

**Modupe Akinola – AB '96, MBA '01, AM '06, PhD '09**  
**Coalition for a Diverse Harvard Questionnaire**

**1. How important should diversity, equity, and inclusion be at Harvard, and what strategies should the University pursue to address these? Please discuss specific programs and policies regarding, for example: Ethnic Studies; faculty hiring, tenure, and advancement; the 1650 Charter's pledge to facilitate education of American Indian youth; Harvard's legacy of slavery; environmental justice measures; etc.**

*Diversity*

As a young Black woman from Harlem, New York, who was raised by immigrant parents and attended an intellectually challenging and progressive private school, my lived experience was unique. I played in two different worlds and was thrilled to be a part of both. When I arrived at Harvard in 1992, the face and language of “diversity, equity, and inclusion” (DEI) were different from today, but their value and importance during my adolescence and my college experience were crucial. I believe the University’s commitment to DEI will be an integral part of the institution’s continued relevance and success in attracting the leaders of tomorrow. This belief has inspired me to conduct research on the topic, building on decades of scholarship that shows diversity can lead to greater creativity, problem solving, and performance, among many other benefits. Moreover, some of my research specifically examines the systems and processes that can hinder the advancement of women and people of color in organizations. In a study exploring bias in academia (covered by news outlets including *The New York Times*), my collaborators and I found that professors’ response rates to emails from prospective doctoral students depended upon the students’ perceived race and gender identity. Professors were more responsive to White male students than to students from other backgrounds (our study examined female, Black, Hispanic, Indian, or Chinese students) in almost every discipline and bias was particularly pernicious at private universities. This research contributes to a large literature suggesting that women and people of color face bias in the processes leading up to becoming faculty – even before reaching the formal admissions stage – and underscores the need for institutions like Harvard to institute systems to prevent discrimination in formal processes (such as hiring and admission). These systems should be coupled with those that nudge decision-makers away from the unintended biases that affect their informal decisions (such as who to mentor).

*Equity*

This example of ways to redress bias drawn from my research captures what equity should look like in practice as it entails creating fair processes and treatment so that everyone, regardless of their background, race, or gender, has the same opportunities to thrive. Equity involves removing structural and historical barriers. Equity also involves acknowledging past inequities. We cannot forget that elite universities like my original academic home of Harvard and my current academic home of Columbia were established on lands taken from indigenous people and built from the labor of the enslaved. Inequity is built into the very foundations of these institutions, necessitating a commitment to investigating this history and engaging with the moral implications of such a past. Harvard has distinguished itself with the Presidential Initiative

on Harvard and the Legacy of Slavery, providing a strategic framework to address inequity that persists as a result of the school's history. The teamwork involved in exploring this history and the incredibly thorough and thoughtful report produced made me very proud to be an alum of an institution that was courageous enough to confront its painful past. However, all too often, the key recommendations emanating from reports like this are not acted upon. Therefore, accountability mechanisms should be put in place to ensure the University continues to move this work forward.

### *Inclusion*

A critical component of inclusion is being able to engage each person and to make them feel valued and an essential part of Harvard. This can be done through offering courses and extracurricular opportunities where students from all backgrounds see themselves in the materials, in the faculty, and can share their lived experiences with others without fear. Additionally, diversifying curricular and extracurricular experiences helps those from more homogeneous environments broaden their repertoires offering a window into the experiences of others. But my perspective on inclusions not only focuses on students and faculty, but also extends to staff. One constituency that is often overlooked on University campuses is staff – the administrators, contractors, volunteers, unionized workers that make the school run efficiently. The greatest demographic diversity on campus is typically found in staff, yet staff often don't feel they have a voice. Recognizing this at my own institution has led me to spearhead efforts to solicit input and feedback from students, faculty and staff so everyone in the community feels a sense of belonging, regardless of their role. My hope is that Harvard is likewise considering the perspectives of all constituents and that DEI efforts are prioritized broadly and not concentrated among certain populations.

## **2. Given the Supreme Court's ruling against race-conscious admissions, what measures should the University adopt to promote student-body diversity along multiple dimensions, including racial diversity?**

The University needs to first emphasize that diversity of all kinds, including race, remains a core value, and very clearly articulate the multiple categories of diversity that create a vibrant campus community. These categories may include educational disadvantages, parents' educational background, and socioeconomic hardship, many of which intersect with race. Further, categories outside of race that are underrepresented need to be identified and measures taken to ensure they are given adequate consideration in the admissions process as well. For instance, there may be schools and neighborhoods that are not well represented in the student body where greater cultivation efforts should be made and attentiveness given during application review. Not to mention, the University should ensure there is adequate diversity on admissions teams so that admissions representatives are savvy enough to recognize subtleties in applicants' lists of extracurricular activities, recommendation letters, and responses to other demographic questions (such as country of citizenship or native language) that can offer insight into sometimes overlooked dimensions of diversity. Additionally, to build a truly diverse applicant pipeline, it is important for the University to expand its outreach to organizations that support underrepresented communities and form partnerships with these

organizations. In sum, the Supreme Court's ruling precludes using race as a reason to admit an applicant, but it does not preclude being even more thoughtful and creative about how to define, assess, and maximize diversity on campus.

**3. Do you support the elimination of admissions preferences for recruited athletes, children of donors, and children of alumni (legacy)? Please address all three categories.**

The Supreme Court ruled that race-conscious admissions violate the 14<sup>th</sup> amendment, which suggests that *any* preferential treatment in admissions processes should be eliminated. While I question this ruling (as affirmative action was put in place to remedy the history of segregation, race-based exclusion, and quota systems that capped the number of students of color allowed to enroll in universities), it sets an important precedent that now needs to be acted upon. While I donate to Harvard and would love for generations of my family to benefit from these donations and legacy status, I recognize that preferentially treating children of donors and alumni disadvantages people who have fewer connections and less privilege. While several of my college roommates and close friends were incredibly talented recruited athletes (and it brings me great joy to see Harvard triumph in athletics), I am aware that becoming exceptional at a sport can require financial resources and time, often at the expense of academic success. Therefore, the practice of athletic recruitment can be advantageous for those with greater means, regardless of academic performance, thus perpetuating socioeconomic inequity. As a result, these practices should be eliminated. I do, however, believe that unlike admissions preferences for legacy and donor children, athletic prowess is a special skill that should be treated similarly to other extracurriculars in the admissions process. Excelling in athletics demonstrates an individual's ability to persevere, push through adversity, thrive under pressure, and balance competing demands. These characteristics should be given similar weight when displayed by athletes as someone who demonstrates them through excelling in the arts, or holding multiple jobs, or generally showing exceptional talent on other dimensions that contribute to the diversity of the student body.

**4. In light of recent turmoil—from the doxing of students to the resignation of President Gay—how do you think Harvard can ensure key institutional values such as: academic independence from political and financial strong-arming; free expression on campus (including the right to protest); and safety for all?**

Recent turmoil has made it clear that in this era, we are having far fewer productive dialogues than we should at Harvard and beyond. To remedy this, more dialogue-based initiatives that help foster greater understanding across such a vast and varied student body need to be introduced. These can include tools that help students enhance their critical listening skills, embrace difficult conversations, and discuss identity. Harvard can also enrich professional development for faculty, strengthening their ability to manage diverging viewpoints on sensitive topics, particularly in times of crisis. These activities should be complemented with clear Rules of Conduct, outlining parameters that allow for freedom of expression in a safe, respectful, harassment-free manner that yields an open exchange of ideas across varied perspectives. Harvard's leadership needs to clearly articulate its fundamental commitment to

remaining independent from outside stakeholders by delineating acceptable and unacceptable (1) behavior from alumni and (2) attempts to influence the university. If these actions are taken and principles upheld, Harvard will be successful in fulfilling its goal of developing students intellectually, socially, emotionally, and empathetically, enabling them to shape their communities and the world.

**5. What steps have you taken to bring diversity and inclusion to Harvard, to your workplace, and/or to other organizations? Are you a member of any of the signing groups below?**

I am a member of the Harvard Black Alumni Society (HBAS).

As a first generation African American with parents from Nigeria, Togo, and Ghana, one of my key goals as a Harvard undergraduate was to share this rich cultural background with others. I did so as part of the Harvard African Students Association, helping to organize an inaugural fashion show and cultural exposé, which offered students a peek into life and culture on the African continent. Further, through my involvement at Harvard Student Agencies, first as a clerical worker then an assistant manager, Vice President, and an Alumni Board Member, a key focus was ensuring diverse representation among our student employees.

This commitment to diversity continued as an MBA at Harvard Business School, where I co-chaired the second annual Africa Business Conference. To this day, this remains the largest student-run African conference of its kind in the world, gathering experts and leaders from across Africa to explore and expand economic opportunities on the continent. As an HBS alum, I also helped organize a celebration in 2018, marking the 50th anniversary of the founding of the African American Student Union. This event helped foster a sense of inclusion and belonging for HBS students and alumni of color by showing the impact that the presence of African American students has made on the school over the decades. I continue to be actively involved in the HBS African American Alumni Association, and the HBS Women's Association of New York, and I have been a reunion section chair for the past 23 years. Through each of these activities, I make sure to represent the voices of people who may feel unheard or underrepresented.

Before and after pursuing my MBA at HBS, I was a Consultant at Bain & Company where I was actively involved in recruiting underrepresented groups and creating systems and structures to ensure everyone thrived. My efforts were so successful at increasing the diversity of the consulting staff, decreasing turnover of Black consultants, and embedding a DEI lens within professional development systems that when I made the decision to leave the firm to pursue my PhD, I was asked by company leadership to continue my work part-time as the first ever Head of Diversity for the company. I held this position for four years until the final year of my PhD Program.

My passion and commitment to DEI has continued throughout my journey in academia. When I arrived at Columbia Business School after completing my PhD in 2009, I was the only Black tenure-track faculty member out of more than 130 colleagues. This difficult reality made it very clear that I needed to serve in three key ways: 1) being a resource to students and staff of color,

2) being an active proponent and creator of sustainable DEI efforts, and 3) being a bridge-builder across differences. For more than a decade, I have focused on these three goals, while contributing to DEI scholarship in each of these domains. I am also proud to be the first Black faculty member in the school's more than 100-year history to progress through the ranks from Assistant Professor to chaired Full Professor.

There are now five Black tenure-track faculty at the school and several non-tenure-track Black faculty, in part, as a result of my efforts to implement structures and processes that ensure diversity remains a focus at the school. The first step in this process was co-chairing a Diversity Committee, resulting in the creation of a Vice Dean of DEI position. This position has been pivotal in making progress in faculty hiring as it has led to the establishment of consistent DEI practices that create accountability within the school's leadership team. I have assisted the Vice Dean of DEI in establishing systems to identify the best and brightest faculty of color, mitigate bias from entering faculty recruiting processes, and implement initiatives that foster inclusion to bolster retention efforts. These actions extend to the classroom where I have worked with the Vice Dean of DEI and faculty colleagues to incorporate DEI-related materials in the curriculum, and increase the diversity of case protagonists, panelists, and speakers in both classroom and extracurricular programming. Further, I have collaborated with colleagues at Harvard convening a best practices conference for teaching and institutionalizing DEI processes across peer business schools.

Lastly, I am an informal advisor to several student organizations, some of which represent students from marginalized groups, participating in student conferences and events, hosting gatherings, supervising independent studies, and generally helping students navigate oft-times challenging experiences at the school. My mentorship extends to PhD students, undergraduates, and staff of color where I serve as an advocate and spokesperson on their behalf to the larger university and administration.

In conclusion, I have engaged in an incredibly wide range of DEI activities at Harvard, Columbia, and in every organization where I have spent significant time. I consider myself fortunate to be able to use the opportunities I have been given to help students, staff, and colleagues in both the private and public sectors experience the benefits of a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive professional and social world.

## **6. What role do you think Harvard can and should play in defending democracy in the US and around the world?**

I am a member of the Leadership Now Project, an organization founded in 2017 by one of my HBS classmates, that is committed to ensuring the United States remains a healthy democracy, with a fair and equitable market economy and a thriving civil society. The organization has galvanized business and thought leaders by providing evidence-based research on topics including state-level political metrics and the role of business and nonprofits in upholding democracy to keep its members informed on the mounting threats to democracy around the world. This organization is diverse on multiple dimensions, but one important metric is that

more than 30% of its members are Harvard alumni representing schools including HBS, HKS, and HLS.

Further, over half of its advisors are Harvard faculty from different schools. This points to the critical role Harvard continues to play in safeguarding democracy through educating society about the importance of democratic ideals. Moreover, it demonstrates that a Harvard education can imbue individuals with skills and passion empowering them to create organizations like the Leadership Now Project that are making a difference in the world.

The notion of equality and freedom of speech are deeply held beliefs in educational institutions like Harvard, but these beliefs started as democratic ideals of the United States. Harvard, as an institution, must continue to be open about the very real challenge of balancing those protections with the need for safety and mutual respect amongst all sectors of our community. As such, it is important to remember that our collective aspirations are deeply intertwined. Harvard's institutional commitment to growth, and not just learning from but correcting past errors and mistakes, will ensure that the University remains a vibrant institution that will continue to lead the world well into the 21st century.