

**Aditi Banga**

**Harvard College '09**

**Candidate for Elected Director of the Alumni Association Board**

**1. How important should diversity be at Harvard? What strategies should the University pursue to address diversity? (Please discuss specific programs and policies, including Ethnic Studies; faculty hiring, tenure, and advancement; and Harvard's pledge in its 1650 Charter to actively facilitate the education of American Indian youth, if you can.)**

In recent years, a wealth of research has proven out with data what we already anecdotally knew: that having diverse perspectives of all sorts at the table – race, geography, socioeconomic, abilities, political leanings, etc. – sets up organizations and groups for greater success in the short and long-term. For Harvard to maintain its position at the forefront of higher education and push that boundary further ahead, it needs to embrace diversity from all angles – the student body, faculty, staff, academics, extracurriculars, programmatic, and social. If elected to this position, I will work with the school's students, faculty, staff, and alumni to develop meaningful goals, and make progress on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion over the course of my tenure.

Let's start with the student body. I discuss a key element of diversity in the student body in my answer to question 2, but to summarize here, an admissions process that allows for Harvard's student composition to more accurately reflect both national and global communities is essential. Therefore, race-conscious admissions, affirmative action, and consideration of other axes of diversity are essential. While the University is strongly committed to progress in this area, much work remains to be done. For example, while Harvard pledged in 1650 to educate "Indian youth" in addition to "English youth," Native Americans remain a mere 2% of the student body today. Reflecting on my own experience attending Harvard, this element of the school's mission and history is not widely discussed, which means that there is no way to hold the school accountable. So Harvard needs to do more, not only to advance the makeup of its community through admission policies, but also for the community to learn about its history so that there is an opportunity to evaluate the school's progress. Beyond students admitted, diversity is also critical to the very structure of the Harvard admissions program, from making the application accessible to a greater breadth of students – here I have been very heartened to see that Harvard continues to embrace optional SATs, a policy it initially instituted due to COVID – and with the staff that review applications and alumni who conduct interviews. And once students are on campus, we need to aim for equity, not equality. That means supporting students who may not have received the prep to adapt to college courses with ease, or ensuring that those who need to find a source of income to help pay for college are not hindered by circumstance from fully partaking in Harvard's educational and extracurricular offerings because they need to balance coursework, extracurriculars, and social lives with maintaining a job to pay the bills.

With regards to faculty and staff, I'm inspired to learn about the 2020 hiring of Sherri Charleston, Harvard's first Chief Diversity and Inclusion Officer, and the creation of Harvard's Office for Equity, Diversity, Inclusion, and Belonging. And I'm proud that this office has taken real, concrete actions in its short life to create programs and initiatives that advance its mission on campus, such as the Affinity

Spaces speaker series and the new annual Dr. Martin Luther King Jr commemorative lecture. It is also heartening to see the progress being made with faculty, with 60% of tenure track and 41% of tenured faculty now being women and/or minorities. Furthermore, while progress has been slower than we would like, it is also encouraging to see that two months ago in Dec 2021, Harvard finally appointed three new faculty to focus on ethnic studies such as Latinx, Asian American, and Muslim studies. Currently Harvard has fallen behind amongst peer institutions in promoting ethnic studies – while there is a secondary field and History and Literature has a sub-track for ethnic studies, there is not a separate concentration on this topic. Frankly, all concentrations could embrace sub-tracks on this front – and that is a conversation I'd like to start if elected to this position. For example, Economics could have a sub-track that is built around coursework on financial inclusion and microloans; History and Science could have a sub-track focused on healthcare disparities based on race. The possibilities here are endless and especially appropriate for a cross-disciplinary school like Harvard.

Things get trickiest on the extracurricular and social front because the University does not directly control student groups and social life. It's critical, though, for the University to work with student leaders of clubs and organizations to ensure they have all embraced diversity and inclusion in their charters and are actively practicing these values. Extracurriculars are also a place where alumni can play an active role in encouraging their campus organizations to be truly open and inclusive – whether that means onboarding more diverse groups of students, or committing to hosting and/or attending a certain amount of programming in partnership with the Office for EDIB, for example.

Harvard is not perfect, and as articulated above, while it has made great strides in certain aspects of diversity, it needs to do better in others. However, what inspires me is that it seems the core culture of the University is increasingly embracing the need for, and undeniable benefits of, diversity and that the University is becoming more comfortable as time passes with holding a critical mirror to itself to reflect on where it could be doing better. A lot of the conversations we are having today did not seem as feasible just 12 years ago when I was a student at Harvard. That's why I'm so excited to be running for this position now – if elected, I intend to voice my values and ideas as laid out above with conviction.

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

I believe strongly that affirmative action and race-conscious admissions, along with consideration of other axes of diversity, are essential for Harvard and other colleges for multiple reasons: (1) to give students of all backgrounds who have made the most of their circumstances to have an opportunity to get to the next level, (2) for the colleges to realize their missions of pushing society forward and Harvard to play a central role in leading higher education reform, and (3) to create a richer community for EVERYONE at Harvard to learn from each other. If we're being honest with ourselves, I think we would all acknowledge that having the opportunity to attend Harvard is not something any of us has achieved alone without support of some kind. For some of us, that might mean parents who have guided and created opportunities for us, or prep schools we've attended that have helped shape a path for us, or teachers or members of our community who have sponsored us. For others, affirmative action and race-conscious admissions play this role. During my time at Harvard, and in the years since as an alum, I've met students who are the first of their families to attend college, or even complete high school, and

who came from a high school that has not sent students to Harvard frequently or at all in the past. Despite coming from a starting line that is further behind, they have proactively made the most of what opportunities they were given and have extremely strong potential. Affirmative action and race-conscious admissions identifies these students and opens the next door for them so that they can continue to develop and grow. And beyond affirmative action being the right thing to do to provide students with equal opportunity, as mentioned above, it is also undeniable that diversity drives creativity, innovation, and better outcomes for us all. Affirmative action and race-conscious admissions are one way to enrich Harvard's campus and create an even stronger academic, extracurricular, and social environment for all members of the community.

The only other thing I would add is that inclusive admissions policies are just the first step. Once students arrive on campus, it is imperative that the University supports them and invests in their success – that includes providing adequate financial aid such that students do not feel they need to choose between having a job on campus or pursuing extracurricular activities that students with greater economic means are able to pursue, or access to tutoring services that help students who may not have had practice writing or studying at a college level in high school to gain the skills and confidence they need to not immediately fall behind in coursework. If elected, I plan to champion and help build concrete programming on campus to support students when they arrive at Harvard, because opening a door does not mean much if students do not feel supported and welcome on campus, and like they can integrate just as well with the community, classes, and professors as other students.

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

The University's mission is to be "at the frontier of academic and intellectual discovery...in the pursuit of truth, knowledge, and a better world." So on its own admission, Harvard believes it plays a central role in creating a more equitable, inclusive, and just society. Harvard must of course increase diversity and inclusion on campus by taking all the actions I have discussed in detail in the prior questions – but it also has an obligation to infuse students with a deep appreciation for, and unwavering commitment to, fostering diversity, equity, and inclusion while they are on campus, so that when they leave and go on to become leaders in the world (whether that means leading a company or country, being an entrepreneur, being a community organizer or activist, or any other path they wish to take), they are bringing that commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion into a new environment. The only way to change society is to bring conversations about the importance of diversity to the forefront in all forums, spaces, and corners of the world – Harvard's alumni body can be ambassadors for inclusion long after they leave campus, and that is the true mission the school should strive to achieve.

Separate from the impact the school has on its student body and faculty, it would be foolish to not recognize that Harvard as an institution has a tremendous amount of power in society and is seen as a beacon of truth and knowledge. Given that power, the University must lead by example: taking concrete steps to increase diversity in the student body and faculty, building more cross-culturally minded concentrations and thinking about intersectionality in academic courses, and ensuring an equal playing field and greater investment in students' success who may need a helping hand. And as it makes an investment in its own diversity and inclusion, Harvard should not be shy to shine a light on the issues it is

trying to solve on campus, and to share its thoughts, findings, and learnings with the world, whether through published reports, conversations with other academic institutions, and more.

**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? Are you a member of any of the signing organizations below?**

As a student, one of my most rewarding experiences was participating in the Crimson Key Society and actively contributing to our Freshman Week programming. That's because Freshman Week is students' very first actual experience with Harvard after the joy of getting admitted and accepting that admission. I took my role as helping set the tone for a positive, encouraging environment for the next four years very seriously, and helping everyone feel like they had a place at Harvard. A lot of this is inspired by my own personal experiences growing up – I was born in India and lived there for the first 10 years of my life before my family moved internationally. Attending an American school was a culture shock for me and I felt so completely out of place. I had been a math whiz in India but I failed all of my tests in the 4th grade after moving because I didn't know American terminology for currency (nickels, dimes, etc.). I was so self-conscious of how no one could properly pronounce my name or how different my family and I looked from everyone else. After two weeks of sitting alone during recess, I received a thoughtful, handmade card by the few other non-American and non-white students in my class inviting me to join them during recess. I'll never forget the kindness extended to me, and it's what inspired me to pass it on with Freshman Week at Harvard.

Since graduating, I've tried to maintain the same mindset by responding to every student who reaches out via the Alumni portal asking for career advice, observing that they are often from young women and minorities; participating as an alumni admissions interviewer so that I can help shape more diverse future classes at Harvard; and also using my prior tenures on the Alumni Association Board to contribute to committees that are trying to make the active alumni community more diverse by better engaging mid-career women, who have a steep drop-off in participation because of family and work commitments. This is a big reason why I'm applying for this Elected Director role – my husband and I just had our first baby 2 months ago and although things have never felt more hectic, I want to be a role model for other young women alums who are starting families of their own to see that active alumni can look like them, too.

Professionally, I have also always been part of the minority in the fields I've worked, from management consulting to technology. When I first made the switch to technology as a Product Manager, I was one of 3 women at the startup of 40+ people that I joined, and the only one in a tech role. As a result, at every company, I made it a point to be an active member of the women's group (or to start one, in the case of the start-up), lead projects and initiatives for it, and take on a mentorship role to guide more junior employees who are interested in business and/or technical careers. One of the hardest aspects of this has been not having a ton of great role models myself at many of the companies I was at of how you can be a woman of color and be a strong, respected leader. But in my current role at Instagram, I am now finally on a team that is overwhelmingly comprised of women of all races and have a female manager, and I've realized how much confidence I've gained that I can be successful in the world of technology

and business because I see others who look like me have done it. So my hope in applying for this role within the Alumni Association Board is that I can make it easier for other recent graduates who are women and minorities to see themselves in this role and take the plunge to apply.

Most recently at Instagram, I've also had an opportunity to push diversity forward in two ways: (1) I was selected by company leadership to serve on an 8-person cross-functional team at the company to amplify diverse voices, both internally and externally with partners and advertising clients. And (2) in my role as head of Shopping Partnerships, I've made celebrating diverse businesses a central tenet, from ensuring the percentage of managed partners that were Black-owned, Latinx-owned, or Native American-owned businesses went from 2% to 25% in the span of 6 months, to bringing more small businesses into the fold as managed partners, so that it wasn't only the largest brands that were getting access to guidance from the company on how to utilize our platform to further their e-commerce ambitions.

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

Yes, of course. The entire Alumni Association Board, including the Elected Director role I am being considered for, exists to represent and further the experience of Harvard alumni. It's therefore critical for us to meet alumni that represent different cross-sections of our community, including the leaders/members of these groups. I love that an element of doing this role is having yet another reason to meet and spend time with alumni, so I look forward to this!