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HEADLINE: Is Harvard Overrated?

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BODY:

Waving a gaggle of prospective students and their parents through the iron gates of Harvard Yard, the tour guide smiles as she begins her spiel on All Harvard Has to Offer--the world-class faculty, the roughly \$ 22 billion endowment, the powerful alumni. "As you may have heard," she says, "we're pretty good at academics here."

Heads nod, parents chuckle--no one seems to have any doubts. Harvard, after all, is the biggest, baddest brand in higher education--the ticket to the fast lane. Nearly 23,000 students applied to the oldest and best-known college in the country last year, the school's largest applicant pool ever. Fewer than 10 percent of the best and brightest were accepted. Almost 80 percent of those who got in enrolled--the highest yield among selective schools.

Status symbol. The school's history speaks for itself. Seven U.S. presidents studied at the Ivy giant, along with more than two dozen Supreme Court justices. Same goes for Al Gore, Robert Oppenheimer, and Yo-Yo Ma. And there seems to be no stopping throngs of future Great Men (and, as of 1975, when Radcliffe and Harvard combined admissions, Great Women) from getting in line. "In terms of status, reputation, breadth, money, power, and influence," writes journalist Richard Bradley, a Yale graduate, in *Harvard Rules: The Struggle for the Soul of the World's Most Powerful University*, "no other university can equal Harvard--not in the United States, not in the world."

Even so, there has been a little trouble in paradise of late. Tempers flared following remarks made in January by the school's president, Lawrence Summers, suggesting that the dearth of women in high-level scientific research jobs might be due to a lack of "intrinsic aptitude." But there have also been quieter criticisms that cut closer to the heart of the school's vaunted reputation: Two books published this year--Bradley's critique and another by Ross Gregory Douthat, class of '02--contend that Harvard suffers from serious academic shortcomings. A leaked student survey seems to confirm their criticisms. And as the faculty struggles to revive an ongoing review of the undergraduate curriculum, people on campus and off are asking a previously unthinkable question: Is the undergraduate education at Harvard really all it's cracked up to be?

Despite the school's well-documented academic prowess, there seems to be at least a shadow of a doubt. In a survey conducted in 2002--and analyzed in a confidential memo leaked to the *Boston Globe*

last March--Harvard ranked fifth from the bottom of a group of 31 elite colleges when it came to all-around student satisfaction. The school may pride itself on the fact that there is a professor for every 11 undergrads and that three fourths of its classes have 20 or fewer students, but students still complained about the inaccessibility of faculty as well as the quality of instruction and advising.

Today's undergrads echo the findings. "If you come here expecting to work one on one with professors," says econ major Michael Kopko, "don't hold your breath." Profs at Harvard may be undeniably brilliant. This is the home, after all, of a genuine all-star team of big brains, including psychologist Steven Pinker, African-American studies guru Henry Louis Gates Jr., and economic historian Niall Ferguson. Students regularly stand and applaud at the end of some large lectures. But that doesn't make the school a cuddly place. "They sell the college like it's Amherst" --small classes, close contact with faculty--says recent graduate Matt Mahan, "but we're not even close." At smaller schools, he says, "you're going to have substantive academic conversations with professors who know your name. Here, you see a famous professor walk through the Yard, and it's almost mutual avoidance."

Reaching out. Some students do approach their teachers--Harvard kids are a proactive bunch, after all. Stephanie Safdi, for one, spent her senior year working every week on her thesis on pluralism--a theory that says there is more than one kind of reality--with Louis Menand, an English professor, New Yorker writer, and 2002 Pulitzer Prize winner. "The opportunities are here. You just have to grab them," says Safdi. "You can create the access if you really try," concedes Kopko. Yet in two years at Harvard, he says he's never been in a class with fewer than 60 people.

The administration is certainly not deaf to student complaints. "That [leaked] survey is one of the reasons why we've moved as aggressively as we have to look at the undergraduate curriculum," says William Kirby, dean of the faculty of arts and sciences, who is spearheading a review of the university's advising and curriculum. The school has hired more professors and created more small classes: The number of freshman seminars, which offer small-group instruction from tenured faculty members, for example, has increased from 30 three years ago to over 120 today.

The thornier problem, though, has involved revamping the school's core curriculum. Created in 1978 to offer students disciplinary breadth in addition to the depth they found in their concentration, the Core, as it's called, requires students to take classes in seven different "areas of knowledge" --ranging from historical study to quantitative reasoning to social analysis. Core classes account for one quarter of every student's Harvard education, but they seem to be widely despised by undergrads, and a group of would-be reformers on the faculty--including President Summers--believes the Core's time has passed. Too much time in class, Summers has said, is being spent on "approaches to knowledge" --studying literary theory, for example, at the expense of actual literature. Too few students, meanwhile, are gaining actual knowledge--the difference, say, between a gene and a chromosome. And too much confusion reigns among students over how to craft a coherent education out of a random selection of classes.

To be fair, Harvard is not the only school with such curricular conundrums. "We have this belief among professors that what they're doing research on is exactly what students need to know," says Harvey Mansfield, a professor of government best known for his campaign against grade inflation. (Until recent reforms, more than 90 percent of Harvard students graduated with honors; last spring, only 55 percent did.) Mansfield supports revamping the curriculum--and gives Harvard's administration credit for taking this academic bull by the horns. Progress against an entrenched academic culture, though, has been slow. Three years after the Core review began, the faculty is still nowhere close to consensus.

Most Harvard students, frustrated as they may be with their academic lives, don't seem too concerned about the fuss their complaints have caused. For them, the faculty isn't what makes Harvard Harvard.

"Listen, the Core program is really disappointing. The lack of access to professors is incredible. Advising is abominable," says Alicia Menendez, a women's studies major. "All that said, it's the students that make this place special."

Student body presidents, sports stars, and musical prodigies abound. "Every single person that goes here has something about them--either little wows or one big wow--that just amazes you," says Lauren Westbrook, a rising senior who spent her high school summers doing college-level internships at companies including HBO and Goldman Sachs. Safdi, who herself won a regional Emmy Award for a TV show she produced in high school, agrees: "You're always finding out little secrets about people. You know, the guy who's the head of mock trial also does stand-up and is a nationally ranked chess player--that sort of thing."

And if this crop of overachievers isn't always focused on academics, it may be because there are so many other outlets for them on campus. There are more than 300 student organizations at Harvard. The school has five orchestras and two jazz bands; over 60 student drama productions are put on each year, even though there is no official theater department. And none of these clubs seem to be a school-sponsored excuse to have a few beers. Harvard students, says Judith Kidd, one of the school's associate deans, want to achieve even when they're having fun: "Even if it's the fly-fishing club," she says, "it's got to be the best fly-fishing club around."

Passion. Some students worry that this culture of accomplishment takes its toll. "They're so busy, they don't have time to think," says Ruth Jesus, a recent graduate. She opted out of student housing (97 percent of students live on campus) because she'd grown weary of what she felt was a constant rat race between students to be more involved, more successful, more prominent than one another. Indeed, Harvard seems to be full of students who never quite part with their college-obsessed high school selves. Still, many undergrads find their peers' extreme devotion to achievement liberating: "It's OK to be very passionate about things here," says Lacey Whitmire, a recent graduate who was a coxswain on a crew team and led backcountry camping expeditions. "It's OK, accepted, and almost expected."

It may not be the coziest of places. And most students don't seem to be unambiguously happy. But if history is any guide, the next group of superachievers will apply anyway. After all, it is Harvard.

BY THE NUMBERS

Harvard University

Location: Cambridge, Mass.

Undergrad enrollment: 6,562; 52 pct. male, 48 pct. female

Tuition, 2005-06: \$ 32,097 Room and board: \$ 9,578

Combined SAT, 25th-75th percentile: 1400-1580

Acceptance rate: 9.1 pct.

GRAPHIC: Picture, Future masters of the universe play poker in Harvard Yard. Many undergrads say their peers are Harvard's biggest draw. (Photography by Scott Goldsmith for USN&WR); Picture, Students walk through the science center, home of the departments of math, statistics, and history of science. (Photography by Scott Goldsmith for USN&WR); Picture, Students linger after a lecture by psychologist Steven Pinker. (Photography by Scott Goldsmith for USN&WR)

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