

The Fellows Know Best: an Introduction to the Harvard Corporation by Adaner Usmani

Most people are familiar with Harvard's reputation as one of the most prestigious universities in the world; the college itself trumpets this tag to its incoming first-years. However, orientation week will leave first-years woefully under-informed about the nature of governance and the process of decision-making at Harvard. This is no accident. This lack of information is symptomatic of the severely antidemocratic environment created by the invisibility and inaccessibility of those who hold effective authority at the College.

In theory, major decisions about the future of Harvard College rest in the hands of the President and Fellows of Harvard College (also known as the Harvard Corporation) and the Board of Overseers. However, there is ample reason to believe that the former rules over the latter: many believe that the Board of Overseers' powers are ceremonial and many argue that it exists merely in order to confirm the decisions made by the Corporation. One author has even described it as "largely ineffectual". Because of this fact, it makes sense to concentrate on the Corporation and its role in nurturing the college's antidemocratic climate.

In recent times, the Harvard Corporation (incidentally, the western hemisphere's oldest incorporated body) has consisted of six "fellows" who have no immediate ties to or financial/political interests in the university, and the President, who always serves on the board. The fellows serve for as many years as they deem appropriate, before choosing their own successors in total secrecy. There are two major reasons that Harvard's incoming first-years should be up-in-arms about this body:

Inaccessibility: The Corporation's meetings are (reportedly) held biweekly; however, the President and Fellows take pains not to disclose the location/time to the student body (although it is widely accepted that they meet at Loeb House, by Lamont Library). It is nearly impossible to affect the content of their discussions directly, as student petitions or demands are only heard at "their secretary's discretion". This same secretary safeguards the minutes of all their meetings. Admittedly, the boards of governors at many multinational corporations conduct their business in similar fashion. However, Harvard is markedly distinct from those institutions. As a hallowed place of higher-education, it warrants a philosophy that rules out that kind of structure. First-years ought to reject the idea that our community can be handled from above (and the ideologies that accompany that belief); we all deserve a say in its future. In an editorial in the *Crimson* published in 2000, members of the Progressive Student Labor Movement (then PSLM, now SLAM) wrote: "Our liberal education is founded on the principles of open dialogue and civic participation, while the authority of the Harvard Corporation demonstrates the contrary." The class of 2010 should echo these sentiments as the year commences.

Elitism: Given this extreme exclusivity, it is perhaps unsurprising that the members of the Harvard Corporation have almost always been white, Christian males. It was not until 1985 that the body admitted its very first Jewish man. Three hundred and fifty years of

absolute homogeneity had preceded his appointment. The first non-male member was a white, corporate attorney named Judith Richards Hope (in 1989). And it was not until the twenty-first century that the first person of color became a fellow. While superficial measures have been taken to correct this self-evident racism and sexism, the historical record merely reflects the perverse philosophy that underpins the Corporation. The very fact of its existence speaks to an unconscionable elitism. First-years should vociferously contest the belief that the University, with enormously diverse concerns and constituents, can be administered by a group of essentially identical individuals (ideologically-speaking, especially). As an example, what kind of prescience authorizes the Corporation to deliberate over the question of a living-wage without input from campus workers and/or union representatives? The elitist premise upon which the Corporation was founded is no longer acceptable in the global community; indeed, it was with the same claim to “expertise” that Europe conquered and exploited much of the world. As such, incoming first-years should demand that the College take tangible steps towards abolishing the Corporation and redistributing its powers to faculty, staff, and students.