Branded

"Your wooden arm you hold outstretched to shake with passers-by."

Does Harvard 'brand' matter anymore?" queried a June 6 headline in USA Today. "As Harvard prepares to confer degrees on yet another batch of graduates Thursday, academic experts scratch their heads at how this institution maintains its reputational dominance in an era of academic parity. But a marketer would understand the Harvard aura in a nanosecond: it's the ultimate brand, at least in the academic world."

"It's the Gucci of higher education," declared USA Today. "Harvard. Just the name exudes superiority, if not smugness. From its 'Veritas' coat of arms to the Georgian-era brick edifices that dot its campus, everything about this storied institution, founded in 1636, smacks of that most un-American trait, elitism."

No, no. The very next day an electronic notice came to members of the Harvard community informing them that henceforth they would embrace egalitarianism. The Administrative Systems e-News reported that University identification cards would no longer carry the designations "Staff," "Officer," "Retiree," or "Emeritus" —in fact, no designations at all, except that IDs issued to students will continue to denote "Student" on the card. Even the gold-colored card formerly given to people in Harvard's service for 15 years or more would be abandoned (although not the perks attached to that condition). "Primarily," confided Administrative Systems e-News, "the change supports the idea of Harvard as 'one community of employees,' breaking down the status divisions implicit in the old designations."

Harvard, the cloth. Primus asked readers a year ago whether anyone could produce a swatch of Harvard cloth, a shirting material said by Fairchild's Dictionary of Textiles to have been manufactured by a Scottish textile mill in the nineteenth century along with Yale cloth, Cambridge cloth, and the familiar Oxford cloth (November-December 2004, page 78). No archivist or keeper of Harvardiana to whom Primus spoke had heard of the fabric. He should have spoken to the managing editor of this magazine, who soon produced a cardigan sweater crafted by his mother, who is originally from Norway, just as he began his freshman year in the College in 1985. It has a yoke of cloth applied to the knitting, with embroidery in Telemark style on top of that. The cloth is black, mid-weight, woven wool and was sold to the managing editor's mother either in Boston or central Florida as Harvard cloth. Primus would not want a shirt made of it, but he is not a nineteenth-century Scot.

Bruce Baron '65, of Harrisburg, Pennsylvania, steered Primus to the website classiclincolns.com, where he learned that the Collector's Series editions of the Lincoln Continental and Continental Mark V in 1979 had headlining material of what Lincoln called Harvard cloth. James Raymond, coauthor of the website, kindly sent Primus a photocopy of a page from the book Original Automotive Interior Trim (c. 1979) that shows Harvard cloth available from Lincoln in a range of colors.

Bookman's heaven. After 40 agreeable years as curator of rare books at Houghton Library, Roger E. Stoddard retired last winter and had this to say at his farewell party: "The American actress Susan Sarandon was asked what she wants God to tell her at the pearly gates of heaven. Her answer: 'I hope that she will say, 'Let's party!'" My answer: I hope that they will say, 'Come let us show you our library.' Then they will take me to a small brick building with a bow front and ample room for study on one side and for display on the other, with lots of loving colleagues, with Borgesian book stacks that seem to go on forever, new books and manuscripts arriving every day, and lots of visitors new and old, from the past and from the present. That's my idea of paradise!"

~PRIMUS V