

# Nonstop



Today's superhero undergraduates do "3,000 things at 150 percent."

by Craig Lambert  
photographs by Stu Rosner

**Y**OU WAKE UP EACH MORNING with a fever; you feel like a shadow of yourself. But no time for sickness today—the Adams House intramural crew has one of its thrice-weekly practices at 6 A.M., and you... will...row. Some mornings, you watch the sunrise from Lamont Library after hitting your study groove there around 11 the night before and bushwhacking through assignments during the quiet time between 3 A.M. and 5. The rower and late-night scholar is Becky Cooper '10. "Lamont is beautiful at 5 A.M.—my favorite time," she says. "Sunlight streams in." There's plenty to do—Cooper is taking five courses, concentrating in literature but still premed: "I can't close doors."

She writes out her daily schedule to the minute: "Shower, 7:15-7:20." Lunch might be at the Signet Society, the private, arts-oriented, undergraduate club where she is vice-president. She also belongs to the Isis, a female social club, and has held the post of Dionysus at the *Harvard Advocate*, planning social events like the literary quarterly's spring dinner (which she revived) for 70 attendees. Cooper has an omnivorous appetite for learning and experience: new fascinations constantly beckon, and she dives in wholeheartedly. Yet the ceaseless activity leaves little space or time for reflection on who she is or what she wants. "I'm more terrified of being bored than busy," she explains. "Though I'm scared I'll work myself into a pile of dust if I don't learn when to stop."

Cooper has always been super-active. Even in elementary and middle school, she "adopted an intense work ethic" and participated in track, basketball, chorus, a pottery class, and gymnastics. At the "pressure cooker" Stuyvesant High School in Man-

hattan, she put the shot and racewalked for the track squad, and added cheerleading. After track meets and practices on Saturdays, she had a Sunday job as a docent in a science museum. And from seventh grade on, she attended summer camps for gifted students at upstate college campuses.

At Harvard, she has hosted a two-hour weekly jazz show on WHRB, and as a freshman acted in *Ivory Tower*, the long-running Harvard TV soap opera viewable on YouTube. (Last summer, she also acted in an independent film shot by a friend in Miami, learning American Sign Language for the part.) In the summer of 2007, Cooper tasted some ravishing *ravioli di zucca* (pumpkin)—"I was in heaven"—and determined to learn Italian and cook in Italy. As a sophomore, she got a job with Harvard University Dining Services, working with their consultant, cookbook author Mollie Katzen, and the next summer, after two months in Paris with the *International Herald Tribune*, was baking in Italy as a pastry chef and speaking only Italian.

As a *Crimson* staffer, Cooper wrote a food column every other week for the arts section. Frequently, her classes and meetings ran from 8 A.M. until 11 P.M., when she went over her column, line by line, with another *Crimson* editor. She returned to college this spring after taking the fall term off to continue a summer job assisting *New Yorker* staff writer Adam Gopnik. "It's exhausting—here now, where next?—continually hopping from one thing to another," she says. "You never let yourself rest. Harvard kids don't want to do 5,000 things at 97 percent; they'd rather do 3,000 things at 150 percent."

There's no irony intended: "That's the standard operating proce-



Late at night, Harvard Crimson staffers put to bed the last issue before winter break.

dure,” Cooper explains. “College here is like daring yourself to swim the length of a swimming pool without breathing. A lap is a semester. I want to do everything I possibly can.” She works on a 28-hour day, she says: some days sleeping 10 hours, others, two. She can describe different levels of exhaustion. One level, she explains, is a “goofy feeling, like feeling drunk all the time; you’re not quite sure what’s going on. Then there’s this extra level of exhaustion, where you feel dead behind your eyes. The last four weeks, that’s where I’ve been. I get sick a lot.”

### ~Keeping Up with the Einsteins~

AMAZINGLY ENOUGH, Cooper is not unusual at Harvard College. Students today routinely sprint through jam-packed daily schedules, tackling big servings of academic work plus giant helpings of extracurricular activity in a frenetic tizzy of commitments. They gaze at their Blackberries (nicknamed “Crackberries” for their addictive pull) throughout the day to field the digital traffic: e-mail and text messages, phone calls, Web access, and their calendars. Going or gone are late-night bull sessions with roommates and leisurely two-hour lunches—phone calls and texting punctuate meals, anyway.

“They are unbelievably achieving,” says Judith H. Kidd, formerly associate dean for student life and activities, who retired from Harvard last year. “They are always on. They *prefer* to be busy all the time, and multitask in ways I could not imagine. Students will sign up for three or four activities and take one of them up to practically NGO level. They were organizing international conferences.”

There’s a wide consensus that today’s undergraduates

make up the most talented, accomplished group of polymaths ever assembled in Harvard Yard: there’s nothing surprising about meeting a first-chair cellist in the Harvard-Radcliffe Orchestra who is also a formidable racer for the cycling club, or a student doing original research on interstellar dark matter who organized a relief effort in sub-Saharan Africa. “You could say it’s a high-end problem,” says dean of admissions Bill Fitzsimmons ’67, Ed.D. ’71, “but one of the dilemmas for the kind of multitasking people who come to places like Harvard is that they could do almost anything. And *especially* if that’s true, you need to think hard about what it is you *really* value, which direction is right for you.”

The paradox is that students now live in such a blur of activity that idle moments for such introspection are vanishing. The French film director Jean Renoir once declared, “The foundation of all civilization is loitering,” saluting those unstructured chunks of time that give rise to creative ideas. If Renoir is right, and if Harvard students are among the leaders of the future, then civilization is on the precipice: loitering is fast becoming a lost art. And if the tornado of achievement that whirls through Cambridge has its obvious rewards, there are, as with most tornadoes, downsides.

Sleep deprivation, for example: varsity athletes, representing about 20 percent of undergraduates, seem to be the only sizable student category to sleep and rise at roughly conventional hours, according to Harry Lewis ’68, Ph.D. ’74, McKay professor of computer science and former dean of Harvard College. At



The Harvard University Choir sings at a dress rehearsal in Memorial Church.

student life. In singing, for example, there are now 19 small *a cappella* groups at the College; before the Radcliffe Pitches were founded in 1975, the Harvard Krokodiloes were the sole such group on campus.

Does this mean that students are starting new groups to build their résumés, so they can boast of having been the founder or president or editor-in-chief of an organization? Impossible to say.

“Yes, it can often be frenetic and [done] with an eye toward résumés,” says Friedrich, “but learning outside the classroom through extracurricular opportunities is a vital part of the undergraduate experience here.” And extracurricular experiences may in fact be the strongest preparation for the “real world”; for years, Harvard alumni have achieved notable success in the arts, for example, despite the lack of undergraduate concentrations in the performing arts. Instead, they learned and

practiced their crafts at the highest levels in groups like the Harvard-Radcliffe Dramatic Club, the Harvard Lampoon, the Harvard-Radcliffe Orchestra, and Hasty Pudding Theatricals.

In *Excellence Without a Soul*, his 2006 book on the future of liberal education, Harry Lewis relates a conversation with three of his former students who had launched a highly successful Internet start-up. What in their computer-science educations had contributed to their success, Lewis wanted to know. There was an awkward silence, then one spoke up. “I really loved my computer-science education,” he said, “but I could have read books and learned a lot of that on my own. The thing that was really valuable was running the Quincy House Grill.” Lewis explains: “He’d had to get people to show up on time, and make sure there was enough hamburger ordered the day before—but not too much, or he’d have to waste it, and that would cut into his profit margin. He took all this stuff and combined it with his technical skills to become a very successful entrepreneur. The way social progress gets made is by learning to work together, and the real place where people can learn to cooperate is in extracurriculars.”

“There are so many opportunities here, I don’t want to sleep,” declares the preternaturally busy Will Guzick ’11. “I want to soak it all in and make the most of my four years.” Last year he pulled plenty of all-nighters, but this year is “shooting for seven hours a night,” usually rising at 9 A.M. for a day of classes, going to meetings for activities in the evening, and studying in the Quincy House library (open all night) or the dining hall until 2 or 3 A.M. “The man who cleans the dining hall knows me well,” he says, grinning.

Guzick rooms in a centrifugal Quincy House suite with four other driven young men who found themselves together (and awake) only twice during the fall term: once on Guzick’s birthday, and one night when they fortuitously encountered each other in the dining hall “and decided to take a picture to commemorate the occasion.”

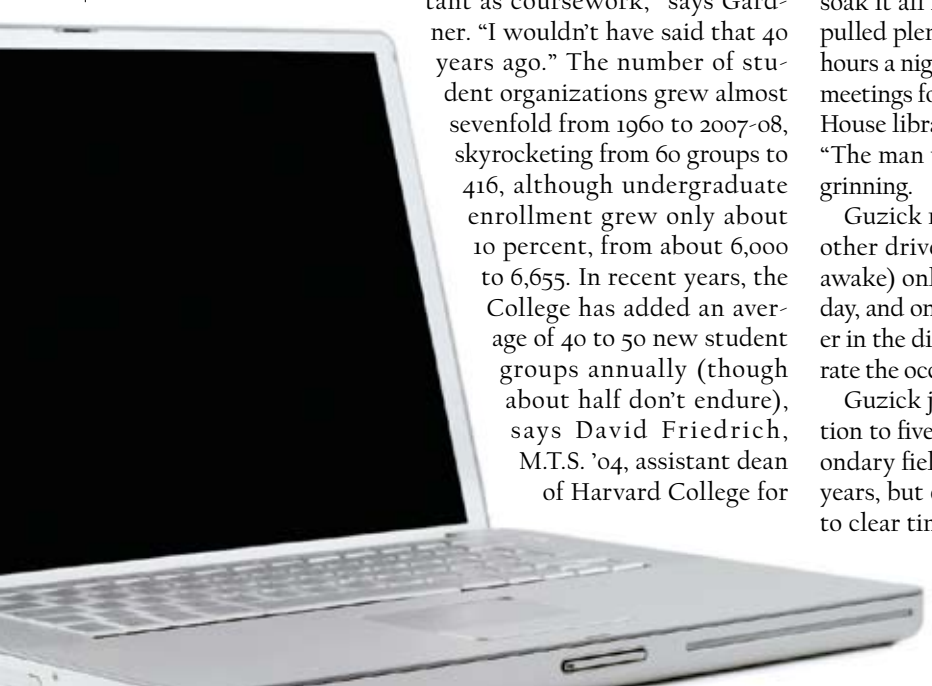
Guzick juggles an astonishing array of commitments in addition to five courses for his economics concentration with a secondary field of statistics. He played varsity tennis his first two years, but dropped that 20-to-25-hours-per-week commitment to clear time for other activities. These include the Leadership Institute at Harvard College, which aims to promote

Becky Cooper’s high school, the standing joke was: “Friends, grades, sleep: you only get two.” Sleep was nearly always the odd one out. Cooper attributes her own frequent low-level infections and colds to exhaustion. Undergraduates tend to push themselves relentlessly and to disbelieve physical limits. “Harvard kids,” Cooper says, “think of themselves as superheroes.”

New technologies vastly enlarge the game of keeping up with the Einsteins. “If you aren’t on Facebook, you feel guilty, you feel like you’re being a bad citizen, or worse, that you are out of it,” says Hobbs professor of cognition and education Howard Gardner ’65, Ph.D. ’71, who studies excellence in the realm of work. “One thing we discovered in our research is that kids look up people whom they don’t know on Facebook, because they want to see how much they’re achieving. If you’re on the *Crimson*, but someone else is on the *Crimson* and the swimming team, well, then....”

The explosion of busyness has occurred not in academics (most students still take four courses a semester), but largely in extracurricular activities. “Extracurriculars are now as important as coursework,” says Gardner.

“I wouldn’t have said that 40 years ago.” The number of student organizations grew almost sevenfold from 1960 to 2007-08, skyrocketing from 60 groups to 416, although undergraduate enrollment grew only about 10 percent, from about 6,000 to 6,655. In recent years, the College has added an average of 40 to 50 new student groups annually (though about half don’t endure), says David Friedrich, M.T.S. ’04, assistant dean of Harvard College for



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leadership on campus; work as a research assistant to a Business School professor, a grader for an Extension School finance course, and as a campus representative for a GMAT tutoring business; the Harvard Undergraduate Economics Association; running (he runs 10 to 15 five-kilometer races per year); working at the Banco Credito del Peru in Lima for four weeks this January; and serving as a peer adviser for nine freshmen and as a drug-and-alcohol peer adviser (he is trying to launch a Friday-night movie series at the Science Center as an alternative to intoxicants). Guzick is also working to organize a series of conferences on French, Italian, and Spanish at Harvard and other colleges because "We don't have a system of language learning outside the classrooms."

He's applying to the Harvard Business School's new 2 + 2 program for college juniors, which would assure him entry into its two-year M.B.A. program after he's worked for two years beyond college. Regarding on-campus leadership positions, he says, "From a résumé perspective, yes, you have to have them. From a personal standpoint, they prepare you very well for staying on top of things in the business world."

The pace of that preparation, though, can be frantic. "People are going nonstop," says Olivia Goldhill '11, a philosophy concentrator from England, "and there are a lot of negative implications. You don't have time to dedicate to your friends or to yourself—or to thoughts that you haven't been taught to think." Goldhill, educated at London's venerable Westminster School, where discussion and debate are the warp and weft of the school day, marvels that, at Harvard, "there are so few intellectual discussions outside of classes. I try to take at least an hour for lunch with friends. There are days, though, that even when you want to go and hang out, everyone else is in their nonstop mode."

An aspiring journalist, Goldhill herself writes opinion columns for the *Crimson*; she also volunteers for the Phillips Brooks House Association, tutoring female ex-prisoners for their GEDs and in job skills. But she believes, too, that "People need to have hobbies, not just extracurriculars—things they do for themselves." (Her own hobbies include reading fiction and plays, going to the theater, and meditation.) "Many have such busy lives building up credentials," she says. "A lot of extracurriculars are résumé builders, and you sit in these meetings not really doing very much. To me, time with friends is the most important, and to my mind it's a little bit selfish, putting future jobs before relationships."

### ~Cradle to Goldman Sachs~

"STUDENTS ARE VERY CONSCIOUS of what it will take to get into graduate school or to get a job," says dean of freshmen Tom Dingman '67, Ed.M. '73. "I regularly have conversations with freshmen who say things like, 'This summer, I have a chance to go back to the yacht club where my family has been involved, and I would run the sailing program. But I don't think I should do that. I should be do-

ing an internship in an office somewhere so that *next* summer I can build on that, and maybe ultimately get an internship with Goldman Sachs.' But they're not paying attention to the things they really enjoy, and not seeing the opportunity to develop themselves holistically—it's more strategizing about how best to build a launch pad."

The strategizing starts early; today's parents groom their children for high achievement in ways that set in motion the culture of scheduled lives and nonstop activity. "This is the play-date generation," says Kidd. "There was a time when children came home from school and just played randomly with their friends. Or hung around and got bored, and eventually that would lead you on to something. Kids don't get to do that now. Busy parents book them into things constantly—violin lessons, ballet lessons, swimming teams. The kids get the idea that someone will always be structuring their time for them." Dingman notes that, "Starting at an earlier age, students feel that their free time should be taken up with purposeful activities. There is less stumbling on things you love and that give you fire in your belly, and more being steered toward pursuits—some of which may, in fact, become passions."

For her part, Olivia Goldhill recognizes that "filling time with activities can be almost a distraction, so you don't have to investigate other aspects of life. The reaction to J-term was a good example of people being scared of what they would do if they weren't given some structure by the University" (see "January Reading," January-February, page 52).

Home life has changed in ways that would seem to undercut children's development of autonomy. There was a time when children did their own homework. Now parents routinely "help" them with assignments, making teachers wonder whose work they are really grading. Youngsters formerly played sports and games



Members of the Harvard Boxing Club spar in the Malkin Athletic Center.



Students study for finals at night in Lamont Library, open 24 hours.

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with other children on a sandlot or pickup basis, not in leagues organized, coached, and officiated by adults; kids had to learn to settle disputes over rules and calls among themselves, not by referring them to grownup zebras. Once, college applicants typically wrote their own applications, including the essays; today, an army of high-paid consultants, coaches, and editors is available to orchestrate and massage the admissions effort.

Adults have taken charge even of recreation, as in play dates. "When birthdays come along, kids have been entertained by magicians," says Dingman. "Or taken out to Chuck E. Cheese. They are the 'Chuck E. Cheese generation.'" Having had their parents organize play and social activities, many young people now arrive at college expecting the institution to operate similarly, *in loco parentis*. "It's very upsetting to read on [year-end freshman] surveys that people have been spending Friday and Saturday nights doing problem sets, finding it hard to escape from what they characterize as the 'intense pressure' of this place," Dingman adds. "When they identify what they think is lacking, they say, 'You haven't organized other things for us'—things like 'trips to bowling alleys.' When I was in college, it never occurred to me that it was Harvard's responsibility to entertain me." Kidd, too, recalls "complaints from parents that we weren't providing enough social activity."

Indeed, parental engagement even in the lives of college-age children has expanded in ways that would have seemed bizarre in

the recent past. (Some colleges have actually created a "dean of parents" position—whether identified as such or not—to deal with them.) The "helicopter parents" who hover over nearly every choice or action of their offspring have given way to "snowplow parents" who determinedly clear a path for their child and shove aside any obstacle they perceive in the way.

Some of the impetus for this is probably "overcompensation," explains Dingman. "With more and more families having both parents working, there's some guilt, and there's a sense that 'When I can be available to you, I'm going to make all things happen for you.' There's no recognition that by stepping up to clear the path, they're really *handicapping* their sons and daughters, making them unaware that they actually have the capacities to do things themselves." Parental involvement can reach astonishing extremes. One Chicago father received a call from his Harvard-freshman daughter who had taken the subway into Boston and wanted to know whether to go right or left at a downtown intersection. (He supplied the answer.)

Dingman's office writes to families of incoming freshmen, asking how Harvard can welcome and support their progeny, and "Oftentimes, we get from parents a very definitive chart of where that student is going," Dingman says. "We'll hear, 'So-and-so has always wanted to be a doctor and will be a pre-med at Harvard, use the summers to work in labs, go to med school, and begin a career in pediatric medicine.' The parents' letters are expressed

with such *certitude*—it’s quite remarkable. This doesn’t suggest that the student has much room to explore, or that there’s much support for someone falling in love with a different field of study.”

Today’s college students, partly due to cell phones, texting, and e-mail, “are in remarkably close communication with their parents,” Dingman continues, citing frequent conversations with undergraduates who tell him things like, “‘My mother’s going to kill me because I didn’t get to the [Institute of Politics] Forum last night—Newt Gingrich was speaking, and she said I had to get a ticket.’ My parents never would have known what was happening on campus; nor would they have thought it was their role to push me toward it.” A survey carried out, in collaboration with Cornell and several other colleges, by associate professor of psychiatry Paul Barreira, director of behavioral health and academic counseling for the University Health Services, showed that one-third of undergraduates are in contact with their parents *daily*.

The parental tendrils can extend even into academic work. In the early 1990s, some undergraduates faxed drafts of term papers home to their parents and received edited, marked-up faxes back; today, e-mail streamlines the process. Barreira cites a study indicating that students who were in frequent contact with parents did better academically; perhaps parents are still “helping” with homework, boosting grades, or perhaps close parent-child ties enhance performance in more indirect, diffuse ways. Barreira doesn’t see reason for alarm. “You hear about parents dictating exactly what is going on with their kids, what courses they are going to take,” he says. “I actually think that’s a minority of students—it may be overplayed.”

Fitzsimmons adds, “Sure, there are more helicopter parents, and they come in all different forms—rich and poor, from all kinds of backgrounds. But for the most part, the helicoptering has *worked*, and is perceived as a positive thing by students.” He cites a study by the College Board indicating that more than 60 percent of students felt their parents had the “right” level of involvement in the admissions process, and that only 5 to 6 percent felt their parents were overly involved.

## ~The Ecology of Overachievement~

IN THE LATTER PART of the twentieth century, the composition of Harvard College changed dramatically. The funnel of access became tighter numerically (20 percent of applicants were admitted in the mid 1960s, versus 7 percent today), yet broadened for greater diversity in race, sex, ethnicity, geographical origin, and social class. “Twenty-five percent of my class [1967] was on some kind of need-based financial aid,” says Fitzsimmons. “It’s a little over 60 percent for the current freshman class. True, we have a better financial-aid program now, so the comparison isn’t exact, but there’s no question that this place has many more people from the bottom quarter and bottom half of the American income distribution. Now, about a quarter of the class comes from families earning less than \$80,000 per year.” New financial-aid initiatives have accelerated change in the last five or six years; consequently, for many students now, “This is their big chance,” Fitzsimmons says. “They have no safety net, no family money—or ‘social capital’—to fall back on.”

Harry Lewis explains: “People who come, on average, from

more comfortable backgrounds are less worried about getting a job after college than those who are very strongly motivated to do better than their parents did. The second group are their parents’ best hope for moving the family up in the world. So there’s more upward mobility, which makes people more energized and ambitious, and sometimes driven—and I don’t consider ‘driven’ itself to be a negative term. That helps create the energy.”

Another shift is that Harvard has become a far more international university than it was a few decades ago. “Harvard may or may not be the greatest university in America,” says Howard Gardner, “but it is clearly the greatest one in the world” in that it’s known from Malaysia to Chile to Sri Lanka, whereas references to Yale, Stanford, and Princeton draw only blank stares even in western Europe. “To get in, you’re competing with people all over the world,” he continues, “which makes it an incredibly selective process.”

Hard-working, enterprising international students may well be raising the benchmark on achievement for everyone, as well as enlarging students’ reference group to global scale. “The average American kid does very little homework,” explains Fitzsimmons. “You can find statistics that show high-school seniors averaging 45 minutes to an hour of homework per night. In many other countries, the norm is four, five, or six hours of homework each day.”

Perhaps the pendulum has swung to an extreme, and a reaction will set in, with a new balance asserting itself. But right now, many College students seem to suffer from a *horror vacui*, a fear of empty spaces, whether those be the J-term, a leisurely summer near the water, or simply an unplanned hour.

“Like one of those puzzles in which you try to rearrange little tiles—to get the number 1 in the upper left corner, and so on—it’s the empty space that makes the other squares maneuverable,” says Dingman. “Without it, the pattern can be fixed and not open to new permutations. I tell students that’s a good way to think about their lives: if they don’t have any empty space, there’s not likely to be any movement. It’s really in those moments where they have created windows of free time that they may learn the most about themselves and end up with the kind of movement they’re looking for.”

One undergraduate who seems to have a feel for empty spaces is Olivia Goldhill, who makes sure there is time in her day for friends, unhurried meals, and cultivating her inner garden. Although she had to take a required quantitative reasoning course to graduate, “I wasn’t willing to put in vast hours of work just to get an A,” she declares. “I think a lot of other students would.” She also feels less pressure because, given her career interests (journalism) and the likelihood of returning to England, “My GPA won’t matter.” Her family, too, has a relaxed, low-pressure attitude about grades. “My mom said she doesn’t want me to get As,” Goldhill says, smiling. “Because that would mean I was missing the college experience.”

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