

Remarks of James Kloppenberg,
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As a member of the USGSO committee, I want to explain why I endorse our committee's report even though, as some of you know, I am in favor of what we are now calling option 1. That is a policy that would result in the dismissal of any Harvard student who joins an exclusionary social organization. I have learned a lot about student life in the last year and a half, and I am not now where I was at the beginning of this debate. I have friends on all sides of this issue, including Harry Lewis and Richard Thomas. Yet everything I have learned has led me to the conclusion that exclusionary social organizations are detrimental to the life of all Harvard students, including those who belong to them and who claim to find them beneficial. I understand the arguments we have heard concerning freedom of association. I understand why some of the students who belong to these organizations defend them. But I am not persuaded by those arguments.

The arguments I do find persuasive, which are laid out in detail in the committee report, focus on one issue above all: the freedom of association enjoyed by some of our students comes at the cost of excluding the majority of our students from those associations. As a few of you know, the focus of my research as a historian has been the difficulty, and the necessity, of balancing competing goods such as freedom and equality, and the changing judgments, over time and across cultures, about the best way to strike that balance. The ideals of liberalism and democracy are complex, delicate, and essentially contested concepts. There have been no irrefutable, knock-down arguments that resolve conflicts such as the ones

we have been debating. Different cultures strike these balances in different ways at different times.

I believe the time has come for the Harvard faculty to think hard about whether we want to continue to value some students' right of free association over other students' right not to be excluded or discriminated against. We now admit students from a much wider range of backgrounds than ever before. Do we also give those students equal access to the life of the college once they arrive?

American historians know that the right of association has most often been used in US history to defend the privileges enjoyed by white males on the basis of religion, race, ethnicity, class, and gender against waves of challenges to those privileges from excluded groups. Harvard College was for centuries a bastion of white male Anglo-Saxon Protestantism. In the last century Harvard has taken steps to break down those privileges, extending from the end of admissions quotas explicitly based on religion, race, and ethnicity, to the institution of the house system, through the advent of coeducation and finally the randomization of the houses.

It is no surprise that the current challenge to the last bastion of white male privilege is meeting dogged resistance, even though these exclusionary social organizations have been identified since 1984 as antithetical to the ethos of Harvard. Echoing the words from that decade of then Dean Harry Lewis, the Crimson editorial board last week endorsed ending the final clubs because of their role, in the words of the editorial, in "perpetuating outdated notions of elitism,

classism, and exclusivity on campus.” For all the reasons that are presented in detail in our committee’s report, I would like to see any student who chooses to belong to such organizations after the class of 2022 enters Harvard dismissed from the college. I urge all faculty members not just to listen to what is said here today but to read the report with care. It is the result of many months of work.

I understand that not everyone at Harvard sees this issue as I do. I understand that many members of the faculty do not grasp the role these organizations now play in undergraduate social life. That role has been accentuated by three developments: the law that raised the drinking age to 21, the randomization of the houses, and the increasing socio-economic as well as ethnic, racial, and gender diversity of our student body. I want faculty members to have an opportunity to continue to learn about how these organizations operate, as I have done for the past year, and I want us to have a vigorous debate about whether or not we consider them consistent with the principles we embrace.

When the faculty of Williams College voted to reaffirm the ban on exclusionary social organizations, the vote was unanimous. None of the other colleges that have instituted similar policies, including Amherst, Bowdoin, Colby, and Middlebury, has seen the sky fall as a result. They are thriving. I do not know whether the Harvard faculty will vote in the same way, against exclusion and in favor of the principle of nondiscrimination. Some may value what they see as freedom above what many of us see as equality. But I want very much for us to have that debate, whatever the outcome. For one thing, I think it is important for

our students, and for those outside our community, to hear just how widespread is the opposition to the final clubs. Even the faculty members who spoke to our committee, either to criticize the May 2016 policy or the July 2017 proposal to dismiss students who belong to exclusionary social organizations--even those faculty spoke with conviction about how much they “despise” or “abhor” such organizations, about their “poisonous” effect on campus life, and about how fundamentally inconsistent they are with the principles our community stands for.

I endorse the committee report neither because I am “back pedaling,” to use the phrase of a person quoted in the Boston Globe, nor because our earlier recommendations have been “watered down,” as a news story in the Crimson put it, but because I think it is important for us to continue to discuss these issues. That is what the report invites us to do. I realize that we live in a time when it is more common to state positions with vehemence and certainty, and either to pretend that there are no alternatives or that the alternatives are nonsense. But that is not the way this faculty should proceed. We should not be taking dogmatic positions on these complex issues, and I do not think we should commit ourselves to closing off debate or closing off our options, as we will be asked to do later today. Instead we should be exploring our options carefully and critically. That is what our committee has been doing for the last six months, and that is what I hope this faculty will continue to do, before we reach a decision.

I consider my own judgment on this difficult issue provisional. It has developed as a result of what I have learned so far. But I remain willing to listen to

arguments that challenge my position. I am also willing to let the policy of May 2016 play out, to see what consequences it will have, while we continue to deliberate. The 84% yield of admitted students this year, the first year the policy has been in force, is an all-time high. It suggests that our potential students are not put off by having certain privileges withheld if they choose to join single-sex exclusionary social organizations. Perhaps that is all we need to do.

But if that policy does not have the desired effect, and if these organizations continue to have the negative effect on most of our undergraduates that the evidence indicates they have had in the past decade, I will join with many other like-minded faculty and put before the Faculty Council a motion to enact some version of option 1. Other faculty members will disagree. That, in a nutshell, is why I endorse the report. The debate should continue. When this faculty does reach a decision, I hope we will find the best way for our community to continue to move toward the goals affirmed in February of 2016 by the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, the principles articulated by President Faust in the Crimson last week, and the principles endorsed by the Crimson editorial board. The principles we should stand for as a university, the principles of open inquiry, equal access, and inclusiveness, embody what I consider the best ideals of our still-developing American democracy.