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J'accuse:

University termed insensitive to Franco-Americans

by Pete Weigel

The University of Maine has neither the knowledge, the experience, nor the sensitivity to listen to and understand the problems of its Franco-American students, says Yvon Labbe, co-ordinator of the Franco-American Project on the Orono campus.

Labbe emphasizes the failure of UMO to deal with the personal needs of Franco-Americans. He charged that the system is aware of its responsibilities at an intellectual and business level, but there has been little personal commitment toward fulfilling those responsibilities or understanding the fundamental emotions of Franco-American students.

The system treats people not as individuals but according to their roles, and expectations within those roles, he claimed.

An "expectancy to conform" hurts

Franco-Americans more than most students, says Labbe. The majority of students at UMO are White-Anglo-Saxon-Protestants, and fit into the system. Their problems are usually academic, Labbe said.

The Franco-American student is asked to fit into an environment in which cultural differences conflict in every interaction, he continued.

"It's not just a matter of language," Labbe stressed, "but a part of themselves that is at stake."

Labbe maintained that a special program for minorities, such as the Franco-American Project, is usually treated superficially as a "luxury". The system takes a "we'll do it last" attitude instead of treating it as an innately significant priority, he charged.

"Scholarships can help a minority student get on a university campus. But

what happens once he gets there?" Labbe asked.

Labbe cited three changes he hoped would evolve within the university system, each dependent on first eliminating the myth that Franco-American students are "culturally disadvantaged." First, he urged the English Department to improve its recognition and understanding of Franco-Americans who have difficulty expressing themselves in a second language. Currently, it is almost a personal risk for a teacher to take a stand and be willing to look beyond language and cultural differences in order to understand a student's work, he said.

Second, Labbe suggested the Foreign Language Department become more responsive to Franco-Americans. He said that in elementary schools Franco-Americans are often told to forget their cultural background, and learn the English language. Later, in high school and

college, the student is told that he will be taught to speak "correct French" (the Parisien style). There may be little difference between the spoken language of the Franco-Americans and the Parisien French, said Labbe, but there are many subtle social and cultural differences which are sometimes ignored.

Finally, Labbe said that he would like an "office of advocacy" created, which would have the power to "fight and struggle for the minority students who lack the power or will to deal with the figures of authority."

He admitted that initiative by the Franco-American Project alone would not be effective.

"All we can do is begin to create an awareness", Labbe concluded. The solution to the problems of Franco-American students, as with other minority students, must "come from within the university itself, from its own sense of responsibility", he suggested.