JHARVARD'S JOURNAL

Beyond the Transcript

Last year, Harvard's senior admissions officers urged applicants to the College—and their parents—to relax a little, lest the rising generation of undergraduates pursue achievement so relentlessly that they end up burning out prematurely (“Harvard to Applicants: Chill!” March-April, page 68). Now the dean of the College, Harry R. Lewis, has extended that message. During the entering class of 2005, selected from those eager thoroughbreds, with what he calls a “pastoral letter” titled “Slow Down: Getting more out of Harvard by doing less.” (The full text is available at www.college.harvard.edu/dean/slow_down.html.)

Lewis cautions the baby Harvardians that “some habits acquired in anticipation of applying to college may not serve you as well while you are here.” Their success, he suggests, may depend on approaching college “with an open mind about the possibilities available to you” and a gradual focus on “fewer things you discover you truly love”—among them, activities pursued for fun, “rather than to achieve a leadership role that you hope might be a distinctive credential for postgraduate employment.”

To these ends, Lewis urges students to give themselves flexibility in planning their courses of study, to think carefully before pursuing advanced standing (“The one irrefutable fact about graduating in three years is that it saves money,” but at the cost of enjoying the intellectual, extracurricular, and personal riches to be had here), and to consider taking a term or a year off before graduation. He suggests how to make choices: don’t commit to two major extracurricular activities at once, for example, and find ways to accommodate multiple academic interests without committing to an inflexible joint or special concentration.

In its broadest context, Lewis’s letter aims to empower students, to change their life rhythms from the grade- and high-school years to the many more decades beyond college. In high school, he writes, academic choices were more limited, and most Harvard students “have taken the most demanding choice available where there was any choice at all,” as well as loading up on impressive-sounding activities. “Yet in later life most of what we do outside our jobs we do because we want to do it, not because we are in any way rewarded for doing it.”

The years between he sees as a transition: “[W]e will certainly give you a diploma and grades and transcripts attesting to some of the things you have done here, but much of what you do, including many of the most important and rewarding and formative things you do”—such as the relationships formed with roommates and friends—“will be recorded on no piece of paper you take with you, but only as imprints on your mind and soul!” Using the choices they really have—and making a sensible commitment to “relax, exercise, eat well, and most of all, sleep” (on the latter point, see page 83)—the dean concludes, will help the students realize that “It’s your life, even at Harvard.”

The main change since randomization has been another attempt at fine-tuning. Discouraged by students’ tendency to form large blocking groups and frustrated by the way these mammoth groups tipped the demographic balances within Houses, the College in September 1999 slashed the allowable blocking-group size in half, to eight. The theory was that without large networks of close friends within their House, students would be more likely to branch out and meet others. This change, coupled with efforts to provide activities that mirror the diverse demographics of each House, has helped facilitate mixing between blocking groups.

At Adams House, for example, tutors and students organized a Chinese New Year celebration in the dining hall; masters’ teas included a Southeast Asian and a Central American tea, with food and drink to reflect each cultural tradition. “We invite students to come and meet a group that’s doing something different,” says Judith Palfrey. “Tomorrow night, they might sit at a different table in the dining hall.”

At the same time, the Palfreys have tried to guard against losing the old Adams spirit altogether: last spring, they appeared as a cross-dressing couple in a theatrical production of a French farce staged in Adams’s Pool Theater. “We still do struggle to maintain a little of the old character,” says Judith Palfrey. “Even if it’s just at intramural sports, what’s the way that Adams House plays? We come in black T-shirts, we’re a little ragtag, we