

Katherine Collins
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Candidate for Harvard Board of Overseers

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Dear Members of:

Alumnae-i Network for Harvard Women
Coalition for a Diverse Harvard
First Generation Harvard Alumni
Harvard Arab Alumni Association
Harvard Asian American Alumni Alliance
Harvard Black Alumni Society
Harvard Gender & Sexuality Caucus
Harvard Latino Alumni Alliance
Harvard Progressive Jewish Alumni
Harvard South Asian Alumni Alliance
Harvard Tamil Sangam Alumni
Harvard University Muslim Alumni
Native American Alumni of Harvard University,

Thank you for the opportunity to address the vital issues raised in your questionnaire regarding the upcoming Overseer election. Please find my responses below.

How important should diversity be at Harvard? What strategies should the University pursue regarding this?

Diversity and inclusion are vital for any endeavor, any institution, and any society to thrive over the long term, including Harvard. When diverse forms of knowledge are reflected in problem solving, better and more creative solutions can be found. When diverse perspectives are brought to debate and dialogue, more complete understanding can be achieved. When diverse experiences are brought together, the world opens up and is illuminated. These elements form the core of civic society, the foundation for effective leadership, and the essence of education, and are completely integral to Harvard's mission.

I am encouraged that in some areas the discussion at Harvard has advanced from assembling diverse populations to a more complete discussion of inclusion. I am also encouraged that the focus on diversity and inclusion extends across multiple dimensions, including admissions, faculty, curriculum, and campus. The current Ethnic Studies discussions at Harvard reflect an especially important element, since faculty decisions are by their nature long-duration and at the heart of any academic institution.

Though it is clear that there are many ongoing and complex issues to resolve, it is also clear that progress on these issues is essential to the long-term success and relevance of the University. It would be a privilege to serve on the Board of Overseers to support the University as these considerations of diversity and inclusion continue to deepen and extend.

How can Harvard encourage more diversity among its alumni leaders and activities?

While some meaningful strides have been made in diversity of composition of the student body and faculty at the University, there will always be potential for further improvement. With respect to diversity of alumni leadership, for example, a holistic approach to recruitment will continue to be a benefit, and there is likely an opportunity to consider many elements of inclusion as well.

For example, in my professional realm there is a longstanding tradition of early morning meetings, which have always presented challenges for parents and for those who live far from the office. This was an inconvenience, for sure, and more importantly it sent a message of “not you” to those for whom it was a hardship. When those meeting logistics were changed, the outcomes were improved for all participants. This is a very small example of inclusionary practice, to be sure, but actions like this have helped to close the gap between the improving statistics of diversity and improving the experience of inclusion. I expect that there is a similar series of considerations for continuing to improve diversity of alumni leaders, some relatively simple and easy to address, and others more complex.

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

A holistic and race-conscious admissions approach benefits the University in numerous ways. A homogeneous educational experience – whether inside or outside of the classroom – does not offer a broad or true education, fails to prepare students for the richly diverse world in which we live, and carries the risk of perpetuating historical bias and injustice. My time at Divinity School would have been of significantly lower quality and value if the community and the curriculum had not evolved to include such a wide representation of religions, life experiences, and personal backgrounds. In both formal and informal ways, diversity is essential to education, and admissions policy is one part of creating conditions for the most complete and enriching educational experience.

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

Harvard's influence is meaningful, and therefore the responsibilities of the institution are meaningful as well. For example, the dialogue around University investment and financial practices, including the role that these play in influencing equity, justice, and inclusion across multiple settings, raises an important and appropriate set of questions.

It matters which questions the University chooses to address. It matters who is invited to be part of dialogue and decision-making. It matters what material is taught, and by whom. It matters how difficult challenges are navigated. What a joy and a privilege, that it all matters! Though it is a never-ending and sometimes arduous path for an institution to be a true leader – and a true partner – in the pursuit of an equitable, just, and inclusive society, it is worthy work, and vital.

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

My own career has included a strong focus on diversity and inclusion, areas where the U.S. financial industry has not typically shone, and has not even demonstrated much progress. When I began my work in asset management, for example, about 20% of portfolio managers were women; now this number is around 10%, and it's even lower for people of color. In a business that prides itself on objectivity and analytical rigor, these proportions are indefensible.

In addition to being an active example of that 10% myself, I have been able to influence recruitment of a more diverse employee base and, perhaps more importantly, have been able to serve as a mentor and advocate for many. As the gender lens investing movement was taking root, I was an active advisor to a number of endeavors and a board member at Criterion Institute, a pioneer in this area. And as a portfolio manager for two large sustainable investing portfolios, I am able to directly question corporate leadership teams on these same issues, amplifying best practices and encouraging further progress.

In my nonprofit roles, a similar focus is found: as board chair of Last Mile Health, our mission is to make access to health care as universal as illness. In pursuit of that mission, ensuring that our own team reflects diversity and local leadership has been essential. In my board roles at the Santa Fe Institute and the Omega Institute, expanded diversity of both teachers and learners has been vital to their organizational missions and successes. Though the methods for pursuing this diversity and inclusion vary from one context to another, the benefits are apparent in all settings.

What's most striking to me as I consider how these threads have woven together across my career and my life is that there is an analytical element, full of data and policies and procedures, and there is also a deeply human element, full of emotion and connection and commitment. I am committed to both of these elements. Asking a different question - a better question - with true curiosity, and then being fully engaged in its follow-through, has been a hallmark of my work in all areas.

It is this spirit of sincere inquiry, heartfelt support, and focused follow-through that I hope to bring to the Board of Overseers, in service to the University and all of its stakeholders.

Sincerely,

Katherine Collins