Schooled in Life

ALUMNI ON UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATION, THEN AND NOW

AS THE COLLEGE CELEBRATES its 375th anniversary, we asked members of this year’s twenty-fifth reunion class how their education shaped who they have become—and what Harvard could do to improve the education of undergraduates today and in the future.

“Have Big Lives.”

One of the more challenging aspects of being a Harvard student and graduate—especially for a woman—is grappling with questions of success and failure, Lisa Myers reports. Myers, the owner of Rosie’s Yarn Cellar in Philadelphia and sole U.S. wholesale distributor of fair-trade Manos del Uruguay yarns, has felt the weight of expectations for alumni to “have big lives.” “Even if you were going to go off and devote yourself to ending world hunger, there was a sense that you were going to be a famous leader,” she says, “not someone nobody ever heard of, and certainly not someone feeding the hungry by cooking for the four people who live in your house every night.” Undergraduates internalize the expectations as the tools and resources “to make an impact” are handed over, she says. “The sense that you’re just settling down and doing nothing, which you could have done with a B.A. from anywhere, is not a good answer.”

During their recent reunion, she and classmates discussed failure at length. “The consensus was that we wished Harvard had taught us more about it—encouraged it, even, since that’s where so much growth and discovery begin,” she says. “I felt that in intellectual risk-taking was the only kind that had been encouraged; a classmate thought even that was hardly supported.” For Myers, the answer came from the late Plummer professor and Pusey minister Peter J. Gomes, whom a friend quoted as saying, “Leadership is not service.” “The Harvardian imperative to ‘Give back’ has somehow been conflated with what I’ll call the ‘expectation of leadership,’” Myers says. “The result is alumni who think their role is to organize a 501(c)(3) to support research into a particular cancer, when fundraising for the American Cancer Society would be a much more efficient use of resources; and alumni who think that starting a business that employs 25 people—while paying the alumnus/a seven figures a year—constitutes ‘giving back.’”

Myers would also like to see the College foster more growth in emotional intelligence and self-awareness, although she is not sure what form this would take. “I do recall the impression that the function of College advising was to get us back to paper-writing and exam-taking, not to help us consider the meaning of our lives,” she observes. “The current wisdom about happiness—or satisfaction in life, if you prefer—is that it comes from our relationships with other people, not from what we do for a living or how much stuff we have. Could an undergraduate education be structured so as to acknowledge that?”

“Get Jobs! Learn How to Do Something.”

There is a naïve belief upon graduating that you can do anything, that the world is your oyster,” says Yule Caise of Santa Monica, a writer-director and producer of films, new media, and television shows (perhaps best known for his work on NBC’s Heroes). “That is a great thing about going to Harvard. But it is also a double-edged sword. I think it got some people in trouble because sometimes you can’t do whatever it is without proper preparation. You may think you can, but it’s often necessary to train”—or to endure the humbling experience of starting from the bottom in a professional field. “My friends who did not go to Harvard did not have this false sense of security and were out there hustling from the get-go.”

The College could help current students more by infusing their educational experience with more practical realities, he says. Workshops on how to turn a calling to the arts into a career would have helped him a lot, for example. “It would also be useful for students to have a roundtable course, with discussions, about entering life post-college, a ‘finishing class,’ so to speak, that is for seniors only,” he adds. “It could be a half-course that is fun, deals with some practicalities I’m sure many students are lacking, and encourages students to think beyond ‘getting a job’ and lean toward personal satisfaction, which promotes happier and ultimately more successful people.”

Students should also “get jobs!” during the year, or at least the...
This thesis. (In the end, he won a Hoopes Prize for exceptional ing or cleaning,” he says. “There is a humility in learning the ba more seriously than when he was a visual and environmental studies concentrator and had to fight to make a fiction film for his thesis. (In the end, he won a Hoopes Prize for exceptional

The “Classic Tough and Demanding Harvard Professor”

H arvard was “a major step forward” for Paul B. O’Brien in learning critical listening, thinking, and communica
toils. He learned well: as pastor of Saint Patrick Parish in the former industrial city of Lawrence, Massachusetts, he leads a congregation of many thousands and runs the Cor Unum Meal Center, which serves more than 200,000 meals annually. “A lot of what I do is try to help people with their day-to-day life issues—some people are very happy, but often their issues are big challenges,” he says. “I have to be the best listener I can be to try and understand someone’s perspective….You have to really hear their words and read a person’s feelings and try to understand where they are coming from. It takes logical thinking and real-life philos
dical work. And then I try to communicate the revelations God has for this person’s life.”

Asked how the College can best prepare undergraduates to

tag today, O’Brien emphasizes rigorous academics coupled with close relationships with professors. He cites his sophomore govern
tural tutorial at Mather House as “an ideal academic experience”: the material was very difficult and the course required “constant writing on high-pressure deadlines.” His tutor, he adds, “was extra
darily challenging and extraordinarily compassionate with people in the group, a perfect combination.”

Even more influential was the process of writing his senior thesis with Arthur Maass, then Thompson professor of government. “He rejected most of what I said and wrote, for months and months. Nothing was good enough: my thinking was inevitably foolishly limited and what I produced for him was surprisingly meager, and he really drove me to work so much harder,” O’Brien recalls. “Then finally there came a point when I submitted a chapter of my thesis and he said, ‘This is very good.’ And we became the closest friends; he even spent holidays with my fam
ily, until he died. He was the classic tough and demanding Harvard professor. He was that way because he cared very much about how my life turned out.” O’Brien presumes such mentorships continue today and urges Harvard to protect and nurture them—and students to pursue them. “The criticism is and was that full professors are not actively engaged with students,” he says. “But my sense was that if I wanted to pursue a connection, that was welcomed.”

O’Brien also lauds Harvard’s encouragement of extracurricu
lar activities, which freed him to explore front-line ministering (both with immigrants in an English as a Second Language program and at a homeless shelter in Harvard Square) before becoming a priest. “I am not sure that at every school I would have been able to spend those huge numbers of hours on those activities,” he says. “A lot of my classmates are very successful in fields tied to their undergraduate extracurricular interests; their academic studies are not directly connected to what they have done with their lives.”

From Passive to “Immersive Learning”

O ur students are way ahead of us technologically,” says

Susan D. Jones, an associate professor who teaches courses on the history of medicine, science, and technology at the University of Minnesota, in St. Paul. “The crucial thing is not just to apply technology on top of current teaching practices but to look carefully at curriculum and spend the resources—time and money—in helping faculty make the changeover to more intensive, innovative teaching.

She would like to see holistic re-

form—not of “pieces of curriculum” but in the ways teaching is conducted daily—to help students move into the future. Research and experience show, she says, that students need to work on real-world problems, not just abstractions; generate their own ideas and conclusions from course content; and learn how to communicate these ideas to a relevant community. Today and in the future, communication requires a capacity for understanding differences among people and cultures, along with understanding the technological interfaces that involve virtual groups who are in-

creasingly part of the conversation.

Jones points to the rise of immersive learning and online education, “in which students participate in problem-solving in multi-user vir-
“Pride Is Such a Useless Handicap.”

Christina (Erickson) Putney urges Harvard undergraduates to take full advantage of the College’s intellectual offerings (she feels she did not) and find “the extraordinary teachers who engage and inspire their students.” “If Harvard is looking for a way to improve,” she says, “it could put more professors like Michael Sandel, E.O. Wilson, and Marjorie Garber into the mix.” Though she left it to “the pros” to devise ways to foster better pedagogical practices, she has found through experience that “the best teachers are those who have a passion about teaching that is equal to their passion for their subjects. They’re like tour guides through uncharted territory,” she explains. “They intuitively grasp what their students don’t yet know and start the journey there. They help you see and interpret things you would have missed and bring it all to life.”

Putney—a full-time mother who is married to a diplomat and serves as a part-time community liaison and office coordinator at the U.S. Embassy in Yerevan, Armenia—has thoroughly enjoyed the online version of Bass professor of government Michael J. Sandel’s “Justice” course, distributed by the University. “Watching the podcasts, I notice that he keeps his students involved in his lectures. Active learning beats passive learning every time.”

To that end, she urges contemporary undergraduates not to shy away from asking questions and speaking up in class. “If I could go back to give my freshman self a pep talk, I’d remind her that you don’t take a course because you already know its content, but precisely because you don’t,” she notes. “So go ahead and ask questions. Pride is such a useless handicap, and it turns out that trying to hide your ignorance is one of the best ways of holding on to it.”

“Become Better ‘Citizens of the World.’”

Study abroad, now encouraged and integrated into the College experience, was largely absent in the late 1980s, recalls Jay Winthrop, principal of Douglass Winthrop Advisors LLC, a registered investment advisory firm in Greenwich, Connecticut. He urges Harvard to make international exposure a priority—and urges students to take advantage of any chances to travel abroad to learn a language, gain different perspectives on areas of study, and experience other economic, educational, and cultural systems. “The world looks far more global to me now than it did 25 years ago, meaning more is asked of young people entering the workforce,” he says. “As well, effective leadership in most professions demands an understanding of the complex forces and cultures buffeting our world.” Students also have other options to learn about cultural diversity: from their peers as well as from “visiting foreign heads of state, or government officials, business leaders, writers, and other leading figures from outside the United States” who often speak on campus. “The question is: how best do we encourage young people to become better ‘citizens of the world’?”

Leadership, although essential in most professions, is “under-taught,” Winthrop asserts. To foster leadership skills within the curriculum, he favors an education with survey courses in multiple disciplines that preserves the freedom inherent in Harvard’s “liberal arts ecosystem.” Although Winthrop and his undergraduate peers were drawn to Brown’s less structured curriculum, “I have come to feel that quite the reverse is more useful,” he says. “I would encourage students to leave Harvard with a broad education, including the study of international economics, history, mastery of a foreign language, proficiency in writing and speaking, et cetera...and to resist the urge to dive too deeply into a single topic.” Such breadth breeds well-grounded leaders. “The world needs more Churchills and Mandelas,” he explains, “leaders with good judgment, an ability to listen, and to communicate a worthy shared purpose.”

Winthrop would also like to see students gain more “real world” professional experience before graduation. He envisions a program staffed by undergraduates and alumni that offers pro bono consulting services to organizations, giving students “the chance to explore a field of interest, to meet alumni with relevant experience, and to learn the demands and expectations of work in a professional setting,” while enabling alumni to fulfill “a desire for public service or to work on projects of personal interest.”