that I was, I took a stride toward the social studies table before I had really gathered myself, and instantly paid the price. Was I to make eye contact with the departmental advisers behind the table and let them see the purposeless, uninformed haze in my blinkers? I knew nothing about social studies, except that it didn’t sound like it involved calculus. But certainly it was too late to reel aside and pretend that I had never considered heading in that direction. In the end, I bowed my head and made a few feeble pokes at the pamphlets on the table, hoping that the advisers would choose to acknowledge me and (they asked for it!) spill the rote spiel that would justify my vague “Thank you” and (they asked for it!) spill the rote spiel that would justify my vague “Thank you” and subsequent retreat. Mercifully, I did improve a bit in a later foray over to a table that had been earmarked for potential classics concentrators: having had some experience with the discipline, I knew it was my intended concentration. I was acute enough to inform a professor that I had heard Thucydides was “Ummm... hard to translate.”

So it goes at advising events, where almost every question a fertile freshman mind can dream up has a readily accessible answer on line at the department website, and where both the freshmen and the tenured professors who emerge for these occasions are privy to the painful knowledge that this is the case.

Not that I came away from the fort-night with nothing but insecurities. Quite to the contrary, between my first day in the dining hall and the two weeks of events that followed, I had pressed into my eager hands an Advising Fortnight water bottle (white, with a nicely accessorized red top to match the vivid logo); an Advising Fortnight stress hall (I nabbed an extra one of these; they’re good for tossing at sleeping roommates); a Frisbee (which is a poor, flimsy excuse for a Frisbee, if I say so myself); and an Advising Fortnight T-shirt (which graced my back in style and allowed me to put off my laundry duties for another couple of days).

And even without the T-shirt and the water bottle, and all the rest of the gimmicky giveaways, I was left with some favorable impressions. For the first time, I realized that departments can have a specific character; that they can be tight-knit and friendly; that like any other institution purporting to be founded on shared interest, they cultivate a certain amount of camaraderie—I couldn’t deny this as I watched the earth and planetary sciences concentrators pal around with their professors in front of the EPS display. And, in a refreshing turn for one who is often jarred by the disarming realization that adulthood is fast approaching, I was allowed to feel for a couple of weeks like a spoiled kid at a carnival, having trinkets lavished upon me in a situation arranged exclusively for my viewing pleasure.

As for that awkwardness—it feels wrong to complain, because the College does seem to try so hard at times—the Advising Fortnight being one of these—to increase student interaction with professors and thereby allay one of the most common (I would say trite) criticisms of the undergraduate experience here. I suppose C.S. Lewis put it best, however, when he wrote that “delicious drinks are wasted on a really ravenous thirst.” It just seems that some fine things—including human interaction—tend to lose a bit of their appeal when they are pursued too determinedly and sought too hard. And not even a good squeeze on an Advising Fortnight stress ball is going to rectify that.

Christian Flow ’10 of Baltimore will join Eliot House in the fall and plans at the moment to concentrate in classics.

THE UNDERGRADUATE
Practically Perfect in Every Way

by Casey N. CEP ’07

In small white rooms lit by fluorescent lamps and littered with empty soda bottles or coffee cups, undergraduates often find themselves heading off to bed—or staying awake through the night—without finishing their reading for section or completing their papers for seminar. What to do, they wonder, as they sit restlessly at their desks, or settle in between their sheets—what to do when, in a few hours, they enter slightly larger classrooms, much larger lecture halls, or smaller seminar rooms? Unprepared and uneasy, some stay home, others go but resolve to be silent, while still others shed their uneasiness on the walk to class and—without regret—fake, pretend, and act their way through the day.

Whatever the reason—the distractions of social life or the commitment of extracurriculars, the joy of performing or the stress of having to be perfectly prepared—students at the College very often find themselves without enough time for the business of college. The pressures to do it all and to do well continue to rise, while students find themselves less and less prepared to find ways of surviving them.

“I don’t think students are making choices. Instead, they are choosing to try and do everything,” says Timothy McCarthy ’93, senior resident tutor in Quincy House and adjunct professor at the Kennedy School of Government. “There’s an increasing amount of pressure on un-
dergraduates to do everything. Students now are better at the performance of engagement than the practice of engagement.” McCarthy, who has co-taught Core classes and led history and literature tutorials, adds, “We see it most in the classroom. This culture of stress and aspiration produces a lot of dissatisfaction. There are fewer and fewer students who love learning for the sake of learning than when I started teaching 10 years ago.”

The pressures to be perfect and do it all are increasingly common at Harvard College, where many students take more classes than is recommended, sleep fewer hours than seems clinically possible, and join more clubs, activities, and sports than there are hours in the day.

“There are definitely a lot more opportunities for students on campus today. There are more clubs, more magazines, and then, even outside of the standard campus publications and organizations, you have people starting their own companies,” says William Marra ’07, who served last year as president of the Harvard Crimson. “Everyone wants to be the next Mark Zuckerberg [creator of the popular networking website thefacebook.com]. You see people doing really well around you, and you wonder ‘Why can’t that be me?’ He says this leads students to take on too many responsibilities for the limited amount of time they have in their schedules.

“Students often enter the workshop afraid to give up their perfectionist habits,” Page reports. “They’re afraid of not having the right answer in class, of not passing in a paper that meets their unrealistically high standards, and of having their ideas critiqued. Often it’s not even about grades, it’s about how students think others will judge or evaluate them for their work.”

Bass professor of government Michael Sandel agrees. “The greatest cost of perfectionism is [that] students lose their willingness to explore and their freedom to make mistakes, both of which are essential to a liberal-arts education,” he says. Rather than stressing perfection or the right answer, his popular Core course, “Justice” (Moral Reasoning 22), is designed, he explains, “to give students the opportunity to step back and reflect critically on their own moral and political convictions through argument, debate, and discussion.”

“The undergraduate years are meant to be a time when students should feel able to figure out what they believe, what they care about, and what’s worth caring about,” Sandel points out. “It’s difficult to do that in this grip of frenzied pressure to be perfect.” This ambitious and perfectionist culture distracts students, he says, leading them to strive for external rather than internal definitions of success. The vocational pressures of life after graduation have always threatened the undergraduate years, but now, he notes, those pressures have been exacerbated by the stress of the college-admissions process. “Often Harvard students emerge from their pressure-packed high-school years having internalized the drive for perfection,” Sandel explains. “But real learning cannot aim at perfection, because real learning depends on making mistakes, taking risks, and bumping against one’s limitations. Perfection is antithetical to a liberal-arts education.”

William Fitzsimmons ’67, Ed.D. ’71, dean of admissions and financial aid for...
the College and the coauthor of the article “Time Out or Burn Out for the Next Generation,” says he has spent the last few years spreading the message that Harvard is not looking for perfect candidates: “Admissions isn’t a hundred-meter dash, it’s a marathon—we look for students with character and personality.” He reports that the admissions office is promoting gap years to applicants as well as to those students who are admitted, and emphasizes that Harvard “encourages students to take time off, to enjoy themselves and their studies.”

But the idea for this column came to me at a time when I was not enjoying my studies very much: I was leaving a section certain that no one else in the room had completed any more of the assigned reading than I had, which was very little indeed. Why none of us could admit that, why instead each of us said some uninformed thing about the assigned reading, I could not immediately understand. Wanting to put the best face forward, not wanting to seem unprepared, or just being too bored to sit quietly—there were many ways of understanding our behavior, but none seemed that compelling, so I started asking my peers.

Students, it seems, really do worry about how they are being evaluated in every minute of every section they attend, with every word of every paper they write. A perpetual nervousness haunts the undergraduate experience, and students’ reluctance to share these worries publicly does not mean they don’t exist. I have noticed it most often in section, but these pressures exert themselves on playing fields, in newsrooms, behind stage curtains, as well as in classrooms. The Bureau of Study Counsel’s well-attended workshops on busyness, procrastination, time management, and perfectionism are unfortunate reminders of the challenges undergraduates face.

And while the message of excellence without perfection may be repeated by every voice of authority within the College, that hardly drowns out the competing voices from outside the gates. Résumés, applications, and interviews all require accomplished and overachieving subjects, leaving many undergraduates without the courage or strength to acknowledge their own limitations. “The saddest part is that the College is producing more corner-cutters than risk takers,” says Timothy McCarthy. “And some of the most successful people in history were miserable failures, or great risk-takers, or both.”

Berta Greenwald Ledecky Undergraduate Fellow and graduating senior Casey N. Cep will miss the tiny white rooms of Harvard College.

SPORTS

Rebound & Transition

Coach Tommy Amaker is the new ruler of roundball.

H ARVARD HAS NEVER WON an Ivy League basketball championship. Changing that legacy, which dates from 1955 (the first year of play in the league), ranks high among the priorities of Tommy Amaker, the Crimson’s new head coach of men’s basketball, who met local media, fellow coaches, and supporters at a press conference, complete with brunch, in mid April. “I’m excited about coaching in the Ivy League,” said Amaker. “Perhaps we’ll have a chance to make history.” Addressing those of his Harvard athletes who were present, he added, “You already are winners. If you are at Harvard, you’re a winner. And if you can attack those rebounds like you attacked that orange juice, we’ll be fine.”

Nichols Family director of athletics Robert Scalise introduced Amaker, noting his success as a player and assistant coach at Duke, and in head coaching jobs at Seton Hall and Michigan. As a coach, Amaker was part of two Duke NCAA championship teams (1991 and 1992), made six Final Four appearances, and reached postseason play 22 times. “Tommy joins us with experience and a pedigree that are second to none in college basketball,” Scalise said. When Amaker rose, he thanked his new boss “for your math there with all the postseasons,” and then added, “You omitted the fact that I’ve been fired”—to explosive laughter.

The University of Michigan did release Amaker—after six seasons (2001-07) in which the Wolverines compiled a creditable 109-83 record, but failed to make the NCAA tournament. “Tommy joins us with experience and a pedigree that are second to none in college basketball,” Scalise said. When Amaker rose, he thanked his new boss “for your math there with all the post seasons,” and then added, “You omitted the fact that I’ve been fired”—to explosive laughter.

The University of Michigan did release Amaker—after six seasons (2001-07) in which the Wolverines compiled a creditable 109-83 record, but failed to make the NCAA tournament. Some Michiganders reportedly considered Amaker to be too principled for big-time college hoops. “If that’s the speculation,” he told the New York Times, “I’ll take it every day of the week and twice on Sunday.” He added that he never felt any pressure there to alter his convictions.

Amaker succeeds Frank Sullivan, who compiled a 178-245 record over 16 seasons. A widely respected figure, Sullivan nonetheless was fired this spring; Scalise was concerned that Harvard had begun to...