

# THE USES OF DIVERSITY

*Harvard's president reaffirms the importance of a diverse student body for learning—and for life in a democracy.* by NEIL RUDENSTINE

DURING THE PAST TWO YEARS, WE HAVE SEEN A STEADY GROWTH IN controversy concerning issues of student diversity, university admissions, and affirmative action. Specific proposals have been advanced in some quarters to eliminate factors such as race, ethnicity, and gender from consideration in university admissions. Although major policy changes have not yet taken effect, some are scheduled to go forward in at least one major university system in the near future, and others are under active consideration. The climate is one of uncertainty and ferment.

As we look ahead, I believe we need to examine not only current ideas and recommendations, but also the relevant past. We need to remind ourselves that student diversity has, for more than

PHOTOGRAPH BY DOUG MINDELL

Reprinted from Harvard Magazine. For more information, contact Harvard Magazine, Inc. at 617-495-5746

a century, been valued for its capacity to contribute powerfully to the process of learning. It has also been seen as vital to the education of citizens—and the development of leaders—in heterogeneous democratic societies such as our own.

## NINETEENTH-CENTURY BEGINNINGS

THE WORD *DIVERSITY* HAS BEEN OVERUSED IN RECENT YEARS, OFTEN TO THE point of cliché. That is unfortunate, because the term has an important history, and no adequate synonym in our language. The word and the idea began to appear in discussions of education at least as early as the mid-nineteenth century. Since then the significance of diversity to the process of education has been increasingly recognized. Without reference to this historical development, we cannot fully understand our contemporary notions of diversity, nor adequately evaluate the arguments shaping the current national debate.

Many nineteenth-century educators tended to think of diversity in terms of ideas—differences in opinions and views in all the areas of life where actual proof was impossible to achieve. Many would have subscribed to the argument that John Milton had made in opposing the censorship of books: “Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men is but knowledge in the making.” The clash of different opinions was often seen to be positive: “that which purifies us is trial, and trial is by what is contrary.”

An important variation on this theme emerged during the 1840s and 1850s. John Stuart Mill stressed the value of bringing “human beings in contact with persons dissimilar to themselves, and with modes of thought and action unlike those with which they are familiar.” The word *diversity* was very much a part of his lexicon. Many passages in *On Liberty* concern the “causes which make diversity of opinion advantageous, and will continue to do so.” It was not enough, moreover, for a person to read about or “be taught” the opinions of others on a given subject:

He must be able to hear them from persons who actually believe them; who defend them in earnest, and do their very utmost for them. He must...feel the whole force of the difficulty which the true view of the subject has to encounter and dispose of....

Excerpted from “Diversity and Learning,” *The President’s Report, 1993-1995*. For the complete text, including citations, contact the President’s office. The text is also available on-line at [http://www.harvard.edu/presidents\\_office](http://www.harvard.edu/presidents_office).

For Mill, opinions and ideas were not disembodied abstractions: they were living things that should be encountered in the presence of “persons who actually believe them.” Diversity, in other words, was most fully realized when made visible and present through actual associations among human beings in all their variety.

John Newman’s view was less combative than Mill’s, but it shared some significant features. Newman envisioned colleges where “a multitude” of students would “come together and freely mix with each other.” Under such circumstances,

they are sure to learn one from another, even if there be no one to teach them; the conversation of all is a series of lectures to each, and they gain for themselves new ideas and views, fresh matter of thought, and distinct principles for judging and acting, day by day.



Newman’s university was to be like “the world on a small field”: students would “come from very different places, and with widely different notions.” Because of such differences, there would be “much to adjust,” new “inter-relations to be defined,” and rules and norms to be established, so that a college could in time become unified in spirit, with “one tone and one character.” Through a process of association and mutual education, unity would eventually emerge from difference.

Mill may have stressed the friction of human contact, while Newman emphasized reconciliation and wholeness. Yet both regarded direct association among dissimilar people as essential to learning. Both take us beyond any simple concept of diversity defined in purely intellectual or abstract terms. Mill emphasized not only different ideas and opinions, but also different “modes of thought and action.” Newman specifically mentioned geographical diversity: students would come from “very different

places,” bringing their “widely different notions.” For both Mill and Newman, these forms of diversity are integral to true learning. They shape some of the fundamental ways in which knowledge itself is generated, tested, and transformed into understanding.



THE NATION STOOD ON THE VERGE OF THE CIVIL WAR WHEN Harvard president C.C. Felton presented his report for the academic year 1859-60. In the midst of this national turmoil, he and others saw a need for colleges and universities to provide an education based on experience with different kinds of people, in the hope of overcoming regional, cultural, and other barriers. One way for Harvard to help achieve this hope, in Felton’s view, was to become a truly national institution, with “students from every State and Territory in the Union.” Gathering students together “from different and distant States must tend powerfully to remove prej-

udices, by bringing them into friendly relations," he reasoned. "Such influences are especially needed in the present disastrous condition of public affairs."

Geography—or place of residence—thus became, from an early date, a critical component in Harvard's concept of diversity. And this factor had, of course, no inherent relation to individual merit or achievement. The rationale was very straightforward: students from many parts of the country were likely to have a variety of basic assumptions, experiences, perspectives, and even prejudices. Felton concluded that if he could bring together young people from different backgrounds who would be educated in association with one another, and who would become leaders in different parts of the nation, then that process could make a difference to the creation of unity throughout the country.

To some extent, the process was already under way. Henry Adams, class of 1858, graduated not long before Felton's report was submitted. Most of Adams's classmates (about 100 in all) were from New England, but "chance insisted on enlarging [his] education by tossing a trio of Virginians" into the mix. One of the trio was "Roony" Lee, son of Robert E. Lee. Adams and the Virginians

knew well how thin an edge of friendship separated them in 1856 from mortal enmity.... For the first time Adams's education brought him in contact with new types and taught him their values. He saw the New England type measure itself with another, and he was part of the process.

As events turned out, Lee and Adams were constrained by differences in heritage, history, temperament, and culture too vast to overcome. The point, however, is not whether this particular experiment in education was or was not a full success. The point is that Adams—and, from a different perspective, Felton—recognized the importance of the attempt, and saw that this "lesson in education was vital to these young men." It produced an awareness of what might, under different circumstances, have proved possible. It also altered Adams's consciousness, and forced him to confront and assess a type of person he had never before known. Chance had "enlarged" his education, almost in spite of himself.



**D**IVERSITY BECAME A MORE EXPLICIT GOAL DURING THE LAST decades of the nineteenth century and the early decades of the twentieth. In the political and educational dialogue of the day, diversity was defined more precisely (as well as expansively); it was sometimes championed; and it was in some places realized more fully than before. It also became a subject of increasing controversy.

Many events contributed to this development. Struggles between differing religions, and between religion and science (particularly the ideas of Darwin), intensified. The movement for women's rights created greater tensions, even as it gathered strength. The social position of black Americans was anything but resolved. Perhaps most significant, successive waves of "new immigrants" had been arriving since the mid-1800s, and this process accelerated in

the 1870s and 1880s. Those who came in the last decades of the century were generally poorer, less well-educated, and more culturally heterogeneous than most previous groups. They came, moreover, in very great numbers.

As we know, this continuous influx of different peoples gave rise to considerable anxieties among the settled population. To some, established institutions and traditions appeared to be under siege, particularly since the newest immigrants were themselves so varied in terms of language and culture. To be sure, some people welcomed the great influx as another infusion of strength into American society. But historians have documented the equally strong movements to curtail immigration, and to limit the opportunities available in education and employment.

This was also a moment when purportedly scientific studies set out to define the "races" of mankind, and to assess their relative superiority. There were also the well-known attempts to demonstrate that the origins of democratic or republican laws and institutions lay in the assemblies of ancient Teutonic or Anglo-Saxon tribes. In a quite different sphere, parochial school systems began to develop more rapidly at this time, as did the movement by Episcopalians and other Protestants to found church-related boarding schools. As a result, secondary and even elementary schools functioned somewhat less effectively as potential "melting pots."

New England, Boston, and Harvard constituted one of the main arenas in which conflicting attitudes and forces encountered one another. Meanwhile, Harvard's president, Charles William Eliot, played an important role in defining an expanded conception of diversity in relation to learning.



**E**LIOT'S PRESIDENCY AT HARVARD SPANNED FORTY YEARS, FROM 1869 to 1909. More than any other leading educator of his time, he stressed the value of cultivating the diverse talents of every individual, while also emphasizing how diversity among individuals and groups can be a major stimulus to learning. He regarded diversity as so powerful and far-reaching in its effects—capable of shaping lifelong attitudes and habits—that he came to view it as indispensable to the healthy functioning of a democratic society.

Scarcely anyone during his time expressed more confidence than Eliot in the potential of all human talent to flourish, given the freedom and opportunity to do so. It was in society's interest "to make the most of every useful gift or faculty which any member may fortunately possess." A democracy "does not seek equality through the discouragement or obliteration of individual diversities.... [It] actively promotes an immense diversity among its members...."

A chief task for colleges and universities, therefore, was to create an atmosphere stimulating in the variety and quality of its offerings. Eliot's commitment to the "elective system" was predicated on the conviction that a diversity of interests and talents among students required a corresponding variety of fields of



HARVARD UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

HENRY ADAMS

inquiry and opportunities to foster individual development. Moreover, the university

must have a large body of students, else... the students themselves will not feel that very wholesome influence which comes from observation of and contact with larger numbers... from different nations, States, schools, families, sects, parties, and conditions of life.

For Eliot, direct contact among a heterogeneous group of students was vital to the process of education. He expanded the definition of diversity to include students from "different nations, States, schools, families, sects, parties, and conditions of life." In a number of articles and reports, he discussed his views in greater detail. Harvard's students should be children of the "rich and poor," the "educated and uneducated." There was also a need for "diversity in religion." The goal was to foster not only greater knowledge, but actual "respect for each other's religious inheritances." This could be achieved only if students and faculty from different sects or denominations could associate freely and learn about one another.

In addition, Eliot's Harvard now intended to attract—even more aggressively—students "from North and South, from East and West." There would be "Democrats and Republicans, free-traders and protectionists, spoilsmen and reformers, Prohibitionists and high-license advocates." The goal was to create a more open and even disputatious university community where the zeal and zest of argument and debate would be audible and tangible. In addition, the gains in terms of tolerance, mutual understanding, and camaraderie would be profound and long-lasting. The "collision of views" at a university is "wholesome and profitable," Eliot wrote. "It promotes thought on great themes, converts passion into resolution, cultivates forbearance and mutual respect, and teaches... candor, moral courage, and independence of thought...."

Discussion and debate are not purely intellectual processes. They involve emotion and conviction as well as reason and argument. They convert "passion into resolution," and teach candor and moral courage. Education and learning are in this sense human and moral processes concerned ultimately with values and effective action. They are most fully tested when individuals engage others whose ideas, passions, experiences, and beliefs differ from their own.

Eliot's conception was fashioned explicitly to serve the purposes and needs of a democratic society that was intrinsically diverse, and committed to freedom and equality of opportunity. Moreover, the fruits of diversity would extend well beyond the university through the continuing association of individuals during their lifetimes. "A university of national resort exerts a unifying influence" far and wide, argued Eliot:

Every year hundreds... go out from each of the great American universities and scatter through the whole country. In their several places of residence they ordinarily rise to places of trust and influence; and they remain united for life, however separated by distance; united by common associations, and by bonds of friendship and mutual respect....

Once again, Eliot powerfully forges the links between diversity, student learning, and the role of higher education in a heterogeneous democratic society.

## DIVERSITY AND RACE: SOME TURN-OF-THE-CENTURY DILEMMAS

IN THE LATE NINETEENTH CENTURY, THE CONCEPTS OF RACE, RELIGION, and nationality were different from our own in several respects—and the idea of ethnicity, in its contemporary meaning, was scarcely developed at all. There was also considerable overlap among these categories. Although race was often defined in terms of skin color, it was even more widely viewed as a set of characteristics that could include a group's native language, geographical home, religion, national identity, temperament, certain physiognomic features, political and cultural traditions, and traditional occupations.

In short, ideas of race, religion, and nationality interpenetrated one another. Composite types and stereotypes were not only common but also carried potential explosive power in the charged atmosphere of the time. Even the most superficial glance at the titles of many turn-of-the-century books and articles suggests why the situation was potentially volatile: *Are We Celts or Teutons?*; *The Growth of the French-Canadian Race in America*; *The Jewish Question*; *The Irish in American Life*; *The Races of the Danube*; *The Coming of the Italian*; *The Racial Problem in Immigration*; *The Causes of Race Superiority*; *The Races of Europe*; and *Immigration and Degradation*, to name just a few.



SERIOUS TENSIONS—SPARKED BY IMMIGRANT, RELIGIOUS, AND NATIONAL groupings—emerged in Boston (and elsewhere) as early as the 1830s and 1840s, and escalated over the next several decades. The Boston Irish (and other groups) took steps to preserve their own religious tradition, as well as to create their own self-help and cultural organizations. These very actions, however,

provoked complaints that "instead of assimilating at once with the customs of the country of their adoption, our foreign population are too much in the habit of retaining their own national usages, of associating too exclusively with each other, and living in groups together...." The inability of the native-born to understand the ideas of their new neighbors perpetuated this gap between them, rousing the vivid fear that the Irish were "a race that will never be infused into our own, but on the contrary will always remain distinct and hostile."<sup>1</sup>

The reference in this passage to the Irish "race" was by no means casual. The more that Teutons, Anglo-Saxons, and the "Gothic" Germanic peoples continued to press their conception of racial superiority, the more the Irish and others felt the need to respond with racial pronouncements of their own—as well as with more assertive attempts (particularly by the Catholic Church) to maintain traditional values in the face of considerable suspicion and even hostility. Given this dynamic of claim and counterclaim, group definitions tended to become stronger, and potential conflict more likely. Once the process had been set in motion, conciliation was increasingly difficult to achieve.

Through at least the 1870s, the Irish and Brahmins in Boston lived uneasily together—essentially at arm's length. The relative lack of immediate major threats or disruptions encouraged some leaders to declare that the major problems facing immigrants were well on the way to being resolved, and that activities on behalf of identifiable groups were therefore no longer necessary. This position

was espoused, for example, by both Henry Cabot Lodge and Patrick Collins (an Irish politician and lawyer who had attended Harvard Law School in the early 1870s). Despite the grim conditions under which the Irish and other groups continued to live,

there was a resolute effort to pretend that the genuine divisions in the city's life did not exist. Thus, in 1876, Collins... declared, "I... denounce any man or body of men who seek to perpetuate divisions of races or religions in our midst.... I know neither race, color nor creed. Let me say now that there are no Irish voters among us. There are Irish-born citizens like myself,... [but] Americans we are and Americans we will remain."<sup>2</sup>

To Collins, the nation was to consist in the future of individuals who were all "Americans": hyphenated groups, such as Irish-Americans, were viewed as potential obstacles to further progress, representing interests and values that no longer required special recognition or attention. Some of the parallels between the 1870s and our own time are too obvious to ignore, whatever lessons we may choose to draw from them.

The main issue was not whether the ideal of a united nation was an appropriate vision for America's future. The more immediate dilemma was whether the difficult realities of the time had been sufficiently resolved, so that the needs, interests, and even the identity of particular groups should fade—in effect—from national consciousness. One of our foremost social historians has suggested that the views expressed by Collins and others were at best premature: "Collins and Lodge were both inaccurate" in their assessment; more important, "they knew it, [and] they nevertheless felt the necessity of speaking as they did."<sup>3</sup>

As matters turned out, few of the deep-rooted problems facing Boston (and other cities) had been adequately confronted and addressed. When the next great wave of immigrants began to reach the nation's shores in the 1870s and 1880s, the scene was set for increased tension and conflict—as well as for intensified group identification and differentiation.

CHARLES ELIOT SHARED WITH MOST of his contemporaries the assumption that there were a number of distinct races, each with its own identifiable characteristics. He also believed that the special talents, qualities, and interests of each race should be preserved, and that each group should be enabled to make its own unique contribution to the

diversity of American society. In this sense, he tended to view races rather as he viewed individuals: they should develop freely along their own lines, following their own bent, because that would lead to the full realization of their capacities. America had always "drawn to it multitudes from all parts of the habitable earth." For Eliot, therefore, the resulting "great diversity in the population of the United States as regards racial origin" was another important "illustration of the variety which may co-exist with freedom and security under democratic institutions."

Eliot believed that, over time, differences among races that lived together in a single society would be qualified and diminished. But he was no advocate of deliberate assimilation or amalgamation. We may not agree with Eliot on the topic of assimilation—or on his conception of race. He himself had complicated attitudes. For



HARVARD PORTRAIT COLLECTION

instance, he was not in favor of interracial marriage, and his views seem to have been shaped as much by Anglo-Saxon attitudes and anxieties as by his desire to maintain the distinctive attributes of each separate group. Nevertheless, he identified race as a positive component of diversity, and defined racial diversity as an element that enhances the vitality and strength of a democratic society.

Moreover, given that the new immigrant groups were closely identified with distinct "races," Eliot's affirmation of racial diversity was effectively an indication of his willingness to make room in higher education for at least some of the recent arrivals. In spite of controversy, Eliot introduced several changes at Harvard. And given the ferment of the time, he could not press forward altogether quietly—even if he had wished to do so. Public discussion and articles were necessary, as was the creation of a University atmosphere that was more open in spirit. Additional financial aid was needed to assist students from different backgrounds. Compulsory chapel was abolished and was replaced by a system of voluntary observance, including services offered by ministers from a number of denominations. Since religion was often linked to "race"—as in the case of Jews, Buddhists, and Catholic groups—greater religious inclusiveness also implied greater racial diversity.

The results of these efforts were measurable and even striking. In 1870, at the beginning of Eliot's presidency, a survey showed that nearly 80 percent of the 563 undergraduates who responded were Unitarians, Episcopalians, and Congregationalists. Nearly 20 percent were members of other Protestant sects. There were seven Roman Catholics and three Jews. The situation altered steadily during the Eliot years, largely as a result of actions that were conscious and even conspicuous. By 1908, when Eliot was about to retire, 9 percent of the College's student body was Roman Catholic; 7 percent was Jewish; and African-American students—absent from the student body in 1870—were at least starting to be enrolled, though still in very small numbers. Even in terms of these three categories, the aggregate number accounted for about 17 percent of the student population, as contrasted to 2 percent at the beginning of Eliot's tenure.

We should remember that Eliot also undertook some significant (if hesitant) initiatives with respect to the education of women. His views fell short of full equality, and were the subject of some intense criticism; and it is not clear how far he would have proceeded without very substantial prodding. Early in his tenure, however, he collaborated on a report recommending the admission of women to the Harvard Medical School. The recommendation ultimately failed, but it represented an important first step. By 1879,

Eliot and the Harvard faculty were working with Elizabeth Carey Agassiz to establish the "Harvard Annex," which was to become Radcliffe College. Women were to be educated separately, although taught by Harvard professors; by 1894, 22 Radcliffe women earned A.B. degrees, and three were awarded A.M.'s.

Eliot's efforts in the sphere of diversity were only part of his larger goals. Yet they were fully consistent with his basic approach to education. The results were uneven and certainly not "linear": they came about as a result of struggle and disagreement, including changes in Eliot's own ideas over four decades as Harvard's president. During his tenure, doors were opened that would be difficult to close entirely in later eras. Some of Eliot's changes "appalled" many people, but they also created a reputation for "diversity, tolerance, and pluralism" which "rested upon solid foundations."<sup>4</sup> From every point of view, diversity had helped to

bring about significant advances in the nature, quality, and scope of undergraduate education at Harvard.



**W**ERE THE BENEFITS OF DIVERSITY apparent to students themselves? On this point, the testimony is necessarily impressionistic. As early as the 1850s, the statements of Henry Adams, mentioned earlier, suggest that direct "contact with new types" of people had "for the first time taught [Adams] their values."

Half a century later, John Reed, class of 1910, entered Harvard near the end of Eliot's presidency. He soon found himself immersed in the bewildering intricacy of Eliot's cosmopolitan college. Reed's own recollection of his Harvard experience suggests some of the ways in which life in a diverse community can lead to pain, isolation, and separateness, as well as to intellectual exhilaration, greater self-knowledge, and moments of human reconciliation:

I got to know many fellows to nod to, and a very few intimately; but most of my friends were whirled off and up into prominence, and came to see me no more. One of them said he'd room with me sophomore year—but he was tipped off that I wasn't "the right sort" and openly drew away from me. And I, too, hurt a boy who was my friend. He was a Jew, a shy, rather melancholy person. We were always together, we two outsiders. I became irritated and morbid about it—it seemed I would never be part of the rich splendor of college life with him around—so I drew away from him.... It hurt him very much, and it taught me better. Since then he has forgiven it, and done wonderful things for me, and we are friends.

Real learning, in all its dimensions, rarely takes place altogether easily, without friction or pain. Indeed, the educational benefits of diversity are often first experienced as forms of temporary dislocation and disorientation—just as they can eventually lead to increased understanding and friendship. Genuine risks and difficulties are involved, and it would be foolish to pretend otherwise.

In John Reed's case, life at Harvard grew steadily better, and he gradually came to revel in the University. It was a place where



HARVARD UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

strong individuals, as well as groups, coexisted in a milieu characteristic of Eliot's open and relatively unstructured institution:

[A] man who came for a good time could get through and graduate...; but on the other hand, anyone could find there anything he wanted from all the world's store of learning....

All sorts of strange characters, of every race and mind, poets, philosophers, cranks of every twist, were in our class. The very hugeness of it prevented any one man from knowing more than a few of his classmates, though I managed to make the acquaintance of about 500 of them.

If Reed was hyperbolic and ebullient, W.E.B. Du Bois was remarkably firm and determined. As a member of the class of 1890, he had a spectacularly successful undergraduate career. As an African-American, he too found himself outside the mainstream of college life. But that did not prevent him from making a place for himself—or from being chosen as one of the six Commencement orators. If his years at Harvard were partly defined by his isolation, he did not doubt that the sheer opportunity to observe and learn from a “majority” institution was one of the most significant experiences of his life.

By 1933, Du Bois could look back on his Harvard time with both dispassion and appreciation. He was very clear, for example, about some of the specific forms of diversity that Eliot had introduced:

Harvard...was no longer simply a place where rich and learned New England gave the accolade to the social élite. It had broken its shell and reached out to the West and to the South, to yellow students and to black. I had for the mere asking been granted a fellowship of \$300....

In addition, Du Bois remembered the University as a place where a more inclusive vision of learning—and of society—was beginning to be publicly articulated:

Men sought to make Harvard an expression of the United States, and to do this by means of leaders unshackled in thought and custom who were beating back bars of ignorance and particularism and prejudice. There were William James and Josiah Royce; Nathaniel Shaler and Charles Eliot Norton; George Santayana; Albert Bushnell Hart, and President Eliot himself. There were at least a dozen men—rebels against convention, unorthodox in religion, poor in money—who for a moment held

in their hands the culture of the United States, typified it, expressed it, and pushed it a vast step forward.

These direct encounters between a brilliant young African-American and a cadre of progressive New England academics produced living proof for Du Bois that people of different races could meet and work on common terms, could respect one another, and could strengthen one another's commitment to the important moral as well as intellectual values essential to serious education.

## SOME TWENTIETH-CENTURY CHALLENGES

IN THE TWENTIETH CENTURY THERE HAVE BEEN AT LEAST TWO MAJOR developments related to the conception of diversity in education,

especially outside the classroom and curriculum. The first had to do with the creation of educational facilities and structures intended to help support the goals that I have been discussing. The second concerned the need to deal with a new problem: how to select students from a pool of highly qualified applicants that was much larger than the available number of places. Let me turn first to the matter of facilities and structures.

From many points of view, the basic conception of a residential education has remained the strongest expression of an institution's commitment to educating the “whole person,” rather than only the intellect. Given this commitment, a young person's character, integrity, industriousness, and other attributes were important in admissions, as well as in the life of the college and the larger community.

The residential nature of a college also allowed the benefits of a diverse student body to be more fully realized. If a college provided proper facilities and assistance—while creating an

open atmosphere of free inquiry and mutual respect—then it could more confidently bring together many kinds of students from different places. At Harvard, students began living in residential “Houses.” Participation in such units—and in associated extracurricular activities—was rightly seen as much more than a mere adjunct to education. It became part of the fabric of daily life, and one of the primary ways that students learned from one another.

President A. Lawrence Lowell was clearly very different from Eliot, and in some ways sought to limit Eliot's concept of diversity. For example, he called for quotas on the number of Jewish students admitted to Harvard. At the same time, he went further than Eliot in providing facilities that could sustain democratic ideals. In developing the residential House system during the late 1920s, Lowell specifically sought to diminish the tendency of students to form “cliques based upon a similarity of origin and upon wealth.” The goal of the Houses was “to bring into contact a body



W.E.B. DU BOIS

HARVARD UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

of students with diverse interests" who would "provoke" one another to think freshly about many subjects. "So far as subjects of concentration, pecuniary means, and residence in different parts of the country are concerned," Lowell wrote, "each House should be as nearly as possible a cross-section of the College."

President James Conant later expanded on some of Lowell's themes. As early as 1936-37, he was asking whether there is "any surer way of finding the truth" than by having it debated by students "of differing opinions." Part of Conant's program involved a reenergizing of Harvard's academic life. The conscious recruitment and enrollment of a more diverse student body was one of its important aspects. Students from an even wider range of socioeconomic, geographic, and ethnic groups (requiring more outreach, and more financial aid) would be attracted to the University only if special steps were taken—and if the University made clear that the newcomers would indeed be welcome.

The Harvard National Scholarships were created as part of this process. Meanwhile, a broad range of urban commuter students were invited to join Conant's collegium. Many of these bright, adventurous, and non-establishment undergraduates earned the ambiguous label "meatballs." One such student, the distinguished journalist and chronicler Theodore H. White, class of 1938, has left us a vivid description of life in Conant's diversified institution:

Conant was the first president to recognize that meatballs were Harvard men, too, and so he set apart a ground floor room at Dudley Hall where we could bring our lunches in brown paper bags and eat at a table, or lounge in easy chairs between classes.

Not only were the members of "this strange enclave of commuting Irish, Jewish, and Italian youngsters from Greater Boston" distinguished by their ethnic backgrounds; they also tended to come from low-income families and were frankly upwardly mobile:

Most of us...knew more about poverty than anyone from Beacon Hill or the fashionable East Side of New York. We hated poverty; and meant to have no share in it.... Harvard had the keys to the gates; what lay behind the gates I could not guess, but all that lay there was to be looted.... There were museums to be seen, libraries and poetry rooms of all kinds to tarry in—and stacks and stacks and stacks of books.

If Conant created something of a new immigrant-urban stew in the College, he also expressed the hope that the Houses (which charged extra room and board rates) would one day be affordable to all Harvard undergraduates. He urged that students should learn "not only the facts about life, but a worth-while way of life.... We must learn how to live together":

Tolerance, honesty, intellectual integrity, courage, friendliness are virtues not to be learned out of a printed volume but from the book of experience; and the content of this book for

a youth is largely determined by the mode of his association with contemporaries. So, too, are those attitudes so essential for the survival of a modern democracy....

Here, Conant—like Eliot—stresses the clear linkage between certain values fostered in a residential college, and the civic virtues essential to citizenship and leadership in a democracy.



THE YEARS AFTER WORLD WAR II PRESENTED NEW CHALLENGES. During the presidency of Nathan M. Pusey in the 1950s and 1960s, questions about admissions were rather different. With the establishment of very high standards and an ever-growing number of exceptional applicants, how should the University select students in order to create the best educational environment possible, so that undergraduates and graduate students alike could

learn as much as a residential institution might offer them? Granted that high academic capability and achievement were central considerations, what other characteristics and qualities should be taken into account—and how should they be evaluated and weighted?

The dilemma was created in part by the fact that many colleges and universities began to rely more heavily on aptitude tests (especially SATs), grade point averages (GPAs), and class-rank indices. When difficult choices are involved, one response is to search for "objective" criteria that can help in decision making, as well as in the explanation and justification of decisions. When the issue is such as to arouse strong feelings—and few things in life arouse stronger feelings in us than the hopes that we have for our children—the search for a way

to base decisions on apparently objective information can become unusually intense.

While Harvard placed a very high value on academic standards throughout this period (and while President Conant was indirectly involved in the establishment of the Educational Testing Service), the University continued to strike a balance between numerical measures and more complex forms of assessment in admissions. The annual Harvard College admissions reports of the late 1950s and the 1960s offer a helpful guide to the major issues and their resolution—a resolution that was fundamentally consistent with Harvard's past practice.

As early as 1961 an analysis of SAT scores for the past three incoming classes showed that the previous "pattern of steadily rising scores seems to have been broken":

From this and other evidence it seems clear that in choosing among candidates who are academically qualified the [admissions committee] continues to give less weight to the so-called objective factors (rank in class and test scores) and more weight to other evidence, not only of intellectual promise but of other qualities and kinds of promise as well.

Harvard had already begun studies analyzing the "objective fac-



A. LAWRENCE LOWELL

HARVARD UNIVERSITY ARCHIVES

tors" of students at the time of admission, in relation to their academic performance in college. In 1963-64, a more explicit assessment was included in the admissions report:

The high quality and variety of talents in recent candidate groups have led us to expect the distributions of scores to shift up and down.... Test scores and other objective criteria of academic performance are most relevant to our decisions only at the extremes of our academic range....

The debate about "objective" indicators has intensified even further in the past quarter-century. This is not the place for an extended discussion, but I want to mention a few considerations that I believe are important.

- There is a broad consensus that standardized test scores can be valuable in providing some evidence about the likely academic performance of students, especially during their first two years (approximately) at college or university. The correlation, however, is far from exact. It is not uncommon for individuals to outperform (or underperform) what the tests "predict." In addition, the predictive power of the tests diminishes over time.

- Standardized tests are designed to assess certain academic capacities, but they do not measure such qualities as a student's ability to exercise good judgment in different situations, or to understand other human beings; nor do they assess qualities such as competitiveness, decisiveness, and cooperativeness—or creativity and imagination.

- The test scores of individuals fluctuate over time, and some of these changes are due to the quality of a student's educational opportunities and preparation. This point is crucial. We know, for example, that the SAT scores of students tend to increase with more (and better) schooling—as well as with more practice in test-taking.

Students who have had less consistent access to good education (and who lack the money to pay for extra "prepping") will frequently do less well on standardized tests. Opportunities, not just abilities, are a critical issue here. Individuals who have unusual drive, curiosity, and a strong sense of purpose can compensate for lower test scores, and they regularly demonstrate that they can succeed admirably if they are given the chance.

- A final point: not only do the test scores of individuals vary over time, but so do the average scores of particular groups. Over decades, for example, selected subgroups have performed better on standardized tests, depending upon their access to educational opportunities and (in the case of immigrants) on the amount of time they and their families have lived in the United States.

These general observations about standardized tests have led—at Harvard and many other institutions—to an admissions approach which takes relevant "objective" data into account, but is not driven

primarily by them. Average scores among students admitted to Harvard remain very high, but they vary from year to year. In addition, the range of individual test scores within the student body continues to be broad. Consequently, the admissions staff looks carefully at letters of recommendation from teachers and others; at the actual quality of a student's academic work (not simply the grades); at evidence of character and commitment; at each student's written personal statement; and at assessments of a student's contributions in specific extracurricular activities or employment situations. These and other factors—including those characteristics that can enable individual students to contribute something distinctive to the diversity of the student body—create the framework for admissions to Harvard College, and they provide a much sounder basis for informed decisions than reliance on any one or two indicators could conceivably supply.

Passages from the admissions committee report of 1964-65 can still stand as a reasonable summary of Harvard's basic approach:

We pay attention to test scores and [class rank] but, helpful as they are, what they tell us... is quite limited, even in the intellectual area.... Our research gives support to the common sense notion that effective intelligence depends as much on such personal characteristics as energy, imagination, and ability to channel one's energies as it does on the qualities the aptitude and achievement tests measure.



IF THERE WERE BROAD CONCEPTUAL shifts concerning diversity during the post-World War II period, they occurred in two areas. First,

diversity was seen as comprising a somewhat wider range of attributes. Second, there was a fuller appreciation of the effect that a diverse student body could have upon an institution as a whole.

The earliest postwar change in admissions—and in the nature of diversity—occurred with the GI Bill. Suddenly, colleges and universities were enriched by thousands of veterans whose different talents and kinds of experience added immensely to the quality of education. At about the same time (in 1946), Harvard provost Paul Buck called for "an extended organization for making contact with the 500 to 1,000 schools that now send us students, often only occasionally." Over the next two decades, Harvard College developed a greatly expanded national and international network of volunteers to assist the admissions staff.

As a result, it was soon possible to seek, actively and affirmatively, students in rural, urban, and suburban areas across the country. Candidates throughout the nation were recruited, as were (for example) pianists, biologists, classicists, poets, football players, and student government leaders. In addition, although the process was slow, Radcliffe and Harvard Colleges were on the way to becoming a fully coeducational enterprise. Meanwhile, minority students enrolled in greater numbers over the next

STANDARDIZED  
TESTS DO NOT  
ASSESS QUALITIES  
SUCH AS  
COMPETITIVENESS,  
DECISIVENESS,  
CREATIVITY, OR  
IMAGINATION.

decades, as did students from abroad and students from low-income and middle-income families.

In other words, a greater degree of openness and inclusiveness, along many dimensions, was becoming part of the rhythm and life of the University. It did not simply happen; it was the result of purposeful efforts to reach out, in order to identify and attract the most promising, capable, and diverse group of students possible.

A second shift during the 1950s and 1960s had to do with a sharpening sense of how diversity could contribute broadly to education within an entire university. Student diversity was seen as "stimulating to the Faculty" and "more relevant to liberal education." Moreover, every new class was viewed more and more as an ensemble, rather than a simple aggregation of individuals chosen without any significant reference to the pattern produced by the whole.

The admissions reports of this period return strongly to the theme that the "measure of a class" consists largely in "how much its members are likely to learn from each other—the real beginning of learning, both intellectually and emotionally." The range of undergraduate "interests, talents, backgrounds and career goals affects importantly the educational experience of our students," because "a diverse student body is an educational resource of coordinate importance with our faculty and our library, laboratory and housing arrangements." This conception of a diverse student body as an "educational resource"—comparable in importance to the faculty, library, or science laboratories—is the most direct expression of an idea that we have seen emerging over the course of more than a century.



AS THE POOL OF COLLEGE APPLICANTS GREW IN THE 1950S AND 1960s (and later), Harvard remained committed to enrolling a broad mix of students. One consequence of maintaining this approach in the postwar period, however, has been the plain fact that admissions decisions have become far more difficult to make—and to explain—in the face of huge increases in excellent applications. Disappointed applicants have asked for detailed reasons, especially if their test scores and grades were, by most standards, high. The gap between institutional decisions and candidate expectations has grown, leading in many cases to misunderstanding and anger.

These reactions are understandable, but other considerations must also be borne in mind. A university has guiding educational purposes that are ultimately the source of its admissions policies and criteria. These criteria have for many generations included considerations of diversity, primarily because of the ways in which diversity enhances the environment for learning. The beneficiaries of such an approach are the students actually chosen for admis-

sion—the students to whom an institution owes its primary responsibility, and for whom the composition of a diverse student body pays significant educational dividends. Given this fact, colleges and universities must be able to exercise their best judgment, applying a broad range of criteria and considerations, in making final admissions decisions. Only in this way can they take full advantage of the important values that diversity provides.

## CIVIL RIGHTS LEGISLATION AND THE *BAKKE* CASE

ALTHOUGH DIVERSITY HAD BECOME A SIGNIFICANT GOAL IN MUCH OF AMERICAN higher education before World War II, substantial parts of our population still remained largely outside the doors of excellent educational institutions. This situation began to change during the postwar period. But even those institutions of higher education that were committed in principle to diversity have had uneven records of accomplishment—Harvard included.

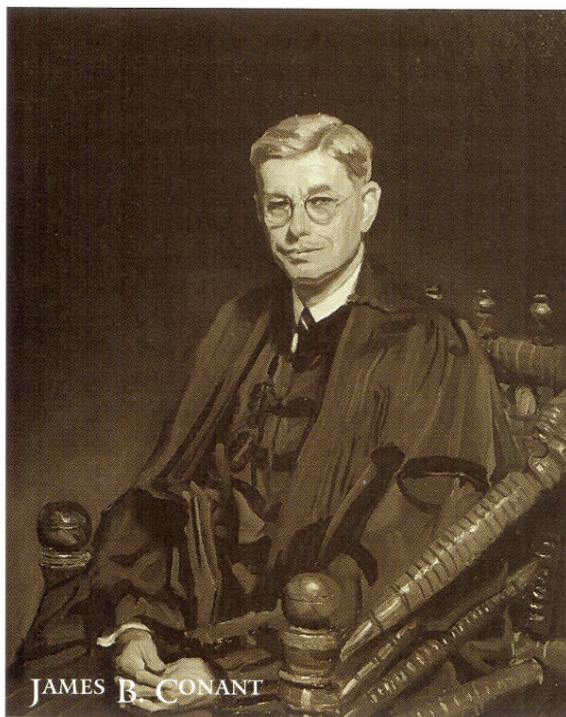
The Civil Rights Act of 1964 (and related initiatives) represented a major effort on the part of the federal government to promote equal opportunity for all Americans, in many spheres of life. Under the Act, admissions (and other specific activities) in colleges and universities that received federal funding became subject to requirements of nondiscrimination. The legislative history of the Act reveals deep and passionate divisions in the Congress, and in the country.

As in the case of any genuine dilemma, the real issues were beyond immediate resolution, and they contained the seeds of continuing disagreement.

In higher education, a variety of programs related to affirmative action were designed during the late 1960s and 1970s. Some met with legal challenges. Perhaps the most conspicuous involved a case brought by Allan Bakke. In 1978, the Supreme Court in *Bakke* issued what remains its most significant statement concerning questions of race and admissions in higher education.

The Medical School of the University of California at Davis had a policy of reserving 16 of the 100 places in each class for members of certain minority groups. Candidates for these spaces were considered separately from others, and were held to a different standard of admissions. The process was largely but not exclusively quantitative in nature, with precise "benchmark" scores and "cut-off" points being used. Bakke contended that he was not admitted because, as a white student, he had been unfairly excluded from competing for one of the 16 places reserved for minorities.

The *Bakke* case was especially significant because it dealt directly with the matter of quotas or set-asides in admissions, as well as with the question of whether race or ethnicity can be used as a factor in admissions decisions. The Court decided, in a 5-4 vote, that the



HARVARD PORTRAIT COLLECTION

admissions process at the Davis Medical School was unacceptable. The clear separation of 84 "regular" admissions places from 16 "special" places for minorities, together with the use of different numerical cutoff points for the two groups, was held to be unlawful.

In his pivotal opinion in *Bakke*, Justice Powell concluded that "racial and ethnic distinctions of any sort are inherently suspect and thus call for the most exacting judicial examination." Nevertheless, Justice Powell (and four other members of the Court, writing separately) judged it permissible to take race explicitly into account as one factor in making university admissions decisions, provided that the institution can show that the practice is necessary to promote a substantial interest.

In addressing what constitutes a sufficiently substantial interest, Justice Powell was persuaded by a rationale based directly on educational grounds: the presence of minority students contributed—along with the presence of others—to diversity, and therefore to the total educational environment of an institution and to the education of all its members. Some consideration of racial and ethnic characteristics was judged to be appropriate, because "the interest of diversity is compelling in the context of a university's admissions program."

In discussing the value of diversity, Justice Powell not only mentioned the "robust exchange of ideas" among different students, but also emphasized the broader concept of student exposure to the "mores"—the customs, habits, and outlooks—of fellow students who are "as diverse as this Nation of many peoples." While the educational benefits of such exposure may appear to be most striking during a student's university years, their long-term significance for society was held to be equally valuable: "The Nation's future depends upon leaders trained" in a diverse environment.

Justice Powell's pivotal opinion in *Bakke* has its roots in a long tradition of thought concerning the nature of education. That tradition preceded, by more than a century, the advent of affirmative action programs and the passage of the Civil Rights Act of 1964. It is a tradition that is still vital, and still crucial to our nation's future.



**I**F IT IS PERMISSIBLE TO TAKE RACE AND ETHNICITY INTO ACCOUNT AS one factor in an admissions process, but generally not permissible to "set aside" places (or to use a set of differently defined standards) exclusively for members of a particular ethnic or racial group (or groups), how can one design and administer an appropriate process?

In addressing this question, Justice Powell drew extensively on Harvard College's policy statement on admissions. This policy, shaped by Harvard's faculty and admissions committee, carried the strong endorsement of President Derek Bok, whose constant efforts in behalf of diversity and affirmative action helped to determine Harvard's goals and extend its progress throughout the 1970s and 1980s.

Two passages from the Harvard statement are particularly pertinent. The first concerns the way in which different criteria can be weighed simultaneously in making admissions decisions; the second concerns the question of so-called "critical mass," including the issue of quotas as contrasted to approximate (and flexible) goals:

When the Committee on Admissions reviews the large middle group of applicants who are 'admissible' and deemed capable of doing good work in their courses, the race of an applicant may tip the balance in his favor just as geographic origin or a life spent on a farm may tip the balance in other candidates' cases....

In Harvard College admissions the Committee has not set target quotas for the number of blacks, or of musicians, football players, physicists or Californians to be admitted in a given year. At the same time... a truly heterogeneous environment that reflects the rich diversity of the United States... can

not be provided without some attention to numbers. It would not make sense, for example, to have 10 or 20 students out of 1,100 whose homes are west of the Mississippi. Comparably, 10 or 20 black students could not begin to bring to their classmates and to each other the variety of points of view, backgrounds and experiences of blacks in the United States.... But that...does not mean that the Committee sets a minimum number of blacks or of people from west of the Mississippi who are to be admitted.

Citing the Harvard policy, Justice Powell insisted on the fundamental difference between a two-track process involving set-asides and a unitary process that judged all candidates by the same set of criteria,

applied in a way that considered each applicant as an individual:

In such an admissions program, race or ethnic background may be deemed a "plus" in a particular applicant's file, yet it does not insulate the individual from comparison with all other candidates for the available seats. The file of a particular black applicant may be examined for his potential contribution to diversity without the factor of race being decisive when compared, for example, with that of an applicant identified as an Italian-American if the latter is thought to exhibit qualities more likely to promote beneficial educational pluralism. Such qualities could include exceptional personal talents, unique work or service experience, leadership potential, maturity, demonstrated compassion, [or] a history of overcoming disadvantage....

This kind of program treats each applicant as an individual in the admissions process.



**F**INALLY, IT IS IMPORTANT TO NOTE THAT JUSTICE POWELL TOOK INTO account the contribution of diversity to education at the graduate as well as the undergraduate level. While acknowledging

A GREATER  
DEGREE OF OPEN-  
NESS AND IN-  
CLUSIVENESS AT  
HARVARD WAS THE  
RESULT OF PUR-  
POSEFUL EFFORTS  
TO REACH OUT.

differences in the educational purposes to be served, he saw sufficient similarity to warrant similar approaches: "Even at the graduate level, our tradition and experience lend support to the view that the contribution of diversity is substantial."

If we want a society in which our professionals possess a developed sense of vocation and calling; if we want them to be able to gain some genuine understanding of the variety of human beings with whom they will work, and whom they will serve; if we want them to think imaginatively and to act effectively in relation to the needs and values of their communities, then we shall have to take diversity into account as one among many significant factors in graduate and professional school admissions and education.

President Conant was once asked how he would measure the quality of Harvard's undergraduate program. Conant was hardly averse to reliance on tests. But he replied that he would "reject all informational tests" that might be given to "recent graduates as indicative of the effectiveness of our general education. Whether a liberal education has been a success or failure should be measured by the student's breadth of vision 15 or 20 years after graduation."

Graduate and professional education plays a central role in helping to expand (or to constrain) an individual's "breadth of vision." Indeed, student diversity must be taken consciously into account at the graduate school level, because education at that level so strongly affects a student's conception of professional vocation, as well as the capacity to work with a variety of fellow professionals. The need to sustain rigorous academic standards in graduate and professional programs is clear. The more difficult challenge, in many respects, is to ensure that ethical, professional, and civic values also receive the serious attention they deserve.

## POSSIBLE FUTURE DIRECTIONS

AS WE MOVE FURTHER IN THE POST-BAKKE ERA, THERE ARE VARIOUS POLICY alternatives concerning student diversity and admissions. We can continue with admissions policies that take many individual qualities and factors into careful account (including a person's ethnicity, race, or gender). These policies have served us extremely well for a very long time, and have enhanced the educational mission of our universities. Alternatively, institutions may choose on their own to take less account of race, ethnicity, and gender in admissions; or they may find themselves prohibited from doing so by legislative or other actions.

My own view is that the main question to be addressed in this context is not so much affirmative action in itself, but the broader matter of diversity as it relates to the quality, breadth, and texture of student learning. The primary purpose of diversity in university admissions, moreover, is not the achievement of abstract goals, or an attempt to compensate for patterns of past societal discrimination. It represents now, as it has since the mid-nineteenth century, positive educational values that are fundamental to the basic mission of colleges and universities. It is also extremely important to the development of civic virtues—and of future leaders—vital to the health and effective functioning of our democracy.

The most constructive and well-conceived admissions programs are those that view affirmative action in relation to the educational benefits of diversity. They may take various characteristics such as race, ethnicity, or gender into account as potential "plus"

factors (among many others) when evaluating candidates, but they do not assign such characteristics an overriding value. Nor do they use set-asides or quotas. They involve energetic efforts in outreach, but not mandated outcomes. Programs of this kind, when carefully designed and implemented, preserve an institution's capacity to make its own determinations in admissions.



THERE IS—REGRETTABLY—NO IDEAL, FRICTION-FREE WAY TO arrive at decisions regarding admissions. During the past half-century, there have been far more applicants than anyone would once have imagined possible. Even if the total number of places in our higher educational system were equal to the number of potential students, a good number of individual colleges and universities would have to turn away many qualified applicants.

When such a large proportion of applicants are barely distinguishable on statistical grounds, SAT scores and GPAs are clearly of only limited value. Admissions processes, therefore, must remain essentially human. They must depend on informed judgment rather than numerical indices. And they will be subject to all the inevitable pressures and possible misconceptions that any exceptionally competitive selection process involves.

Long-established basic principles continue to offer the best guidance:

*Our commitment to excellence means that we will continue to admit students as individuals, based on their merits: on what they have achieved academically, and what they seem to promise to achieve; on their character, and their energy and curiosity and determination; on their willingness to engage in discussion and debate, as well as their willingness to entertain the idea that tolerance, understanding, and mutual respect are goals worthy of persons who have been truly educated.*

In assessing individual merit, we will—as in the past—take a number of criteria into account. Grades, test scores, and class rank will be given appropriate consideration, but they will be viewed in the context of each applicant's full set of capabilities, qualities, and potential.

*Our commitment to excellence also means that we will seek out—in all corners of the nation, and indeed the world—a diversity of talented and promising students.*

Such diversity is not an end in itself, or a pleasant but dispensable accessory. It is the substance from which much human learning, understanding, and wisdom derive. It offers one of the most powerful ways of creating the intellectual energy and robustness that lead to greater knowledge, as well as the tolerance and mutual respect essential to our civic society.

In our world, it is not enough for us and our students to acknowledge that other people, with other modes of thought and feeling and action, exist somewhere—unseen, unheard, unvisited, and unknown. Little if anything can substitute for continued association with others who are different from ourselves, and who challenge us—even as we challenge them.

*In selecting those students who will be offered places, the whole must be seen to be genuinely greater than the sum of the parts.*

When an individual student is admitted, the decision is rarely if ever the result of a circumscribed choice between two—or a very few—applicants in direct competition for a single place. The proper analogy is not a race between a few individuals, where one wins and the others lose. Once a standard of high quality has been assured, there are still many more candidates than there are spaces

available. At that point, the question is how to admit not only individuals, but also an entire entering class of students who—in their collective variety—are likely to have a strong capacity to teach and to learn from one another.

Such a process of selection involves the conscious consideration of different forms of diversity. In this process—as I stated earlier—quotas or set-asides in admissions are not acceptable. By the same token, efforts to prohibit categorically the consideration of particular characteristics or criteria are no less arbitrary than to accord such factors a completely insulated form of protection or status.



**W**E SHOULD NOT ROMANTICIZE THE IDEA OF DIVERSITY IN order to reach a sensible and realistic assessment of its positive value. Mill, Felton, Eliot, and others were anything but sentimental in their outlook, and the complex circumstances of our own historical moment demand nothing less. Mill understood only too well that unfettered discussion and argument—stimulated by diversity—can sometimes inflame situations rather than resolve them:

The tendency of all opinions to become sectarian is not cured by the freest discussion, but is often heightened and exacerbated thereby.... But it is not on the impassioned partisan, it is on the calmer and more disinterested bystander, that this collision of opinions works its salutary effect.... There is always hope when people are forced to listen to both sides....

For Mill, diversity could be divisive. But he saw that the long-term risks of isolating individuals and groups from one another are likely to be greater than the risks of creating opportunities for direct exchange. In the end there are no guarantees. There is only the hope created when people “listen to both sides”—or indeed to many sides.

This was precisely President Felton’s conclusion, long ago, when Harvard made more conscious efforts to enroll students from different regions of the nation. It seemed clear to Felton that education should attempt to reduce the hazards of separation and division, rather than reinforcing them. The gains in mutual understanding and tolerance—even in the midst of argument and intermittent tension—would ultimately outweigh the dangers that could result from sustained isolation.

This perspective surely provides the basis for a response to those of us—and I include myself—who are seriously concerned about fragmentation, sectarianism, and incidents of tension or conflict between groups in our contemporary society. The present situation in the United States is particularly difficult in many respects. At the same time, we need to remember that this nation’s experiment in diversity has always been complex, and has involved significant strain as well as episodes of violence. Indeed, by most measures, our contemporary predicament is not more severe, and in some respects is less so, than that which existed throughout much of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. We should bear in mind the disruptive and often violent incidents that took place in the decades leading to the Civil War; the terrible War itself; the difficult and divisive history of the Reconstruction; and so much of the turbulence that marked the era of the “new immigrants.”

Attitudes, habits, and prejudices fade slowly, and perhaps never as completely as we might hope. Moreover, if the better part of a century was required before many “white” immigrant groups were able to enter fully into the life of the nation—groups who had

## A Sesquicentennial of DIVERSITY AT HARVARD



“UP UNTIL THE LAST TWO OR THREE YEARS, WE’VE BEEN ABLE TO count on a fair level of understanding as to why diversity was important and good,” says Harvard president Neil L. Rudenstine. “That’s been more directly challenged of late.” Hence his decision to devote his most recent report to the Board of Overseers to “Diversity and Learning.” “People have been declaring themselves on the issue,” Rudenstine points out. “If you don’t say what you think about it now, you’re really not doing your educational duty.”

Speaking out is not without risks when the issue has become politicized and Harvard is pressing its case for continued federal funding of student aid and research. “The tack I took,” Rudenstine says, “addressing the issue historically and talking about diversity in education, was very deliberate. I hoped to get back to seeing why people wanted diversity in the first place.”

What Rudenstine discovered in “reclaiming diversity for educational discourse” was surprising on two counts. First, he found the idea of diversity taking form in writings by John Stuart Mill and John Newman on how education takes place—not, as it is stereotyped in debates today, over “satisfying the claims of this group or that.” Second, he “started with the assumption that this was a post-World War II phenomenon, maybe as late as the 1960s.” Instead, he traced the debate at Harvard to the years just before the Civil War.

To Rudenstine, this detective work suggests that “there is 150 years of tradition here that we ought to take seriously—that there is a theory and, more important, a practice that we’ve been living by.” He acknowledges that related, equally contentious, issues exist—diversity in the curriculum, for example, or in the composition of the faculty. But focusing on the student body enables Rudenstine to emphasize a message he sees as fundamental: Diversity promotes effective learning and promotes the conditions for democracy in a heterogeneous culture.

~ J.S.R.

experienced neither slavery nor systematic legal discrimination—how much time should be estimated for a similar process to take place with respect to African-Americans, for whom official segregation in many aspects of daily life continued to exist into the 1960s? How soon should we expect forms of group identification—and some patterns of self-separation—to vanish?

The extent of our nation's success in dealing with diversity can be measured only in the full light of our entire history. Without such a long-term view, as well as an informed awareness of what can be achieved in a heterogeneous society (and at what speed), we will almost certainly undervalue all that has been accomplished so far, and we will be tempted to overdramatize the shock effect of periodic incidents: incidents that can easily be interpreted as evidence of crisis or failure, when in fact they are often no more than signs of the inescapable if unsettling stresses which exist in a large and complex democratic society.

As we try to assess the progress to date, particularly on our campuses, we ought to ask whether there are ways to evaluate more systematically the degree of success realized so far. Are there certain kinds of arrangements, norms, and stated expectations that enhance the experience of diversity and learning—and others that affect it negatively? We are now in a position to begin to draw on our cumulative knowledge. Such studies would help make clear that our institutions are still very much in the midst of a national experiment in diversity, and that we are committed to learning from it in order to ensure its success.

Meanwhile, as I look at the present situation on many of our campuses, I believe that the achieved level of tolerance and respect—among thousands and thousands of students—is extraordinary. How many of us would have predicted, in 1950 or 1960, that so great a number of talented and dissimilar students would be studying together and learning from one another after so brief a passage of time? No similar transformation has ever before taken place in the long history of higher education.

This is not a moment for national self-congratulation. But neither is it a moment to underestimate the substantial human and institutional achievements—in terms of education and diversity—of the past few decades. These achievements have their roots in ideas and actions that reach back more than a century. The record is impressive. The progress, however imperfect, is inspiring. That progress must be sustained and strengthened. To change course now would be to turn aside from many decades of difficult but steady hope and fulfillment, in order to follow pathways far less bright, and far less full of promise. ▢

---

<sup>1</sup>Oscar Handlin, *Boston's Immigrants* (rev. ed. 1959) 185 (quoting the *Boston American*, Oct. 21, 1837, and Mayor Theodore Lyman of Boston).

<sup>2</sup>*Ibid.*, 226.

<sup>3</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>4</sup>Stephan Thernstrom, "Poor but Hopeful Scholars," in *Glimpses of the Harvard Past* (1986), 126, 128.

---

## POETRY

# Retribution

This is the hour's coldest, the month's dog,  
when pavement turns to frazil ice.  
Why wait then for a miraculous birth.

A collop of the sun, rouged for hours,  
freezes black. The cat won't budge  
from her kind hamper.

Fall in Greenland's water, you won't come up again.

The horse of the sun comes riding. The boy scrambles  
from his chamber. I am the chamber, the boy,  
it is not just my life I must answer for.

This is a snowman's story.  
The boy has vanished with my cow  
to make his fortune.

This is my last white coffee, this is retribution.

White horse of the sun,  
there is rouge on your face;  
linens on your fine saddle.

I make this story as I go, a silk lie to finity:  
a blue stained wedding robe, a red  
ribboned cradle, black breath on a mirror.

It ends. It never ends.

~ NAOMI FEIGELSON CHASE

*Naomi Feigelson Chase '54 is the author of two books of poems, Waiting for the Messiah in Somerville, Mass. (Garden Street, 1993), and Listening for Water (Archival, 1980). She has also published A Child Is Being Beaten: Child Abuse in America and The Underground Revolution: Hippies, Yuppies, & Others.*