

The Chronicle Review

<http://chronicle.com/weekly/v52/i29/29b00601.htm>

From the issue dated March 24, 2006

Has Harvard Lost Its Way?

By HARRY R. LEWIS

Harvard strives to be the best at many things, and it often succeeds. But Harvard has protected its reputation for excellence at the expense of its sense of a larger purpose. Harvard's leaders have allowed the university's mission to drift from education to customer satisfaction. For them, Harvard is no longer a city upon a hill but merely a brand name.

Today's Harvard education offers as a common thread nothing like the Puritans' fear that their children would be left without a learned ministry, or the 19th- and early-20th-century benefactor Henry Lee Higginson's conviction that "the health and true welfare of our University and our country go hand in hand," or the worry of the 1945 curricular reform, *General Education in a Free Society*, that civilization itself might lie in the balance if Harvard did not do its job. The old ideal of a liberal education lives on in name only. No longer does Harvard teach the things that free the human mind and spirit. In 2005, after a three-year review of its curriculum, it headed toward the conclusion that its students are free agents and for the most part should study what they wish.

A liberal education in the sense Harvard now uses the term is simply an education not meant to make students employable. Undergraduate education should not be too advanced or too specialized, nor should it include courses that would be helpful in the world of business. Becoming too skilled at any one thing, so skilled that a graduate could make a living doing it, is distasteful. Students are better off being broadly educated generalists — though not much breadth can be demanded because students would resist any requirement.

Undergraduate education defined in that way allows professors to do as they wish as well. In an effort to persuade me that I should back the newly proposed, requirement-light curriculum, one professor offered that it meant we faculty members would no longer have to teach students who did not want to take our courses. But the courses from which students learn the most are often ones they would be disinclined to take without being pressed to do so. The general-education courses I took on Western philosophy stretched and rewarded me, and the core course I teach on information technology and society plays that role for my students. If professors can define their job as teaching what they wish to those who wish to be taught it, Harvard will not carry the centuries-old ideal of a liberal education forward into the next generation. It will instead indulge students' inclinations to learn more of what they know already, while avoiding unpleasant but

enlightening disagreements among professors about the relative importance of different studies. Liberal education will be reduced to an easy compromise among academics rather than a long-term commitment to the welfare of students and the society they will serve.

Even excellence assumes different meanings depending on the circumstances. No more than half the class should graduate with honors, Harvard opines, to preserve the value of the honors degree. The effect may be to make Harvard graduates, in aggregate, less well educated rather than more, but at least the news media will no longer deride us for grade inflation. The very concept of an honors program should be discarded, according to proposals afloat in late 2005. At the same time as Harvard plans to remove incentives to pursue advanced work in a field, it is proposing incentives to dilettantism, in the form of "secondary fields" in which students could earn recognition for a mere smattering of learning. In fact, stimulating Harvard's remarkable students to do excellent work is beyond our ambitions. That lowering of expectations may reflect a reluctance of some faculty members to educate students.

Harvard teaches students but does not make them wise. They may achieve extraordinary excellence in both academic and extracurricular endeavors, but the whole educational experience does not cohere. Few could give a good answer, five or 10 years after graduation day, to the simple question: What was the most important thing Harvard taught you? Parents hope that their children will remember, in later life, lessons greater than how to parallel park or how to balance a checkbook. Like good parents, a good university should help its students understand the complexities of the human condition — or at least what others, men and women of acknowledged wisdom, have thought about the difficulties of living an examined life. A good university challenges its students to ask questions that are both disturbing and deeply important. Part of becoming a responsible adult educated in the best tradition of human thought is to come to grips, personally, with the basic questions of life.

One might argue that the great, sprawling, modern research university must be different things to different people. Perhaps, given the other demands on its faculty, the best it can hope to do educationally is to present a menu from which its multitalented, multiethnic, multicultural, multinational students can pick and choose. That cafeteria theory of education avoids the problem of valuing some things more than others, of judging that the specialties of some professors are more important for educated citizens than the specialties of others. It suggests that character and morality are not the university's business at all.

Some of the forces that have brought universities to incoherence are societal. Universities did not create the consumer culture, but they have been overtaken by it. Universities did not become expensive by themselves, but they are subject to the same economic forces as other institutions. What universities have not done is to resist societal forces where resistance would be right and proper. The greatest universities have fared the best — they are the highest ranked and the most sought after by the customers. Sadly, although their wealth and their desirability have put them in the best position to press back against the

forces that have compromised the education they offer, they have instead drifted complacently along with those forces. Harvard, as the best of them all, can push back most easily.

But the forces controlling Harvard today want it to follow the crowd. If most other universities have something, be it a simple distribution requirement for graduation or a women's center, the new Harvard thinks they must be right. It is easier to justify doing as others do than to defend the principles behind Harvard's uniqueness. Harvard needs the will to push back where thoughtful consideration should lead it to other choices. That will must come from everyone who is part of the Harvard family.

First, the leadership of the university. Harvard requires strong leadership. Harvard is not a direct democracy, not even a representative democracy. Decisions at Harvard cannot follow the average or the majority sentiment. Harvard needs leaders whom others will follow, not unquestioningly but with confidence and respect. But Harvard is not an autocracy either. In fact, it is more like a volunteer agency. Students at Harvard are volunteers — they would all be welcomed at other good colleges if they wanted to leave. Even though they are subject to Harvard rules and regulations while enrolled, their power of passive resistance is far stronger than the university's power of coercion. They will study hard and do good work only if they are inspired. Every faculty member is a volunteer, too. Leading professors is, admittedly, like herding cats. They could all get jobs elsewhere at the drop of a hat. There are few effective punishments for professors, especially those with tenure, so the president and the deans cannot order them to be obedient. Almost everything professors do, they do because they have come to believe in its importance and rightness, not because someone above their pay grade tells them they should do it.

Even the support staff are volunteers. Those pushing paper can be made to do their jobs in the way that clerks everywhere are kept in line. But when they come in contact with students, they are likely to put on their human faces and to be candid about the way things work. Their loyalty is invaluable. The truth about Harvard's attitudes, motivations, and hypocrisies travels very efficiently by word of mouth in a university, whatever the communications office may say. There is no upstairs and downstairs in a healthy college. Students talk all the time to the police officers, the medical trainers, the financial-aid officers, not to mention those with official advising and counseling roles. The employees at the bottom of the organizational tree are the ones who see students the most. They, too, are educators. They absorb the spirit of the institution and convey its values to students every day.

Most important in articulating and communicating institutional values is Harvard's civil service. Many long-serving educational administrators have inexplicably left Harvard in recent years. The buzzwords of the new approach to such appointments include "professionalizing" the staff, bringing in "fresh ideas," and just "shaking things up." Reorganization is a disruptive and unending process. New organizational trees accompany reorganizations, with hierarchical, sharply defined reporting structures and new jobs to be filled by newly hired staff members. Though touted as making Harvard

better, such moves often succeed only in shifting attention away from the big picture. Each new dean or administrator or vice provost assumes responsibility for some immediate task, which thereby becomes no one else's problem.

The reorganizations have also eliminated many of those who knew how Harvard used to be. Far more significant than any structural effect has been the incalculable loss of many administrators who recognized their work as education and saw in it a high calling. They thought rigorously about the goals of a college education and how their part of Harvard might work with others to fulfill those goals. They were reflective about causes and effects, smart about students, and reluctant to risk teaching the wrong larger lesson by a quick decision that might be expedient in the short run. They were self-effacing members of a collective effort, and they provided perspective on deep and enduring problems. They were, in other words, genuine educational professionals. They left Harvard, or were forced to leave, because they did not fit into the new, retail-store university, in which orders are taken, defects are papered over to get the merchandise out the door, and the customers are sent home happy by "student-service professionals."

Lawrence Summers was the product, not the source, of the trends that brought Harvard to its present predicament. He is an economist, who sees the actions and decisions of men and women as governed by rational choice and power, not by belief and commitment. He was hired by, and was answerable to, a governing board consisting largely of people from the world of business and finance. As a former U.S. treasury secretary, he understands the power of money to shape society. In his Washington years, he learned the ways of politics and the power of the media — and the importance of controlling information and communication, of message over substance.

Summers cultivated a reputation as a *provocateur*, but he avoided comment on difficult issues, such as banning military recruiters from campus, to stave off adverse publicity. The Summers administration cannot even be credited with making the university more businesslike. Summers centralized power in order to run the university more efficiently, saying: "Academic freedom is wonderful, but it really doesn't have a place in the purchase of cement." But the brilliant economist was a poor business manager. In the five years of his presidency, the balanced budget of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences fell to an annual deficit of \$40-million — at the same time the university endowment rose by more than \$8-billion. The deficit is projected to rise to \$100-million within five years. Summers hired many high-priced consultants to review administrative structures, but the main result was to swell the bureaucracy of assistant provosts, vice provosts, and vice presidents; divisional deans and deputy deans; and assistant deans and associate deans. Much of the daily business of the university now becomes stalled in the bureaucratic thicket.

The vast power Summers held might have enabled him to achieve great successes. But his misfortunes arose from the impatience, harshness, thoughtlessness, and lack of candor with which he used that power. In the Harvard of President Summers, students and faculty members were like the electorate as seen from Washington, D.C. interest groups, not collections of individuals. Interest groups are given what their spokespersons say the

groups want, in proportion to their size and influence. Educational pros and cons were balanced by political, not intellectual, analysis.

Summers enjoyed his celebrity; *The Harvard Crimson* called him a "rock-star president." If unhappiness created public-relations problems, the president could earmark funds to buy peace. Most retellings of the tale of Summers's remarks about women in science and engineering do not report the real source of the anger it caused. In his speech, he belittled the importance of gender discrimination as an explanation for the small number of women scientists and said he thought that "intrinsic aptitude" was a more important factor. Yet three months earlier, when a large group of women professors pointed out to him a dramatic decline in hiring of women faculty members, he offered no such theory. The faculty furor came because his speech revealed, to what he thought would be a friendly crowd, his doubt that ordinary hiring efforts would ever yield many first-class women scientists. He responded by apologizing, creating a new bureaucracy, and committing a large sum of money. The apologies and funds did not, however, erase the memory of Summers's insincerity.

Public controversies and internal dissatisfactions marked Summers's tenure as president, but too much has been made of his personality and his management style in explaining his downfall. Surely he was as much of a bully as a bull in a china shop, and his contempt extended not just to individuals but to entire fields of study, but none of that would have mattered if his ideas had been inspiring. Summers presented no imaginative program, envisioned no educational ideal, carried no flaming torch that students or faculty members wanted to follow. Because whatever agenda he had was advanced so ineffectively and unconvincingly, Summers will be remembered as a weak president, not a strong one.

The Faculty of Arts and Sciences resolved last March that "the faculty lacks confidence in the leadership of Lawrence H. Summers." Coming two months after Summers's speech on women in science, the vote has often been construed as a rebuke of his views, but the debate leading up to it raised broader issues of substance, integrity, and governance. Any motion condemning a particular action or opinion probably would have failed.

The lack of confidence of the Harvard faculty in its president was widely caricatured as stemming from a complacent faculty's resistance to his controversial and innovative ideas, a backlash resulting from his abrasiveness, or more simply an attack by feminist harpies allied with leftist crazies. The reality is that the ideas Summers offered did not meet the Harvard standard. He expressed his "controversial" ideas as one-liners in brief talks, not in essays in which ideas struggled against contrary ideas. There was in his presidency a striking absence of the balanced, thoughtful, and informed analysis that characterizes the academy at its best. Where earlier Harvard presidents, including Summers's immediate predecessors Derek Bok and Neil Rudenstine, wrote eloquent essays about matters they thought worthy of broad attention, Summers avoided using the written word to provide deep analysis of complex issues.

His willingness to offend made him a hero to some, inside and outside Harvard, even as it insulted others. Summers's presidency ended, however, not because of stylistic gaffes but because of disclosures of apparent dishonesty, which tipped the views of professors who had supported him during earlier controversies. When asked in a recent faculty meeting if he had any opinion about the university's actions in the Andrei Shleifer affair, in which the university paid millions to settle a federal lawsuit involving a fellow economist, Summers denied knowing enough to make a judgment. That provoked soft murmurs from the many professors already familiar with Harvard's role. Discredited as a moral leader, he could no longer play the role of academic leader.

Then a few days later, Peter Ellison, the former dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences, reported that, in response to a question in an earlier faculty meeting, the president had misrepresented his plans to change the faculty's authority over doctoral programs. The issue, said Ellison, had become one of the president's character, not his personality or style. A second no-confidence vote was scheduled; it would certainly have passed by a wide margin. Summers chose to offer his resignation rather than suffer that humiliation.

Lists of Summers's achievements were quickly posted on the Harvard Web site and parroted in major newspapers, both by news reporters and opinion writers. Yet many of the successes claimed for Summers are neither his nor real. To the extent that his agenda had substance, incompetent administration and lack of sustained attention damaged it more than any faculty intransigence.

Ultimately, Summers lacked the skills needed to make significant improvements in undergraduate education. His style was portrayed as hard-nosed and data-driven, but data documenting educational problem areas had been collected and published for years. An expanded seminar program, more study abroad, and an introductory science course have been claimed as his curricular achievements, but they fit into no big educational picture and may not even be improvements. The faculty was already discussing the need for a curricular review a year before Summers became president; he deserves the credit for its official launch, but also the blame for its ham-handed management. In spite of the expectations he created when he became president, the undergraduate academic program he leaves behind may be less rigorous than the one he inherited and demand less study of science and of foreign cultures. The new financial-aid program he touted for low-income students amounted to only \$2-million in a financial-aid budget of almost \$85-million. Summers announced the new program in a media blitz, but credited none of the earlier work documenting the seriousness of the issue.

Planning for Harvard's new campus across the Charles River in Allston, regularly cited as one of Summers's greatest accomplishments, proceeded with the same disorganization as the curricular review — with multiple, poorly coordinated task forces, their work ignored when found flawed or unwelcome.

All that is to be expected in a university that orients itself toward external markers of prestige and influence. Deliberation and debate are not the currency of a university in

pursuit of temporal values. Summers is a victim in this drama, not a villain — a victim not of faculty anger but of his success at the role assigned to him.

Lawrence Summers's principal failing was not that he was too strong or too uncongenial, but that the wisdom, knowledge, and judgment he lent to faculty affairs were too feeble. In the end, professors realized that Summers was not offering leadership they could respect. The Harvard faculty would rather mind its own business than vote down the president; they did not do so for sport. The majority voted against him, and a larger majority was prepared to do it again, because his intellectual contributions as president failed to meet Harvard's high standards and to bring honor to the institution.

What Harvard needs more than anything are ideas and idealism, and those have to be articulated from the top. With the announcement that Derek Bok will be acting president, Harvard is already restoring confidence in its leadership. While some news-media accounts have characterized Harvard professors as inmates eager to run the asylum, the serious question is about the wishes not of the professors, but of the governing board, the Harvard Corporation. In searching for Summers's successor, it runs the risk of being distracted by superficialities — candidates' gender, celebrity, and manners, for example. Yet it also has the opportunity to return to original principles, to think deeply about how a college fits within a research university in the 21st century, about how Harvard can do the most good for society, and about how Harvard fits within America and the world.

During most of the Summers years, the Harvard Corporation had a leadership vacuum. Its members were rarely heard from in public and rarely spoke to those who made the university run, except the president and his staff. If Harvard were a publicly held corporation in today's climate of intensely scrutinized corporate governance, the shareholders would have been up in arms. In airing their concerns about Summers's leadership, Harvard professors were playing the role of shareholders. In 2005 some fellows who had joined the corporation since Summers's selection began to listen to what professors were telling them, and the corporation ultimately played its proper fiduciary role.

For Harvard to reclaim its soul, the alumni must recognize what has happened to their university. To the extent that controversies at Harvard were portrayed as a struggle between the president and the professors, the alumni stood skeptically on the sideline. They were led to see faculty members as ivory-tower snobs or social radicals; when Summers attacked Cornel West, an African-American-studies professor who wore an Afro and released a rap album, they gave the president the benefit of the doubt. But alumni who remember Harvard for the lasting values it gave them should recognize where economic and market incentives are taking their university. The alumni-elected Board of Overseers, the large if marginalized second of Harvard's governing boards, was awakened during the Summers crisis. It must not return to functioning as the university's cheerleaders rather than its governors.

The biggest tasks await the faculty. Every decision concerning undergraduates should be held to an educational standard. No matter what the choice, whether affecting academic

programs or student life, the question should be asked: If we do this, then over the course of four years, what lessons will Harvard students learn, and will they become better educated? Only if the faculty is engaged, in small ways and large, in considering the purpose of changes can wise changes be made — changes that will make Harvard graduates both excellent and prepared to serve their roles in society.

The next Harvard president must help the faculty develop a shared sense of educational responsibility for its undergraduates. There is no better student body anywhere, and we professors are teaching them because they are the promise of the world. We must design a curriculum for those future citizens, professionals, and scholars that we ourselves respect.

We will never return to the days of *General Education in a Free Society*, when the faculty imagined that all students might take one course. But there is an enormous difference between that impossible unity and today's total disunity. The faculty must find a way to set priorities for itself so that it can give some guidance to students about what educated people, civilized people, should know in the 21st century.

The faculty needs to change, too. There is a great deal of good will among professors for more attention to undergraduates, and a great many disincentives and cultural biases prevent that good will from being translated into practice. Some of the change can, with incentives from the university's leaders, happen quickly. Departments that are famously indifferent to undergraduates can, tenure notwithstanding, undergo the same process of reorganization that is applied to other underperforming units. In the longer run, teaching should be a serious component of faculty-hiring criteria, not simply a peripheral item. Alumni, parents, students can all call for change, and governing boards can insist on it. Honest means of evaluating teaching will have to be developed, mechanisms that are as scrupulously unbiased as the rigorous system of external reviewers used to evaluate the scholarship of tenure candidates. More fundamentally, "teaching" needs to mean more than skill at lecturing and leading seminars. We must find a way to honor good character in our faculty members and to penalize acts that call a professor's character into question. The evaluation of character is easier said than done, given the risks of bias and prejudice. But the present system so discourages any judgment of personal character that a better system would not be difficult to design.

Finally, the counseling and therapeutic services for undergraduates must share the stage with a less clinical treatment of students' hearts and souls. There is no program for that change. Telling students to go to church is not the answer, though church is an answer for some students. Community service is also an answer for some, though it has become so professionalized and technical that many students draw more managerial than spiritual value from volunteering. The opportunity to study under exemplary visitors from the "real world" is a special privilege of Harvard students. The teaching of challenging texts, literary or philosophical, can raise in today's students the same important and troubling questions they have raised in other readers for centuries — if they are not taught to elicit "correct" answers that will earn high grades.

None of these proposals are inimical to excellence. Excellence must remain a guiding value, but the pursuit of excellence should no longer be an excuse for ignoring everything else. Faculty members should be expected to offer some courses that span large domains of human thought. Professors, like graduates, should possess knowledge in many things as well as expertise in one.

The restoration of a true core to undergraduate education, an approach to education that will turn dependent adolescents into wise adults, circles back to the question of leadership. The university's leaders must believe in the process of self-discovery, and they must articulate that belief. They must support and praise faculty members and coaches and deans and career counselors and therapists who recognize its importance. To that end, the leaders must themselves embody the values of self-understanding, maturity, strength of character, compassion and empathy for others, as well as scholarly excellence. Everyone in the university — parents, students, professors, and members of the governing boards — should have a say in judging whether that standard is met.

Harry R. Lewis, a professor of computer science at Harvard University, served as dean of Harvard College from 1995 to 2003. This essay is adapted from Excellence Without a Soul: How a Great University Forgot Education, to be published in May by PublicAffairs. Copyright © 2006 by Harry R. Lewis.

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Section: The Chronicle Review
Volume 52, Issue 29, Page B6