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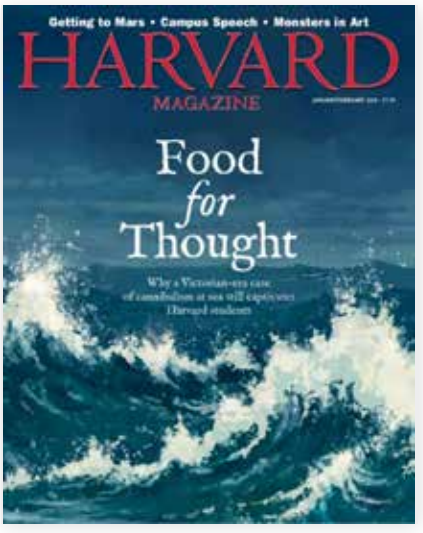
On the cover: *Illustration by Jessie Lin*

FROM TOP: JONATHAN SHAW/*HARVARD MAGAZINE*; MIKE SPENCER/COURTESY OF HARVARD EXTENSION SCHOOL; DAN PAGE

Cambridge 02138

Morality, Mars, the Meaning of Education



LAW IN A LIFEBOAT

Adrift at sea with no food and no hope of rescue, desperate crewmen kill their shipmate Richard Parker and eat his remains to survive ("Law in a Lifeboat," January-February 2026, page 26). An identical episode occurs in the nineteenth-century novel *The Narrative of Arthur Gordon Pym of Nantucket*. Yet another example of an author lifting material from the headlines? No. Remarkably, Edgar Allan Poe published his book in 1838, 46 years *before* Parker, Dudley, and Stephens were shipwrecked.

Mark Eckenwiler '82

In retracing the impact of *The Queen v. Dudley and Stephens*, Adam Cohen fails to pose or answer what I view as the most significant issue: what assurance did the murderous seafarers have that they would not be rescued an hour or a day after their act of cannibalism? In other words, how can one adjudge the legality or morality of the throat slitting absent greater context?

Clearly, had the act been committed within sight of a rescuing boat, there would be no real legal or moral quagmire; we would all agree that the perpetrators committed murder. The degree of temporal and spatial separation from rescue must inform any judgment in the case; if those who engaged in the act could reasonably assume that they had no way out but the killing of another, this becomes a much closer case.

Moreover, in such desperate straits, it is doubtful that any legal regime could curb the appetite of the empowered.

Michael Sussman, J.D. '78

The *Queen v. Dudley and Stephens* case cannot reasonably be compared to the trolley problem as suggested in "Law in a Lifeboat." In the trolley case, a utilitarian can easily demonstrate that switching the runaway train saves multiple lives and maximizes utility. Captain Dudley and Stephens, by contrast, were guilty of a crime even if they were judged on utilitarian grounds. Maximizing utility, in this case, would seem to require maximizing the expected remaining life-years of the survivors, i.e., saving the life of someone with a life expectancy of 50 more years is better than saving the life of someone who has a life expectancy of 15 or 20 more years. Killing the youngest member of the crew doesn't accomplish this. If Captain Dudley had been interested in maximizing utility, he might have slit his own throat or Stephens's throat. What this case really demonstrates is that Dudley and Stephens, like many who invoke utilitarian arguments, were really interested in maximizing their own utility.

Howard Landis, M.B.A. '78

Adam Cohen's article about *Dudley and Stephens* is entertaining, but this case does not deserve the level of attention it has received in the legal and philosophical academy.

According to Cohen, "the case almost perfectly illustrates the great philosophical debate between utilitarians...and those who espouse a rights-based theory of justice" (January-February 2026, page 30). But *Dudley and Stephens* is a poor illustration of that debate. The problem is that it was overwhelmingly likely that Parker would have died of dehydration if he hadn't been killed. This is a *moral confound* in the case: a factor beyond Parker's right to life and the calculus of consequences that is potentially morally relevant.

A true test of the disagreement between utilitarians and rights-based theorists needs to be a case in which this moral confound is absent. Perhaps the most famous is the late Judith Jarvis Thomson's case of the doctor who kills a perfectly healthy bystander in order to save the lives of five other innocents who will die if they do not receive the bystander's vital organs through transplantation. Here, I expect, the reader will agree that it is *not* morally permitted to kill the one to save five. If there is a major lesson to be drawn from *Dudley and Stephens*, it is that we all need to be very careful to avoid moral confounds when we test moral principles against each other.

Samuel C. Rickless '86

If the cannibalism debate provokes strong opinions, so did the debate over the allocation of life-saving ventilators in ICUs during the early COVID-19 epidemic. Various U.S. medical centers, state health commissions, and bioethicists rushed to promulgate triage guidelines. The University of Pittsburgh guideline, a model for many states, does not mince words: the tiebreaker for access is *age*. They use the term "life-cycle considerations," a code for giving priority to younger patients within age groups: 12 to 40, 41 to 60, 61 to 75, over 75. A list of "factors that have no bearing"—which starts with "race, disability" and includes "perceived social worth, perceived quality of life"—omitted age.

Unashamed, undisguised medical discrimination was signed by apparently honorable, even distinguished, physicians and bioethicists. It was the impetus for the book I published in 2024, *American Eldercide: How It Happened, How to Prevent It*. What made the situation even more appalling—and ultimately different from the cannibalism on the boat—was that an ethical alternative was staring them all in the face. A Harvard Medical School epidemiologist organized a petition that was quickly signed by hundreds of doctors. In cases of scarcity, which are likely to recur in any public health catastrophe, they recommended a lottery.

Margaret Morganroth Gullette '62, Ph.D. '75, B.F. '87

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7 WARE STREET

Time for Iteration

On tough grading, meandering paths, and the purpose of education

I remember well my first brush with tough grading at Harvard—circa 1990, during my first-year Expository Writing course (better known in the College as "Expos"). We had turned in our first assignment, and before the next class session, the instructor pulled me aside. "I'm going to use your essay as an example," he said. My ego soared until he finished the sentence: "...of what not to do."

He wasn't wrong. Buoyed by some bad high school habits, I had apparently written the entire paper in the passive voice. I don't recall the grade he gave me, but it certainly wasn't an A. There was no better way to knock that bad habit out of my writing for good.

That was a productive moment of discomfort, the kind of ideal educational experience that Lindsay Mitchell, a onetime Expos teacher and former *Harvard Magazine* senior editor, describes in her thought-provoking cover story about the costs of Harvard's current wave of grade inflation (page 24). Mitchell delves beyond stereotypes and reflexive judgments to describe a set of challenges for teachers and students—and for the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) as it works to fine-tune the academic enterprise.

The FAS "re-centering academics" initiative is part self-reflection and part sales job: recasting the purpose of higher education as something less transactional and more transformative. Several stories in this issue explore how students across the University can embrace the possibilities of failure and exploration. Lydialyle Gibson digs into the history and mission of Harvard Extension School, which offers an alternate route to advancement, along with the thrill of knowledge for its own sake (page 30). In his charming Undergraduate column, Andrés Muedano '27, one of our Ledecky fellows, writes about his efforts to resist the pressure today's undergraduates feel to instrumentalize every moment (page 56).

What Muedano and Mitchell describe might be an inevitable byproduct of an ever-more-competitive admissions process that not only rewards achievement but also compounds the pressure to do more, faster, without the leeway to stumble or meander. But Dean of Arts and Humanities Sean D. Kelly offers Muedano a different way to view academia: as an opportunity for what Plato called "serious play." It's a sunnier metaphor for the work of learning than the "friction" Mitchell describes in her grade inflation story (and that I experienced as a shell-shocked Expos student). Both are useful ways to think about how to spend our precious time in school, and what it means to iterate—in our work, and in our plans.

On the subject of iteration: if you sense something different about this issue, your eyes have not deceived you. We've changed our section titles to make their contents clearer: "Arts & Culture," "Research & Ideas," "People & Passions." (We are fans, here, of the ampersand.) We've also adjusted our print size and some of our typefaces for the sake of greater readability. And we're introducing some new recurring features that will highlight the wide-ranging experiences and interests of Harvard alumni. Feedback is welcome, whether positive or critical. It's all part of the process. —Joanna Weiss, *Editor*

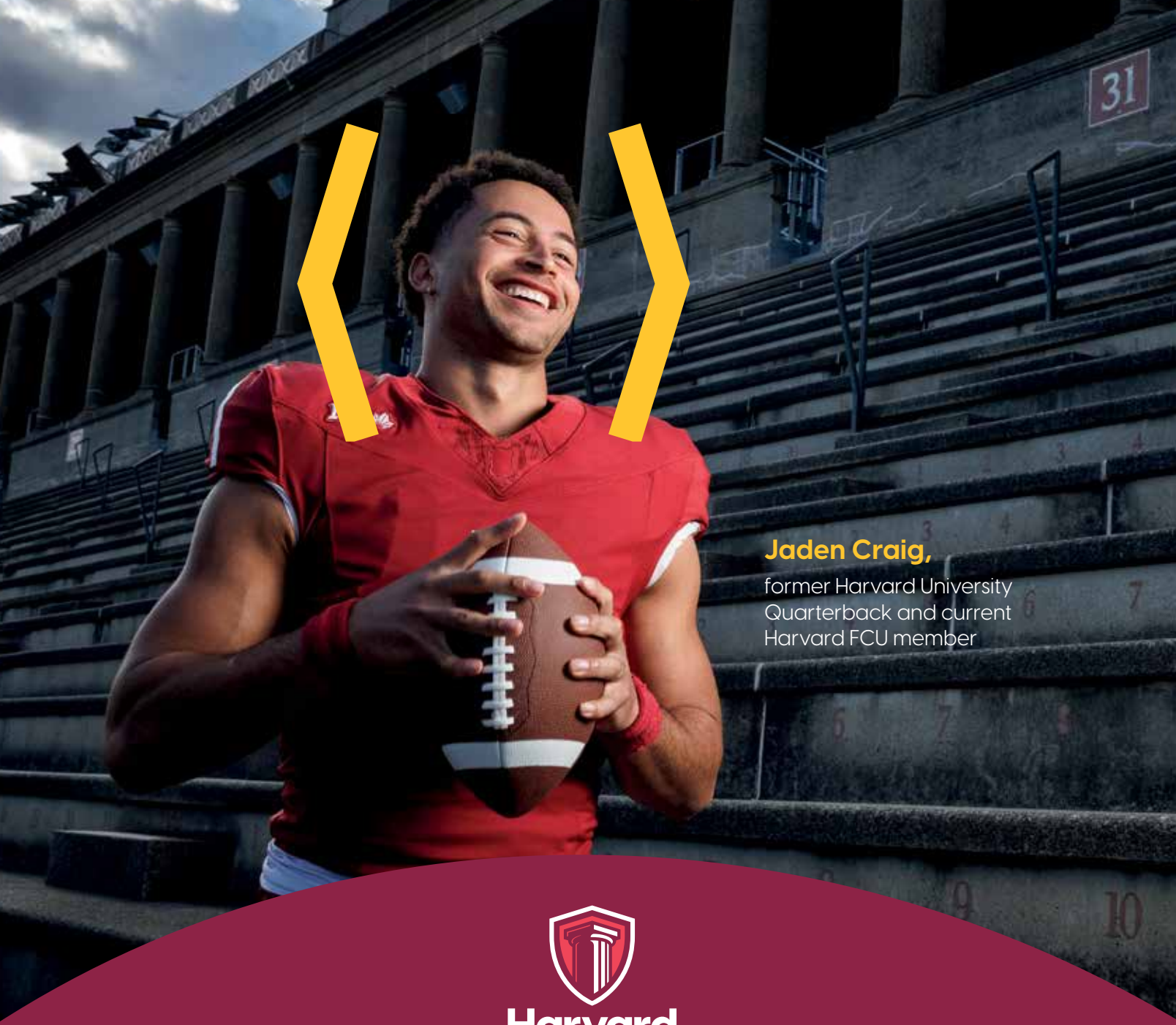
Hard cases may make bad law, but they also make great stories—seemingly forever. As a law student, I wrote about the Richard Parker cannibalism case in the *Harvard Law Review* 41 years ago, in my book note reviewing *Cannibalism and the Common Law* by A.W.B. Simpson. My analysis then was that the case illustrated the limits of utilitarianism, because a "greatest good for the greatest number" moral theory, taken seriously, would appear to mandate that poor Parker (or someone) be consumed, rather than simply justifying or excusing such action. It's tough to square that demand with most people's moral intuition. I knew at the time that I was not the first Harvard-affiliated person to address the Parker case, and I suspected—correctly, I now see—that I would not be the last.

Joseph M. Ramirez, J.D. '85

Adam Cohen's cover story on the case of the nineteenth-century English cannibals is an intriguing—and highly entertaining—meditation on what appear to be irresolvable legal and moral paradoxes. Cohen mentioned that the cannibals were found guilty. He didn't comment, however, on their punishment, which became a story in itself. At the time murder was a capital offense, so they were duly sentenced to be hanged. But the sentence prompted massive public sympathy for the convicts due to the extremity of their predicament at sea, and the court itself recommended mercy. The result? A six-month prison sentence without hard labor, after which they were released. Talk about lessening a sentence!

Saniel Bonder '72

Adam Cohen's "Law in a Lifeboat" is an excellent example of how moral dilemmas interact with the law. It also exemplifies the fascination with cannibalism. But Harvard isn't the only campus tied to the subject. An even closer connection is at another university. Ten years before Captain Dudley infamously saved himself, Alferd Packer confessed (controversially) to eating his companions on a winter trip through the San Juan mountains in southwestern Colorado. He eventually spent many years in prison for his supposed deeds. At the University of Col-



Jaden Craig,
former Harvard University Quarterback and current Harvard FCU member

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orado in Boulder in 1968, the administration allowed the students to name the eatery in the new student union. It is still the Alferd Packer Restaurant and Grill.

Randy Levine, Ph.D. '72

I was disappointed to see that your account of the seafaring cannibals case neglects to mention the definitive modern scholarly account of the incident and resulting legal proceedings by the renowned legal historian and Michigan law professor A.W.B. Simpson, *Cannibalism and the Common Law: The Story of the Tragic Last Voyage of the Mignonette* (1984).

John H. Langbein, LL.B. '68

Adam Cohen's article on the 1884 cannibalism-at-sea case was riveting. Cohen mentions other popular tales involving cannibalism, including "Hansel and Gretel" and *The Silence of the Lambs*, in his piece; I am only surprised that he omitted a reference to the 2004 folk-rock album *Mignonette*, which was directly based on the incident, and the ill-starred 2024 Broadway musical it inspired, *Swept Away*.

Peter Vertes, M.A. '86

Adam Cohen's article on the history of *The Queen v. Dudley and Stephens* brought back a lot of 1L memories; I remember learning the case from Professor James Vorenberg. (Clearly, it made an impression that remains after 45 years!) He imparted to the fledgling lawyers in the 1L Criminal Law course that the law would entail hard, even impossible, cases, and notwithstanding the imperfections of each competing theoretical approach, the ability to live in a tolerant and just society depended equally, if not more so, on the willingness of those in power to recognize the imperfections of "perfect" justice and to "do the right thing." A lesson worth remembering, indeed.

Herschel S. Weinstein, J.D. '80

In more than 80 years of reading I have had few experiences of snapping back and upright, likely goggle-eyed, as I had

You Answered

IN THE JANUARY-FEBRUARY ISSUE, WE ASKED YOU:

What should the crew of the Mignonette lifeboat have done in 1884?

Turn to page 64 for the survey results—and a new question about this issue's cover story.

reading the sentence in Adam Cohen's article recounting his roommate's chicken-leg-and-ketchup evocation of "Thomas Dudley, an English captain…[who] after a shipwreck, with no food in his lifeboat… decided the only way to survive was to kill and eat the cabin boy" (January-February 2026, page 27).

Mustard would have been a historically more likely choice.

J. Cynthia Weber, Ph.D. '70

MICHAEL SANDEL

In the Michael Sandel interview, the interviewer suggests that Sandel was concerned that globalization led to increasing inequality ("Making Waves with Philosophy," January-February 2026, page 29). This is true only if you adopt a hyper-nationalist stance. Globalization led to greatly increased equality among all people since it raised a couple of billion of us out of poverty.

A good book in 2018, *Factfulness* by Swedish academic Hans Rosling, detailed how far the world advanced on such issues as hunger, education, women's rights, and infant health due to globalization and science. Sandel seems (per the interviewer) willing to base his argument about globalization and science on the know-nothing response to vaccination and immigration of the current administration.

James Kardon '71

The most striking aspect of Professor Sandel's call to "transition to the green economy" is its grassroots counterpart. A group called PlantBabyPlant has recently been launched to counter the idea of "Drill, baby, drill." Its guiding force is Robin Wall Kimmerer, the author of *Braiding Sweetgrass* and *The Serviceberry: Abundance and Reciprocity in the Natural World*. Both her books have been on the bestseller list for years, proof that this worldview has already taken root in our destructive consumerist culture.

Sandel's brilliant analysis includes examining "market values," "social and civic inequalities," and a twisted new concept of freedom. With Kimmerer and Sandel leading the way, I suggest we're on the path to a transformative future.

Kitty Beer '59

CAMPUS SPEECH

I enjoyed Rakesh Khurana's article "A Clear-Eyed Take on Campus Speech" (January-February 2026, page 37). I agree that the role of the university as an environment for civil discourse is more important than ever, but he only touches on the role of social media in the current polarization of public discourse, while I believe it is a root cause.

In social media, groups are separated by their alignment with certain statements, which an algorithm then amplifies. Each of these bubbles gets its own set of facts that seemingly support internal statements. The algorithms are designed to encourage strong reactions to drive engagement: rage, hate, envy, pride, certainty, demonization of contrary evidence or opinions. In every sense, the list of properties I currently see in social media's design is anti-university, anti-intellectual, anti-civic, anti-citizen. It is not surprising that the public (and therefore students) have responded in kind. The unavoidable fact is that universities are becoming more like social media than social media is becoming like universities.

There needs to be some idea of social media as a public utility that supports and is responsible to the public interest, in the same way that Dr. Khurana calls for university leadership to support and be responsible to the university community. In that regard, the crisis of civility is really a crisis of leadership at every level of society.

Larry Kyrala, A.L.B. '12

I read former Dean Rakesh Khurana's review of *Terms of Respect* with a sinking heart. My distress arose from what I saw as the contrast between the Eisgruber/Khurana view of how elite colleges should educate their students and that articulated by Dean Jeremy Knowles 25 years ago, in his September 2001 welcoming speech to the first-years (a cohort that included our daughter).

Dean Knowles told his entering stu-

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harvardmagazine.com/letters-ma26

dents that Harvard's goal for them was that, upon graduation, "You will all be able to recognize 'rot' when you see it." This goal would be achieved by exposing them to a wide (and unvarnished) range of people and convictions. I believe that Dean Knowles was embracing Holmes's marketplace of ideas, which Dean Khurana characterizes as "reduc[ing] discourse to competition and consumption" (January-February 2026, page 38).

In contrast, the Eisgruber/Khurana preference is for Brandeis's deliberative community, which must be "nurtured." Forget unvarnished exposure. Quash what Dean Khurana calls "'junk' ideas." Instead, expose students to those ideas and beliefs that "nourish public life" (whatever THAT means!).

John Thorndike '64, J.D. '68

Khurana often refers to "the university" as if it was a monolithic entity with powers to influence the speech, and perhaps the thoughts, of its faculty and students. Not so fast, grasshopper. Harvard is run by its Board of Overseers and the Corporation with the president, fellows, and faculty forming the chorus in this dramatic opera. The faculty have drunk deeply of the leftist lemonade. Just look at their political contributions. I think a cultural shift toward free speech has serious headwinds with this embedded philosophy and will be very difficult.

Khurana states that the obligation of the university "involves, among other things, convincing students that real learning requires slow thinking and patient listening" (January-February 2026, page 38). Or, in the words of the great twentieth-century philosopher Yogi Berra, "You can observe a lot by just watching." Yogi's implied message was that you should approach life with an open mind and not judge without reason and evidence. His plea runs headlong into the Ring Lardner expression: "Shut up, he explained," which is the current mantra of the counterculture brigade.

Ronald M. Barton '69

GETTING TO MARS

"How to Get to Mars (for Real)" steps gingerly around the question of how much a manned expedition to Mars would cost (January-February 2026, page 32). NASA's own estimate for a single flight is approximately $500 billion. With subsequent support flights, the cost would ascend into the trillions. Meanwhile, half of humanity lives on less than $6 a day.

SPEAK UP, PLEASE

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"I really do believe it's part of us as humans," a former Harvard faculty member exclaims excitedly, referring to costly but mindless adventures like this one (page 36). A pity that lifting up the less fortunate half of humanity is not a more prominent "part of us as humans."

George Scialabba '69

Thank you for your interesting article, "How to Get to Mars (for Real)." The engineering challenges are formidable and were interestingly described. However, the article does not address the question of why.

If the point is to learn about Mars, robots designed for the purpose are likely to be more cost-effective. So, we are left with the romance. Sending people to Mars is not likely to be a good use of resources, I suspect.

Jay Kadane '62

MATH CIRCLE

I greatly appreciated the article on the Cambridge Math Circle ("A Numbers Game," January-February 2026, page 13). I have been involved in a math circle for students for about 15 years and, for a short time, a now-dormant circle for teachers. It is worth noting that there is a prior history at Harvard in the 1990s. Bob and Ellen Kaplan started this circle and were quite influential in spreading math circles in the U.S. along with others. The Global Math Circle is a continuation of the Kaplan circle.

Bob Sachs '76

VITA

The vita story of Takashi Komatsu, 1886-1965, was a timely opportunity to revisit a global problem (January-February 2026, page 51). The run-up to Pearl Harbor and the ensuing U.S.-Japan conflagrations were all about "spheres of influence" driven by so-called vital economic interests. The United States proclaimed the Monroe Doctrine regarding South America but didn't grant the Japanese empire similar entitlement in Southeast Asia.

Komatsu, in his impressive ascent into the chambers of Japanese authority and power, certainly would have been a keen observer if not a significant participant in the discussions of empire management. His company must have been building battleships in the late 1930s. What were his thoughts? Did he have intense conversations with U.S. operatives in the late '30s? Was he a principled dissident who survived? Did he leave revealing private communications? Where are our historians when we need them?

Robert Park, A.M. '67, S.M. '81

ERRATA

In "Pugilistic Art" (January-February 2026, page 64), Daniel Mendoza was said to have become England's first sports megastar in the late 1800s. In fact, this took place in the late 1700s.

In "A Flight of Fantasy" (January-February 2026, page 45), the name of the author of *Le Morte d'Arthur* was misspelled. The correct spelling is Thomas Malory.

A Transformation in Allston

Animating the Enterprise Research Campus

by Jonathan Shaw

The Enterprise Research Campus in Allston, shown above, includes, from left to right: the East (red) and West Labs (silver) of One Milestone; the residential tower Verra (green); the Atlas Hotel tower (tan); and the Treehouse Conference Center (gray), also shown below (left). From the ground floor of Verra, the two lab and office buildings of One Milestone can be seen (bottom right).

JONATHAN SHAW/*HARVARD MAGAZINE*

GLEAMING BUILDINGS visible from Cambridge across the Charles River signal the transformation of an overgrown rail-truck transfer yard in Allston—now Harvard's Enterprise Research Campus (ERC). The mixed-use development, led by real estate investment corporation Tishman Speyer on land leased from Harvard, was first envisioned in 2011 as a major installment in Harvard's expansion into Allston. The red and silver buildings are the East and West laboratories and offices. Roche/Genentech, the global pharmaceu-

COURTESY OF VERRA

COURTESY OF GANG STUDIO

Clockwise from top left: a residential apartment interior; the co-working space at Verra; the lobby of the Treehouse conference center; and its branching staircase

Below: Ama at the Atlas, one of the hotel's restaurants (left), as well as the lobby area, leading to the restaurant at the far end, photographed on opening day (right)

tical company, has already leased a quarter of the approximately 400,000-square-foot space, still under construction inside. The company will begin a phased move-in during the summer.

The green tower and the smaller companion building beside it are state-of-the-art apartments, with 60 percent already leased as of January. And the tall tan building with a bluish glass facade fronting Western Avenue is the Atlas Hotel, which officially opened on January 28, replete with a ground floor restaurant and, come the warmer months, rooftop dining and bar options. The Harvard COOP will open a store in the hotel offering books and clothing. Room rates range from several hundred dollars nightly to more than $2,000 for special suites.

Next door is the Harvard-owned and -operated Treehouse Conference Center, a building made of engineered timber and designed by Kajima professor in practice of architecture Jeanne Gang. The conference center, which hosted several large gatherings in December

JONATHAN SHAW/*HARVARD MAGAZINE*

2025, can accommodate events with as few as 20 and as many as 755 attendees. Phin Coffee House, a Vietnamese coffee shop with an existing location in downtown Boston, will open later this spring on the ground floor, welcoming the public into this low-carbon building. The cement used in its construction was made with ground glass as a pozzolan to reduce its carbon content by as much as 95 percent.

One Milestone—two laboratory and office buildings, named for their street address—is still under construction on a nine-acre campus, as are the retail portions of the ERC, which will include a Little Sprouts daycare center. Still to come are the finishing touches (a sculpture, more plantings) on the two-acre greenway that unites the complex. The linear park will eventually provide pedestrian and bicycle connections east to the Charles River and west to the landscaped swales and groves (see "Green Shoots," page 59) behind Harvard's Science and Engineering Complex—and beyond to the residential neighborhoods of Allston.

Next to open on nearby North Harvard Street will be the Goel Center for Creativity and Performance: a new home for the American Repertory Theater, and a significant addition to Allston's cultural landscape. ▽

YESTERDAY'S NEWS

Surviving Among the Ashes

by Nell Porter Brown

On a dark and stormy night in January 1764, as snow and wind whipped across the Yard, a vast conflagration destroyed Harvard Hall. Gone to ashes was the stalwart brick building and its roughly 4,600 books. Damaged beyond repair were most of the vital pedagogical scientific instruments, specimens, and objects known as the Philosophical Apparatus. "In a very short time," University President Edward Holyoke wrote, "this venerable Monument of the Piety of our Ancestors was turn'd into a heap of ruins." Winter vacation meant the campus was virtually empty, save for members of the Massachusetts General Court. They had moved into the hall to escape a smallpox outbreak in Boston, and the blaze likely began under the hearth in the library.

Some 404 of the College's precious library books survived the fire: some had not yet been shelved, and others were out on loan. Among those to avoid the flames, perhaps fittingly, was the fourth edition of John Downame's *The Christian Warfare Against the Devill World and Flesh: Wherein is described their nature, the maner of their fight and meanes to obtaine victorye*, printed in 1634. There is evidence that the Puritanical spiritual treatise was among the 400 volumes (plus 779 pounds sterling) that John Harvard bequeathed to the College upon his death in 1638. The story goes that, in 1764, an undergraduate, desirous of reading the red leather-bound door-stopper, had snagged it before the break—and it was overdue at the time of the fire. The book, at times on display at Houghton Library, honors John Harvard himself—and the University's sometimes-fiery educational mission. ▽

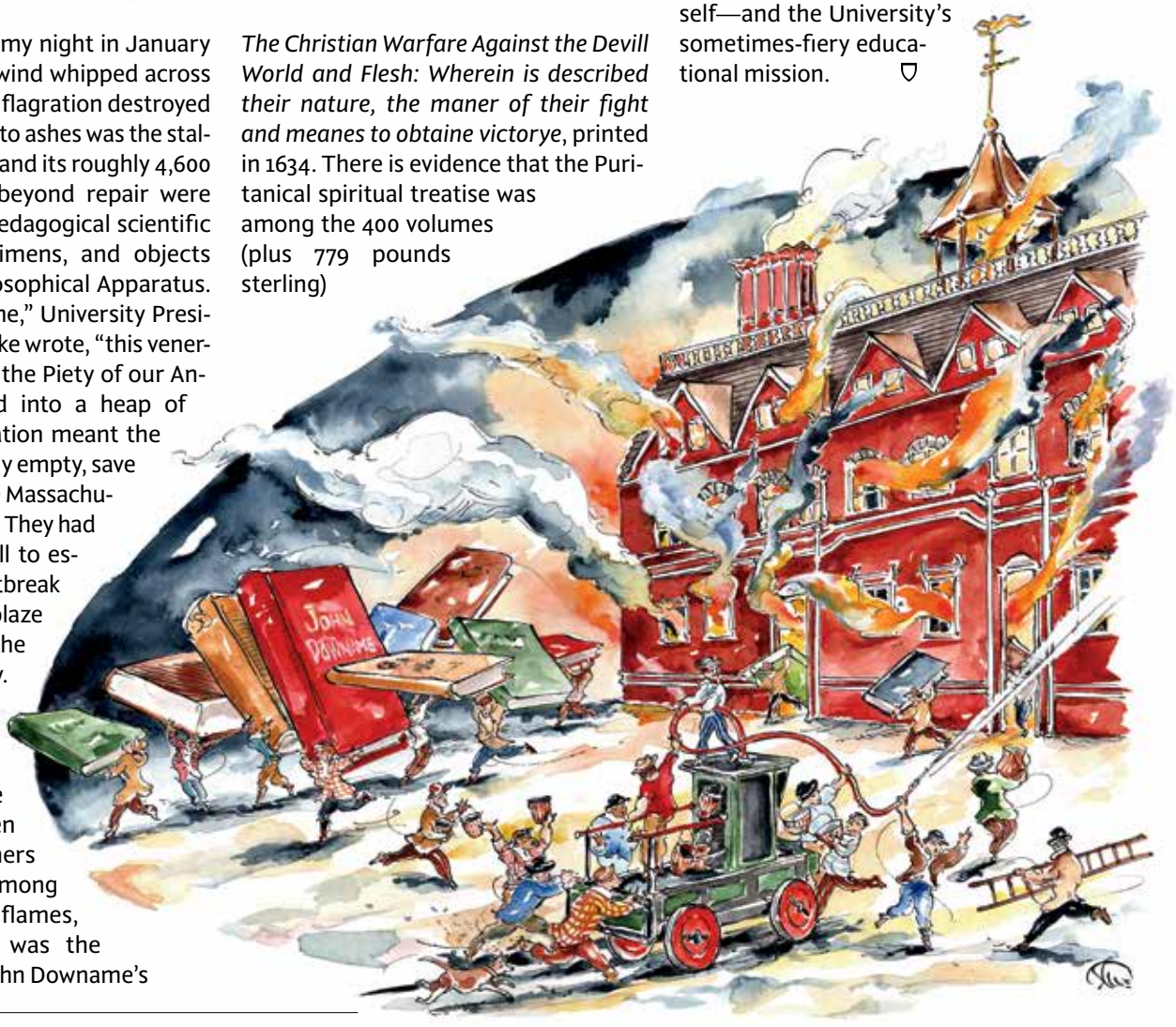


Illustration by Mark Steele

Anyone Can Sing

Cambridge Common Voices welcomes all singers—and different ways of making choral music.

by Schuyler Velasco

Adam Roberge (center) sings into a microphone with fellow members of Cambridge Common Voices during a performance in Sanders Theatre.

When conductor Andy Clark co-founded Cambridge Common Voices (CCV) in 2018, he envisioned the all-abilities community chorus as cutting-edge and explicitly political.

"I had these lofty ambitions of an innovative group that would reject the common practices and pedagogies of choral music," says Clark, the director of choral activities and a senior lecturer on music at Harvard University. He thought the repertoire would include "music to advocate for the world we wanted to see and bring to light the ways callousness toward folks with disabilities compromises the quality of life for everybody."

The group's members, however, didn't want any of that. They just wanted to sing.

"So many were pushing for choir as their friends had experienced it," Clark recalls. "They wanted a conventional experience, and they wanted to perform music about love, about loss, about joy."

A partnership between Harvard's choral department and Lesley University, Cambridge Common Voices has 40 members from across the Boston area with a range of abilities and profiles, from physical impairments to autism to—in many cases—prodigious musical gifts. Some members have encyclopedic memories of particular eras or genres; some play multiple instruments or write music; several have perfect pitch and rhythm. Yet traditional choir singing, with its physical demands (standing still for long periods), rigid behavioral expectations, and narrow avenues for learning songs (reading sheet music or by ear) can be a poor fit for singers outside the typical mold.

Adam Roberge was one of them. Born blind due to a congenital condition called Norrie disease, Roberge, 32, took private voice lessons but had had frustrating chorus experiences, especially through his public high school years. Sheet music wasn't available in Braille; because he rocks back and forth when he stands, teachers assumed he couldn't remain upright through a concert.

"Directors were not willing to have me in a choir," says Roberge, a tenor.

He heard about CCV through a friend and became one of its earliest members. Since then, he has performed with the group at Fenway Park and at a celebration for Cerebral Palsy Day in New York; he has sung with the Longwood Symphony Orchestra and at Berklee College of Music. In themselves, those types of experiences embody the more overt messaging that Clark thought would characterize the group in the beginning.

"If there is a message, it comes through with more nuance—in the ways in which we sing, in which we make music and are with one another," Clark says.

The group's musical framework, too, is quietly groundbreaking. CCV's directors draw on universal design, an idea that first emerged in architecture to make buildings more accessible. In the past decade, the concept has made its way into education—teaching to different learning styles and capabilities, based on a foundation of cognitive neuroscience. Principles of Universal Design Learning, as outlined

Photographs courtesy of Cambridge Common Voices

by the education nonprofit CAST, emphasize lessons with multiple avenues to understanding any topic, rather than a one-size-fits-all structure.

In musical practice, that translates to several different, complementary ways to learn a given song. CCV can make use of traditional sheet music, lyric sheets, Braille, and solfège scales—in which each note corresponds to a hand signal that indicates whether the pitch is moving up or down. Roberge, for instance, learns through Braille and listening to rehearsal tracks on YouTube.

"There are aspects of our rehearsals that are very familiar," Clark says. "We have a warm-up. We have an agenda of the progress we want to make. Then there are aspects that might be somewhat unconventional—we're offering multiple modalities representing the music."

At a holiday concert this past December, CCV's full range was on display. To kick off the afternoon's program in Harvard's Sanders Theatre, the group led the audience in a sing-along of favorites including "Let It Snow," "Have Yourself A Merry Little Christmas," and "Let It Go," from the movie *Frozen.* Dressed in Christmas sweaters and Santa hats, singers danced to the music and shook maracas and tambourines; a CCV member introduced each song with a bit of trivia.

Next, CCV joined Harvard's student singers and orchestra members in a world premiere staged reading of Charles Dickens's *A Christmas Carol*, with settings of standards including "God Rest Ye, Merry Gentlemen" and "It Came Upon a Midnight Clear." The score is modern and a little tricky, with multi-part vocal lines woven around a central narration and trading off melodies with the instruments.

"Andy's very firm on wanting to be like any choir—sharpening skills and taking on new, challenging pieces," says James Gutierrez, CCV's managing director. "The sing-along is, I think, the group's comfort zone, but we also push them to do more complicated stuff with three- and four-part harmony."

Cambridge common voices came about as a collaboration between the Harvard choral department and Lesley's Threshold Program, a residential college curriculum for neurodiverse students. Clark teaches classes on music and disability, and he conceived of the choir as both an addition to Lesley's offerings—at the time, despite the school's robust arts therapy curriculum, there weren't many musical outlets for Threshold students—and as a service-learning opportunity for his Harvard students, who sing in the choir, serve as teaching assistants, and sometimes compose original music through the Harvard Choruses New Music Initiative. CCV songs including "Where I'll Go" (by Rachel Guo '22) and "We All Have Dreams (by Rebecca Araten '23) came out of the program.

In recent years, CCV has sharpened its focus on creating and performing such originals, in keeping with the principles of universal design. Clark likens the group's musical selections to buildings: Some are retrofitted versions of traditional standards, akin to a 300-year-old campus building with an elevator and a wheelchair ramp. Others are built from the ground up with broader accessibility in mind.

For example, "The CCV Blues" has a way in for just about anyone; the song includes two-part call and response harmony, spoken word, and improvisational solo sections. Rehearsal resources include lyrics, a sound file, and traditional sheet music.

The rehearsals and original songs also make use of members' singular abilities, Gutierrez notes. Roberge, for one, has great ears: an automotive enthusiast, he can identify the year, make, and model of many classic cars by the sounds of their engines. Ellie Slager, a 25-year-old soprano, is a prolific lyricist; she is working with the group's arranger in Pennsylvania to set a few of her poems (she's written over 100) to music.

"I would be a whole different person if I wasn't in CCV," she said. Before joining, the group singing available to her was via small, informal after-school programs. The choir is woven into her social circle, and a few fellow members are her roommates.

At the end of 2025, the group completed its first album, consisting entirely of new music and recorded on campus. Much of the material, like the song "Give Me A Chance," hearkens back to Clark's activist vision for the choir, but cast in personal terms. Composed by member Zach Gordon, a multi-instrumentalist with perfect pitch who is on the autism spectrum, the lyrics nod to his strengths while making CCV's larger existential case:

Give me a chance to come along
Give me a chance to play
Give me a chance to speak
I might have something to say.

CCV in concert (above); Soprano and longtime CCV member Ellie Slager performing a solo (right)

Clockwise from top left: views of Warren's wood-paneled platform bed alcove and his bathroom, which features a zinc-lined tub, a marble sink, a floor composed of brown tesserae, and an overhead-tank toilet whose bowl was once embellished with gold leaf

TREASURE

House Tales

The quirky digs of a humanities department

by Nell Porter Brown

Across campus, Harvard's toiling employees might dream of taking an afternoon power nap. At the 1833 Beck-Warren House, home to the Department of Celtic Languages and Literatures, all they'd need to do is duck into a roomy bed chamber and doze off. Not that department administrator Mary Violette, whose desk is a few feet away, ever has. Yet she has researched, and appreciates, the bed's provenance.

Her office was once the domain of Henry Clarke Warren, A.B. 1879, a pioneering Sanskrit and Pāli scholar and polyglot. Disabled by a spinal injury as a child, Warren was virtually immobile and often in pain, but nevertheless traveled, studied at Johns Hopkins University, and led a rich life as an independent academic. As an adult he lived in Cambridge from 1891 to 1899, buying what had been the home of Harvard Latin professor Charles Beck. Warren remodeled the second floor, installing aquariums, skylights, a sun porch, and a zinc tub and seat in the Victorian-styled bathroom (still used today). It was here, too, that Warren completed *Buddhism in Translations,* an octavo in 540 pages with some 130 Pāli scriptures converted to English prose and verse—part of the monographic serial the *Harvard Oriental Series,* founded by his former teacher and longtime friend, influential Harvard Sanskrit scholar Charles Rockwell Lanman.

With scant time and strength, Warren was devoted "not to the learned *quisquiliae* on which many scholars fritter their days away, but rather to one or two works of individuality and independent significance," noted Lanman in his 1899 obituary for Warren, who bequeathed his home and land to Harvard. Students still study languages in the house—among them Old Irish, Middle Welsh, Scottish-Gaelic, French, and German. "So I think about what these walls have heard," Violette says, and "[wonder] what languages the ghosts are speaking."

Photographs by Nell Porter Brown/Harvard Magazine

News in Brief

Garber Presidency to Continue

The Harvard Corporation announced in December 2025 that President Alan M. Garber, whose term was to end in 2027, would continue to serve indefinitely. Garber, Harvard's 31st president, has been praised for his rational and unflappable presence since assuming the presidency, even as the partnership with the federal government to conduct research on its behalf has come undone.

Senior Fellow Penny Pritzker said Garber "is both principled and pragmatic…deliberative and decisive…respectful of tradition and intent on innovation…He models open-mindedness and civility, with compassion toward others, a selfless concern for Harvard's best interests, and an unwavering focus on how Harvard can best serve the wider world."

Courts Weigh Research Funding

In mid-December, the Trump administration appealed a September 3, 2025 U.S. District Court ruling that restored more than $2.2 billion in funding to Harvard. Judge Allison D. Burroughs had found the government violated Harvard's First Amendment rights by withholding funding in retaliation for protected speech and had failed to follow procedures mandated by the Civil Rights Act of 1964.

Separately, in an early January ruling that affects all universities, the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit made permanent an injunction barring the National Institutes of Health from retroactively capping federal reimbursement of indirect costs associated with research, such as utilities, rent, and laboratory equipment.

Donors Support Ph.D. Candidates

Amid the uncertainty in research funding, a group of alumni donors has contributed $50 million to create an endowment fund for Ph.D. students in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS), with the aim of raising another $50 million in matching gifts by the end of June. The initiative, dubbed the Research Accelerator Challenge, will allow the FAS to admit more graduate students across its divisions (science, social science, arts and humanities) as well as in the Paulson School of Engineering and Applied Sciences (SEAS). FAS leaders say the endowment will allow Harvard to compete for the best Ph.D. candidates and enable the kind of high risk, high reward research that leads to scientific breakthroughs.

"Graduate student support is a top priority for faculty across our Divisions and SEAS," Hopi Hoekstra, the Edgerly dean of the faculty, wrote to students and faculty in February. "This initiative

reflects a shift from responding to constraints to investing strategically in our core academic activities."

Looking to Corporate Partnerships

Threats to federal research funding have made corporate partnerships and technology licensing an increasingly important source of revenue. On January 2, Sam Liss, formerly the executive director of strategic partnerships in Harvard's Office of Technology Development (OTD), succeeded Isaac Kohlberg as head of the department. Senior vice provost for research John Shaw, to whom Liss will report as part of a reorganization of the OTD, noted that "this is a key moment for industry engagement at the University."

Rhodes and Marshall Scholars Named

Nine Rhodes and five Marshall scholars from Harvard will study in the U.K. in 2026. Rhodes scholars in the College class of 2026 include Americans Anil Cacodcar, Emma Finn, and Yael S. Goldstein, and international students Sazi Bongwe, Je Qin "Jay" Chooi, Hairong "Helen" He, Fajr Khan, and Will J. Flintoft. Harvard Law School student Omid E. Yeganeh, from Canada, is the ninth Rhodes scholar. Marshall scholarships were awarded to four members of the class of 2026—Kashish Bastola, Hannah Duane, Tenzin Gund-Morrow, Ashwin Sivakumar—and one alumna, Edith O. "Tomi" Siyanbade '23.

NOTA BENE: Two interfaculty initiatives have new leaders. Rita Hamad, professor of social epidemiology and public policy, is the next faculty director of the Harvard Center for Population and Development Studies. Lesser professor in early childhood development Stephanie Jones will be the faculty director of the Center on the Developing Child…Following a December shooting at Brown University, a Harvard ID is required to enter all FAS buildings until at least the end of the spring semester…The spring 2026 visiting fellows at Harvard Kennedy School's Institute of Politics are former Speaker of the House Kevin McCarthy, a Republican, and former Secretary of Transportation Pete Buttigieg, a Democrat.

Research & Ideas

What Do Puppies Know?

The characteristics that make a great service dog emerge as early as eight weeks of age.

by Schuyler Velasco

As research participants, dogs have a powerful advantage over other highly intelligent species, like parrots or chimpanzees, for the scientists studying them. "They're ubiquitous," says Brian Hare, Ph.D. '04, a professor of psychology, neuroscience, and evolutionary anthropology at Duke University. Urged on by his Harvard thesis adviser, Moore professor of biological anthropology emeritus Richard Wrangham, Hare began his academic career studying primates, but he homed in on cognition in canines during graduate school. In the two decades since, he's had the covetable task of observing and training generations of puppies as they grow up.

"I have the largest sample of animals on campus by far," says Hare, who heads up Duke's Puppy Kindergarten, a longitudinal, training-based study of puppy cognition dating back to 2018 with backing from the National Institutes of Health. "People bring their dogs in just like people bring kids, and it's literally thousands and thousands of testable animals."

The Hare laboratory's latest research, now a preprint for the journal *Animal Behavior,* focuses on puppies bred to become service dogs—and the stages at which they develop certain abilities and intelligence markers that suggest whether they will be successful at such work.

The researchers tracked 101 puppies from two service dog organizations—Canine Companions and Eyes, Ears, Nose and Paws—during the period of rapid brain development that occurs between 8 weeks and 20 weeks of age.

Every two weeks, a team led by co-author Hannah Salomons tested skills in-

Photograph by Poetrenkod/iStock

cluding memory, problem-solving, impulse control, and social communication. In one test, puppies learned to nudge a loose lid off a Tupperware container to access a treat. Trainers then sealed the lid and waited for the puppy to look to them for help—a social communication skill.

Of the 10 abilities tracked in the study, nine typically emerged by the time the dogs were 16 weeks old. One of the earliest, the ability to understand human gestures such as pointing, appeared at around eight weeks.

"Some of what we were able to measure emerges rapidly," Hare says, "and [the puppies] reach adult performance levels within weeks. With other skills, it's quite gradual, and they're improving a little bit every other week." Bladder control, for example, usually shows up at around 14 weeks, while eye contact could emerge somewhere between the 10th and 11th week.

When he was a graduate student at Harvard, Hare studied the evolutionary differences between dogs and wolves, focusing on the ways in which domestication changes cognitive development. Effective service dogs, he notes, have certain traits that diverge significantly from their wild ancestors.

"One of the things dogs inherited from wolves, and what makes them great guards," he says, "is they're very xenophobic. They're fearful of strangers—it's why, when you have a dog at home, they bark when somebody comes to the door, or they can be aggressive out on a walk."

But service dogs, including those from Canine Companions, have been intentionally bred for the opposite trait. "They aren't just neutral to strangers, they're 'xenophilic'; they actually prefer strange people to people they know and live with," he says. "That's a big, big change. These dogs are crazy attracted to new people, and that's what makes them great service dogs."

In the *Animal Behavior* study, a dog's individual aptitudes and skills generally remained consistent into adulthood—a crucial finding that suggests those dogs that have the smarts and temperament to handle the rigors of service work could be identified earlier.

"That could really be a game changer in terms of being able to have more dogs available to help more people," Hare says, "because we could know early which dogs would be worth investing in, and which dogs might not have the capacity for it."

Hare's family dog, Neutron, didn't have the capacity for it. Despite being bred at Canine Companions as a service animal (the organization has its own breed type, a mix between a Labrador and a Golden Retriever), Neutron proved too scared of the vet's office to hack it as a working dog. He's perfectly happy helping around the lab, but more than a year of time, money, and effort went into his training before he flamed out. Hare hopes studies like these could improve the selection process and make service dog training more efficient and less costly.

"[What's] important for training seems to emerge in this very narrow window," Hare says. "And as long as they have socialization and a rich, warm family life, that maturation process will happen."

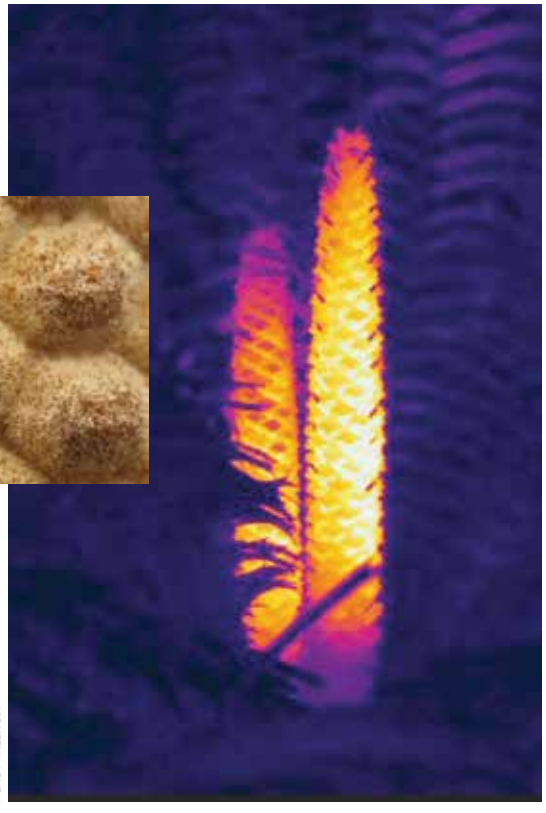
Research in Brief

Cutting-edge discoveries, distilled

by Jonathan Shaw

The Original Pollination Signal

Plants usually attract pollinators using bright colors and scents, but some of the plants that have been around the longest use heat instead. A collaboration between professor of molecular and cellular biology Nicholas Bellono and Hessel professor of biology Naomi Pierce has shown that cycads, a division of cone-bearing plants that are ancient in evolutionary terms, warm their reproductive structures in daily cycles, releasing invisible infrared radiation that attracts beetle pollinators. Experiments showed that beetles are drawn to this heat even when color, scent, and touch are removed, proving that infrared radiation itself acts as a signal. The team also discovered that the cycad-feeding beetles have specialized sensory cells in their antennae that detect infrared heat, tuned precisely to the temperatures produced by their host plants. This heat-based signaling predates colorful flowers and likely played a key role in the earliest plant-pollinator relationships, long before bees and butterflies became dominant.



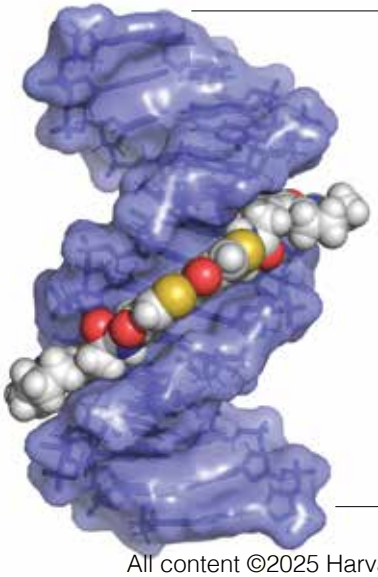
A beetle (above) feeding on the reproductive cone of a cycad, and serendipitously pollinating the plant. The beetles are attuned to and attracted by the infrared heat signature of the cones, as illustrated on the right.

WENDY VALENCIA

Selling the Building, Risking the Hospital

In the early 2000s, some U.S. hospitals began to sell their buildings and land to real estate investment trusts (REITs), then leased them back, with the promise that the capital infusion would be reinvested into better patient care. Researchers at the Harvard Chan School of Public Health compared 87 hospitals acquired by REITs between 2005 and 2019 with similar hospitals that were not. They found that REIT-acquired hospitals were almost six times as likely to close or declare bankruptcy than hospitals that retained ownership of their real estate. The study also found no meaningful differences in patient care quality, staffing levels, or short-term health outcomes such as mortality or readmissions, despite the income from the sales. Instead, the financial strain of rent obligations may weaken hospitals' long-term stability, raising concerns for patients and communities and highlighting the need for stronger regulatory oversight of such sales.

REIT-acquired hospitals were almost six times as likely to close or declare bankruptcy.



BALSKUS AND D'SOUZA LAB, 2026

How a Gut Toxin Warps DNA

Researchers led by Cabot professor of chemistry Emily Balskus have discovered why patients exposed to gut bacteria that produce a toxin called colibactin can develop cancer-linked mutations. Colibactin is generated by several species of bacteria (including some strains of E. coli) when triggered by environmental factors including diet. It binds to DNA regions rich in the bases adenine and thymine, where it forms rare but dangerous "cross-links" that tie the two strands of DNA together and block them from repairing themselves. It's a powerful example of how the gut microbiome can influence health.

A toxin that binds to human DNA, tucked into a narrow groove of the famous double helix, forms cross-links that block DNA repair and can lead to colorectal cancer.

Colibactin is a powerful example of how the gut microbiome can influence health.

Bees and Flowers Are Falling Out of Sync

As climate change intensifies, scientists are revisiting an old way of thinking about extinction.

by Andrés Muedano

In "Struggle for Existence," the third chapter of *On the Origin of Species*, Charles Darwin describes not only constant competition and scarcity but also cooperative interdependencies between plants and animals. One major example: bumblebees and the European violets they pollinate. If the bees were to go extinct, Darwin speculated, so would the flowers.

A century and a half later, Darwin's example still animates scientific research. In a study published last September, professor of organismic and evolutionary biology Charles C. Davis and his co-authors modeled the interactions between bees and violets in the United States. They found that one way climate change threatens plant species is by disrupting their relationship with pollinators.

Davis, who studies biodiversity and serves as the curator of vascular plants at the Harvard University Herbaria, explains that while bees play a significant role in the life cycle of violets, the plants do not strictly depend on them to survive. "These are strange species," Davis says: they can reproduce sexually through pollination, or they can reproduce asexually through a self-fertilization process in which the flower never actually opens.

Still, it would be a problem if flowering plants like violets reproduced only asexually, says Shijia Peng, a former postdoctoral fellow in Davis's lab who conducted the bulk of the research for the study, which was published in the *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*. "It would decrease genetic diversity" and eventually "maybe lead to extinction," says Peng, now at the University of Oxford.

As the climate changes, the study found, so too does the relationship between bees and flowers. Using herbarium specimens and crowdsourced observations from amateur naturalists, Peng focused on 23 violet and seven bee species. She built a dataset of more than 15,000 violet observations collected from 1895 to 2018 and more than 6,700 crowdsourced bee observations collected between 1900 and 2022. This yielded

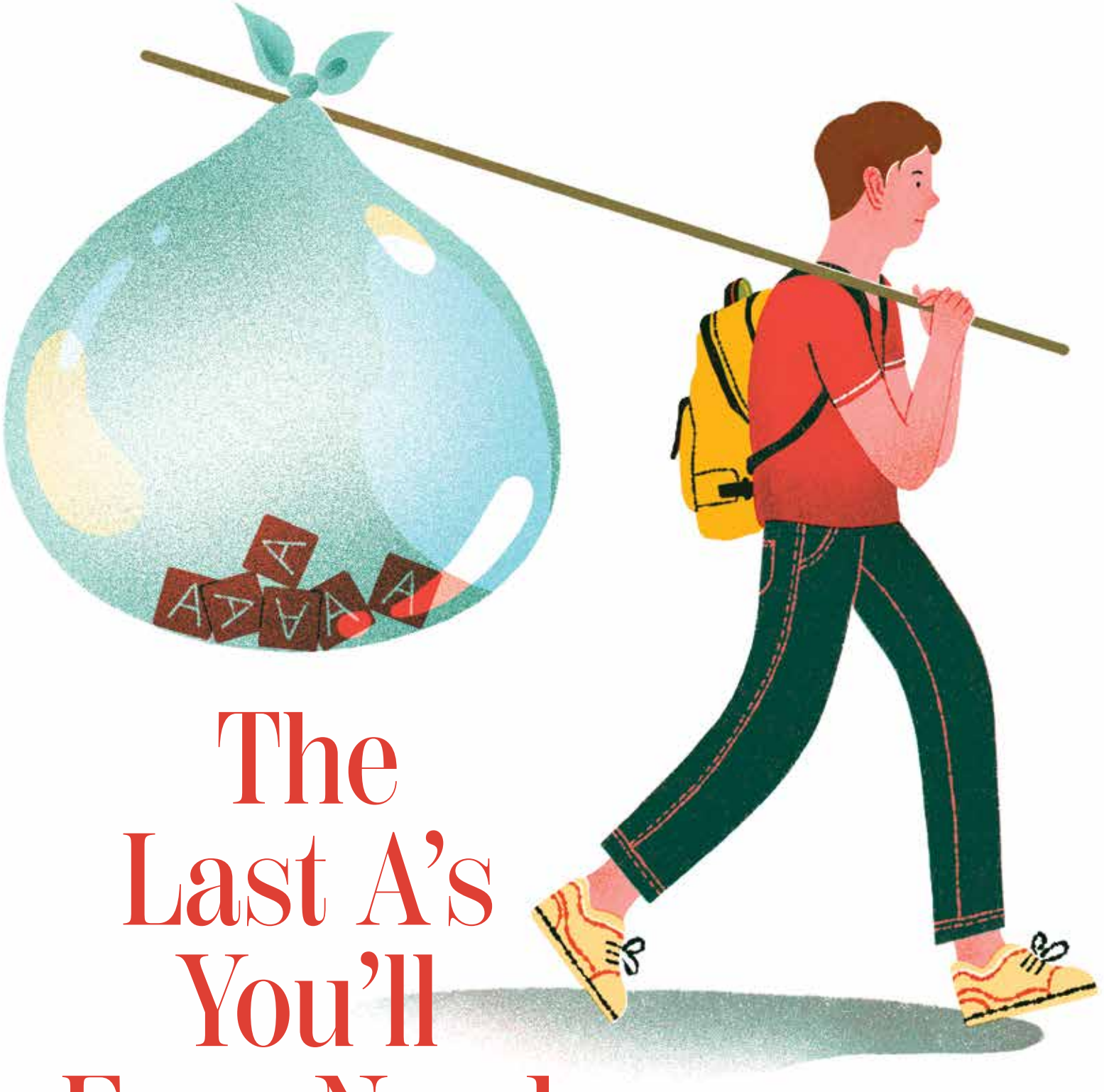
FARIJAZZ/ISTOCK

thousands of datapoints, each taken at a specific location across the eastern United States.

By mapping the flowering, fruiting, and climate information and cross-referencing it with bee observations, the researchers could see when bees and violet flowers were in the same place at the same time—and found an increasing separation between the two partners. During the last 120 years, rising temperatures have shifted when violets bloom, while the timing for bees remains the same, Davis says: "They're falling out of sync with each other."

EVGENIY ANDREEV/ISTOCK

This research suggests that the usual practice of quantifying a given species' extinction risk—which doesn't consider its interactions with other organisms—might not tell the full story. Peng argues that global conservation frameworks, based on decades of studies that don't take cooperative mutualisms into account, may be underestimating some species' true level of vulnerability. The new study's "stunning insight," says Davis, "was that, if you look only at the plant side of the equation, you don't see particular threats to the species. It's only once you factor in this interlocking mutualism that the picture of the threats starts to really crystallize."



The Last A's You'll Ever Need

When I was teaching Harvard undergraduates a decade or so ago, a student shared a prophecy her mother delivered while dropping her off at campus for the first time. Pointing to one of the many placards emblazoned with "Harvard" near the Yard, the mother looked at her daughter and said: "Those are the last two A's you're ever going to need."

That mother clearly understood something important, not just about the golden ticket a Harvard degree is thought to represent, but also about her daughter and about Harvard culture. She likely knew she had an overachiever on her hands and that a tireless pursuit of top marks could easily spoil her daughter's time in Cambridge. What she did not anticipate was how her daughter's experience of college would change when the A's started raining down.

On February 6, a Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) subcommitee released recommendations for major changes in the College's grading policy, aimed at curbing the grade inflation that has come to define Harvard's academic enterprise. The suggestions will likely dominate conversations on campus this spring, following months of concern over Harvard's grading excesses. A's were commonplace by 2014, when I started teaching in Harvard's mandatory first-year expository writing program, informally known as "Expos." They were even more abundant when I left the program for a magazine job in 2021. Last October, the FAS released a report that quantified the change: solid A's made up 24 percent of final grades in the College in 2005, 40.3 percent in 2015, and 60.2 percent by the spring of 2025. (Eliminating non-letter grades like pass-fail from the calculation makes the problem even more stark: nearly two-thirds of all letter grades are currently A's.)

After the October report, a bevy of think pieces on grade inflation at Harvard emerged. Most invoke an archetypal Harvard student: blithely skating her way across campus toward permanently elite status, a tear forming at the corner of her eye at the mere mention of an A-minus. In this sketch, there's a kernel of truth. Most of us who've taught here in the past 10 years have hosted at least a few students in our offices crying over their grades. After I gave one student a B as her final grade, she sent me a blunt email detailing all the reasons she deserved an A instead—a fit of pique that came across as entitled.

But I also suspect this portrait of the arrogant, A-bedecked Harvard student grows more out of preconceived notions of the College than from any understanding of how students experience grade inflation. Take my angry emailer, for example. What was she thinking her missive would accomplish? Did she imagine I would throw up my hands and say, "By God, you *do* deserve an A!" Beneath her Hail Mary note ran a strong undercurrent of desperation.

This brings us to how grade inflation generates a counterintuitive effect: instead of producing self-satisfied, complacent students, it supercharges their anxious striving. As Amanda Claybaugh, the dean of undergraduate education who authored the October grade inflation report, told me, "One might expect that a world where everyone got A's would be a very relaxed world, but actually, it's the most stressed-out world of all."

Claybaugh, a professor of English, is driving the effort to reconsider academic evaluation at Harvard. Runaway grade inflation, she notes, may undermine the educational mission, since it's unclear, when grades are this high, if adequate correction of student work is taking place, or if course material is genuinely challenging. Part of the broader FAS goal of "re-centering academics," the grade inflation initiative is meant to preserve the value of a Harvard degree, which could be diluted as A's proliferate and an impression of lax academic standards spreads beyond campus.

How grade inflation created "the most stressed-out world of all."

by LINDSAY MITCHELL

When I spoke to Claybaugh last fall, she confirmed that my frustrated Expos students were part of a larger phenomenon in the College. Faculty teaching large introductory courses routinely field about 200 grade change requests for every exam, "which is an enormous amount of pressure and labor. And they grade very carefully in the first place," she explained. "They also say that they feel students can't take in the feedback they're getting because they're so fixed on arguing for why they need an A."

The psychology driving this grade-frenzied atmosphere stems from the way A's flooding the marketplace changes their value as a currency, rendering them both essential and trash at the same time. When you feel that *everybody*'s got an A, then you must get one, too—every time—or you have failed to keep up with the mainstream. Yet all the A's in the world will still do zilch to get you ahead.

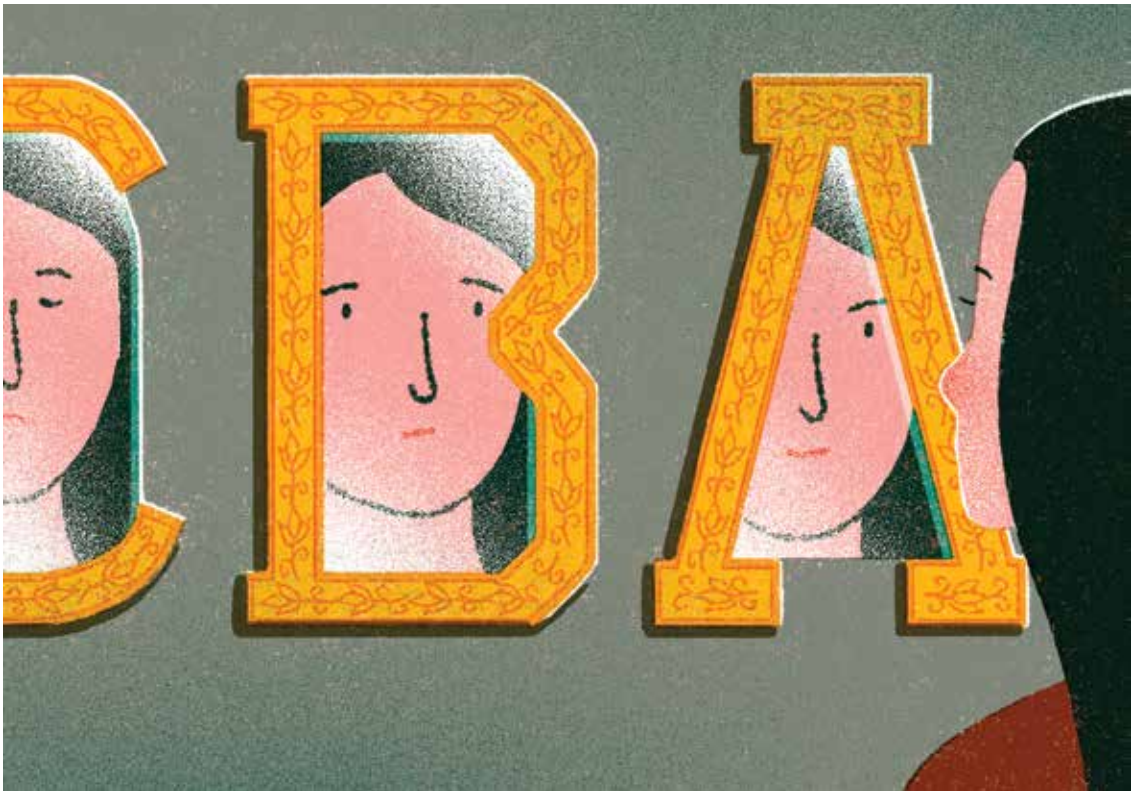
Several current undergraduates I spoke to described the stress this situation has produced among a student body determined to excel. "Grade inflation means there's no way to tell a great student apart from a good

Illustrations by Jessie Lin

student," math concentrator Gil'i Zaid '26 told me. "People who want to differentiate themselves can't do it by taking a reasonable number of classes and doing well in them. You can only do it if you take six classes and get overwhelmed by work. Or through taking the regular four, then adding in four extracurriculars and pouring yourself into them."

In turn, the swelling fear of not keeping up with the perfectly graded masses discourages students from taking academic risks. On campus, stories abound of introductory classes populated by enrollees who don't need them—many have already taken a version of the same class in high school—but who are willing to repeat the material to have their A outcome in the bag. In those classes, if there's a curve set by the highest or median score, students taking the class to actually learn the material are often left to claim the lower grades.

And instead of picking courses that might prove challenging or just exploratory, many students aggressively seek out "gems," the new Harvard slang for "guts": easy classes without rigorous grading schemes. Meanwhile, the number of students taking classes pass-fail drifts upward, as students cower before intimidating subjects and elect the route that obviates grading altogether.



In my Expos classes, the students' risk aversion showed itself first during individual conferences, when I met with every person to discuss their drafts. One of the most common problems with first-year essays is that they often argue a fairly superficial thesis. One goal of the conferences, then, was to demonstrate to students how to engage more deeply with the course material so they could go home and craft an argument that was more complex and based on rigorous observation.

I was stymied when students fixated on leaving our talk with a fully articulated thesis statement that had been green-lighted by me. I would repeatedly steer them back to their assigned reading, suggesting strategies for finding patterns of evidence, only to have the students wildly pepper me with new thesis statements they came up with off the tops of their heads. Their urge to quickly receive a guarantee of an A was so strong it muffled my actual advice.

After the conference, terrified students would often email me their revised drafts repeatedly to get me to say they were "okay" before I graded them. On occasion, someone emailed me every couple of hours when I didn't respond immediately. With one abject soul, I was able to track her miserable night by looking at the string of messages she dispatched through the wee hours, while I was sleeping. She had sent me her thesis statement over and over—with each successive iteration showing an almost imperceptible tweak—pleading with me to tell her if it sounded like an A thesis.

One enterprising freshman, seeking assurance that his A was nigh, looked me up online and realized I was a resident tutor living in one of the Quad houses—a good distance from the freshman housing in the Yard. On the night before the final version of his paper was due, he knocked on my bedroom door well after midnight, covered in sweat. He had hoofed it all the way from the Square, draft in hand, hoping to convince me to check it for remaining deficiencies before he turned it in for real nine hours later.

These are, as you can imagine, miserable situations for everyone involved. In fact, the part of grade inflation that possibly strikes closest to the heart of the educational mission is the way it has compromised the relationship between faculty and students.

When students become this obsessed with grades, the student-teacher interaction is reframed in crudely transactional terms. And in my experience, students often react to their grades in a way that suggests that they conceive of the grades' significance very differently than their instructors do.

To me, the grades I awarded had an extremely localized meaning that reflected student performance on specific assignments. In my way of thinking, it would have been reasonable if students' grades improved during the semester as they showed greater mastery of the course material.

But many students obviously believed their grades came closer

to denoting their whole worth. I, as the instructor, acted merely as a giver of A's, and my willingness (or lack thereof) to grant them in turn defined the value of the student, who would go out into the world and make money or attain status in proportion to her graded value. With this mindset, my students mostly received solid A's with an attitude of relief rather than joy. Any grade below that, on the other hand, landed as deflating or even ruinous, depending on how GPA-dependent that student's future plans were.

When students fear that any non-A grade might eliminate them from consideration in the next competition, they increasingly see faculty as a threat. Willa Fogelson '26, a math concentrator, told me this can be a particular problem in departments where most students' post-graduation plans require high GPAs. "Math majors are...sometimes the most afraid that they won't get [an A]," she said. "That's the crux of the issue from where I'm sitting. I would like to think there was a time when there was this inherent trust between students and professors, and I don't think that exists anymore."

When students become this obsessed with grades, the student-teacher interaction is framed in transactional terms.

According to Gurney professor of English literature and professor of comparative literature emeritus James Engell, a longtime thinker on the purpose of higher education, the disconnect emerges when students' rising fixation on grades combines with increased time pressures on students and faculty, leading to fewer opportunities for face-to-face conferences where the discussion roams beyond grading. "You need to treat the student as a whole human being, not just a person trying to do well in a particular class," he explained. "You get to sit down and get to know the student and understand where they're coming from, what their background is, what their hopes are...When we completely separate evaluation and this broader advising, we're going down a bad path."

The Agatha Christie-worthy mystery that now haunts the campus is what level of work the students are actually doing amidst the torrent of A's. This gets at the question of how much grade compression (the narrowing of the grade range) is reflecting grade inflation (the extent to which those grades are granted for lesser work than they used to be). Depending on whom you're talking to, today's students might either be megawatt stars—the best of all time, deserving of their higher grades—or faded shadows of previous generations.

Both viewpoints rest on at least a few shaky assumptions, including vague guesses about what Harvard students "used to be like." At one Expos faculty lunch I attended, a chorus bemoaning the current state of literacy in the College dominated the clacking of forks against plates, until one instructor revealed she'd excavated a quote from one of the original Expos instructors in the 1880s (Expos was founded in 1872). It almost exactly matched the substance and tone of the complaining we had just been doing: the quality of student writing was shoddy, by Jove.

In truth, it's hard to say how current Harvard students stack up compared to generations past. While modern students fought their way to the top of a much larger heap than in the

Grading at Harvard: A Primer

On February 6, the Subcommittee on Grading of the Undergraduate Educational Policy Committee recommended two changes to the College's grading policy. One is to impose a 20 percent cap on A grades in every class—with four additional A's permitted per class to give more flexibility in small seminars. (There would be no caps on A-minuses, B's, or other grades.) The second is to calculate honors granted inside Harvard using average percentile rank rather than grade-point average. Enacting these changes will require a full vote of the faculty, likely this spring. Here's how grades are currently determined at the College:

While administrators monitor grade distributions, they do not currently impose faculty-wide requirements governing how many A's professors may award. The only universal grading standard appears in the Harvard College Student Handbook, which defines an A or an A-minus as work of "excellent quality," demonstrating full mastery of the subject, with an A reserved for "extraordinary distinction."

Grading practices vary widely, with instructors determining how grades are calculated and how much weight to assign to exams, written work, and participation. In some large introductory courses or multi-section classes, instructors apply mild curves to ensure consistency across sections. But most courses rely on absolute performance standards. Faculty members have final authority over grades, though students may request reviews. Any grade changes must be approved by the registrar.

With an instructor's permission, undergraduates may elect to take any letter-graded course pass-fail, though 84 letter-graded credits (out of 128 total credits) are required for graduation. Certain courses, including tutorials and First-Year Seminars, are graded as "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory" rather than with letter grades and do not count toward the graduation requirement.—Olivia Farrar

days when the mob simply migrated from Exeter every year, they're also a generation whose attentional resources have suffered from exposure to social media and other addictive technologies. Many experienced a style of "concerted cultivation" parenting—loaded up with activities to prepare them for the college admissions process—that taught them to instrumentalize every moment but wasn't so hot for encouraging them to lounge around a full day with a novel.

So it makes more sense to think about what our students do well versus what they struggle with, and whether our grades reflect those realities. In my own classes, I frequently encountered reading comprehension issues serious enough to hamper the putative goal of a writing class—and even seemed to witness students' reading skills degrading in real time. In my early Expos days, I liked to bring an old *Lampoon* parody of a Harvard student essay into class to read aloud together—with each person taking the next sentence round robin at the seminar table—as a lighthearted way to kick off a discussion of my students' own papers. After several years, though, I noticed more and more students seemed unfamiliar with the vocabulary in the parody, with many now stumbling over words like "penchant," "motif," and "preponderance." I finally stopped bringing the *Lampoon* piece to class, since by then the laughs had turned scarce and the faces had turned red with embarrassment.

The challenge will be to help students feel they're working hard within a system that has meaning.

These students were not puffed up with unjustified praise, like the entitled Harvardian of the grade inflation think pieces. They showed awareness that they were not performing as well as they should. In fact, I suspect many Harvard students recognize that they've occasionally received high grades for mediocre work in the College. Claybaugh told me she recently encountered a senior looking back on his time at Harvard who told her that he'd earned a lot of A's he didn't deserve. But every grade he got that wasn't an A, he knew he did deserve.

Teaching Expos in the College, I came to recognize this mindset. Many students feel the inflated grades they've received compose a smooth edifice that surrounds them and could crumble at any moment to reveal the pockmarked reality of their performance. For some, this can become a source of shame, because their inflated A's suggest their faults are unspeakable and must be hidden, whereas, for all they know, other students' A's are entirely deserved. Grade inflation then becomes a dimension of imposter syndrome that reflects other aspects of this generation's coming-of-age experience. It is similar to looking repeatedly at a friend's social media posts portraying her life as perfect, while knowing that your own posts were curated to obscure a multitude of flaws.

Grade inflation can be just as poisonous for students who believe absolutely in the legitimacy of their grades. I talked to one crying student who confessed that her plan at Harvard had always been to be one of the smartest in her cohort, before she earned a few subpar marks one semester. Now she believed she had to figure out a new identity, less founded on her intelligence. Her self-image was so premised on getting only A's—a psychology imprinted by her grade-inflated environment—that a couple of minor breaches in her parade of perfect grades extending back through childhood was enough to limit her sense of her own intellectual potential.

Amid the hand-wringing over Harvard's grade inflation report, some have suggested making every course pass-fail or eliminating grading completely. But letter grading won't easily be replaced with other means of communicating how well students are doing. I can tell a student she's improved, sure, but that concept sounds squishy and abstract, whereas saying her grade has risen from a B to a B-plus sounds like quantifiable progress. A more stringent grading system helps students believe that education is real because it creates friction. Without pushback, who is to say we are doing anything at all?

Engell told me this feeling of discomfort is central to his idea of what education is. "Education should be uncomfortable for students and faculty alike, meaning you're challenged, you're frustrated, you're presented with ideas or points of view that you don't accept when you initially hear them," he said. "Education is not a comfortable business, nor should it be."

The next challenge for educators will be figuring out how to help students feel they're working hard within a system that has meaning. The only time grade inflation became an explicit topic of conversation in one of my Expos classes, my students told me that the problem was not that many professors were giving high grades while a few were giving low ones—it was that the students had no idea when this was going to be the case. They described times when they had poured effort into a course, only to realize that students turning in a slapdash product had received the same grade. And they described other times, in other classes, when they were lulled into a sense of security and let their attention wander to an extracurricular or a personal issue, and then were given a much harsher grade than they were used to receiving for that level of effort. On that day, my students—beneficiaries and victims of grade inflation both—did not seem like anyone's idea of an entitled Harvard student. They just seemed unmoored.

The February 6 recommendations propose two major changes to the College's grading policy. One is to impose a 20 percent cap on the A grades in every class—with four additional A's permitted per class to give more flexibility in small seminars that often attract advanced and highly motivated students. (There

would be no caps on A-minuses, B's, or lower grades.) The second is to calculate honors granted inside Harvard (such as Phi Beta Kappa) using students' average percentile rank rather than grade-point average. Enacting these changes would require a full vote of Harvard's faculty, likely to take place this spring.

Ultimately, curbing grade inflation will require cooperation from faculty and students—both of whom have reasons to resist reform. Claybaugh told me that a 2011 paper by Diker-Tishman professor of sociology emeritus Christopher Winship on the impossibility of eliminating grade inflation still haunts her. Winship coined the concept of the "low-low contract," where faculty and students learn to ask very little of each other. As one of Claybaugh's faculty colleagues put it to her, referring to the one-to-five range on student evaluations of teachers, "We give them all A's, and they give us all fives."

The October report also offered a glimpse of the hard road ahead, mentioning failed attempts to mitigate grade inflation at Princeton, Wellesley, Cornell, Dartmouth, and Yale. Even if Harvard's effort succeeds, many students understandably fear it will only put Harvard students at a disadvantage when pitted against students from schools where grades remain inflated.

Most of the students I talked to about the grade inflation report, even while admitting grades are too high, took a defensive stance. They were already being worked to the point of exhaustion—and now Harvard was talking about making things harder yet? These conversations confirmed how entrenched grade inflation is in the modern educational landscape. To reinstate strict academic standards, Harvard will need to help students see how a world with fewer A's could be a better one for all involved.

In my final days teaching at the College, I sometimes thought of a famous Harvardian who was rumored to have gotten an (uninflated!) B in Expos: T.S. Eliot, A.B. 1910, A.M. '11, Litt.D. '47. I like to imagine it was his time in Expos that inspired him to write the lines from "The Love Song of J. Alfred Prufrock," penned while he was still a student: "There will be time, there will be time...Time for you and time for me,/And time yet for a hundred indecisions,/And for a hundred visions and revisions."

I can't say why Eliot was mulling over the arc of time when he was 22. But I wished my College students could remember that they had so much yet to experience beyond Harvard. I was older, and tended to have a different idea of what disaster looked like, and what it was possible to recover from.

Maybe even more than showing them how to write a bang-up essay, that's the perspective I would have wished to share with my Harvard first-years as they embarked on four years here: You may find you don't have time for a hundred visions and revisions. But it's probably still true that you can settle for a B, and it won't be the thing that sinks you.

Because if there's a lesson to be learned from Eliot, who went on from Harvard to become one of the great American poets—and who in fact got D's in his other classes that first year—it's that your college grades are hardly the end of the story. ▽

Make the Grade

What should Harvard College do—if anything—about grade inflation?

Go to **harvardmagazine.com/grade-inflation** to cast your vote.

And turn to page 64 for the results of last issue's "Law in a Lifeboat" survey.

Lindsay Mitchell is a former Harvard resident tutor, Expos instructor, and senior editor of Harvard Magazine. *She lives in Wichita, Kansas.*

Harvard's Egalitarian Education

For 100 years, Harvard Extension School has offered an unconventional path to college. Now, it's growing faster than ever.

by Lydialyle Gibson

Photograph by Mike Spencer/courtesy of Harvard Extension School

On a sunny Thursday last September, more than 400 people crowded into the pews in Harvard's Memorial Church, wearing identical crimson lanyards with the words "Continuing Education" printed on the strap. The mood was giddy, with a touch of newcomer jitters. Many had traveled across the country—or even the world—to attend this convocation ceremony for students newly admitted to a degree program at one of the largest and least talked-about parts of the University: the Harvard Extension School.

All this angst stems from a paradox at the heart of the relationship between the school and the rest of the University.

Nancy Coleman, the dean of the Division of Continuing Education (DCE), which houses the Extension School, looked out at the sea of students. Many were in their 30s, 40s, or older, and would spend the next few years taking remote classes at night and on weekends, while juggling full-time jobs and family responsibilities. Coleman told them that they were now Harvard students. "Wherever you are coming from, whatever your story, know this," she said, "you are welcome here." She paused, then emphasized again, "You *belong* here."

DCE deans have been delivering a version of this message at every convocation since 2018, when Harvard Extension School (HES) began holding the annual ceremony. They keep repeating it in part because people need to hear it. Type "Harvard Extension School" into Google, and a list of related search suggestions pops up, including "Can anyone go to Harvard Extension School?" and "Is Harvard Extension School actually Harvard?" Questions about the legitimacy of an Extension School diploma erupted in 2023 over an online bio belonging to anti-DEI provocateur Christopher Rufo, A.L.M. '22, which seemed to blur the distinction between his HES degree and a traditional Harvard master's in government. And in his book "*The Gates Unbarred*": *A History of University Extension at Harvard, 1910-2009*—its title taken from a poem by the late Boylston professor Seamus Heaney—the school's former longtime dean Michael Shinagel writes that HES is often "overlooked or totally ignored" in University histories that are otherwise exhaustive.

Established in 1910, HES is one of the country's leading continuing education schools, a field that, until a couple of decades ago, was very small. "It lived very much on the margins of higher education," says Suzanne Spreadbury, the HES dean of academic programs. "Harvard was an outlier." Today, most American colleges and universities have some kind of continuing education school, although Harvard's remains one of the most academically diverse and demanding, enrolling more than 13,000 students, about 4,000 of whom are candidates for bachelor's or master's degrees. (Anyone can sign up to take individual courses, but there is an admissions process for entering a degree program.) Financially, HES not only pays for itself through tuition revenue, but generates a surplus. Since 1975, it has been part of the DCE, which is in turn housed within the Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

For years, HES student groups have lobbied without success to change their degree names, which they view as outdated and stigmatizing. The diplomas for every other school at Harvard list an academic concentration, but HES graduates, no matter their field of study—creative writing, biotechnology, cybersecurity—receive a bachelor's or master's of liberal arts in "extension studies."

All this angst stems from a paradox at the heart of the relationship between the school and the rest of the University. Much of Harvard's prestige has historically been tied to its exclusivity. Last year, nearly 48,000 people applied to Harvard College; only 4.2 percent got in.

But HES—with its open enrollment policy, relatively low tuition, and a catalog of 900-plus courses, nearly all of them online—is one of the most egalitarian parts of Harvard. It's "the ultimate democratic experiment," Shinagel says, with a different kind of mindset. At the College, the major mark of achievement is gaining admission, but for degree-seekers at HES, it's getting to graduation. The school's whole purpose is to make academic learning accessible to as many people as possible, and to give them flexibility to design their own academic paths, whether they're taking one-off courses for personal enrichment, earning a professional certificate, or applying for formal admission to a degree program. At a time when U.S. President Donald Trump's administration is pressuring elite institutions like Harvard to invest in workforce development and skills-based vocational programs, the University can point to HES as a place where that kind of investment is already deep and longstanding.

Indeed, the bigger question HES raises isn't whether it's "really" a part of Harvard or whether its students "belong" here—indisputably, that answer is yes—but instead something deeper: what is education for?

Latanya Sweeney, A.L.B. '95

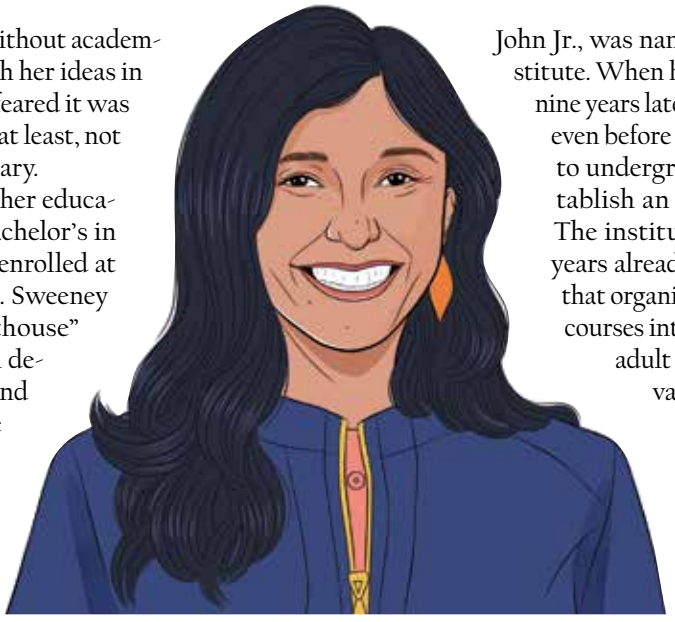
"The Extension School was pivotal," says the current Harvard professor. "It gave me the ability to regain my academic sense of self."

Latanya Sweeney remembers shedding tears when she saw the HES banner at a college fair in downtown Boston in 1990. Now the Paul professor of the practice of government and technology, Sweeney is a giant in computer science, a scholar whose work helped launch the fields of data privacy and algorithmic fairness. She's also deeply embedded in the College, having spent 10 years as a Currier House faculty dean. But in 1990, she was a 30-year-old without a college degree, in a state of what she calls "academic despair." A decade earlier, she had left MIT to start her own computer company. Business

Illustrations by Stephanie Singleton

was thriving, but she felt stuck: without academic credentials, she couldn't publish her ideas in peer-reviewed journals. And she feared it was too late to get those credentials—at least, not without giving up her job and salary.

At HES she was able to regain her educational footing. After earning a bachelor's in computer science in 1995, she re-enrolled at MIT, this time as a Ph.D. student. Sweeney often describes HES as a "lighthouse" for people like her who had been derailed from the traditional path and "thought our academic lives were over." She recalls one HES classmate who discovered late in life that she wanted to be a doctor, and another who finally got her college degree at the same time as her son. Another had returned to school quietly to earn the undergraduate diploma that his coworkers assumed he already had.



Priya Tahiliani, A.L.M. '13

The current school superintendent studied literature while working as an English teacher and incorporated her HES classes into her lessons, sharing her marked-up papers with her students.

"What the Extension School allowed," Sweeney says, "was this kind of diligent work—one foot in front of the other, even if the most you could do between life and work and raising children was one course a semester, year after year."

From the beginning, HES was intended to make college-level classes available to people who, for whatever reason, couldn't go to college—including, explicitly, women and members of the working class. The concept grew out of the Lowell Institute, an organization founded by John Lowell Jr., a Boston textile manufacturing scion who attended Harvard for two years before dropping out in poor health. He died young in 1836 and left a will stipulating that half his wealth be used to provide public lecture courses in Boston. The most popular ones were to be free, while more "abstruse" six-month courses, Lowell decreed, should cost no more than "two bushels of wheat."

The Lowell Institute took off immediately—people lined the streets for tickets, and some lecture series had as many as 10,000 applicants. Among the instructors in those early decades were Harvard luminaries including William James, M.D. 1869, LL.D. 1903 (psychology), Asa Gray, LL.D. 1875 (botany), and Oliver Wendell Holmes Jr., A.B. 1861, LL.B. '66, LL.D. '95 (government).

In 1900, A. Lawrence Lowell, A.B. 1877, LL.B. '80, a cousin of John Jr., was named the head of the Lowell Institute. When he became president of Harvard nine years later, his first major undertaking—even before his famously ambitious reforms to undergraduate education—was to establish an extension school on campus. The institute was its model. For several years already, Lowell had been revamping that organization, transforming its lecture courses into a more systematic program of adult education and persuading Harvard faculty colleagues to teach their regular classes again in the evenings at the institute. One of the institute's philosophy students wrote in 1910 of his classmates: "Young and old, black and white, artisans and teachers, men and women—who had questioned the meaning of life, and the universe, were eager to compare their thoughts with the questioners of all time. It was an audience to challenge any professor's attention and respect."

That same year, Harvard leaders authorized the formation of a Department of University Extension. It awarded its first degrees in 1913, to John Coulson and Ellen Marie Greany.

Many elements from those early years carry through to today, including an emphasis on accessibility. Classes now cost more than two bushels of wheat, but the overall tuition price for a complete bachelor's degree ranges from $34,560 to $69,120, according to the school's website (the cost varies depending on factors like financial aid and the number of transferable credits from other colleges). For a master's degree, the total tuition is about $41,000. The admissions process at HES is similarly geared toward inclusion, while also imposing a level of rigor. Rather than submit a traditional application, students who want to enter a degree program must first score a B or higher in three required HES courses—the lineup varies by concentration but always includes courses in research methods and writing. "Earn your way in" is the school's tagline for this process, which has been in place for decades.

Students come to HES for all kinds of reasons. Priya Tahiliani, A.L.M. '13, was a Boston schoolteacher about to start a family who needed a master's degree to keep her teaching license. She went on to earn a doctorate and is now the superintendent of the Brockton, Mass., public school district. Connie Askin, A.L.B. '93, the CEO of the Worcester, Mass., chapter of Big Brothers Big Sisters, grew up on a Minnesota farm, the youngest of six children,

From the beginning, HES was intended to make college-level classes available to people who, for whatever reason, couldn't go to college.

HES classes in the 1960s were taught to sailors on a Navy submarine.

Connie Askin, A.L.B. '93

The nonprofit CEO says HES "opened up the world," recalling the "thrilling intellectual energy" in the classroom after a long workday and a bus ride into Cambridge.

hungry for a college education. She moved to Boston and got a job as a secretary, then enrolled in classes at HES.

Anna Soltys Morse, A.L.B. '18, was a child of academics for whom school never quite fit. After a failed start at college, she spent several years working as a wilderness guide and dogsledder. Now she works all over the world as an acrobat.

"This was the only way I could get a degree," says Morse, who concentrated in humanities and graduated *cum laude*. Some semesters she took four courses, other semesters only one or two. "And then there were times when, you know, I didn't have electricity," she says, because she was out in the woods leading a trip, "and so it was not possible to take classes. The flexibility was very important."

Ariel Gamiño, A.L.M. '03, the HES alumni association president, took his own winding path through higher education. He arrived in the United States from Mexico at 17, and after learning English, studied computer science in community college before graduating from the University of Texas at Austin. He stumbled upon HES years later while living in Boston, when he found out that his employer would reimburse his course tuition.

At first, he just explored new interests—photography, psychology—but then he realized he could get a degree. Gamiño spent the next five years studying for a master's in software engineering, eventually using his education to land a job in artificial intelligence. "People who attend the Extension School want to keep learning," he says.

The average age of HES students is mid-30s, and most are mid-career, so transcripts and test scores don't mean as much. Instead, with the earn-your-way-in model, "we get to see what type of academic work they can do *now*," Coleman, the DCE dean, says. "Can they handle the rigor of the program? And by the time they finish the three courses, they know what they're getting into. And we know who they are."

The courses themselves also retain much of the school's founding DNA. There are now dozens of subject areas for students to choose from—including modern-day fields such as finance, digital media, and industrial psychology—but liberal arts remain at the heart of the curriculum. To earn a bachelor's degree, for instance, students must take courses in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities, as well as in a foreign language and moral reasoning. Many HES classes are taught by Harvard faculty members (the exact number fluctuates, but this year, it's roughly one-third of the courses). Other classes are led by faculty members from other universities or industry experts outside academia. Anthony Amore, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum's head of security and the lead investigator in the infamous unsolved 1990 heist, teaches a class on art crime, a part of the HES museum studies program; Hugh Fink, a former *Saturday Night Live* writer, teaches television comedy sketch writing.

In describing why they teach there, HES instructors often echo the Lowell Institute ethos. Kevin Madigan, the Winn research professor of ecclesiastical history at Harvard Divinity School, talks about HES's ability to distribute Harvard's "unparalleled blessings" to students around the world. Before online courses were the norm, he taught a Saturday morning seminar on campus for many years. "I was always impressed that students would drive up from New York on Friday night," he says. "That's dedication."

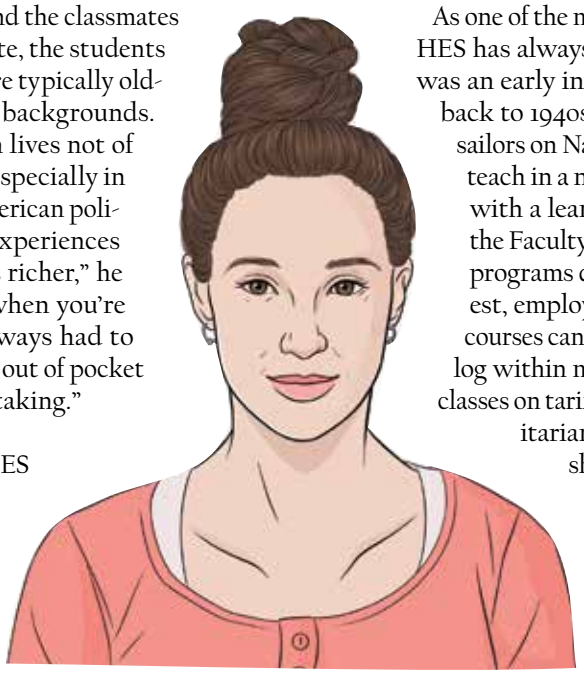
Ariel Gamiño, A.L.M. '03

"When you're taking classes," says the software engineer, "you feel the weight of history—Harvard's history, but also the Extension School's."

Some travel from farther away. George Wendt (not the actor from *Cheers*), A.L.M. '11, who now teaches at HES, got a master's in management while simultaneously attending law school at Tulane. During summer and winter breaks, he would fly from New Orleans to take classes on Harvard's campus. "You might have to sacrifice your sleep and your hairline, but it can be done," he says. "And it's absolutely worth it."

Wendt's frequent co-in-

structor at HES (and his onetime professor) is John Paul Rollert '01, a faculty member at the University of Chicago's Booth School of Business who has taught courses on leadership and politics at HES for 20 years. Compared to his University of Chicago business students and the classmates he knew as a Harvard undergraduate, the students he encounters in HES classrooms are typically older, with more diverse educational backgrounds. "They've lived real lives, and often lives not of immense privilege," Rollert says. Especially in class discussions about modern American politics, "they introduce vivid, lived experiences that often make the conversations richer," he says. "It's a different discussion when you're talking with people who have always had to work for a living, or who are paying out of pocket themselves for the classes they're taking."



Anna Soltys Morse, A.L.B. '18

"The hardest part" about HES, says the professional acrobat, "is definitely finishing the degree."

During the past two decades, HES has seen an explosion of growth. Between 2010 and 2025, the number of master's graduates more than doubled from 522 to around 1,200 per year. Bachelor's degrees held steadier overall, fluctuating between about 130 and 190 graduates per year. Class enrollments increased by more than 20 percent. And the school's academic offerings surged: between 2012 and 2020, the number of courses nearly doubled, and the number of certificates and microcertificates—credentials that can be earned in just two to five classes, and which can often be "stacked" toward credit for an HES bachelor's or master's degree—rose from a handful in the 2000s to now more than 40.

Partly, this reflects national trends in the higher education marketplace. Continuing education programs have proliferated in recent years and are in increasingly high demand, at a time when regular college enrollments have dropped 15 percent nationwide.

New courses can go from conception to the course catalog within months.

"People ask me, is this a growing field? And I tell them, 'Oh my God, it's the only area that's growing,'" says Robert Hansen, the CEO of UPCEA, a national association of online and professional education programs (of which Harvard is a founding member). "One reason it's growing is because the average college learner is now well into their 20s and often working, while the number of full-time residential college students is shrinking every year."

Coleman has seen this too. "At DCE, we're not calling them non-traditional learners anymore," she says, "because the non-traditional learners have become the traditional learners." In that environment, she says, it's crucial for institutions to be able to offer a curriculum that is flexible, accessible—and, often, online.

As one of the more market-focused parts of Harvard, HES has always been a locus of experimentation. It was an early innovator in distance learning, dating back to 1940s radio courses and classes taught to sailors on Navy submarines in the 1960s. "Since we teach in a non-traditional model," Coleman says, with a leaner approval process than the rest of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, "we can develop programs quicker" in response to student interest, employer demands, or current events. New courses can go from conception to the course catalog within months. This year, the school debuted classes on tariff economics, journalism under authoritarian regimes, and Hollywood's relationship to AI. It also launched several new certificate programs, including in AI and climate change management.

A similar dynamism runs through HES's approach to education. In 2008, the school revised its master's degree requirements to allow students in professional concentrations the option of submitting an applied research or creative project instead of a traditional thesis. A decade ago, HES opened that option to all master's students, including those in liberal arts. Huntington Lambert, the DCE dean at the time, believes the change may have helped boost HES's overall graduation rate, which rose from 73 to 90 percent between 2010 and 2020. "We tried a lot of things and we learned a lot," he says. "In particular we learned to try to do what the [student] tells you that they need in order to learn better."

Those successes fed into a sense of optimism at September's convocation ceremony, where Gamiño, the alumni association president, stood at the back in Memorial Church, beaming. He greeted the newly admitted degree-seekers on their way into the ceremony and then again on their way out, as everyone headed to a reception under a tent by the Science Center. "It's always great being there," Gamiño said later. "Being together, feeling the energy—we have so many stories."

And the anxiety about belonging? He smiled. "That's a phase all Extension School alumni go through," he said. "But honestly, I can't think of an alumni event where I didn't feel like I belonged. They welcome you. Like, 'You're a learner, you graduated from our school. Welcome.'" ▽

Lydialyle Gibson is a senior editor at Harvard Magazine.

Back with the Bonobos

Martin Surbeck's research sheds light on these social primates—and the powerful females who dominate their groups.

by ANNIE ROTH

In 2003, a young Swiss researcher named Martin Surbeck found himself lost and wandering through a jungle in the Democratic Republic of the Congo (DRC). Just weeks earlier, he'd responded to an ad for a field assistant position that promised the opportunity to get close to bonobos, an elusive species of primate. As he trudged along in the sweltering heat, slogging through chest-high rivers and dodging the spikes and spines of dense foliage, he started to question his choice. "I thought, 'What the heck am I doing here?'" he recalls. "'Nobody knows where I am. What went wrong in my life to have me end up here?'"

But he continued trekking, shadowing bonobos as they traversed the canopy above him on a route scientists had not seen them take before. Eventually, a pond packed with water lilies appeared. Surbeck watched as the bonobos waded into the water and plucked out the floating plants like partygoers pilfering hors d'oeuvres from a waiter's tray. "It was extremely beautiful," he says. From that moment, he was hooked.

Now an associate professor in Harvard's department of human evolutionary biology, Surbeck has spent more time studying bonobos in the wild than nearly anyone else. On his jungle treks, he has observed behavior that shatters myths about these supposedly peaceable primates—and sheds light on the strong females who dominate their groups, helping their sons connect with good mates and banding together to keep the males in line.

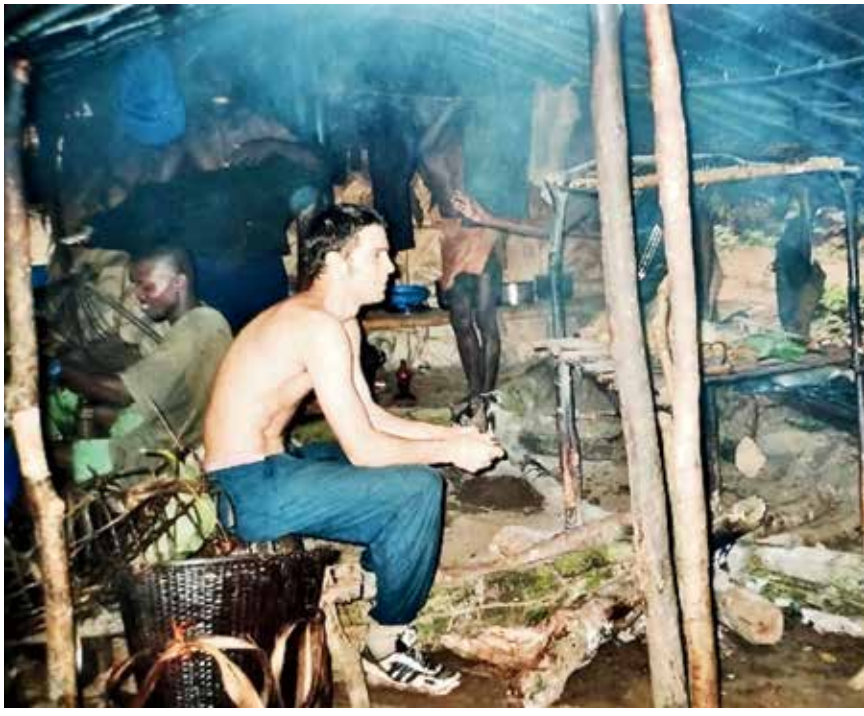
The young female Willow relaxes on a vine (left). Surbeck observes bonobos in the jungle during his 2019-2020 trip to the Democratic Republic of the Congo, the only place on Earth where bonobos roam free (above).

Scientists have long been interested in bonobos, a highly intelligent, socially sophisticated species that, along with chimpanzees, are our closest living relatives. Found only in the jungles of the DRC, they are the smallest living great apes, standing between three and four feet tall when upright and weighing upwards of 86 pounds. They form social groups ranging from eight to 25 adults and engage in complex forms of communication, including the use of symbols, gestures, and vocalizations.

Due to habitat loss and poaching, as well as their smaller population size, bonobos are an endangered species: only between 10,000 and 50,000 of them remain in the wild. Because most studies have focused on groups in captivity, Surbeck's long-term fieldwork in the DRC stands out for its ability to follow their communities over time. "Bonobos, like us, are a long-lived species, and until recently we had access only to short snippets of individuals' lives," he says. "The emergence of long-term data

PHOTOGRAPHS BY PHOENIX LESTER, KOKOLOPORI BONOBO RESEARCH PROJECT (LEFT); ROLAND HILGARTNER (TOP RIGHT)

Photographs by Martin Surbeck, unless otherwise noted



ROLAND HILGARTNER

Surbeck with Leonard Nkanga, who has been integral to the camp's founding and research efforts, in 2018 (left); a young Surbeck at the LuiKotale camp in 2003 (above), during his first formative trip into the DRC jungle to follow bonobos in the wild

is very exciting, as it allows us to see how individuals change over time…and to modify the picture we have."

For one, bonobos have sometimes been considered the hippies of the ape world because, unlike chimpanzees, they don't engage in warfare and don't tend to intentionally kill one another. But within a few years of fieldwork, Surbeck saw a variety of interactions that put that idea to the test: females teaming up to kill smaller primates, males constantly bickering among themselves, and bullying among members of a group.

In his latest key study, published last year in the journal *Communications Biology*, Surbeck and his colleagues used decades' worth of behavioral observations to show that females reign supreme in bonobo communities—often by forming what can be violent coalitions against males. If a male is causing problems, for example, females will join forces to attack or intimidate him. Males who back down lose social status, while their female adversaries gain it. Males who fight back risk injury and, in rare cases, death. "We have one visual where a male's face has been ripped off," Surbeck says. "So, this behavior can have very severe consequences."

Surbeck and his colleagues have also discovered that the higher a female's social rank, the better access they have to food—and to quality mates for their sons. In other words, for the male offspring of powerful mothers, it's not their good looks or high earning potential that attracts females. It's their mother's status within the community.

"Females are very central in the group and the males are in the shadows of their moms," Surbeck notes. "It's not necessarily because the moms do something special, but because the sons have a key player…to whom they can always go. It's like a social passport into the interesting domains of the bonobo society."

Bonobo mothers are not above trying to meddle in their sons' love lives. During one incident, Surbeck witnessed an outraged mother yank the foot of a low-ranking male trying to mate with an attractive female—in an effort to keep them apart—because she wanted her own son to be with that female. Relatedly, because mothers and sons stay together for life, a bonobo mother can help boost her son's chances of producing a higher number of grandchildren.

"This pattern helps illustrate one possible pathway for the evolution of menopause," Surbeck explains. "It can be advantageous for older females to shift from having more children themselves to supporting existing offspring and grandchildren, thereby improving the survival and reproductive success of their descendants."

To gather data, Surbeck and his teams have spent countless hours over the years following bonobos, earning their trust, and documenting their behavior while based at two field sites: first at LuiKotale (in the DRC's Salonga National Park, Africa's largest tropical rainforest reserve) and later at Kokolopori, a community preserve. Days in the field begin at 3 A.M. with a hike through the jungle to areas where bonobo communities slumber in their elaborate treetop nests. Researchers then follow a group until sunset, trekking through the jungle's labyrinthine underbrush as unobtrusively as possible, while the bonobos amble along or stop at feeding or grooming sites.

Female bonobos reign supreme, often by forming violent coalitions against the males.

For Surbeck, 49, the lush and perilous jungle fieldwork is exhilarating. He spent the majority of his late 20s and early 30s in the field, sometimes for as long as nine months at a time, tracking wild animals from dawn to nightfall, an intense practice known as focal following. "Colleagues will say, 'I'm so glad I don't have to do any more focal follows,'" he says, "and I'm just like, 'Hell, if only I could do more focal follows.'"

Surbeck was born in a small town in Switzerland, where he spent his summers in the Alps helping out with the cows on local farms. He quickly realized he wanted to work with animals. He earned his bachelor's and master's degrees in biology and zoology from the University of Zurich, spending time in India and Africa, where he studied birds and wasps. His early fieldwork with bonobos led to a doctoral degree at the University of Leipzig, where he focused on dominance, competition, and cooperation among bonobos, which other scientists at the time knew little about.

In 2016, Surbeck established a new DRC field site at the Kokolopori Bonobo Reserve, in collaboration with the Bonobo Conservation Initiative and Vie Sauvage, conservation organizations that had formed the reserve in 2003. In 2019, Surbeck joined the Harvard faculty; his research team spends time at Kokolopori. The site enables him to study a population of bonobos—three distinct communities that roam in that region—and compare those groups' behaviors to those he documented while at LuiKotale.

The individuals in the three Kokolopori bonobo groups are identified by the names of colors, musicians, and bodies of water (mostly in French). Researchers know them intimately. Much like humans, Surbeck says, bonobos have unique personalities and complex behaviors that make them difficult to stereotype. In both Kokolopori and LuiKotale, he's been struck by the dramatic, soap opera–like aspects of bonobo society.

He points to a young female named Amu in LuiKotale who had a hard time settling into a community. "She drove everyone a bit crazy: the males in the group, the females who were loosely attached to those males," he says. "Yet the males would travel far beyond their usual home ranges to search for her whenever she left the group, trying to persuade her to return. When she did come back, she immediately became the center of attention. I have never seen anyone as popular as Amu."

In Kokolopori in 2019, Surbeck witnessed a trio of females gang up on a troublemaking male whom researchers had identified as Gris. He had entered "a feeding tree and was kind of pestering" others and then, "all of a sudden, three or four high-ranking females just darted down on

ROLAND HILGARTNER

LUKAS BIERHOFF, KOKOLOPORI BONOBO RESEARCH PROJECT

Four-year-old Evora (right); Nancy playing and sliding down a vine (bottom right); Brun, a juvenile male, lounging on a grooming log (bottom left)

him, out of the blue," Surbeck recalls. "He leapt out of the tree, barely making it out, and ran off." The females chased him away into the jungle and returned to the feeding tree a few minutes later "as if nothing had happened."

He expected Gris to reappear as well, with a few scratches and a bruised ego. But he didn't show up again on a research camera until more than a month later, roaming alone. "He eventually re-associated with the group," Surbeck says. But he had clearly been put in his place.

Bonobos, like this young mother, Saphir (top left), can migrate and take time to find a community they want to stay with. Members of the Ekalakala and Kokoalongo communities come together and interact on grooming logs (top right).

Surbeck's research has documented many such instances of female dominance. His *Communications Biology* study used observational data gathered between 1993 and 2021 to reveal that of 1,786 conflicts documented between single males and single females, females won the majority of them.

One primary source of that female power is cooperation. Females can prevail alone, Surbeck says, but their rate of success is much higher when they band together with other females or know they have that back-up support if needed. In communities where "they form frequent female coalitions," he says, "they always win." Intimidating behavior, such as chasing and screaming, usually does the trick. But female coalitions, as noted above, are not opposed to a little violence; a male could lose a finger or a toe for crossing the wrong female.

To view videos of bonobos in the wild, visit **harvardmagazine.com/bonobos.**

In an earlier study, published in 2019 in *Hormones and Behavior,* Surbeck and colleagues pointed to a few potential sources of female cooperative bonding: same-sex sexual behavior and oxytocin. Female bonobos can often be seen rubbing their genitals together in conjunction with situations of high tension or when a conflict is brewing. The researchers discovered that the females had higher levels of oxytocin—which can engender good will and cooperative behavior—following these same-sex sexual activities.

Bonobo females aren't monogamous, and they engage in frequent sexual activity—to release tension, to promote cooperation and social cohesion, as well as to procreate—with multiple partners, both of the same and opposite sexes. For most social mammals, males leave their natal group (and join a different one) when they reach sexual maturity. But in bonobo society, young females are the ones to leave, moving to groups featuring other females to whom they are not related.

Male bonobos, Surbeck has found, have their own ways of resolving conflicts with each other. In 2024, he and his colleagues published the results of a multi-year study showing that males in Kokolopori exhibited higher rates of conflict with each other than did their chimpanzee counterparts. Yet while they bickered more than chimps, their squabbles rarely resulted in physical harm. At the end of the day, the "peace" that male bonobos keep, Surbeck says, is "rooted in permanent argument"—not extreme violence.

Surbeck is currently focusing on exploring this less violent, more socially interventionistic approach to disputes—along with cooperative behavior among individual bonobos of the same and different communities. Unlike chimpanzees, bonobos can get along with those outside of their own

LIRAN SAMUNI, KOKOLOPORI BONOBO RESEARCH PROJECT

The "peace" that male bonobos keep, Surbeck says, "is rooted in permanent argument."

social groups. Some even move among communities, switching in and out, over time, without major fights and violence.

Contrasting behaviors of different primate species, Surbeck says, can help us evaluate how humans think about our own societies—and identify alternative ways of relating. Some people may look at human warfare, hostility, male sexual violence, and strictly patriarchal social structures and believe those behaviors to be a part of our DNA, he explains, but bonobo communities show that these aspects of society are not evolutionarily inevitable.

Humans are part of "this group of animals with extremely flexible behavior and a strong capacity for social learning. Our patterns of conflict, cooperation, gender relations, and power are therefore not rigidly fixed by biology," he points out. "Instead, they can change depending on history, culture, and environment, which means there is a wide range of possible ways for human societies to be organized."

Cooperation, he says, is a vital avenue of his research moving forward. "What brings the group together in a way that they can stay with each other?" Surbeck wants to know. "Under which social and ecological conditions, and given which individual characteristics, is cooperation and exchange between groups most likely to occur and be maintained?"

Surbeck returned to Kokolopori for nearly two months this winter, meeting with staff and researchers, checking in on schools and hospitals connected to the project, and meeting with local and national officials to address ongoing problems of deforestation and hunting. What he fears most is that bonobos might not survive this century. "We could lose one of our closest living relatives not because we were unable to save them and their environment," he says, "but because we did not care enough."

He also spent some time among the bonobos in the forest. One of his greatest joys, he says, is "walking with the bonobos through their environment—when the vegetation is not too thick and we can stroll together—and simply sharing their presence, quietly witnessing the lives of a different species."

Annie Roth is a freelance science writer and filmmaker who specializes in stories about animals and the people who study them.

Baby Gwen with her mother, Gloria, a high-ranking female who outranks the males in her group (right); females and offspring of the Kokoalongo community during a grooming session (bottom right); Cobain, a young adolescent male (bottom left)

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Arts & Culture

A Queer Rabbi's Very Long Journey

Director Sandi DuBowski's Sabbath Queen *dramatizes the tension between ancient and contemporary Judaism.*

by Tim Murphy

Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie in his drag persona as Hadassah Gross (top) and officiating the interfaith marriage of two men (below)

Sabbath Queen, the 2025 documentary produced and directed by Sandi DuBowski '93, opens tensely: in the courtyard of a Manhattan home, Rabbi Amichai Lau-Lavie prepares to flout the doctrine of the Conservative Judaism movement in which he was ordained by officiating the marriage of two men, Koshin and Chodo. The problem isn't that they're gay—Conservatism allows same-sex unions. It's that Koshin is Jewish and Chodo is not, and the movement forbids interfaith marriage.

That opening is intended "to establish a frame," says DuBowski. "It says to the audience, 'This is a burning question that the film will return to, and also here are the larger stakes around these two versions of Judaism—one traditional and fundamentalist, and the other progressive and open.'"

That tension is at the heart of *Sabbath Queen*'s very intense subject, Lau-Lavie, 56,

Photographs courtesy of Sandi DuBowski

the Israeli-born descendant of one of Judaism's most prominent dynasties of rabbis. His quest to forge a community of Judaism more in tune with modern life and pluralistic values led him down several paths. In 1999, he co-founded Storahtelling (a sort of theater group for reinterpreting Old Testament stories) and, several years later, Lab/Schul (an "artist-driven, everybody-friendly, god-optional, pop-up, experimental community for sacred Jewish gatherings").

He embraced and then rejected the strictures of being a Conservative rabbi, such as not officiating interfaith weddings. And he created for himself a drag persona named Hadassah Gross—a widow of six rabbis whose Hungarian accent and huge hair and sunglasses serve as a Trojan horse for her God-is-love ideas about Judaism. Lau-Lavie has been called "a rock star" by *The New York Times* for his reach in expanding ideas of what Judaism can look like.

"Expansive" also describes *Sabbath Queen*, which DuBowski—whose best-known prior documentary, *Trembling Before G-d* (2001), explored the dilemma facing gay Orthodox Jews—made over the course of a two-decade-plus friendship with Lau-Lavie. The two met in the '90s when DuBowski, an openly queer and progressive Brooklyn native, was in Jerusalem searching for people to interview for *Trembling*. "Everyone kept saying that I should meet the chief rabbi of Israel's gay nephew, which was Amichai," DuBowski says. "But Amichai is such a diva that he wanted his own movie."

When Lau-Lavie moved to New York shortly after, the two began hanging out. DuBowski, intrigued by both Lau-Lavie's radical vision and his drag alter ego, began casually filming him.

Such was the start of what would become two decades of shooting, six years of editing, nearly 3,000 hours of footage, seven cinematographers, four editors, and more than 10 producers. This "epic process," in DuBowski's words, cost in the low seven figures and was funded in part by 15 benefit events over the years, held in several cities. It led to a documentary that is unusually capacious, moving freely between "ancient time and contemporary time," as DuBowski puts it. The film also showcases Lau-Lavie's ever-evolving identities: heir to hidebound tradition yet gay maverick iconoclast; indie performer yet enrollee of the august Jewish Theological Seminary.

Boxing all that into a 105-minute film wasn't easy. "Even once we were in the editing room, I was still shooting," DuBowski says. He followed Lau-Lavie between New York, Israel, and Poland (where his family lived before the Holocaust). "I didn't even know when I started shooting that he was going to become a rabbi," he says, "or have three children with a lesbian couple, or that his father would die."

To work out a map for the editing, he says, "we had a vision board where every one of Amichai's identities was color-coded. We were constantly tracking time, trying to figure out who would be the main characters. At one point, my main editor said, 'This film needs a narrator, and I think it's you.'" DuBowski agreed to give it a try—until viewers at an early screening said it didn't work. Amichai's

brother, Binyamin, became the new narrator—a prominent Israeli rabbi of a more traditional mold who, throughout the film, speaks compassionately of his rebel brother's spiritual quest while gently disagreeing that traditional Judaism can be opened up as freely as Amichai would like.

"He became the counterpoint to Amichai," says DuBowski, "a straight Orthodox rabbi with a progressive queer brother. He's allowing people to understand the context and culture that Amichai both comes from and is challenging."

Additionally driving the narrative was the almost filial friendship between Amichai and DuBowski, who now shows up only intermittently onscreen but enough to make clear that he is not merely an observer but also a participant in Lau-Lavie's alternative Judaism. There's a moment late in the film when the fourth wall comes down and Lau-Lavie complains to DuBowski of being exhausted with his endless questions and filming.

"If you're a queer religious person like Amichai, you feel you always have the eye of God on you, and for him the camera became that eye," says DuBowski.

The film, which *The Hollywood Reporter* called "a rich and intimate portrait," has yet to be picked up by a streaming distributor, but it has already been screened at more than 100 film festivals and arthouse cinemas internationally.

Sabbath Queen continues DuBowski's pattern of documentaries about people challenging their religions from within. (DuBowski also co-produced, with director Parvez Sharma, the 2007 documentary *A Jihad for Love* about queer Muslims.)

"We're in a moment of great shift around what is the baby and what is the bathwater of our ancient traditions," DuBowski says, "especially regarding gender, sexuality, tribalism, and violence." *Sabbath Queen* allowed him to explore these questions by following one seeker's journey. Even the ending is unresolved.

"I not only submitted to the not-knowing for this film," he says, "but embraced it as part of the process."

JUSTIN BETTMAN/CONTOUR BY GETTY IMAGES

Director Sandi DuBowski spent two decades filming Lau-Lavie for *Sabbath Queen*.

Can Stories Help Us Cope with Climate Change?

The growing genre of climate fiction offers a way to process reality—and our anxieties.

by Gabriella Gage

The year is 2036 and the global temperature is 2.3 degrees Celsius above the pre-industrial average. Grace Chan is preparing to take office as the leader of Ocean Independent State, a governing body created to solve a climate emergency. That night, she crashes her pickup truck amid rising tides. As she faces death, memories surge forward: a youth shaped by climate disasters in Malaysia, her work combating rising sea levels through the ambitious "Fairhaven" infrastructure project, and the hopeful stories she writes to cope with her climate anxiety—imagining alternative outcomes to historical disasters such as the sinking of the *Titanic*.

This is the arc of *Fairhaven: A Novel of Climate Optimism* (2024) by Steve Willis and Genevieve Hilton '94, who writes under the pen name Jan Lee. The book is a recent entry in the genre of climate fiction—an increasingly popular vehicle for writers and readers to process their climate anxiety through narratives rather than polemic, as one literary agent puts it.

Long before climate data became a part of daily life, science fiction and speculative works imagined the consequences of ecological collapse. J. G. Ballard's *The Drowned World* (1962) offered a vision of humanity reshaped by climate change, while Octavia Butler's *Parable of the Sower* (1993) depicted a society unraveling under the pressures of climate change, inequality, and violence.

In recent years, many imprints have begun to formally tag books as "climate narratives," rather than keeping them under the umbrella of science fiction, says literary agent Mark Gottlieb, the executive vice president of Trident Media Group. Since the mid-2010s, Gottlieb explains, he has seen a substantial increase in both climate-related submissions and acquisitions: "Climate fiction has shifted from a niche concern to a central narrative engine across literary and commercial publishing," he says.

Today's climate fiction, or "cli-fi," addresses a new urgency, as misinformation proliferates, distrust in scientific institutions increases, and the statistics around global temperatures and sea levels grow more dire. Some cli-fi authors imagine their fiction could raise awareness and galvanize action—reaching audiences who may never pick up nonfiction works like Rachel Carson's *Silent Spring* (1962) or David Wallace-Wells's *The Uninhabitable Earth* (2019).

And some believe fiction can add something else to the climate debate that data-driven climate news often lacks: an element of hope. "I joke that *Fairhaven* is a bit of propaganda—it's a book with a mission," Hilton says. "We want people to read it and think: 'Things are bad, but I'm going to do something.'"

Novelist Tim O'Brien, the author of *The Things They Carried*, once described the purpose of fiction as "getting at the truth when the truth isn't sufficient for

Illustration by Nicole Xu

the truth." Cli-fi books implicitly engage in that endeavor—and in debates over the advantages and pitfalls of channeling fiction for a higher purpose.

For Hilton, fidelity to scientific truth—and the urgency of addressing it—is paramount. She co-writes with Willis, an environmental engineer, who grounds their narratives in technological plausibility. "You don't need to address climate change explicitly," Hilton says. "But if you're writing a story set in 2050, and a character looks out the window and the weather is the same as in 2025, it breaks from the story's verisimilitude. You need to explain that to the reader."

In recent years, calls for climate accuracy in narratives have extended beyond novels into film and television. The Climate Reality Check, a collaboration between Colby College and the climate consulting firm Good Energy, offers a way for storytellers to assess climate representation in their narratives. (It's modeled on the famous Bechdel-Wallace Test, which evaluates women's representation in movies.) The climate check poses two questions: does climate change exist in this world, and do the characters know it?

"Climate change stories are also stories of family, friendship, dreams, home, belonging," says Megha Majumdar.

But accuracy and bleak realism can sometimes provoke despair rather than action. A 2018 Yale University–affiliated study found that only 26 percent of respondents reported a positive emotional response to cli-fi, with many expressing feelings of futility and hopelessness. When fiction is too prescriptive to a higher purpose, it can backfire.

That's why, though Hilton aims to inspire change, *Fairhaven* notably resists dystopian tropes, instead emphasizing action-oriented solutions. Its hopeful outlook aligns with emerging subgenres sometimes described as "thrutopian," "solarpunk," or "techno-optimist."

But not all writers who tackle climate change want to assign their books an explicit social mission. "I don't think fiction has an obligation to do anything," says author Megha Majumdar '10, whose second novel, *A Guardian and a Thief*—a finalist for the 2025 National Book Award—explores the moral consequences of climate change through what Majumdar calls the "specific texture of lived experience." The book is set in a near-future Kolkata, India, as a family prepares to flee a climate-ravaged city with food shortages. Their immigration documents are stolen by a thief acting out of desperation and hunger. Over seven intense days, the narrative complicates notions of hope, duty, and survival in two families linked by circumstance.

"Climate change stories are also stories of family, friendship, dreams, home, belonging," Majumdar says.

Anxiety about environmental destruction takes a different shape in *Habitat*, the genre-bending debut by Case Q. Kerns, a staff member in Harvard's English department and a contributor to *The Harvard Review*. Kerns's interconnected stories explore immersive habitats both literal and figurative: bunkers, the lives of cloned animals, and the ecosystem of body transplant culture. These speculative coping mechanisms for the future come with ethical costs.

"I focus less on the 'climate' of climate fiction," Kerns says. "To me, extinction is just as central, and more intimately horrifying—the disappearance of species entirely innocent of the systems that destroy the environment."

In the story "Armstrong," a father sells an heirloom watch to buy his daughter a Christmas gift—an off-market clone of Armstrong, the canine star of her favorite television show. This Gift-of-the-Magi-esque move is its own meta-critique of the future. The cloned dog exists "trapped between two worlds"—alive, yet stripped of instinct and natural habitat, created solely for human consolation and consumption. Armstrong becomes an embodiment of the intimate, ethical quandaries sparked by a future ravaged by climate destruction.

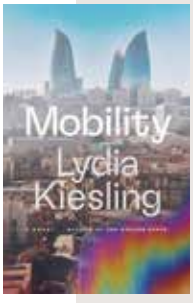
"How do we take care of each other in the future? How do we cope?" Kerns asks. "That, to me, is realistic."

In the end, he says, fiction's own resistance to conform to labels and rules may be its most powerful tool for engaging a wider range of audiences in climate conversations. "There's no wrong way," Kerns says, "to start thinking about how the world could be better."

A Climate Fiction Primer

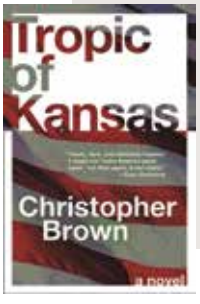
Three authors and a literary agent share their reading recommendations.

GENEVIEVE HILTON RECOMMENDS
We Don't Have Time For This
by Brianna Craft
(Disney Hyperion, $18)



MEGHA MAJUMDAR RECOMMENDS
Mobility
by Lydia Kiesling
(Crooked Media Reads, paperback, $18)

CASE Q. KERNS RECOMMENDS:
The New Wilderness
by Diane Cook
(Harper Perennial, paperback, $14)



MARK GOTTLIEB RECOMMENDS
Tropic of Kansas
by Christopher Brown
(Harper Voyager, paperback, $16)

Off the Shelf

Recent books by Harvard authors

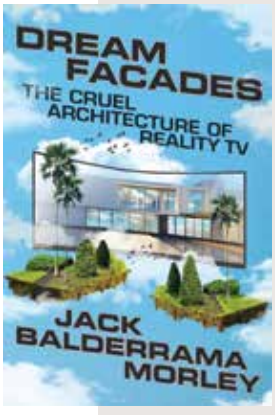
by Gabriella Gage

Moments after they meet, the titular character of the new novel *Lucien* christens his Harvard roommate with a new name: Atlas. A titan to hold up the heavens, a character condemned to endure. Employing every conceivable trick—including quoting the philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche—to sway his roommate on the name change, Lucien demonstrates how easily identity can be mythologized; the story that follows tackles the consequences.

Mythmaking abounds in this issue's selection of books. At the hands of time and power structures, certain fables and theories become canon in the annals of history and science, while others are exiled and discredited.

As always, we are confronted by the limitless—and sometimes insidious—power of storytelling.

Dream Facades: The Cruel Architecture of Reality TV by Jack Balderrama Morley '08 (Astra House, $28)



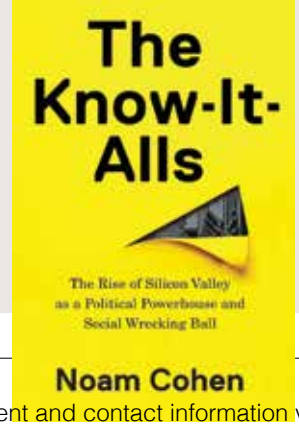
In this interdisciplinary debut, dissatisfaction and the modern human condition collide with the exaggerated physical landscapes of reality TV. *Dream Facades* explores the "real places swollen with the fantasies projected onto them" on shows like *Selling Sunset*, *The Kardashians*, and various *Real Housewives* franchises (note: your guilty pleasure knowledge of reality TV will come in handy). Instead of a coffee-table tour of these homes, Morley, an editor at the magazine *Dwell*, contextualizes the cultural and architectural shifts—building booms and busts, urbanization, planned obsolescence, and the commodification of personal style in home design—that fuel these dream facades and our fascination with them.

The Westerners: Mythmaking and Belonging on the American Frontier by Megan Kate Nelson '94 (Scribner, $31)

In 1888, Ella Watson, a homesteader and cattle rancher in Wyoming, embodied the rugged individualism and entrepreneurial spirit of the American West, with one critical flaw: she was a woman with power. For that, we learn, she lost everything. History branded her as "Cattle Kate," an outlaw and rabble-rousing prostitute. Hers is one of seven immersive portraits in *The Westerners*, by Pulitzer Prize finalist Nelson. Here, the complex narratives of Indigenous and non-white communities and women who helped shape the West come alive in vivid detail to challenge a prevailing myth of the frontier—that it belonged only to white males—and the remnants of manifest destiny that shape American culture and politics to this day.

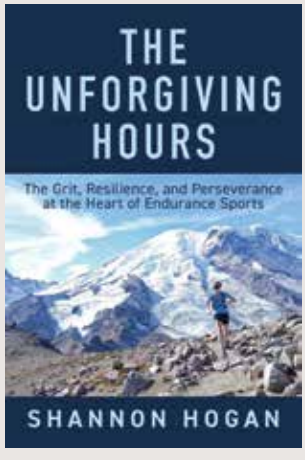
The Know-It-Alls: The Rise of Silicon Valley as a Political Powerhouse and Social Wrecking Ball by Noam Cohen '89 (The New Press, $22 paperback)

That same allegiance to radical individualism—this time with the internet as the new frontier—threatens American democracy in these origin stories of the deemed know-it-alls, tech moguls with household names: Bezos, Zuckerberg, Thiel, to cite a few. Cohen, a former *New York Times* technology columnist, positions the pursuit of artificial intelligence as a driving factor in the evolution of computer science, captured best through his portrait of John McCarthy, a pioneer of both. First published in 2017, this updated paperback version includes a new 6,500-word introduction by Cohen in the tone of a cautionary tale already coming to pass.



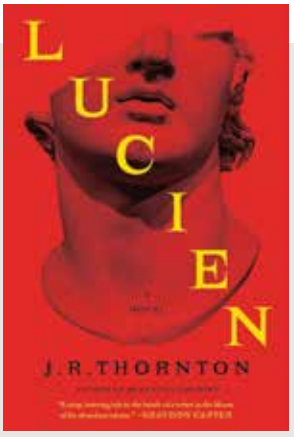
The Unforgiving Hours: The Grit, Resilience, and Perseverance at the Heart of Endurance Sports by Shannon Hogan, A.L.M. '23 (VeloPress, $28.95)

Run longer, swim farther, push harder—what propels humans to seek extremes and test their limits for sport? *The Unforgiving Hours* is concerned less with the psychology, and more with the journey. Hogan regales us with retellings of endurance triumphs: ultrarunners finding their way in 100-mile courses, sailors making their way to Alaska sans motor, and a 15-year-old swimmer traversing the choppy waters of the English Channel to set a new world record. No stranger to feats of strength, Hogan—a former pro mountain biker and ultrarunner—writes with reverence and exhilaration that evokes the adrenaline rush of someone who has hit the same highs.



Lucien by J.R. Thornton '14 (Harper, $18.99 paperback)

A working-class art prodigy is plunged into the bacchanalian underbelly of Harvard filled with characters whose very names evoke entitle-



ment...Atlas, Dante, Crosby, Steinway, Zola, and Xander. From the first encounter, the title character propels both narrative and narrator forward with an ever-looming anvil of class injustice waiting to drop. The book is rife with final clubs, art forgery, and a Gatsby-esque fascination with a subculture of the Harvard experience that will resonate with some College alums more than others—but that nevertheless informs the Harvard mythos in the outside world.

Marked by Time: How Social Change Has Transformed Crime and the Life Trajectories of Young Americans by Robert J. Sampson (Belknap, $29.95)

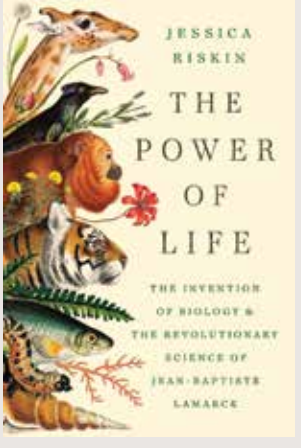
Does *when* we are make us *who* we are? This unprecedented study traces the lives of more than 1,000 Chicago children in multiple birth cohorts over the course of nearly 30 years, revealing how key social and historical changes can shape crucial human development stages. One startling finding: a child born in the mid-1980s was more than twice as likely to be arrested as one born just 10 years later, despite identical backgrounds, neighborhoods, and risk factors. Along the way, Sampson, a sociologist and Flowers University Professor at Harvard, asks us to rethink longstanding risk assessment tools used to predict criminal behavior, as well as our collective tendency to categorize social progress and decline as linear.

Recession: The Real Reasons Economies Shrink and What to Do About It by Tyler Beck Goodspeed '07, Ph.D. '14 (Basic Venture, $30)

Boom, bust; up like a rocket, down like a feather. Economics is filled with supposed truisms. Here, Goodspeed debunks the cyclical theory of recessions as a necessary price for periods of economic expansion and as a natural and useful palate cleanser in economic history. Blending case studies and sharp analysis, Goodspeed, the chief economist at ExxonMobil and briefly the acting chair of the Council of Economic Advisers during U.S. President Donald Trump's first term, unpacks a confluence of questionable decisions, miscalculations, and global catastrophes that have led to recessions and suggests how we can prevent their recurrence.

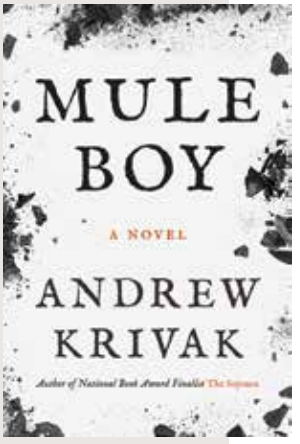
The Power of Life: The Invention of Biology and the Revolutionary Science of Jean-Baptiste Lamarck by Jessica Riskin '88 (Riverhead, $32)

Being ahead of your time often puts you at war with it. Innovative French naturalist Jean-Baptiste Lamarck had a knack for antagonizing those in power and theorizing concepts that would render him an "exile of mainstream science." In this humanizing portrait, Lamarck is often out of sync with his counterparts: while he is engrossed in the diversity of living things, spending his days studying worms, his fellow scientists are betting on phrenology, which will later be used to support eugenics. With nuance and wit (cue: "The Battle of the Mollusks!"), Riskin revives Lamarck and his idea that living beings play an active role in their own transformation.



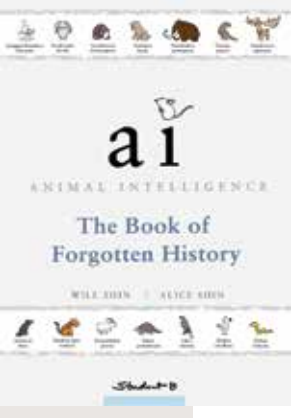
Mule Boy by Andrew Krivak (Bellevue, $17.99 paperback)

The light stamp of a mule's hoof and the twitch of its ear are all that forebode pending disaster in a Pennsylvania coal mine that collapses on New Year's Day in 1929. In this novel, Ondro, the 13-year-old boy tending to the mule cart, survives but will spend much of his life navigating the guilt and suspicions of "a darkness deeper than any tomb in the mines." Over a series of visitations later in life, Ondro retells the final moments of those who passed. Krivak, a visiting lecturer in creative writing at Harvard and the descendant of a coal mining casualty, writes with pulsating rhythm and simple, elegiac prose that echoes the language of his forebears. The anthracite's sheen, the smell of a carbide lamp, and the *memento mori* will cling to you long after reading.

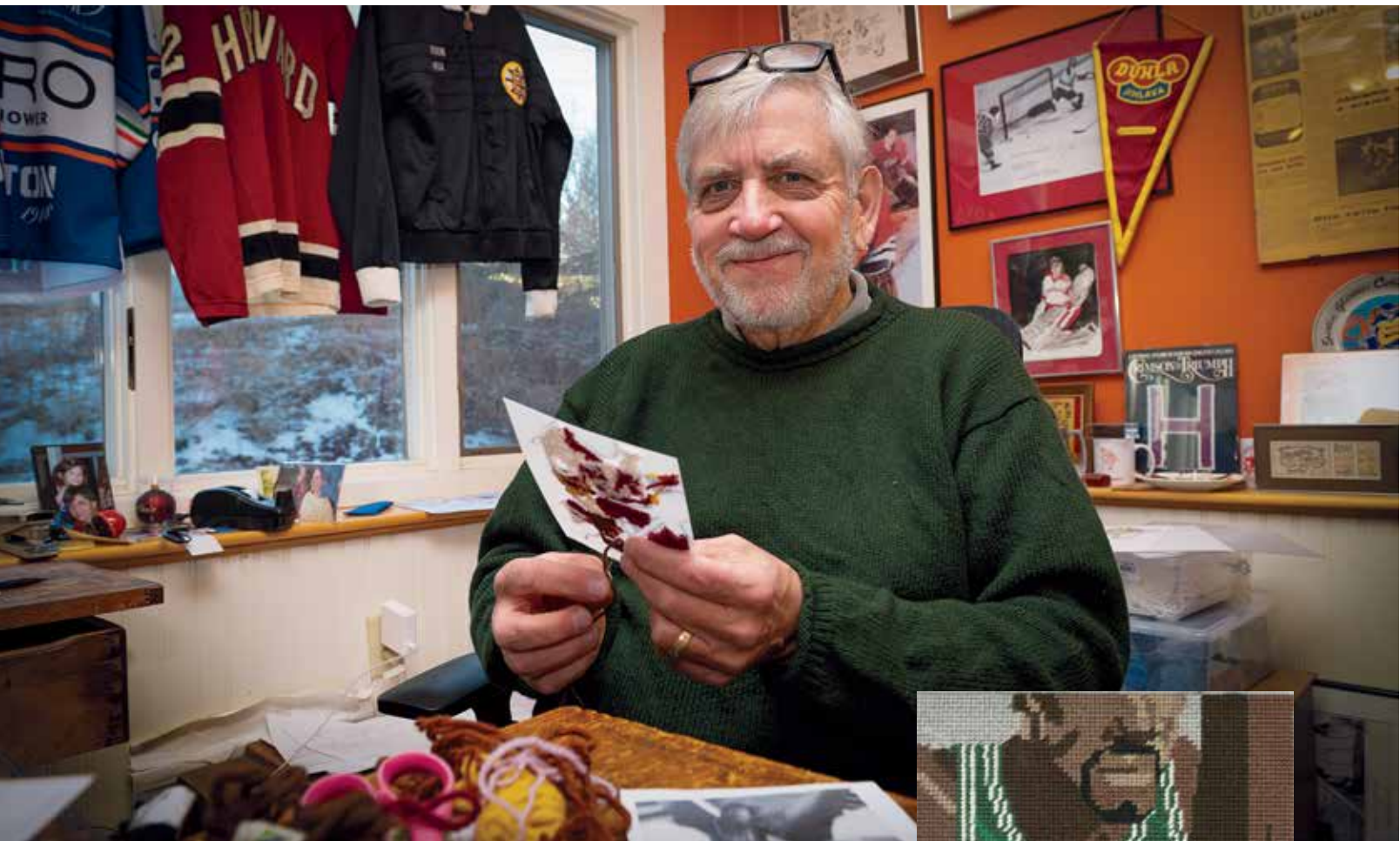


Animal Intelligence: The Book of Forgotten History by Will Shin, M.P.A. '15; illustrated by Alice Shin (Student B, $10 e-book)

The Shin siblings have created an enigmatic reimagining of history through the eyes of animals who have watched by the sidelines as humans have fumbled through civilization. It may take a moment to find one's bearings in this alternate world of dinosaurs dropping one-liners, cats engaged in espionage, and enlightened pythons, but the book's blend of fable, philosophy, and quirky cartoons offers an insightful critique of humanity accessible to adults as well as younger readers.



People & Passions



In Stitches

Joe Bertagna weaves a needlepoint history of New England sports.

by Schuyler Velasco

Few images in modern sports are more familiar than the back of New England Patriots No. 12: Tom Brady's navy blue jersey, his silver and red helmet, his strands of close-cropped brown hair. But seeing them in needlepoint—woven in tiny, exquisite detail by Harvard hockey legend Joe Bertagna '73—is like seeing them for the first time.

No detail has escaped Bertagna's notice or the work of his extra-large goalie hands. The tight brown stitches representing the fringe on Brady's neck are gridded unevenly; there's a small green sticker between the 1 and 2 on his helmet. On his jersey, the "Y" in "BRADY" is a weird shape, for a "Y."

Bertagna enjoyed needlepoint as an evening hobby throughout much of his post-collegiate career as a hockey coach and commissioner. When he retired a few years ago, he embarked on a new ambitious project: recreating the most indelible figures in Boston sports history in brightly colored

Joe Bertagna working on a needlepoint in his home (above); his completed work of Celtics star Bill Russell (below)

Photograph by Stu Rosner
All needlepoint images courtesy of Joe Bertagna

thread. He's sewn Celtics great Bill Russell in his prime; Bruins defenseman Bobby Orr's "flying goal" to clinch the 1970 Stanley Cup; Olympic figure skating gold medalist Tenley Albright '57, M.D. '61; Patriots kicker Adam Vinatieri's field goal in the snow.

"I've done needlepoint for 30 or 40 years, usually as a mechanism to relax," says Bertagna, whose creations were on display in the Sports Museum at Boston's TD Garden last year. "And I love these types of projects. I like a beginning, middle, and end."

Sports, replete with bright colors and recognizable silhouettes, turn out to be a perfect fit for this particular craft. Viewed close up, Bertagna's projects are lively with detail. Slight color variations evoke the shadows of small folds in Russell's green Celtics jersey; Albright's crimson skirt flutters mid-air.

"It's just amazing," says Stan Grossfeld, a Pulitzer Prize-winning *Boston Globe* photographer. "Joe's an artist, and he's got the nuances that a great artist would have. He can see light. He's meticulous [with] detail, and he has the patience."

This past December, Bertagna auctioned off 30 of his sports needlepoints at Prince Pizzeria in Saugus, a suburb north of Boston, to raise money for the Sports Museum's anti-bullying programs. Taken together, the items up for grabs involved "hundreds of thousands" of stitches, Grossfeld notes. The largest work in the collection, an 11-by-17-inch recreation of Grossfeld's 2013 photo of a Boston policeman celebrating a grand slam by Red Sox star David Ortiz, is made up of nearly 19,000.

"I've always had an artistic bent," Bertagna said a few days before the auction. Needlepoint, he said, "has served me on a bunch of different levels, and I'm proud of how this project came out."

Since his college days, Bertagna has routinely popped up in unexpected corners of New England's social and cultural scene. As Harvard's goalie, he appears for about 15 seconds during the hockey game in the 1970 movie *Love Story*. During his undergraduate years, he was buddies with Benazir Bhutto '73, the late prime minister of Pakistan. Alongside his hockey administration career, he has published a handful of books, including a 1986 history of Harvard sports; in

INTRODUCTIONS

Beer executive Mallika Monteiro

by Andrea Javor

As executive vice president and managing director for the beer division at Constellation Brands—the maker of Corona and Modelo—Mallika Monteiro, M.B.A. '07, is facing a volatile time in the alcohol industry. Declining consumption, tariffs, and inflation have pushed her focus toward recruiting legal-aged consumers in their 20s. (This interview has been edited for length and clarity.)

What are the trends in the beer industry that you're currently navigating?
Drinkers are looking for flavor. Sweet and fruity is in across the board. Consumers are moving between alcohol categories quite seamlessly as they look for flavor experiences—quite often at the expense of beer.

How do you convince younger consumers to pick up a beer instead of a seltzer or a mocktail?
Reminding them that beer is fun. Beer is the original drink of moderation. And it comes in these great, convenient formats. If you're in a stadium, you can drink it in a can. If you're in a nice restaurant, it comes in a bottle or in drafts. It's inclusive across demographics. Our non-alcoholic Corona is a part of that.

What's the best piece of advice you've ever gotten?
Not to play it safe. You have to take smart risks, but you can't marinate in the analysis forever.

What's a path you didn't take?
I wanted to be a journalist. Christiane Amanpour was my idol. But at Harvard Business School I realized I loved building businesses. So I took my passion for stories, and I brought that here.

What's the biggest swing you've taken in business?
A pitch to our CEO to create a $100 million fund to invest in female-founded businesses in the beverage alcohol space. I was quite junior and sure that I would get laughed out of the room. But it was the easiest "yes" I've gotten in my career.

What's your go-to drink at a bar?
There's nothing like an ice-cold Corona with a lime. But other than that, I'm a whiskey girl at heart, so a High West Rendezvous rye, on the rocks.

Photograph courtesy of Mallika Monteiro

1981, seven years before *The Onion*'s founding, he edited *Not the Boston Globe*, a single-issue parody newspaper with the front-page headline, "Reagan still asleep."

Bertagna, whose mother practiced cross-stitch, picked up needlepoint as a way to unwind from the pressures of his sports-related day jobs, which have included six seasons as the Bruins goalie coach, an Olympic Games on Team USA's coaching staff, 23 years as commissioner of the Hockey East conference, and the distinction of serving as the first head coach for Harvard women's hockey in the late 1970s. Early creations included a Chicago Blackhawks logo for his brother and a crimson rocking chair cushion with a Harvard "H" on it for his mother.

"I needed something mindless at the end of the day, where I didn't have to think about the things that were stressing me out," Bertagna says. "I would do these fun little projects and give them away as gifts."

The Sports Museum project came about with encouragement from Grossfeld, who became friends with Bertagna around 2021 when they both attended a weekly gathering of local sportswriters. *Boston Globe* columnists Dan Shaughnessy and Bob Ryan and broadcaster Lesley Visser—the first female National Football League analyst to cover a game on TV—have received needlepoint gifts from Bertagna over the years. "I told him he should do this as a project, because these were unlike any needlepoints I'd seen before," Grossfeld says. "You don't associate needlepoints with sports. It's butterflies and flowers."

Bertagna began the project in earnest as his hockey administration career wound down: his tenure as the commissioner of Hockey East ended in 2020, and his executive directorship of the American Hockey Coaches Association came to a close in 2024. With extra time on his hands, Bertagna sewed for three or four hours each morning and evening at his home in Gloucester, Mass. At that pace, smaller four-by-six-inch pieces take him about a week; the Ortiz home run celebration took five months. He gets his materials at Coveted Yarn, a neighborhood shop in a church basement. According to a story Bertagna likes to tell, he has never seen another man in the store, but he once happened upon a group of elderly women knitters arguing about Patriots offensive coordinator Josh McDaniels.

A Boston policeman celebrating a grand slam by Red Sox star David Ortiz

Completing the Sports Museum project has pushed Bertagna beyond his needlepoint comfort zone, prompting him to delve into different sports and more intricate designs. "I've spent my whole life in hockey, so I have a better familiarity with it," he says. "When you're looking at something, a picture's a picture, but if you understand how [jersey fabric] folds and equipment feels, you can have a better grasp."

The sports represented in his latest project run the gamut from soccer to marathon races to golf. The result is an unlikely history of New England sports that is both comprehensive and deeply personal, including a portrait of the artist in his Arlington High School jersey and hockey mask, as well as a scene of his wife, Kathy, playing golf with a hockey stick (she thought her legs looked too big and told him to redo them).

For a few needlepoint works, he experimented with black-and-white color palettes, which require unsparing precision because of the lack of color cues. For others, he had to sew faces, which he doesn't enjoy. "Faces are hard," he explains. "They come out cartoonish."

Though proud of the project, which he is thinking about making into a coffee table book, Bertagna was ready, as the auction neared, to get back to the less ambitious, personal gift items he can fiddle with at the breakfast nook or while watching TV.

But first, there was money to raise. On the night of the fundraiser, the back dining room at Prince Pizzeria buzzed with a boisterous crowd eating pasta and pizza while browsing the culmination of Bertagna's yearslong effort. "How's your back?" one man greeted another over the noise.

"It sucks!" the second crowed, grinning.

Clad in a gray tweed jacket and a Red Sox tie, Bertagna moved through a throng of supporters that included family, childhood friends, his Boston sports media pals, and several teammates from his Harvard hockey days.

"He sat back knitting while we did all the work!" joked Kevin Hampe '73, who played defense while Bertagna tended goal. Hampe didn't know about his friend's needlepoint hobby until it was featured in Grossfeld's January 2025 photo essay in *The Boston Globe*. There wasn't a needle or thread in sight when the two were roommates in Eliot House—one imagines that if there had been, Bertagna never would have heard the end of it.

There were rounds of live bidding for six of Bertagna's creations, with a silent auction for everything else. Boston radio personality Hank Morse played auctioneer, needling the crowd into larger and larger bids and roasting various surrounding towns. Three works bundled together, including the Bill Russell needlepoint, netted $1,000—the highest bid of the night. The rest—33 in all—went for several hundred dollars apiece.

Overall, Bertagna's work raised $11,226 for the museum, "about twice what I expected," he later said. But the biggest get, arguably, was the commissioning of a custom creation from the artist himself, which sold for $900.

"No faces," Bertagna warned the winner.

HM To see more of Bertagna's needlepoint designs, visit **harvardmagazine.com/bertagna**.

Photograph by John Graham

SPECIAL INTEREST

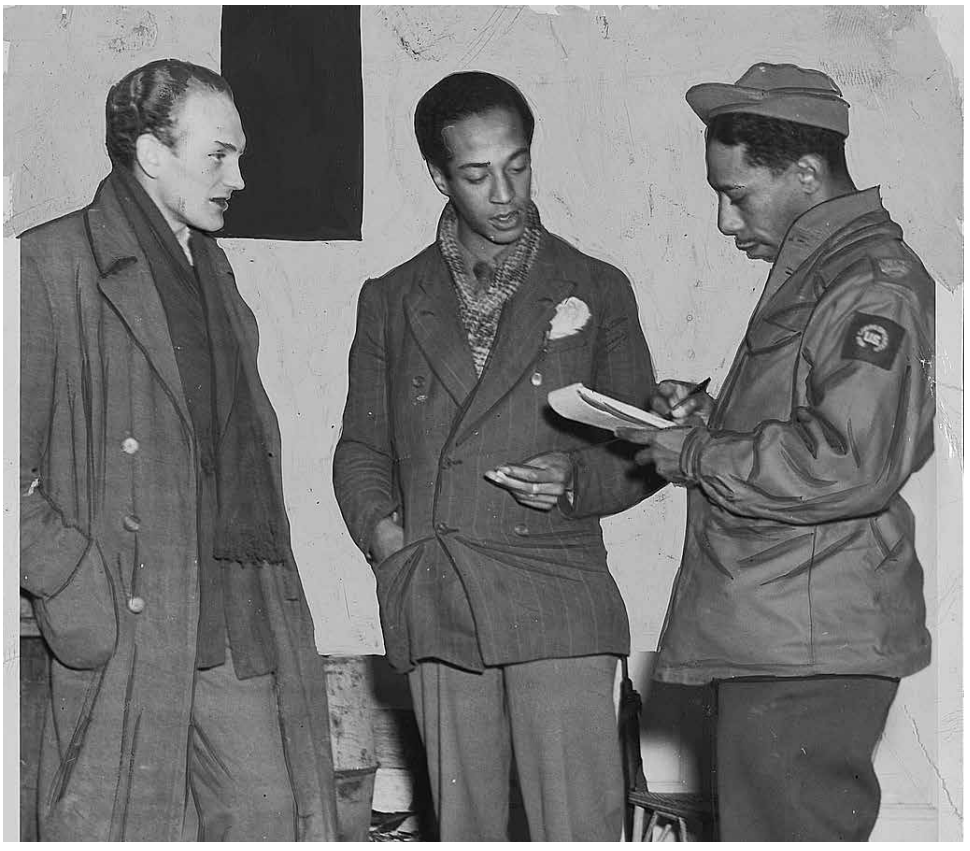
Dispatches from Denali

by Lydialyle Gibson

In 1963, seven members of the Harvard Mountaineering Club became the first—and, so far, only—climbers to ascend the notorious Wickersham Wall, a near-vertical ice cliff on Alaska's Denali mountain, whose constant rockfalls, frequent avalanches, and hidden crevasses make it one of the most dangerous mountain faces in the world. Among those climbers was John Graham '64, who went on to a career as an author, adventurer, and diplomat in war-torn places—and who now, at 83, dispenses life lessons on TikTok under the username "Badass Granddad."

Cleaning out his office a few years ago, Graham stumbled upon a diary he kept during that 1963 climb, as well as a cache of his black-and-white photos from the trip. Last fall, he published them as *Denali Diary*, available free online at johngraham.org/denali-diary. The writing is spirited, full of his younger self's "boyish enthusiasm," as Graham puts it. The photographs—of the laborious ascent, the beautiful and formidable terrain, and the climbers' down time at camp—are often stunning.

The image above is one of Graham's favorites, showing (from left) David Roberts '65, Don Jensen '65, and Peter Carman '64 breaking for camp at 12,600 feet, so high up that "you can hardly tell the snow from the clouds," Graham says. At that moment, the climbers were nine days and one calamitous snowstorm from the summit. "Good news," that day's diary entry reads. "The top of the Wall is almost in sight."



Peggram (middle) and Arne Hauptmann talk to war correspondent Max Johnson after escaping from a prison camp.

VITA

Reed Edwin Peggram

Brief life of a worldly scholar: 1914-1982

by Ethelene Whitmire

In December 1944, African American newspapers reported that an exceptional Harvard doctoral student, Reed Peggram, had narrowly escaped from an Italian prisoner-of-war camp with his Danish companion. "Two Men with Strange Story Walk Through Battle Lines," read one headline. Another announced: "Boy Friends Scorn Bombs, Come Out OK." Reporter Max Johnson, embedded with the African American 92nd infantry division, compared the duo to a modern-day Damon and Pythias, from the Greek legend about loyal friends facing death. "If Peggram's story proves to be correct," Johnson concluded, "it will undoubtedly become one of the greatest human-interest stories yet revealed in this war."

Yet the poignant tale of this African American scholar has been lost to history. What happened to Peggram following his fraught wartime odyssey, endured with the man he considered his soulmate?

His life had begun humbly. Born in 1914 in Dorchester, Massachusetts, Peggram was raised primarily by his grandmother, a school janitor. He excelled at what's now called Boston Latin School and enrolled at Harvard (living off campus, as Black students were required to do then) to study Romance languages and literature. He planned to become a professor, joined the poetry and German clubs, and took courses in French, psychology, history, German, and Spanish, graduating *magna cum laude* in the class of 1935, with a Phi Beta Kappa key. The granting of a Rhodes scholarship to study in England, however, was complicated by A. Chester Hanford, a Harvard dean who wrote him a glowing letter of recommendation followed by another letter—not shared with Peggram—that told the admissions committee that Peggram was also a "negro." Peggram instead completed a master's degree in comparative literature at Columbia University and in 1937 began doctoral studies at Harvard. According to archival material at the U.S. Library of Congress, during that time Peggram had an unrequited crush on undergraduate student Leonard Bernstein. (The one-sided sentiments and the rebuff are revealed within a collection of the composer's letters, which Peggram had asked him to destroy.) In September 1938, having received Julius Rosenwald and John Harvard fellowships, he moved to Paris to study decadence in nineteenth-century French literature at the Sorbonne. There, on the cusp of World War II, Peggram ignored warnings to return home, determined instead to live out his dreams of becoming a cultured gentleman: traveling, going to operas, joining the Shakespeare and Company library, and exploring his sexuality in a less constrained social setting. This new life soon included a new love, the handsome Danish artist Arne Hauptmann, who Peggram met in May 1939.

A few months later, the pair was living in Copenhagen. But as word of a probable German invasion spread, they left, ultimately landing in Florence, Italy. Family members and others urged Peggram to return home, but he refused to leave Europe because Hauptmann could not get a visa to enter the United States. (Even an inheritance from Peggram's Harvard friend Montford Schley Variell '36 was not persuasive.) Peggram and Hauptmann lived in poverty before they were arrested for being foreigners from countries either occupied by, or at war with, the Germans, and were held for more than a year at prisoner-of-war camps.

As Allied troops finally arrived in Italy, amid the fighting, bombing, and general chaos, the camp's security measures weakened and many prisoners escaped. Peggram and Hauptmann trekked through woods and mountains for several months, once being shot at by German machine gunners, sheltering with partisan families during the day and sleeping in barns

at night. Once rescued and resettled, their requests to get Hauptmann a visa to enter the United States were denied. So, in 1945, Peggram returned alone to Massachusetts, his exciting academic fellowship having become a seven-year, life-altering tribulation.

Peggram was candid in 1950 when he wrote to classmates in his Harvard College Class of 1935 Fifteenth Anniversary Report: "After the Second World War, which I saw from Denmark and Italy, I passed through four years of hospitalization for a nervous breakdown. It appeared that I had been using seven languages more fluently than I was capable of doing."

He had been sent to Medfield State Hospital, in Massachusetts, for electroshock treatment. Discharged in 1949, he was never able to work again. (His own father, Harvey Peggram, had returned from fighting in WWI in 1919 and was hospitalized in mental institutions for the rest of his life.)

Peggram spent his own later years living with family in Dorchester, listening to classical music albums borrowed from the Boston Public Library in Copley Square. His next Harvard class report revealed slightly more: "My own postgraduate history is no particular triumph...All of which reduces my current occupation to singing in Episcopal Church choirs and cultivating enough courage to offer my antique, revised, unpublished doctoral dissertation to a publisher." He ended with, "My congratulations, meanwhile, to whatever more ambitious colleague has been recognized as V.I.P." In 1985, the class report under his name simply stated that Reed Edwin Peggram had died on April 20, 1982, in Dorchester.

A life holding such promise, that took a creative young man to Europe to follow passionate and intellectual pursuits, had ended where it began. And he never saw Hauptmann again.

Ethelene Whitmire, a writer and professor of African American studies at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, is the author of The Remarkable Life of Reed Peggram: The Man Who Stared Down WWII in the Name of Love *(published on February 3, 2026), as well as* Regina Anderson Andrews, Harlem Renaissance Librarian *(2014).*

THE UNDERGRADUATE

The Play's the Thing

What is lost when students treat learning as a means to an end

by Andrés Muedano

Near the end of the summer, I started writing a novel. It doesn't yet have a title, nor does its narrator have a name. Among my friends, this work in progress has come to be known as "the manuscript." Its opening scene features a young man at the Mexico City International Airport; the rest is too complicated to explain. I began the fall 2025 semester—my junior year—with the intention to submit "the manuscript" to a small Mexican literary program that pairs aspiring, unpublished writers with well-established novelists. It wasn't an unreachable goal, really: by the first of December, I would have to submit around 50 pages of 12-point, double-spaced Spanish prose.

I set up a schedule at the end of August: I would write for at least one hour every single day. To keep myself accountable, I even included this resolution at the top of a list of goals that hangs on the wall next to my desk. This list was the very last thing I saw as I closed the door to my dorm before heading back home for Christmas. "Write!" it reads.

Written, I had not. The deadline came and went, and I returned to campus in January with nothing tangible to show for my efforts. This failure troubled me because writing is something I thoroughly enjoy. As a child, I would compose short stories as a way to escape boredom, something to do when I wanted to play. Now in college, I was doing the same thing for the sake of getting into a literary program, and this felt like a necessary justification: a valid reason for me to spend my free time writing fiction. But turning a passion into a task had taken away what I enjoyed most about it. It made me want to stop doing it.

That I felt the need to *justify* an activity that brings me joy is symptomatic of a broader phenomenon shaping the experiences of many undergraduates. We feel pressured to treat everything we do as a means to an end, even when that renders our activities less exciting. Questions like "What do I enjoy doing?" or "What do I want to learn?" quickly turn into strategies for self-optimization: "What will look most impressive on my résumé?" we ask ourselves, or "What concentration will

Illustration by Dan Page

help me land the job I want to do *next*?"

The pre-professionalization of extracurriculars perfectly exemplifies this phenomenon. Would-be hobbies are now tools for future success—tools that will help land internships, job offers, or spots in graduate schools. Even activities like artistic clubs and advocacy groups have been affected, becoming sites for networking in the case of the former and instruments for self-fashioning in the case of the latter. In this climate, doing something for its own sake can feel like a rare, subversive act.

The pervasiveness of instrumental thinking affects our academic culture as well. This became clear to me after my friend Hannah invited me to join a reading club she was organizing with Sean D. Kelly, the dean of arts and humanities. Every two weeks throughout the fall semester, a group of students would meet Dean Kelly on the second floor of University Hall to discuss a section of *Being and Time*, the famously rich (and infamously challenging) work by German philosopher Martin Heidegger. There was something precious about these meetings, something I haven't found that often in other Harvard classrooms: no one was there for course credit, and none of us intended to use the sessions as a résumé line, either. We were there out of genuine curiosity, and, as a consequence, every conversation felt stimulating and rich.

It is no coincidence that all of us in the Heidegger reading club also joined the Dean's Student Advisory Board, a program established last September to "promote enthusiasm" for the arts and humanities. The new board comes together at a time when enrollments in the humanities are declining. In the 1970s, almost 30 percent of Harvard College first-year students planned to concentrate in the humanities. By 2022, according to the *Crimson*'s freshman survey, that number had fallen to 7 percent. Many observers have explained this decrease by pointing to economic pressures. Given the uncertain state of the job market, it can feel dangerous to commit to humanistic disciplines, as opposed to concentrations leading to more lucrative careers in finance, consulting, and technology—the path followed by just over half of College graduates in the class of 2025, according to another *Crimson* survey.

I think those analyses are correct, but I believe there is another explanation on a more personal, philosophical level. When it comes to the humanities, there is no higher purpose or utility than posing questions and looking for answers, because that quest is an end in itself. The same is true of other domains, such as basic research, where learning and building knowledge are the main sources of value. "We have this finite experience," professor of organismic and evolutionary biology Benjamin L. de Bivort told me one morning over coffee. "And I think of basic science as a way of connecting this brief existence to the reality we happen to pass through." Lacking an extrinsic purpose or application, endeavors like this demand that we carve out meaning in them for ourselves. That openness is freeing, but it can also feel frightening.

Would-be hobbies are now tools for success—tools that will help land internships, job offers, or spots in graduate schools.

Of course, this personal explanation is not separate from the economic one. Latching onto a career path with a fixed track can feel less scary, says Julia, a friend of mine who came into Harvard wanting to study comparative literature and the arts before she switched to government. "You go to law school, you become a lawyer, and you live happily," she explains. "That is really safe. Even having that in mind is really safe." Such longing for safety shapes how students approach life outside academics, too. Joining a prestigious student organization to rise through its ranks feels safer than, say, spending one's free time on personal creative or intellectual projects. External recognition takes precedence over self-initiated quests for fulfillment.

In the end, and as the parallels with basic science suggest, these anxieties are not specific to the humanities. They are relevant to our very conception of education. I spoke to Dean Kelly about this in his office on a cold Monday morning in December. "The educational experience," he told me, "should be an experience where we come to feel alive in our communities and in ourselves and in relation to what we're hoping to be." He cited Plato, who asserted that education should be a form of "serious play," and I couldn't help but think about my own approach to education: originally quite serious, but recently much more playful.

I first came into Harvard wanting to study chemical and physical biology, not really understanding all the possibilities a liberal arts education could offer. During my first semester, I finished my distributional requirements so that I'd be able to focus on biology and chemistry for the next seven semesters. I could picture the sequence of my education with almost perfect clarity: an undergraduate degree in biochemistry, a Ph.D. in computational biology, a postdoctoral fellowship, and then, hopefully, a tenure-track position.

Yet the more time I spent in the sciences, the more it dawned on me that, if I were to follow the route I had sketched out for myself, then the rest of my academic trajectory would be similar to the kind of life I was leading at Harvard. *Do I even want this?* I started wondering. Like many around me, I had latched onto a comfortable track, thinking of my education as a series of steps up a straight ladder. I hadn't thought of college in terms of what it truly was, which is a pedagogical experience. Thus came the most consequential lesson I have learned while in Cambridge—not a fact about biology, but about myself: I didn't want to be a scientist. I didn't know what I wanted to do with my life! Over the next three semesters, I changed my concentration four times. I ultimately landed on philosophy.

Part of what makes education "play,"

Dean Kelly told me, is that you are not controlling everything that happens. Students today are afraid of not being in control, he added, and that fact pervades our educational system. Indeed, during the first meeting of the advisory board, we students agreed that diverging from the well-worn path leading toward a career in finance or consulting can feel uncertain and provoke anxiety. In our December conversation, Dean Kelly offered a nudge: "It takes a lot of courage to get beyond that, but I think it's the people who have that kind of courage [who] will do interesting things, whether that's in basic science or, you know, writing novels."

Part of what makes education "play" is that you are not controlling everything.

Dean Kelly's comments reminded me of my own failed plan for the fall semester, and with this insight, I felt motivated to keep on writing. The Mexican literary program will run again in 2027, and I may or may not apply. Either way, though, I'll make sure to work on "the manuscript." ▽

2026 Board of Overseers and HAA Elected-Director Candidates

Slates announced for the spring election

The Harvard Alumni Association (HAA) nominating committee has announced the 2026 candidate slates for the Board of Overseers (one of the University's two governing boards) and the HAA's own elected directors. Balloting is open from **April 1** through **May 19** at **5:00 P.M**. Degree holders other than officers of instruction and government may vote for Overseer candidates; all degree holders can vote on the HAA elected-director candidates.

Other candidates seeking a position on this year's ballot must have submitted the required number of petition signatures by January 29.

The HAA nominating committee candidates for the 2026 ballot are the following, six to be elected Overseers and six to be elected HAA directors:

Overseer candidates*

Salvo Arena, LL.M. '00, of New York City; partner, Chiomenti

Nisha Kumar Behringer '91, M.B.A. '95, of Greenwich, Connecticut; independent director and audit committee chair, Birkenstock Holding PLC

Clive Chang, M.B.A. '11, of Miami; president and CEO, YoungArts: The National Foundation for the Advancement of Artists

Teresa Hillary Clarke '84, J.D. '89, M.B.A. '89, of Miami, chair and executive editor, Africa.com; former managing director, Goldman Sachs & Co.

Arti Garg, Ph.D. '08, of Hayward, California; EVP and chief technologist, AVEVA

Trey Grayson '94, of Walton, Kentucky; partner, FBT Gibbons; former secretary of state, Commonwealth of Kentucky

Alfredo Gutiérrez Ortiz Mena, LL.M. '98, of Mexico City; former justice, Supreme Court of Justice of the Nation (Mexico)

Nadine Burke Harris, M.P.H. '02, of Sebastopol, California; pediatrician and former surgeon general of California

Philip L. Harrison '86, M.Arch. '93, of Atlanta; CEO, Perkins&Will

*This year, the committee has nominated nine candidates for Overseer, rather than the usual eight, in light of an additional vacancy on the board due to the resignation of Vikas Sukhatme, M.D.'79 (who is the Woodruff professor of medicine at Emory University). The sixth-place finisher will complete the remaining two years of Sukhatme's term.

HAA elected director candidates

Mia Esther Alpert '99, of Los Angeles; founder and president emerita, Harvardwood

James P. "Jimmy" Biblarz '14, J.D. '21, Ph.D. '23, of Los Angeles; attorney, Hueston Hennigan; lecturer in law, UCLA School of Law

Allison Charney Epstein '89, of New York City; opera singer and producer

Medha Gargeya '14, J.D. '19, of Washington, D.C.; senior associate, WilmerHale; lecturer on law, Harvard Law School; captain, U.S. Air Force Reserves

Jakob Haesler, M.P.A. '99, of Paris, France; global head of consulting, Forvis Mazars Group

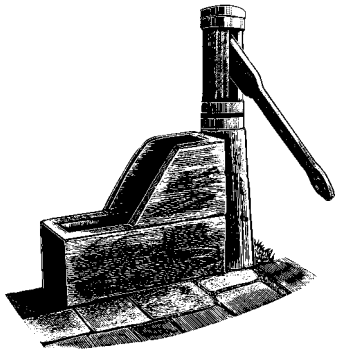
David G. Lefer '93, of New York City; director of the Innovation and Technology Forum; industry associate professor, New York University

Margarita Montoto-Escalera '78, M.B.A. '85, of San Juan, Puerto Rico; consultant, Reichard & Escalera LLC

Yoshiko "June" Nagao '96, of Tokyo, Japan; private investor

Jeffrey H. Tignor '96, of Washington, D.C.; attorney-advisor, Federal Communications Commission; senior lecturing fellow, Duke Law School ▽

Green Shoots



"Your wooden arm you hold outstretched to shake with passers-by."

Spring beckons, and with it, images of archetypal Neo-Georgian brick enclosing quads of trig lawn, crisscrossed by asphalted walks and dotted with stately trees: think the River Houses and Harvard Business School (HBS). But in his wanderings, Primus has encountered a radically new design vernacular for University landscapes of the twenty-first century and beyond. Fittingly enough, it anchors the science and engineering complex (SEC) across Western Avenue from HBS, now home to the applied scientists who are engineering that future (see "A Transformation in Allston," page 11).

Along the street, the SEC looms over a conventional row of honey locusts, oaks, and elms. The fireworks emerge out back. There, the Stimson landscape architecture studio has created an environment of unusual complexity and year-round appeal. Seen from above, the space unfolds in segments like those defined by the paths across Harvard Yard, but rearranged in disorienting ways. At the pedestrian level, there are areas of lawn, groves of trees, and even an allée of birches—but with sight lines down to swales and up to green roofs on multiple tiers of the science facility, which afford scholars and students grand city views and places to hang out.

During a wintry walkthrough with Joe Wahler, the project principal, those roofs and swales caught the eye. They have been given over to self-maintaining, evolving tangles of native species (switch grasses, New England asters, and so on), whose desiccated stems and seed heads provide visual interest when deciduous trees and bushes have shed their leaves. Against the blinding white science complex, the plants cast organic shadows, softening the built mass. All this is far from what Wahler calls the "very planar" landscape of the "original Harvard Square vocabulary." Indeed.

Those planted roofs and sunken spaces are functional, too. The vegetation reflects the eighteenth century, when much of this part of Allston was marsh and salt-hay meadow (before it was filled for industrial use). And the design elements and plantings form an intricate system of rain gardens that capture water falling on the site and guide it to the ground, where it filters down to a 78,000-gallon cistern, to be used for irrigation and in mechanical systems. In a low, riverside site, this is climate-resilient landscape: part of a highly engineered operating system befitting the science center itself.

Wahler noted that nonnative species from the Arnold Arboretum's collection—witch hazels, dawn redwoods, and others—were planted, too. This cloning brings a slice of the Arboretum to Allston residents.

All this, he acknowledges, is a "natural, unnatural landscape": the SEC and surroundings rest on and extend into a two-level, below-grade pier. In its work here, Stimson has drawn on the site's natural history, elements of Harvard's traditional look, and modern engineering to re-envision the built environment. The firm has done many other campus projects, from House renewals to the River Birch grove and amphitheater between the Music Building and the Science Center; its more formal work will be on display in the courtyard of the new American Repertory Theater now rising on North Harvard Street. But its scheme for the SEC, thoughtfully planned and beautifully executed, enjoyable in any season, has established a strong template for the campus of the future.

Guiding thoughts toward spring and channeling the great Pump helmsman/poet David McCord, A.B. 1921, A.M. '22 ("Birthday Candles," September-October 2025, page 56), Terry Murphy '59—a self-described "proud son of Upper Michigan's 'snow country'" now writing from the softer climes of Bethesda, Maryland—recalls a verse on dreary late-winter days in Cambridge and environs.

"When your correspondent was director of news, sports, and special events at WHRB," he recalls, "the 'network' informally welcomed the end of winter in New England with this brief hymn:

> Spring has come to Cambridge
> Let us gladly ring the Bell.
> But said the sadly sodden Robin
> As it ice-encrusted fell,
> 'Like hell. Like hell. Like hell.'"

To a glorious campus spring—eventually!

—PRIMUS

The exterior of the science and engineering complex (above) Photograph courtesy of Christian Phillips Photography

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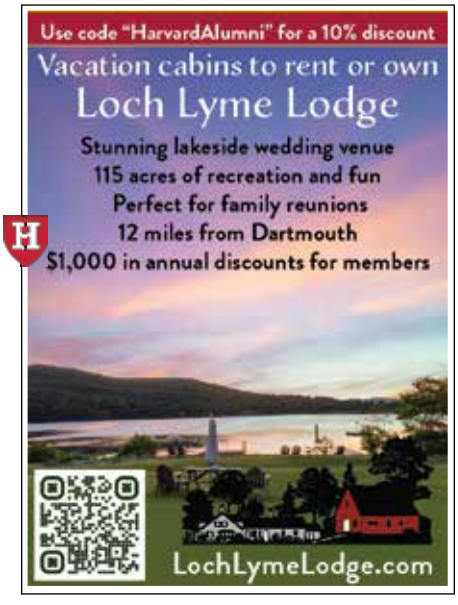

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Our charming and accomplished client is a 34-year-old, 5'6" cardiologist raised in California and currently serving as an Assistant Clinical Professor in San Francisco. She is warm, adventurous, and grounded, with strong Indian family values. She seeks a U.S.-raised, accomplished Indian gentleman up to age 38 who shares similar cultural values. **Photo/Bio**: signaturepius@banyanway.com | 470-684-0830.

It is our great pleasure to represent one of the most outstanding female executives in biotechnology and sciences. Accomplished, stunning, and with a doctorate from Brandeis and a post-doctoral degree from MIT, our client is making it a priority to meet a wonderful and confident gentleman, 55-70, for a true romance and partnership. Athletic, stylish, and fun, her background is both international and bicoastal. Our client balances her life with a healthy lifestyle, great travel, good friends, and close family. We are seeking men with excellent character and an equally interesting life to reach out and talk with us for possible introduction. East-West Coasts, kind, dynamic, and adventurous! Bio and photo to: sandy@therighttimeconsultants.com or phone us in confidence: 212-627-0121.

DC/NY: beautiful inside and out—a class act with great presence and style, our private client is an Ivy-educated public policy consultant ready for a genuine partner. Born and raised in NY, she is open to meeting men throughout the East Coast. Charming and sincere, she can light up a room. Her passions include supporting philanthropy, great family time, and wonderful travel. Her match is a dynamic, fit, accomplished, and worldly gentleman with a warm smile and a twinkle in his eyes. 68-78. Respond confidentially to: sandy@therighttimeconsutants.com or 212-627-0121.

This 46-year-old East Asian beauty lives between Manhattan and Greenwich, CT. She attended both Harvard and Columbia and worked in tech and finance. She enjoys cooking, traveling, dancing, and researching investing opportunities. She is cultured, fun-loving, stylish, and family oriented. She's looking for an intelligent, handsome, and caring gentleman. He should be fun, loyal, and interested in having a life partner. This lady is happy and refreshingly drama-free. CONTACT: Bonnie@bonniewinstonmatchmaker.com.

Seeking single gentlemen 25-75: We are a national upscale matchmaking firm personally representing exceptional ladies. Our services are complimentary to you since our clients pay all fees. Our beautiful, educated, and successful ladies are looking for gentlemen who are ready for a meaningful relationship. We look forward to hearing from you. www.elegantintroductions.com, nancy@elegantintroductions.com, 305-615-1900.

Our charming, feminine, and attractive divorcée on New York's Upper West Side seeks a cultured gentleman, 64-75, based in Manhattan or nearby (NJ, LI, CT). A lifelong arts and social justice person, her passions include fine art, the environment, books, writing, and catching a great film, performance, or concert. She is seeking a happy, financially solid, and kind man to share her beautiful life. In confidence: sandy@therighttimeconsultants.com or 212-627-0121.

Our handsome, 5'10" private client heads a multi-generational business in New England. Athletic (tennis, skiing, pickleball), social, and kind, he is the proud father of two wonderful elementary-age children. We are seeking attractive, athletic, successful women, 30s to mid-40s, in the New Haven and Northeast corridor to reach out to us for a potential introduction. Bio & Photo: sandy@therighttimeconsultants.com. 212-627-0121.

Our fabulous client is charismatic, 5'7", brunette, a super accomplished M.D. (Yale B.S., Stanford, M.D.), divorced, and now ready to find her new life partner. With strong New England and East Coast roots, she is based in Washington, DC, but spends a fair amount of time in the SF Bay area. Passionate about kids, healthcare, and giving back, she enjoys the outdoors, the arts, photography, and wonderful travel. Her match is a highly accomplished gentleman, 5'9" and above, with excellent "work-life balance," and an optimist with a kind heart and big picture life. Both East/West Coasts are fine! Bio & Photo: sandy@therighttimeconsultants.com, 212-627-0121.

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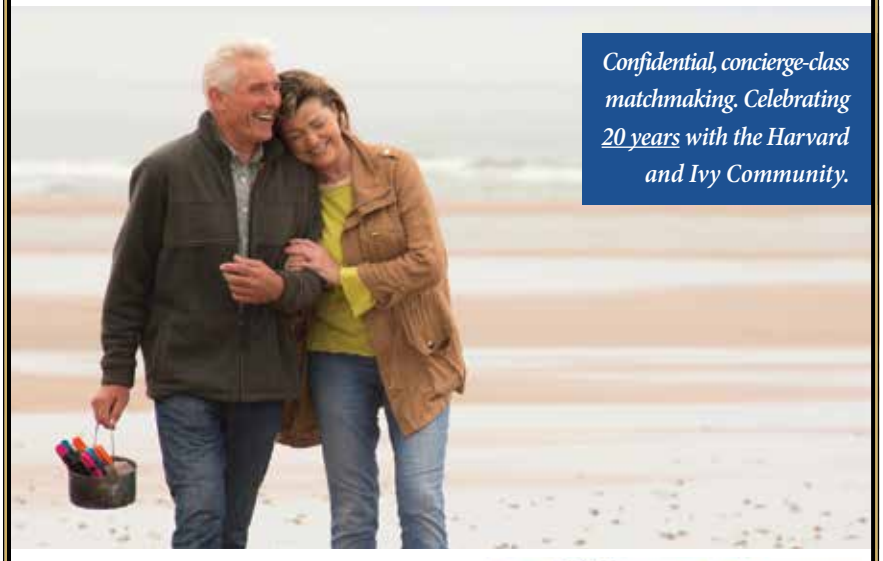

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Our slender, curvy, blonde widow, 5'5, an accomplished academic (Harvard A.B., Ed.D.) and author is seeking a kind and loving man to share her life. An experienced leadership consultant to Fortune 100 companies and remote African health facilities, she is looking forward to less work, more adventure, and pleasure with her new man, 66–74. Her match is a fit, retired, or semi–retired progressive gentleman who can enjoy residences in both Florida and New England. Reply confidentially: sandy@therighttimeconsultants.com or call 212-627-0121.

ATTENTION GENTLEMEN: Our team is looking for eligible bachelors who are interested in real relationships. I am a highly reputable matchmaker who privately represents beautiful, smart, and accomplished women. Women pay our fees, so there is no charge for men. Complementary inclusion in our database. Join now: Bonnie@bonniewinstonmatchmaker.com.

Our stunning private client, 5'5", is a seasoned foreign affairs professional with a stellar career and continues to teach and lecture at an Ivy League university. A former ambassador, multilingual, and amazingly well-traveled, her interests extend beyond the academic: music, fine arts, literature, and dance. Our client's match is a confident, dynamic gentleman (60s to early 70s) who also enjoys and appreciates music, international literature, and art, who is passionate about great conversation and finding a lasting love! Bio and photo in confidence: sandy@therighttimeconsultants.com or call 212-627-0121.

Calling all matchmakers and dating coaches! Reach single Harvard alumni, faculty, and staff in *Harvard Magazine.* Advertise in our May-June issue. Deadline: March 13, 2026. Call: 617-496-6686 or email: classifieds@harvard.edu to reserve your spot.

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Our beautiful and charming 5'6" DC widow is a Vassar and Yale Law graduate, ready to meet her new romantic person. Her match is a fit and successful gentleman, 70-80, 5'9" and up, preferably in the DC/Maryland/Northern Virginia area. Her match values kindness, integrity, and shares our client's broad and international perspective and background. He enjoys family time, travels well, and is staying active in meaningful, philanthropic, and social justice endeavors. He shares a liberal perspective and wishes to find his next-chapter partner. Respond confidentially: sandy@therighttimeconsultants.com or 212-627-0121.

Be part of our May–June issue, arriving just ahead of Commencement. This is a high-visibility opportunity to connect with 265,000 Harvard alumni, faculty, and staff during a milestone moment.

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SHANNON'S CIRCLE

You Answered...

Our January-February cover story described an 1884 maritime murder case that has captivated generations of Harvard students: the shipwrecked British crew of the *Mignonette* was adrift in a lifeboat for 21 days with no food or water before the officers slayed and ate the cabin boy. We asked readers to weigh in on what the crew should have done.

Here's a sampling of the answers we received. Find more online at **harvardmagazine.com/survey-boat**.

Eating someone after death may only be permissible if that person has agreed—much like an organ donor.

—JOHN B.

I have no problem with cannibalism per se; it's the murder that is wrong. Once one person dies, his body should be used for the benefit of the living.

—MICHAEL D.

Richard Parker was killed because he was lowest on the social hierarchy. This is wrong. If they resolved that someone should be sacrificed, it should have been by consensus and by lot.

—LAUREN G.

On our most basic level, all animals must strive to live. Choosing the cabin boy made good sense in a terrible situation as he was the least likely to survive. The fact that the others survived seems to indicate they made a sound choice.

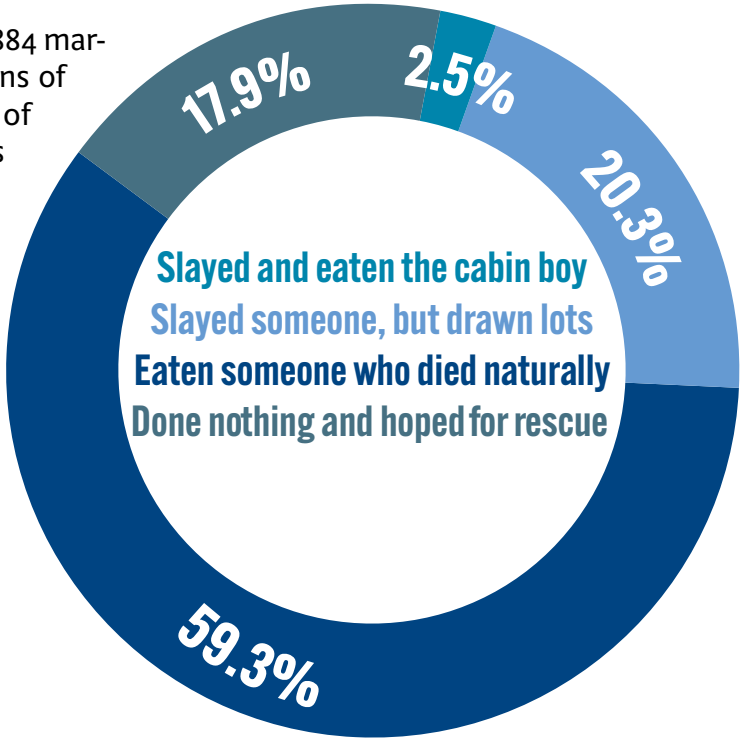
—ED E.

The captain was responsible for the safety of the yacht and the lives of the crew. So, why wasn't the lifeboat properly provisioned? Since he manifestly screwed up, why didn't the captain sacrifice himself? (Yes, I understand, it was Victorian England.)

—DON P.

Morally, one needs to do the right thing, even when it is very difficult to do so. And, living with that crime on one's conscience is not much of a life anyway.

—KATHARINE L.



"Per advice from the highly respected law firm of Dewey Eadham & Howe."

—JUSTIN A.

Next question

Our cover story, "**The Last A's You'll Ever Need**" (p.24), describes the challenges of grade inflation at Harvard College, where nearly two-thirds of all letter grades are currently A's. Faculty leaders have proposed major changes to the grading system.

We invite you to join the conversation.

WHAT SHOULD HARVARD COLLEGE DO ABOUT GRADE INFLATION?

Go to **harvardmagazine.com/grades** or use the QR code on the right to answer our survey. Results will be shared in the May-June issue.

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