

Jeffrey D. Dunn AB '77 cum laude, MBA '81

Former executive chair, president, and CEO of Sesame Workshop, and current interim president and CEO of the Boston Symphony Orchestra

Coalition For A Diverse Harvard Q&A

1. How important should diversity, equity, and inclusion be at Harvard and what strategies should the University pursue to address these? If you can, please discuss specific programs and policies (e.g. Ethnic Studies; faculty hiring; tenure and advancement; Harvard's pledge in its 1650 Charter to actively facilitate the education of American Indian Youth; Harvard's legacy of slavery; environmental justice.)

DEI is *hugely* important for Harvard. Education is the key to making true the ideal that all people are created equal. We cannot have a just and free society without equal access to a quality education. Education has always been the way in which individuals, families, and entire communities lift themselves up, including me. Harvard enjoys a unique prominence and what it does – or does not do – profoundly influences the entire educational system and, consequently, the world around us. *Therefore, diversity, equity, and inclusion must always be a cornerstone of Harvard's ethos.* Without it, the institution is depriving its students of the experience they need to become the the leaders of the just future we aspire to. We are a lamp that helps to light the world.

I further believe that diversity and inclusion must reach beyond admissions, to curriculum, faculty hiring, and tenure. The specifics of these programs and policies are academic decisions appropriately left to the University's leadership to thoughtfully study and arrive at a recommendation. Should the US Supreme Court overturn affirmative action, Harvard's leadership will need to reflect deeply upon the best way to ensure inclusive access and promote diverse scholarship within it. Claudine Gay, the newly announced 30th President of Harvard, may well find this to be the defining issue of her tenure. The role of the Board of Overseers is to provide perspective, applicable leadership experience, a conscience, and a compass to help the university's leadership move forward with its proposed policies and program recommendations.

I also applaud and support Harvard's recent efforts to have an honest reckoning with the history of slavery at the University. It is overdue but not too late. As I write this, multiple Governors are banning books and one has banned the entire AP African American Studies class. History is often uncomfortable. Rarely is it only glorious. But we cannot move forward without an honest understanding of the past. Harvard has both an obligation and an essential role to play in ensuring that the truth is known and understood, so proper decisions can be made. Its obligations extend to the fulfillment of its original land grant charter commitment to facilitate the education of American Indian Youth.

However, more important than my beliefs as an individual is the process by which Harvard as an institution makes decisions around these key topics. Too often, consequential decisions are

made without a diverse and representative group of voices. I understood and addressed this at Sesame Workshop by expanding the Operations Team that advised me as CEO to include a wider range of voices. (Please see my answer to Question 4.) If I am elected, I will work to ensure that the values of the University's leadership align with those of our diverse alumni community, and the process by which the University reaches decisions makes room at the table for everyone.

2. Please state your views on affirmative action and race conscious admissions.

I agree with and support Harvard's position that a racially diverse class is necessary to create the educational experience that will prepare students to live a productive life and exercise effective leadership in their chosen profession. Racism has been with us for centuries and the history of the American educational system is no different. The playing field has never been equal for all and the only way to fix it is to ensure that people of all races have access to the highest levels of education. To achieve this diversity, I further believe that race should be a factor in admitting an individual and building a class. The United States Supreme Court is deliberating on whether Harvard's admissions process is constitutionally compliant. I am hoping that it will uphold what the lower courts have already ruled.

Recently, I served as President & CEO, and then Executive Chair of Sesame Workshop, the nonprofit education organization that produces *Sesame Street*, and is a leader in early childhood learning. Very similar to affirmative action at the college level, the foundational premise of *Sesame Street* is to focus on society's most vulnerable children and help to level the critical early education playing field for them. The value of *Sesame Street* is that it is available free to all children, regardless of where they live or the resources their parents have.

3. What do you think Harvard's role should be in creating a more equitable, inclusive, and just society?

It is impossible for me to imagine how we can achieve an equitable, inclusive, and just society without Harvard and other similar universities playing a leading role. I think prominent universities like Harvard have perhaps *the* most important role to play. Whom we admit and what we teach has a profound impact on the entire educational ecosystem and serves as a role model and a conscience to the nation. If Harvard fails to lead on this issue, who can replace it and achieve the same impact? We have unmatched resources and influence. Harvard must have the courage to lead in these times of challenge -- even when it is under attack. If not Harvard, who?

4. What steps have you taken to bring diversity and inclusion to Harvard, to your workplace, and/or to an organization that you have been involved with?

I have confronted many of these same DEI questions professionally over the course of my career in children's media and education, and I would bring this experience and sense of responsibility to the Board of Overseers.

I joined Sesame Workshop as its CEO because I believe that so much of the opportunity and success that I have had in my life is the direct result of the education that I had access to, and I believe that every child should be afforded the same opportunity that I have been. It pains me to think of what my life would have been like without the education I got, and this prompted me to act. *Sesame Street* was a cornerstone in changing the face of television and culture. It was the very first TV program to put people of color in starring roles, helping them to become role models for children who had never seen characters that looked like themselves on TV. *It understood that representation was key to engagement and learning.* It was the very first program to say that kids from lower income families deserved the same early educational resources and access as the children from wealthier families. More than 100 million children around the world have been lifted up by Sesame's work. In 2019, *The Hollywood Reporter* called *Sesame Street* the most influential show in the history of television. Harvard celebrated 50 years of its success with a giant tribute in Sanders Theatre.

In the immediate aftermath of the murder of George Floyd, I did two things as the organization's leader. First, I expanded the organization's Operations Team, the group of executives that advised me on Sesame's strategy, policies, and procedures, to include a more diverse group of people. I already had a 50/50 leadership gender mix, but this expansion increased the number of people of color and added younger staff members to the team, both of which greatly increased the range of views that I was hearing as I made decisions. Second, we directly tackled racism and explaining it to young children. We decided that it was no longer enough just to model the behavior of inclusivity, respect, and caring in our content (which we had always done); we felt that we needed to help young children understand what was happening in the world around them that was inevitably shaping their present lives and the adults they will become.

We partnered with CNN to produce Town Halls speaking to parents and families about racism. We created educational materials that parents and teachers could use. We further developed *Sesame Street in Communities*, a program to help local community social service organizations provide effective counseling to parents, caregivers, and children on a range of topics that are chronic contributors to Adverse Childhood Experiences (ACE's). ACE's stunt effective brain development and learning, especially among the poor and vulnerable.

Internationally, in war zones, we collaborated with the International Rescue Committee to tackle the educational needs of refugee children around the world. Today, there are more refugees than at any other time in history, and our planet runs the risk of multiple generations of human beings having their entire future compromised because their children are being educationally starved. This has profound implications not only for human equity, but also for global stability. We focused the world on this issue and raised over \$200 million to help fund it, including \$100 million from the MacArthur Foundation's inaugural *100&Change* grant. We used these monies to create the largest early childhood intervention in the history of humanitarian response. In sum, at Sesame we looked at the resources and experience we had and the

prominence we enjoyed and devoted them to embracing the kids and families most often left behind because of race, ethnicity, wealth, or geography. We have made a difference.

After I retired from Sesame Workshop, I became the first Executive in Residence at Harvard's Graduate School of Education and have used my leadership experience to help mentor and support master's degree students looking to develop educational innovations that will serve the needs of kids of color.

5. If elected, would you be willing to meet occasionally with the leaders and/or members of the groups below during your tenure?

Of course. As a leader, I have always been an active listener and solicited the inputs of a cross-section of viewpoints before making decisions. There are always many, and the sheer size and breadth of our University makes this especially true at Harvard. As CEO of Sesame Workshop, I expanded the organization's senior leadership team to increase the visibility and input of a wide range of voices. If elected to the Board of Overseers, I will always welcome conversations with any of the organizations listed as part of this coalition. It is only through listening that we learn.