

The Hardest Class at Harvard: Welcoming More than Wealth into the  
University  
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They may not have signed up for it, but thousands each year find themselves stuck in the same class at Harvard, and it's the hardest class around.

Call it the working class, call it the school of the hard knocks, call it what you will. But whether students, employees, or both at once, theirs is a predicament that seldom appears to matter to those enrolled in the more popular classes here—those whose toilet bowls they clean and whose collared shirts they proceed to borrow on weekends.

Yet in a year when the University is drawing more lower-income students than ever before—such students total a still-modest 18 percent of freshmen—it may be time to ask ourselves whether Harvard has really shed its fabled old boy ways, as it claims it has, to welcome more than wealth into its ivy-clad arms.

Those growing numbers have made it inside the gates thanks in part to the Harvard Financial Aid Initiative (HFAI), which finally waived the parental contribution from families living on less than \$40,000—an income equivalent, incredibly, to one year's full tuition at the College—and sent recruiters in pursuit of lower-income applicants.

The outcome has illuminated the difficulties of convincing such students that it's even worth their while to apply—a conviction that comes so naturally to seniors at the elite private schools, which, according to *Worth Magazine*, account for 94 of the top 100 “feeder schools” that set kids up for places like Harvard.

The fact is, it still takes far less to get here if you start on the upper half of the economic ladder, from which more than 80 percent of the college still hails. This University has always embraced class-based affirmative action, but of an inverse sort based on the self-perpetuating system of legacies and prep school pipelines.

What HFAI is now doing is affording more disadvantaged applicants an opportunity to slip through the cracks in a class wall erected over hundreds of years. Much of that wall remains intact, at least on the inside, and even if it doesn't keep them all out anymore, the divisions it fosters certainly don't help them fit in once they're here.

At times, it seems as if people do as much as they can to ensure this remains a community defined by the standards of its upper crust, which always hover just below the surface, hiding behind the popped pink collar and the aristocratic lockjaw.

But for lower-income students, the rules can be all too obvious in the ways they're expected to relate, to speak, to dress, and to spend, spend, spend for no apparent reason.

“I've always had the feeling that there's only so much of Harvard I can even get to know,” Francisco Perez '06 tells me. “People make so many assumptions [that] you have money,

it's amazing. If you don't have it, then you're not going to be able to participate.”

There is an unspoken code to all of this, first formed in the prep academies and magnet schools where so many were conditioned to this kind of privileged life, then refined and reinforced by the divisive institutions of our Harvard lives—from official policies and regulations to the student snobbery of final clubs and DormAid.

It seems our social life charges admission, literally. And so, still, does academic life, even for those on full financial aid: The lowest income students are required to work constantly to meet Harvard's \$3,500 “self-help” expectation or face down insurmountable debt after they graduate. Not a pretty picture.

Harvard could easily take HFAI to the next level—improving not just admissions stats, but the quality of life for those lower-income students admitted—by reducing and ultimately eliminating the “self-help” requirement, raising campus wages for students who want to work, and increasing grants as Princeton has to allow students to graduate debt-free.

With the endowment rocketing through the roof to an unimaginable \$25.9 billion, the University can surely afford it better than these students can. And in the event the College ever decides to expand the student body, those plans should include an ambitious target for expanding the proportion of lower-income students to a level that actually reflects their presence in our society.

Yet, the administration can't be counted on to dismantle Harvard's class wall and change the system by itself.

Over the last 30 years, minority students have created a space for themselves, through their own action and self-organization, to share their experiences and battles, cultivate their own identity, and remind each other they are not alone at Harvard.

Now, lower-income students need spaces of their own, too — surely more than the fourth-generation members of final clubs need theirs. And ultimately, we all need spaces to interact on a more equal footing, ones that don't require an unlimited credit card for the purposes of friendship, learning, and living.

This is not a call for sensitivity, for pity, pieties, or political correctness. But some basic decency and a new openness towards all our fellow students would be nice. That, and a bold challenge to the class hierarchies still alive and well on our fair campus.

John Harvard, tear down this wall.