

# BUZZWORDS



Thoughts on SUIQ from

Chancellor Kenneth A. Shaw

As promised in the December 1999 *BuzzWords*, I continue a five-part series on diversity on this campus with the March 2000 edition. I believe that beginning the 21st century with this topic is entirely appropriate. After all, now more than ever those who can work with and appreciate all kinds of people and cultures will succeed.

I begin with the topic of discrimination. Like many words, this is one that has taken on a distinctly negative connotation. And rightly so. Discrimination has brought untold suffering to millions of people around the world.

Today, of course, federal and state laws—notably the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the establishment of affirmative action in hiring and contracts in 1965—prohibit overt discrimination. It is unlawful to prevent someone we perceive as different from ourselves from voting, using public transportation, renting or buying housing, using such public accommodations as hotels, and so on.

Syracuse University, of course, follows all of these laws to the letter. While this institution cannot claim to have had a perfect history of tolerance, it has made important progress in its efforts not only to eliminate blatant discrimination, but to foster acceptance and appreciation.

Legal barriers, however, do not guarantee that certain forms of discrimination have been abolished. It is outrageous when a disrespectful epithet is scrawled on a bathroom wall in a residence hall or ethnic hatred is broadcast by e-mail to hundreds of unwilling recipients. In these cases, the response must be swift and unequivocal—the perpetrator must be found and dealt with through the University judicial system.

Discrimination can also be very subtle. It can cause doubts to surface as people wonder: “Does my professor make eye contact with others and call

on them more than me, and is that because I am different?” “Did I lose out on that promotion because the other candidate was from a more privileged group?”

These are not easy matters to deal with. But we can begin by acknowledging that our perceptions are shaped by our experiences, and, where one person sees a normal activity, another can perceive bias.

National polls show us that whites and people of color equally value family, hard work, fairness, and the like. These groups part company, though, in their perceptions of such social institutions as business, education, or health care. The majority of

whites say that these institutions treat everyone fairly, while a significant percentage of people of color disagree.

Sometimes perceptions can go into overdrive, however, and some outcomes are used to “prove” discrimination. For example, if the student population includes 53 percent women and 47 percent men, can we assume that the institution is biased

toward women to the exclusion of men? Or are there other variables—such as motivation, breadth of programs, demographic idiosyncrasies—that impinge on this result?

Discrimination in all its forms deserves our attention. Intentional acts of hatred and oppression must be dealt with immediately and definitively. More subtle acts of discrimination merit thoughtful discussion. We are fortunate that this is the kind of environment where such dialogues can happen fairly easily—at least if we make it so. And it is our obligation to do so. Have you observed acts of overt or covert discrimination? Let me know by sending a note or e-mailing your thoughts to me via [kelee@syr.edu](mailto:kelee@syr.edu).

The next *BuzzWords* will address institutional barriers to diversity.

## Discrimination