class families. Their average SAT score, 1270, is far above the national average.

Despite those high SAT scores, many high-school policy debaters concentrate so hard on the circuit and miss so much school traveling from tournament to tournament that their grades are not always good enough to get into highly competitive schools like Harvard. Students will spend entire summers at debate “institutes” on college campuses, mastering the art of argument and learning to talk ever more cohesively—and ever faster.

In recent years, the Harvard team and its alumni have urged the admissions office to respect policy debating more. The team does not actively recruit, relying instead on its reputation within the high-school debate community to garner potential new members. And, once admitted, the small group of policy debaters has an excellent future. Despite the long hours of travel and research, Harvard’s team members say that the knowledge they gain from the experience helps them to excel academically. “I’ll put the average GPA of my team up against any other activity at Harvard,” Perkins says proudly. “My debaters have exceptional grades.” Members regularly go on to top law schools, which see policy debate as a strong credential—with good reason. Tyler professor of constitutional law Lawrence H. Tribe ’62, J.D. ’66, for example, won the national debate tournament in 1961. Perkins says policy debate has helped several alumni land clerkships at the U.S. Supreme Court.

When Perkins himself was a debater at Georgetown, he met an ambitious freshman debater from MIT named Lawrence H. Summers. During the next four years, Summers became one of top debaters in the country. “He was famous for proving that just about anything led to nuclear proliferation,” Perkins recalls. (High-school policy debaters still love to tie their opponents’ arguments to Armageddon.) Perkins also notes that the future U.S. Secretary of the Treasury ran circles around other debaters on economic issues. Now, installed as president of Harvard, Summers credits his four years on MIT’s policy-debate team with helping him argue persuasively and develop critical skills that he has used throughout his public career. “I think more clearly because debate helped me learn to organize my thoughts,” he says. His colleagues joke that he can hardly have a conversation without dividing up and numbering his points. Perhaps most importantly, Summers says that debating taught him to recognize that there are always two sides to every argument. “I’ve been taught,” he says, “to listen very carefully to what the other guy is saying.”

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THE UNDERGRADUATE

A Woman’s Studies

by ARIANNE R. COHEN ’03

I can’t explain what I study at Harvard.

I am a women’s-studies concentrator. After a two-year stint of floating through five large academic departments while regularly switching concentrations and trying to fulfill premedical requirements, I have—to put it mildly—seen all that Harvard has to offer. And I love women’s studies.

For the first time in my life, I am actually engaged with my studies. I enjoy writing papers. The concentration is small and supportive, always happy to point me in the right direction or keep me up to date on fellowship and other academic opportunities, while providing me both individual attention (such as this semester’s one-on-one tutorial) and the freedom to branch out along intellectual tangents as I see fit. These things cannot be said for my former departments, particularly larger ones where political biases and narrow academic constraints are a way of life.

Equally important, within the concentration—much like at the Cheers bar—everyone knows my name. Though my mother uses such fluffy comments as fodder in ribbing my “warm and fuzzy” field, warm and fuzzy is good at a chilly place like Harvard, where attention from individual professors and genuine academic support—two key components of a quality education—are sometimes hard to come by. Women’s studies offers easy access to Harvard’s confusing web of resources. I have my whole life to fight bureaucracy; I don’t need to practice as part of my undergraduate education.

Unfortunately, liking one’s field and being able to explain what one studies are two different things. I generally try to hedge the topic, but inevitably a fellow student will ask what my concentration is. I usually respond straightforwardly: “I am a women’s-studies concentrator.” But Harvard students tend to be audacious, persistent, and intellectually questioning people.

“So, what exactly do you study in women’s studies?”

“I study gender studies...it’s much more than just women.”

“Well, what besides women do you study?”

“Um, well, take gender, for example. The construction of gender is intimately attached to race, religion, class, and a myriad of other identity markers, and can’t be isolated into one academic vault. It’s broad.”

That phrase usually suffices, and the conversation quickly turns into a question-and-answer session about my future plans with a women’s-studies degree, or my “women’s-studies opinion” of such popular commodities as the Easy Bake
Still, explaining that I do my studies falls far short of explaining what I study.

I was pondering this dilemma over coffee late one night, after a phone call in which an old friend had denounced my concentration as “pointless.”

“Why,” he asked, “did you ever leave government?”

In a fruitless attempt to change topics, I countered by arguing, “You just don’t get it!”—a line of reasoning that, since its en-

trance into my pubescent vocabulary eight years ago, has inevitably gotten me nowhere. Luckily, friend and fellow women’s-studies concentrator Laure “Voop” Vulpillières happened by just as I hung up. I figured that this lofty senior, a four-year women’s-studies veteran, would definitely have the answers to my troubles.

“Voop, how do you explain women’s studies when people ask?”

“That’s so annoying! I can never explain it, especially to my mom.”

“Okaaaay, so if someone were to say, ‘Voop, what do you study in school?’ what would you say?”

“I don’t know. I usually just try to change the subject as quickly as possible...whatever we study is really interesting though—why, what do you say?”

“Whatever I say, I end up sounding militant. So I try to say as little as possible.”

“Yeah, me too. It’s a bummer...hey, after I graduate, can you stay in school for a long time and keep studying women’s studies, so you can tell me what to read?”

“Um, yeah, sure, for one more year anyway.”

So there you have it: Neither of us has any idea of exactly how to explain what it is that we study, yet we both want to continue studying it forever. So, we continue to study away, saying very little, but enjoying ourselves immensely.

After voop departed my room, I pondered for a while before telephoning a joint history of science/women’s-studies concentrator to help me cope with my inability to explain my academic program. She recalled venting similar concerns in a meeting with a professor. The professor responded helpfully that “women’s studies is not a field. It’s an area of interest.”

My friend went on to explain that women’s studies applies to any field. In history of science, it explains how science has created and enforced its own definitions of sex and gender in society. In literature, it examines how various authors portray women and men in different historical moments and, by extension, the changing social construction of gender in society over time. In social studies, it analyzes the gender-based power dynamics of various political theories, and how these theories translate into the daily lives of both sexes. In essence, women’s studies is looking at how gender operates in society across many different disciplines, while providing students with analytic tools that apply to any power...
dynamic. To me, this made sense.

I thanked my fellow student profusely for this explanation, and called Voop to tell her the good news. She was thrilled.

Not surprisingly, the wide application of women's studies is reflected in the structure of women's studies itself at Harvard. Women's studies is a committee, not a department, so each professor is affiliated with another field. Though I'm sure that some members of the women's-studies committee might disagree with the "women's studies as a field of interest" model—particularly those who want the committee to become a department—this explanation does justify the practical struggles of explaining the field, because it's interdisciplinary.

For my own purposes, I use women's studies in reference to my future profession (and current avocation), writing. I had initially assumed that women's studies would simply give me something intelligent to say about women, a useful skill in a market flooded with women's magazines. But through the process of intellectually tracing the position of women and gender in various social circumstances, I have learned how to trace the lines of power in any circumstance. It's like a lens with which to scrutinize any situation and instantly see what is happening on multiple planes. This ability is infinitely valuable to a fledgling writer, for whom the capacity to take common information and quickly see an interesting story spells the difference between career success and failure.

**Britain-bound**

Eight Harvard seniors will cross the Atlantic to study at Oxford next year as Marshall and Rhodes Scholars.

Sarah Moss has been an avid mathematician since junior high school, but plans to study philosophy at Oxford. The Marshall Scholar sees math and philosophy as kindred subjects with similar demands on logic and reason. On returning from Oxford, she hopes to take a Ph.D. in philosophy and teach at a university.

Fellow Marshall Scholar Lauren Baer, a social-studies concentrator, has investigated women's roles in development in rural indigenous communities in Guatemala and worked for a human-rights organization in New Delhi. She will study the intersection of law and development in gender issues, first at Oxford, where she will earn a master's in philosophy in development studies, and then in law school.

After hearing a Bhutanese refugee lecture at Harvard, Rhodes Scholar Neil Brown became curious about that country; already interested in ethnic relations and conflict in the developing world, he did research in a Bhutanese refugee camp in Nepal for his sociology thesis. He plans to earn two master's degrees at Oxford, in forced migration and in development.

Last summer, Rhodes winner Albert Cho spent 11 weeks in Mauritius doing thesis research—the globe-trotting social-studies concentrator's interest in development has also led him to intern with the International Centre for Trade and Sustainable Development in Geneva. He plans to work for an international company after completing one M.Phil. in development economics and another in environmental change and management at Oxford.

Rhodes winner Andrew Park, an economics concentrator and arts lover, wanted to write a thesis about "something a little different:" he's studying the relationship between directors' name recognition and the box-office performance of their films. A volunteer for Phillips Brooks House projects and president of the campus Asian American Association, Park has become interested in social policies relating to minority populations—a topic he will pursue when studying comparative social policy at Oxford.

Robert Porter, son of IBM professor of business and government Roger Porter, is following his father's Rhodes-winning footsteps. The government concentrator plans to earn an M.Phil. in political theory and political institutions. He has presided over the Harvard Republican Club and Harvard Students for Bush—an experience he cherished on Harvard's predominantly liberal campus.

Stephen Sachs expects to spend his life in government and will head to law school after Oxford. The Rhodes winner stumbled upon his thesis topic while interning for the Democratic staff of the House Judiciary Committee: he is investigating the extent to which medieval English merchants were able to create and abide by self-made laws—a model proposed to Congress by some Internet businesses. He plans to earn a bachelor's degree in philosophy, politics, and economics at Oxford.

Karin Alexander, a Rhodes scholar who concentrates in social studies, plans to pursue a degree in development studies at Oxford. The Zimbabwean senior hopes to return to Africa to help educate her country's rural population in civics and politics.
In the fall term of his freshman year, Dawid Rechul ’02 wrestled for Harvard at 197 pounds, the highest class short of heavyweight. But during reading period his weight, unnaturally low at 197 pounds, zoomed up to 225. It became clear that there was no way he would be able to make weight for his first wrestling match after exam period.

Just as he was about to notify his coach, the phone rang. It was Jay Weiss, the coach, who told him, “Our heavyweight is not wrestling with us any more. But Brad Soltis [another 197-pound wrestler] is ready to come back from his injury. So I was wondering if…” Rechul broke in. “Jay, I have something important to tell you,” the greatly relieved wrestler blurted out. “I’m already a heavyweight.”

Quite a heavyweight he has turned out to be. Ranked tenth in the nation in a preseason poll, Rechul (his name is pronounced David Re-hool; the spelling is from his native Poland) has gone 16-5 in his early matches this year and has a real shot at winning the NCAA tournament in March.

“I think he can win a national title,” says Weiss. “Dawid just needs to realize how good he is.” Last spring, wrestlers at the Eastern Intercollegiate Wrestling Association (EIWA) tournament found that out for themselves. Rechul pinned all four of his opponents (winning the award for most falls in the shortest time, at 19:59) on his way to the championship, and was named the tournament’s most outstanding wrestler—the first heavyweight since 1948 to win that honor.

Last year, the Harvard team, which Rechul cocaptains with Kevin El-Hayek ’01 (’02), won the EIWA tournament for the first time. The Crimson also shared the Ivy title with Penn and Cornell. Harvard grapplers have become a force to reckon with under Weiss, who took over as coach in 1999.

Tracing power lines always makes a good story, because power dynamics decide who wins, why, and the details of ensuing fallout—all the interesting parts.

Not coincidentally, whenever Nieman Fellows or famous journalists speak with undergraduates on campus, they often recommend that young writers “find the margins” of any newsworthy situation, because that is where the good story lies. (Such margins are in direct opposition to the proverbial “center” of the story, which can be located by the mass of frantic, microphone-wielding reporters.) This strategy makes for a captivating twist on the status quo, and a fascinating—and, one hopes, self-supporting—way to portray the world. This is why I love women’s studies: because it has become a pivotal piece of my path to writing renown by teaching me how to think in a manner equally applicable to academia and the real world.

In the end, has this new knowledge helped me come up with a succinct answer to that ever-bothersome question, “What exactly do you study?” Not in the slightest. But I know that I appreciate my concentration for the opportunity it allows me to use my own mind freely—and develop ideas accordingly—within academic boundaries. And at least I’m now very secure in my new answer: “It helps my writing and thinking, but I can’t really explain it right now.”

Arianne R. Cohen is one of this magazine’s 2001-2002 Berta Greenwald Ledecky Undergraduate Fellows.