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College '11
Harvard Forward candidate

Coalition for a Diverse Harvard Candidate Questionnaire

1. How important should diversity be at Harvard? What strategies should the University pursue regarding this? (Please discuss specific programs and policies, including Ethnic Studies and faculty hiring, tenure, and advancement, if you can.)

Diversity is not just important to Harvard and its mission: it's essential. As an undergraduate, it was what I learned from my classmates – incredible, passionate thinkers from around the world – that made my Harvard experience as rich and formative as it was. Classroom or dining hall discussions are more meaningful when there is a diversity of background and experience to better inform the conversation.

As an Economics concentrator, I saw the importance of diversity in academia when I studied the work of the Jameel Poverty Action Lab (JPAL) at MIT. Esther Duflo and Abhijit Banerjee started JPAL to bring a new perspective, one grounded in understanding the lived reality of impoverished populations through empirical data, to the “dismal science” of economics.

Rather than relying on pre-existing models developed over decades by faculty at elite institutions, typically white men in ivory towers, Duflo and Banerjee run field studies in Africa and Asia to learn how economic theories fare when exposed to the real world and how best to make tangible impact. Duflo and Banerjee won the Nobel Prize in Economics in 2019, with the committee writing, “...as a direct result of one of their studies, more than five million Indian children have benefitted from effective programmes of remedial tutoring in schools. Another example is the heavy subsidies for preventive healthcare that have been introduced in many countries.”

When I first heard of them in 2009, they had not yet received their prizes, but I can still recall reading their papers in my sophomore econometrics tutorial and being electrified by their new approach and the revelations it had unlocked. By working directly with people and by bringing new perspectives to the table, Duflo and Banerjee had raised the intellectual bar for economics and created positive change in the world. Their work is a small example of how to be serious about its mission of Veritas through learning and inquiry, Harvard needs to intentionally foster diversity in its student body, faculty, staff, and curriculum.

I am encouraged to know that, since I graduated in 2011, the College has gone on to admit classes that are majority-minority for the first time in its history. At the same time, to further promote diversity, I believe the University should take several steps beyond its current policies.

First, [it should establish an Ethnic Studies department & concentration](#) with the necessary resources and support to offer a meaningful curriculum centered around cultures, histories, and peoples from all places. Students have rightfully been asking for this for decades, and its creation would give a dedicated home to some of the faculty and students most engaged in creating increasingly nuanced dialogue on Harvard's campus. Another step the University should take is to provide more resources for personal mentoring, counseling, and extracurricular support for first-generation and minority students, all of which are essential at a large institution like Harvard. We should also provide further resources to the Office of Faculty Development & Diversity with the goal of continuing to build a pipeline of faculty candidates from underrepresented groups or disciplines. Finally, Harvard should offer increased diversity training opportunities for students, staff, and faculty to build awareness of how community members of different backgrounds perceive and engage with the University and how we can make Harvard more diverse and inclusive on a day to day basis.

2. How can Harvard encourage more diversity among its alumni leaders and activities? (If not discussed above.)

Harvard can encourage more diversity among its alumni leaders and activities by increasing its support for diverse speakers and community engagement through HAA, proactively working with Shared Interest Groups to include diversity and inclusion in their programming, and increasing representation of recent alumni and student voices in its governance.

The importance and value of HAA support for diverse speakers and community engagement was highlighted to me by an event earlier this year in Seattle featuring Professor Anthony Jack, Assistant Professor for Education at the HGSE and author of *The Privileged Poor*. As part of an event with President Bacow, Professor Jack shared his work describing the different experiences of low-income students coming into elite universities out of public schools versus those coming from boarding, day, and prep schools. Seeing the audience of several hundred Harvard alumni so engaged with Professor Jack's work and its implications for Harvard was very exciting, and showed how presentations and events with diversity-oriented speakers can build awareness within the alumni community of these critical issues and their nuances. The event also included recognition of the Crimson Achievement Program, a high school mentoring program set up by the Harvard Club of Seattle. Having Harvard recognize and support more of these community engagement programs encourages alumni to participate in these programs and also builds a community dedicated to fostering a more inclusive, diverse mindset for Harvard alumni.

Another way the University and HAA can support diversity in alumni leadership is by proactively working with Shared Interest Groups to have the SIGs promote diversity and inclusion themselves. While less direct than the speakers and events discussed above, working with SIG leadership is a more grassroots approach that will allow for individual groups to foster conversation in their own forums around how they can be taking action to promote diversity. As Harvard does its own work on building diversity on campus and in its community, it can share best practices, trainings or other resources with the SIGs.

A third way to support diversity in the alumni leadership would be to establish a [Recent Alumni Overseer program as outlined in the Harvard Forward platform](#). This idea is based on similar models at Princeton, MIT, and elsewhere that were intentionally designed in the late 60s to encourage more diversity in the alumni leadership of those institutions. Instituting a similar model at Harvard, by setting aside six seats on the Board of Overseers for alumni who've graduated in the past four years, would ensure that the more diverse recent alumni body would be ensured a seat at the table and the ability to provide their perspectives and personal context to important conversations and decisions being made by the Board of Overseers.

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

I am strongly in favor of race-conscious admissions and value the critical role they play in helping ensure diversity and representation across all Harvard programs. It is a well established and well founded keystone of the Harvard admissions process, and essential in supporting the diversity discussed in question #1. Given the enormous historical inequities in the United States and around the world based on race, gender, sexual orientation, and so many other attributes, affirmative action and race-conscious admissions are critical in defending the diversity of Harvard's community.

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

Harvard, as a place of immense resources and privilege, has a big role to play in developing citizen-leaders and thinkers who are informed, dedicated, and passionate about creating a more equitable future.

Part of that role lies in cultivating a diverse student body and faculty where all individuals feel valued, respected, and heard. This work must be done proactively and explicitly, for students from first-years in the College to postdocs in the labs. The University must also encourage its students to engage and empathize with stories and perspectives different from their own to make sure they understand the value of connecting with others, as well as the conscious work that goes into creating inclusive spaces. Harvard should also take an active role in providing opportunities to its soon-to-be graduates (and alumni!) to learn about and pursue careers beyond Harvard that work to create an equitable, inclusive, and just society.

Finally, as a world leader, Harvard has a responsibility to leverage its significant resources and influence to advance social justice, with the most pressing issue of our time being climate justice. The climate crisis disproportionately impacts marginalized communities and the global South, and Harvard should be leading the way in climate action. This means making climate-related research and education a priority, utilizing our influence to mobilize greater action worldwide, and divesting our 40 billion dollar endowment from fossil fuels. Harvard cannot create a just society if we are profiting off injustice. Creating a healthy planet is essential to creating a more equitable world.

5. 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 been lucky to build a career where the majority of my work has focused on sustainable communities, which inherently require weaving diversity into the fabric of organizations and building inclusion. I have devoted myself to projects ranging from designing minority-owned preferred supplier programs to funding job training for first-generation immigrants. The people in the marginalized communities I worked with, from the rural Pacific Northwest to the deep South, struggled not just to build financial capital but also with barriers to their human and social capital. Due to cuts in government funding, many of the communities had lost the shared spaces that had brought them together a generation ago, such as libraries or town squares. Combined with cuts to education, it created a negative feedback loop that local community-oriented organizations were stepping forward to address. My work was providing financial support to local organizations who wanted to provide loans to small businesses or set up funds to help local farmers buy their land. This work showed me how deeply political, economic, and educational opportunities are connected, especially at the local level. As low-income and minority communities are most at risk from the earliest impacts of climate change, it is a reminder that a key root of the climate issues we face comes from not including all voices in the decisions that shape our world.

I had a chance to practice building this diversity and inclusion into an organization while at MIT's Sloan School of Business. In my second year, I started the Community Finance Challenge, a case competition to bring together MBAs from all over to discuss how we can use modern technology to help build more inclusive, sustainable economies. Discussing issues of economic opportunity and inclusion is ineffective without ensuring people from different genders, races, nationalities, and economic backgrounds have a seat at the table. That's why we intentionally reached out beyond the top-ranked business schools, which are normally overrepresented in case competitions, to all the 700 business schools in the United States, connecting with students from MBA programs at HBCUs, religious universities, Indigenous communities, and rural universities. Concurrently, we raised funds to offer all participants a need-based travel stipend, which is uncommon in MBA case studies. Through our outreach, we received submissions from 60 teams and 34 schools across the country, many of which had never been represented in a national case competition before. When it came to judging the case, we anonymized submissions during the written review process to reduce implicit bias. In the end, our judges awarded first place and \$10,000 in funding to a female-led team for their focus on serving first-generation immigrant entrepreneurs. At the afterparty, it was great to see teams from all over the country joining together to discuss the presentations, ideas, and opportunities they had raised through the Challenge.