

## HAA ELECTED DIRECTOR QUESTIONNAIRE – MAIYA WILLIAMS VERRONE

As in prior years, we are providing a questionnaire to all candidates for Overseer and Elected Director. Your answers to the following questions will help guide our members in their voting. **Please reply with a pdf** with your answers to this address, [directorelection@gmail.com](mailto:directorelection@gmail.com), by **Monday, February 15..**

### 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 and faculty hiring, tenure, and advancement, if you can.)

Diversity is essential for the type of education Harvard seeks to provide its students, in all the schools across the university. When Harvard alums are asked what they remember most about their time at Harvard, what was most rewarding in their education, most people mention the quality and diversity of the student body. For those rich conversations and interactions to occur you must have people from all sorts of different backgrounds, people who come from different regions of the United States and the world, people of different ethnicities, genders, income brackets, religious beliefs, and political leanings. And then you want all of those diverse individuals to have the intellectual curiosity to meet each other, exchange ideas, debate and collaborate. That to me is the ideal.

But how do you attract these students? First you must make the university feel like a welcoming place for everyone. First, that means the student body must be fully diverse. Students in a minority category should be able to find enough people in the group with which they identify to feel like comfortable, seen, and valued.

Second, the tenured faculty should be equally diverse, so that the students can see that the opinions and teaching styles of people within the group they identify are valued and respected.

Third, there should be spaces where all of these different ethnic and racial groups can gather, such as a multicultural center, so people can see their cultural identities represented.

Fourth, Harvard should create an Ethnic Studies Department. The past four years have made obvious the need for people to understand the histories and social structures of communities different from their own. Ethnic studies seems not only to be an essential concentration option, but it should also be a requirement within the Harvard undergraduate curriculum. It is essential that our future leaders have within their higher education a critical examination of power and privilege and a solid understanding of oppressive structures, as well as an understanding of the specific burdens experienced by people of certain races and ethnicities. Harvard should really be much further along in this regard. It's embarrassing that other universities, particularly other Ivy League Universities, are so far ahead of Harvard in this area. We are no doubt losing students to these other schools.

Fifth, diversity is not confined to race and ethnicity. The same welcoming atmosphere should also be there for gender non-binary students, first generation students, and low-income students. There should be resources to support the special needs of these groups, ideally staffed by people who have had some experience with the issues these groups face. The recent pandemic exposed some of Harvard's blind spots in this area, particularly with low-income students facing a lack of housing and tech support for virtual learning.

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

Having been an interviewer for over twenty-five years and an area chair for the San Fernando Valley in Southern California for five years, I have seen up close the wealth of diversity within the

Harvard applicant pool. I believe that this is an area where Harvard actually does a very good job, seeking out students beyond the “feeder” schools, looking beyond test scores to evaluate students on what they have done with what they have been given. As I mentioned above, I believe diversity is the key to providing a rich collegiate experience, and race is certainly one of many elements that go into building that diverse student body.

That said, it would be a gross mischaracterization to label admissions practices as “affirmative action.” This term suggests there is a “favoritism for groups which have historically been discriminated against,” but that is not the reasoning behind Harvard’s admissions decisions. I would, however, like to point out that race and ethnicity are not the only non-academic elements that Harvard considers when building a class; there are applicants who are favored for their athletic ability, their artistic ability, being a Harvard legacy, or being from a family that is deemed likely to make a large donation to the University. One can debate the fairness of all of these examples of “favoritism,” but it is unfair to target race as the only non-academic element that goes into the admissions decisions.

Personally I think having such an amazing array of students, young people who are excellent in so many fields, who have demonstrated leadership, intellectual curiosity, perseverance and grit under extraordinary circumstances... these are the people with whom you want to have conversations late into the evening, not students who are only excellent in test taking and grade grubbing.

**3. What do you think Harvard's role should be in creating a more equitable, inclusive, and just society? For example, please share any thoughts on divestment from fossil fuels and the prison industry and on the role of the Harvard University Police Department, issues of concern to current students.**

Training students to create a more equitable, inclusive and just society should be one of Harvard’s primary goals. To that end Harvard should be modeling what that means and divest from industries that destroy the planet, such as the fossil fuel industry, and instead invest in clean energy, an industry that will no doubt replace fossil fuels as the primary source of energy as we take on climate change. They should not be supporting any industry that supports systemic racism, such as the prison-industrial complex.

The Harvard University Police Department should be defunded, and then abolished. The presence of armed police on campus creates an unwelcoming space for students who may have experienced trauma with police in the past, particularly students of color. As a private police force The HUPD is also unregulated, and thus unaccountable to the public. That non-transparency is concerning, particularly in light of the HUPD’s history of discriminatory practices.

Harvard is the ideal place to develop and institute the kinds of novel alternatives to policing that can be held up as an example for other institutions and communities to follow. Investment in mental health care, housing for the unhoused, substance abuse counseling, crisis response teams, and other non-violent solutions focused on healing and uplifting the community would be a better use of their money.

**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?**

As a director on the board of the Harvard Club of Southern California (HCSC) I have been instrumental in creating the Anti-Racism Committee (ARC), providing our alumni with webinar events about systemic and structural racism. We began with a very popular informational event defining anti-racism, then followed that with affinity groups conversations. People were split into groups by race and in that “safe space” were encouraged, with the help of a facilitator, to ask

questions and raise concerns brought about by the recent protests over George Floyd's murder, interrogate their own complicity, and discuss their role as allies and participants in the anti racism cause. We also held virtual events on topics of systemic racism in health care, education, the criminal justice system and the entertainment industry. Before the pandemic I organized an event with Coalition For a Diverse Harvard wherein a lawyer provided our alums with insight into the recent discrimination lawsuit against Harvard's admissions practices. ARC has a permanent tab on the HCSC website where people can access information about ways to educate themselves on the subject, tools to become an anti-racist, as well as organizations and local businesses they can support.

Aside from my Harvard activities I have also been active in promoting diversity and inclusion in other organizations to which I belong. I am a longtime mentor with a group called Write Girl and serve on their steering committee for IDEA (inclusion, diversity, equity and access). The purpose of IDEA is to take a hard look at how well the organization is achieving these objectives, and then develop and implement workable solutions for areas that are lacking.

Within my profession as a writer I am constantly attentive to diversity. It was one of the things that motivated me to start writing novels. Growing up I was always struck that books about Black kids were always grim and about struggle, while white kids were free to have fun adventures. In my books kids of color are engaged in all sorts of exciting escapades, because escapist literature should include everybody. As a TV writer and producer I am always mindful of avoiding stereotypes, creating realistic characters that represent the range of humanity. I also take it upon myself to encourage showrunners to cast people who are something other than white, heterosexual, cisgender, slender, and able bodied. Additionally I mentor several fledgling writers of color.

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

Of course! I would be eager to meet with leaders from all of the groups listed. It's the reason why I'm running for the Elected Board of Directors, to reach out to any group that feels marginalized, to make sure every voice is listened to and heard, and to bring more diversity and inclusivity to our alumni activities.