. So classroom problems can pose an obstacle for advancement of junior faculty. Time spent by them dealing with such problems is time that is not available for research and journal publication, career elements which are critical for academic advancement.

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<sup>1</sup><http://www.latimes.com/local/lanow/la-me-ln-ucla-blackface-kanye-party-20151008-story.html>. See also <http://www.kcrw.com/news-culture/shows/which-way-la/is-the-lapd-over-reacting-to-a-hostile-atmosphere#seg-ucla-students-protest-blackface-frat-party>.

<sup>2</sup><http://www.latimes.com/local/education/la-me-ln-ucla-women-20151008-story.html>

It is interesting to note that back in 2013, the *New York Times* featured a report on the Harvard Business School that had similar revelations – and which largely focused on (male) student behavior.<sup>3</sup> One suspects that you could investigate prestigious graduate business schools around the country and come up with comparable findings (just as there have been undergraduate fraternity-related incidents around the country comparable to the recent UCLA event). It is worth noting, however, that when the Harvard B-School report came out, Harvard in response raised the proportion of women in its MBA program to over 40%.<sup>4</sup>

Which brings me to what might be done at UCLA. Faculty inherently turn over slowly; students turn over fast. A new crop of students is admitted annually. Even if there are major issues in intra-faculty relations (peer evaluations, promotions, etc.), it is hard for a dean or other school administrator to make rapid changes such matters. Hiring and advancement of faculty are handled through a complicated process involving committees, departmental meetings, and external reviews. In contrast, student admissions policy can change quickly. Faculty have little direct involvement in MBA admissions; the process is handled by internal School staff. Admission policy is a lever a dean can pull.

One suspects that a jump in the proportion women – currently the percent female at UCLA Anderson is 30%<sup>5</sup> - would limit the kind of frat house behavior in core MBA courses that apparently went on at Harvard. One suspects that an increase in the proportion of non-traditional students (for example, those who want to work for nonprofits or the public sector or who have done so in the past) would also improve the climate for junior female faculty in particular.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup><http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/08/education/harvard-case-study-gender-equity.html> and <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/10/education/harvard-business-students-see-class-as-divisive-an-issue-as-gender.html>. (The latter reference referred to income-related snobbery.)

<sup>4</sup><http://poetsandquants.com/2014/01/28/hbs-dean-makes-an-unusual-public-apology/>

<sup>5</sup><http://www.anderson.ucla.edu/degrees/mba-program/admissions/class-profile>.

<sup>6</sup>California voters enacted Proposition 209 in 1996 which bans affirmative action in public universities – including affirmative action related to sex.

[\[http://ballotpedia.org/California\\_Affirmative\\_Action\\_Proposition\\_209\\_%281996%29\]](http://ballotpedia.org/California_Affirmative_Action_Proposition_209_%281996%29) However, MBA admissions involve a significant degree of subjective judgment; it is not just a matter of test scores.

My personal recollection – which may be faulty – is that the proportion of women in the 1970s at the UCLA management school was higher, perhaps 40% or so – and then fell back. When I arrived in the late 1960s, the proportion of women was very low so the change in the 1970s was dramatic. But the 1970s and 1980s also saw an effort to change the curriculum to be more like Harvard. In the mid-1970s and before, the UCLA program was much more individualized than it became.<sup>7</sup> The Harvard model – a fixed MBA curriculum with an emphasis on case studies – was implemented. The School imitated Harvard and thus became more like Harvard including, so it seems, the deficiencies found there and identified by the *New York Times*.<sup>8</sup>

In an effort to promote the Harvard case method at Anderson – part of the general effort to be more like Harvard - there were classes for instructors on how to do it. Not surprisingly, the classes involved cases. One of these cases told the story of an instructor who walks into his class (the instructors in the stories were male) and finds his MBA students engaged in a food fight, literally tossing their lunches around the room at each other and making a mess. It then describes how the instructor took charge and began the day's lesson.

What was remarkable about the story is that it treated such junior high behavior as if it were something that might be expected from a group of graduate students in their late 20s. When I suggested that the remedy for such behavior was not *taking charge* but rather *discharge* (dismissal), this idea was quickly put down. The theme of the case was in essence that boys will be boys and that instructors should expect to deal with that fact.

In short, the Harvard B-school revelation in the *New York Times* in 2013 should not have been a surprise. It was the accrual of a long history. Imitating that program at other institutions (such as UCLA) could be expected to produce similar results, even if the dark side of those results was

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<sup>7</sup>Up to that point, the School – it was not yet called “Anderson” – had a variety of separate programs for different fields – finance, accounting, marketing, etc. – as well as a general MBA program. The separate programs were similar to “majors” in an undergraduate college. All of the separate fields shared a limited common core of management classes.

<sup>8</sup>One element introduced – I think in the 1980s – was the organization of MBA classes into sections. The students were divided into section groups. Each group stayed together through the core courses. This arrangement may simply have been an administrative convenience that avoided the complications of individual student enrollment in each course. But it meant that a section in which a subgroup of students exhibited bad behavior was preserved in class after class to replicate the problem.

unintended. But if imitation is to be the policy, then why not start by imitating what Harvard did after the story came out in the *New York Times*? Raise the female/male ratio in MBA admissions substantially. And since it's likely that it's not just Anderson that has a problem, all other major B-schools should take notice. Admissions policy is not the only fix that's needed. But it is a quick one.