Stemming the Applications Flood

Harvard college will henceforth require that early-action applicants for admission not apply early elsewhere. Students admitted early to Harvard, in December, remain free to apply to other institutions in the regular action cycle (where offers of admission are mailed April 1), and need not make their final choice before May 1, the national “common reply” date. This change returns Harvard to its earlier practice, and aligns it with the original intent of early admissions, at a time when such policies are under scrutiny and in transition nationwide (see page 15).

According to William R. Fitzsimmons, dean of admissions and financial aid, Harvard’s decision benefits students. The College received a record 7,600-plus early applications this year, 1,300 more than last year. The rapidly expanding early-admission pool, he said, might suggest that more students were rushing into premature college choices—applying early to multiple colleges they have barely explored in the hope of gaining an edge over other applicants. Advancing the college-admission timetable in this way affects course selection and student behavior in high school; strains the capacity of teachers and counselors to advise students and write letters of recommendation; and tests colleges’ ability to evaluate applicants adequately during the short time available in the fall.

Harvard had changed its policy last year to conform to guidelines adopted by the National Association for College Admission Counseling, the nation’s largest organization for high-school counselors. Seeking to maximize flexibility for students, the association said colleges could not restrict applicants to filing a single early application. Then, last fall, Yale and Stanford announced they would eliminate “early” school, the standard to which Harvard now reverts.

Grade Deflation

Jawboning works. That’s the import of a letter to the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) from Benedict H. Gross, dean of undergraduate education. He reports that even before FAS-enacted changes in College grading and the awarding of academic honors take effect, the ever-upward march of students’ grades has, at least temporarily, come to an end. Extensive faculty, decanal, and presidential discussion of grading that preceded formal legislation has apparently had its effect.

During the 2001-2002 academic year, Gross’s data show, the mean grade awarded declined to 12.58 from 12.65 (on the 15-point scale in use until next fall, when a 4.00 scale becomes effective). That seemingly slight change in fact brings the mean grade back to the level prevailing three years earlier, and is the first decline in the past 16 years—the period analyzed during FAS’s deliberations. Mean grades declined across the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences.

Moreover, the decline was driven by less-frequent A-range grades (46.4 percent of grades awarded, versus a peak of 48.4 percent in the 2000-2001 year). B-range grades increased (42.1 percent of all grades, compared to 40 percent in the prior year), driven by the use of the B+. To Gross that suggests that faculty members are seeing more formerly A- work in slightly sterner light. Grades awarded below the B- level remain essentially constant, at about 6 percent of the total.

It would not be surprising to see a deflationary trend take hold. The new grading scale eliminates numerical gaps between minus and plus grades that plagued the old scale. The tighter percent-of-class rules for determining academic honors take effect with degrees conferred in June 2005.

And FAS clearly intends to continue its informal efforts to influence faculty behavior. Gross (Leverett professor of mathematics—appropriately, in light of the data involved) is requesting course grade distributions from each instructor, “as a way of raising awareness of individual grading practices.” An informational booklet on grading strategies is in the works. Department chairs now receive summaries of “departmental grading practices,” and have been asked to “be in touch with individual instructors whose grading practices seem to depart from the standards articulated by the department” and FAS as a whole. “Course grade index data” will show chairs how grades in a given course compare with those the same students earned in their other courses.

All these efforts, Gross writes, aim to “assist us in the important work of evaluating the work our students do.” In arts and sciences, grading henceforth will clearly be less art and more science.

Stage One

Actress Emily Knapp has a niche of many roles.

Two years ago, Emily Knapp ’03 was slated to be the assistant director for a production of Eugene O’Neill’s The Great God Brown, which the Harvard-Radcliffe Dramatic Club was mounting at the Loeb Drama Center. “But Emily is such a fine actress that I asked her to audition,” recalls the play’s director, lecturer on dramatic arts Marcus Stern, associate director of the Loeb-based American Repertory Theatre. “She did such a terrific job that I asked her to take the lead female role.”

Stern calls Knapp “a rather remarkable
creature of the theater. You come across certain people who innately have a sense of the stage. She seems immediately to feel comfortable on stage, and she understands events and their impact—and how as an actor she is able to help facilitate those events. She really is one of the more talented actors we’ve seen coming through Harvard.” The Crimson review of The Great God Brown agreed: writer Matthew Hudson ’03 called Knapp “ravishing” as Margaret. A year later, another Crimson reviewer described her “mesmerizing” Mrs. Lovett in Stephen Sondheim’s Sweeney Todd as “the most brilliant performance to grace the [Loeb] Mainstage this year.”

“In O’Neill’s first scene,” Stern says, “Emily played a giddy young schoolgirl, and did it with a charm, joy, and humor that was wonderful to watch. In what is nearly the next scene—but set 20 years later—she played a wife having problems with her husband, and did a masterful job in carving out the heartbroken loneliness and desolation of a woman who is trying to survive a marriage that has gone bad.”

Appearing opposite Knapp was Cary McClelland ’02, now in the theater-directing program at Columbia. “Every scene is a contest of energies,” he says. “Acting with Emily, you feel like you’re getting ‘beaten’ a lot—which is cool. You know you’re getting trumped; she is constantly coming up with new things. You are put in a crisis where you have to come up with new things yourself. It raises your ingenuity and the level of your work.” Stern adds that Knapp is “a valuable asset for a director. Her work is so strong, it’s a good litmus test to see if a director’s staging ideas might work, because she executes directorial ideas exceptionally well.”

At age 22, Knapp has been onstage half her life, and has performed in more than 30 productions, including nine plays at Harvard; she was Irma in Jean Genet’s The Balcony and took the title role in Hapgood by Tom Stoppard. She has also acted with the Underground Railway Theater, the Sogán Theater Company, and this spring, will play Lychorida in Shakespeare’s Pericles at the American Repertory Theatre. At the 2001 inaugural of President Lawrence H. Summers, she read one of Shakespeare’s sonnets; last year she won the

“I love collaboration—that’s why I love the theater,” she continues. “Building off other people and having other people build off me.” That includes the audience, which is “absolutely integral,” she explains. “You can feel the vibe of an audience while you’re on stage, and you have to respond to that. On stage you’re making millisecond-by-millisecond decisions all the time—whether to speed up or slow down, how long to hold something. The audience can certainly affect the movement of a play. There’s an inertia to the audience: what they want to do and are willing to do. Performers can turn audience inertia around, as well as drive it forward.”

Reviews, on the other hand, she shrugs off. “Someone said that if you believe all the good reviews, you have to believe the bad ones,” she says. “You end up with [your own] internal meter of how good something is, and you can’t let that be thrown off by the opinion of one person. At higher levels, reviews can make or break a play, but at this level, I just don’t pay attention.”

Instead, she focuses on her fellow thespians. “I don’t know what makes any actor good, but I do know what has made me improve,” she says. “Lots of access to performance, some really stellar teachers, and my collaborators. When people around you are churning out interesting stuff, it gives you a drive.”

Her theatrical drive took root early; from a very young age Knapp loved going to shows. She was born in London in an “academic trunk,” she jokes. Her English mother, political scientist Helena Meyer-Knapp, RI’95, and American father, physicist Robert Knapp ’65, teach at Evergreen State College in Olympia, Washington. Knapp summered in England and in her teens once spent a year there, seeing a show each week and studying at the Guildhall School of Music and Drama. Nowadays when she returns to London, “Every member of my extended family

Photograph by Stu Rosner
takes me to the theater at least once,” she says, smiling with pleasure at the thought.

Knapp’s first show, at age 11, was HMS Pinafore, staged by an Olympia youth-theater program called Kids at Play. Growing up, she also studied French horn, piano, and voice (her voice studies continue), and later choreographed and taught tap dance. At the Charles Wright Academy in Tacoma, Knapp played soccer but didn’t act, because her theatrical energies were channeled into community theater work, particularly the semiprofessional Harlequin Productions.

“That was where I was introduced to the deepest analysis and love of theater, rather than the production of ‘glitz,’” she recalls. “We’d have a week or two of roundtable work and textual analysis of a play. Theater became my life. I loved being on stage and performing, but I was as much in love with the process and the community that developed around it as with performance itself.” One high point was a production of Henry V in which eight actors played all the parts. “I was playing Katherine, the boy, Redford, and several other roles,” she recalls. “It was the most exhausting and vibrant theater experience I’d had—an amazing example of ensemble work.”

For college, she considered both Harvard and the arts-focused Tisch School at New York University. “I decided I wasn’t ready to be done with my academic education—I didn’t feel like I knew what I wanted to know,” she says. A social-studies concentrator, Knapp won an honors thesis on the International Criminal Court.

“I had a crisis of conscience in the middle of college,” she says. “I wondered if theatrical production was really just a lot of trivialities. In theory, theater had a larger importance and relevance, but in practice, it became about these details. Maybe I wanted to pursue academia instead. I did that for awhile, and came to realize that academia had pitfalls of its own, and that theater was as relevant as you wanted it to be. You have to place yourself in a position where you are making the theater you want to make.”

She has done exactly that. McClelland notes Knapp’s “precision as an actress, how specific a character she draws on the stage. Not only physical precision, but precise internal choices, the way her character negotiates the landscape around her. Emily is also hyperspecific in how she chooses projects. She works really hard to figure out what a play is trying to achieve, and only takes on projects that she thinks will challenge and push her.”

Course work in drama has helped, too, though it has its limits. “There are ups and downs in applying the academic study of drama to actual practice,” she explains. “In acting, there is only a certain amount of abstraction that helps you, because the practice of acting is very material and mundane—and it’s not calculated, not rational. Acting is more about impulse than rationality.”

Directing is different, since it is “a lot about language games,” she says. Knapp directed an evening of one-act Harold Pinter plays at the Loeb Experimental Theater; directing, she says, involves “Throwing out a lot of words to an actor and learning which ones communicate the ideas you have in your head. Voice teachers have 20,000 metaphors for opening the throat, and directing is a bit like that. As an actor you can simply do, but as a director you need to verbalize everything.”

Well, theater people often need to do most everything, and Knapp’s colleagues praise her humility and willingness to help with tasks like building and painting sets. She will travel in Europe this summer and attend some theater festivals, and next year plans to study drama, either in London or the United States. She can imagine directing or writing someday, but for now, she says, “I find acting very fulfilling.”

“The amazing thing to me is that theater is created out of the will of the people who are making it,” Knapp declares, stating a kind of credo. “Not out of bricks and mortar—it’s created out of the force of its practitioners, and with that force you can move people. Afterwards you strike the set, you destroy it, and it’s all gone and you can never make it again. It’s the aliveness, that’s the thing.” —CRAIG LAMBERT