growth; they enroll more than 2,500 students.

And in late February, Caroline M. Hoxby, Bommer professor in economics at Stanford, analyzed online learning in a working paper, “The Returns to Online Postsecondary Education.” As summarized in the abstract, the research found “little support for optimistic prognostications about online education.” Drawing on the cohort of students enrolled full-time, or very substantially, in online programs (thus heavily at for-profit institutions, many of which have been discredited in recent years), she concluded that their online work was “not substantially less expensive than comparable in-person education,” as measured by tuition or the schools’ costs. Moreover, “Online enrollment usually does raise a person’s earnings, but almost never by enough to cover the social cost of the education. There is scant evidence that online enrollment moves people toward jobs associated with higher labor productivity”—meaning that taxpayers are unlikely to recoup public costs through higher tax revenues, and, indeed, that many of the students would struggle to repay their loans. Many educators criticized Hoxby’s student and institutional sample, and her aggregation of results among different kinds of learning situations, but most agreed her metrics are relevant for assessing online programs’ costs and potential.

One interesting cost (which HarvardX has also encountered) involves making online content accessible to people with disabilities—usually by captioning. In March, the University of California, Berkeley, announced that it was ending public access to more than 20,000 legacy audio and video files, in response to a federal order that they be made accessible. YouTube, the iTunes U, and Berkeley websites will remove the items. Its edX courses continue to be made accessible, and future contents will accommodate users with constraints. —J.S.R.

Developing Data Science

Harvard plans to build a data-science institute in Allston to support research, education, and entrepreneurship in what University leaders call “a new discipline.” Data science is central to research in public health, the physical, social, and biological sciences, and medicine; it has become increasingly important in all fields that involve empirical research, such as law, government, and even the study of culture. The institute would provide a commons for collaboration among almost every school—especially the Harvard Paulson School of Engineering and Applied Sciences (SEAS, which will have a new home on Western Avenue by 2020), Harvard Business School, the i-lab incubator and its affiliates—and research-intensive businesses that the University expects to attract to its Allston “enterprise research campus.” (For an overview, see “Why ‘Big Data’ Is a Big Deal,” March-April 2014, page 30.)

Harvard has the ingredients needed to do “world-leading data science,” said Colony professor of computer science David C. Parkes, area dean for computer science in SEAS, and co-director of the data-science initiative defining the path to an institute, together with professor of biostatistics Francesca Dominici, senior associate dean for research at the Harvard Chan School of Public Health (HSPH). Harvard has “methodologists; compelling applications questions; and… the context of society. That is the magic triangle,” Parkes said. With leading professional schools and affiliated hospitals, each with its own data-science expertise, the University has many resources already in hand. “We need to somehow bring them together,” he said, “and go from this distributed excellence” to creating a place where the people and their skills “sing together.”

The initiative plans several early steps: creating an interdisciplinary postdoctoral fellows program in which each fellow works with multiple faculty members; outfitting new programmatic spaces—one in Cambridge and one in Boston (“to help us bootstrap what we want to be,” Parkes said, “until we get to a permanent space”); and hiring professional data scientists to work with students and faculty members.

These moves complement the launch of three data-science master’s programs, one each at HSPH and Harvard Medical School, launching this fall; and one in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences beginning in fall 2018.

Dominici and Parkes declined to compare Harvard’s data-science plans to those elsewhere, or to put a timeline on the physical data-science institute in Allston. But Dominici said, “I think we are going to end at an unprecedented scale and a most important impact.” Read a complete report at harvardmag.com/datascience-17. —JONATHAN SHAW

THE UNDERGRADUATE

Exclusivity, from the Inside

by lily scherlis ’18

I was the kind of kid who would actually respond to the mass email freshly appointed Dean Rakesh Khurana sent to the incoming freshman class. I didn’t realize he was the kind of dean who would reply, asking to meet me.

At the time, I was deep in the throes of competing with other prospective undergraduate literati to join the staff of The Harvard Advocate, the College’s long-lived literary magazine. I was very angry at having to prove myself to win a spot in an extracurricular. Here we all were, already at Harvard, still chasing after prestige. The social scene felt like a forest of ladders all stretching upward toward the sunny warmth of feeling included, wanted, comfortable.

“I hate all these social hierarchies and power structures,” I told him. “I just want to work on a magazine and make friends.
Why do I have to be formally assessed and declared good enough by my peers before they'll let me hang out with them?”

He told me I could be the one to change the socioextracurricular landscape. I shrugged. “I'm not positioned to do anything,” I said, unwilling to be empowered by an inspired administrator. “Once you have enough power to change these spaces, you have no personal stake in doing so. You don't need them to change for you to feel included: you already are.”

These days I'm the magazine’s president. Most of my closest friends are Advocate members. I've forked almost all of my college experience over to this organization. I'm in its headquarters, a crumbling white clapboard home on South Street, a good 50 hours a week. I have laughed and cried on every chair and couch in the building.

But I haven’t forgotten. The freshman-fall iteration of me has taken up residence in the back of my head. She likes to tease me about having sold out to the great machine of institutionalized validation. “Don't worry about it,” she says sarcastically, “You're just personally responsible for perpetuating a mean and exclusionary system and too blinded by your position to see it.”

In the two and a half years since I met with him, Khurana’s push for more inclusive social spaces has come to define his administration. This has involved substantial cracking down on exclusive social spaces. These efforts force me to consider my own position more carefully. I don't want to attack the organization that has become my family here. I also don't want to make excuses on its behalf: it has been hard for me to make the Advocate into a home. I’m lucky to have it. Being irrevocably personally tethered to the Advocate makes me at once protective of it and obsessed with holding it accountable.

Op-eds and College-wide emails tend to skate over the human messiness of being an individual trying to navigate campus organizations responsibly. We are all learning how to handle having power over each other. At the Advocate, we are college kids selected by other college kids to select other college kids as the certified Harvard literati—and we're not always older or more experienced than the people we assess.

For most of us, this is the first time our social capital has been reified through an explicit institutional process. This process is called “comp,” which stands for either “competition” or “competence,” depending on whom you ask. It’s the standard Harvard term for the semester-long training and assessment that some extracurriculars use to select and prepare new members. Most comps happen every semester, are open to all students, and can be repeated as many times as desired. Selective comps all claim to strive for meritocracy, but even if they always select those most deserving candidates, they’re still exclusionary. The line dividing members and non-members persists.

Two and a half years later, it's weird to think that my conversation with the dean was a grain of sand in the administrative dune that may or may not be slinking toward South Street. Groups that exclude on the basis of a relevant skill—as opposed to organizations that select members using solely social criteria—have been largely ignored by the College, though there are rumors we’re next after the final clubs. Nevertheless, comps are often accused of contributing to the power hierarchies that plague our social spaces. In early March, the Undergraduate Council announced that it would build a comp evaluation system to help students make informed decisions about which organizations to attempt to join—a system that will implicitly double as a way to hold organizations accountable to popular opinion.

The Advocate has a long-standing image problem grounded in frustrating historical realities. It was founded in 1866, and for most of its history, systematically excluded potential members on the basis of class, race, gender, religion, or sexual orientation (usually in tandem with the College's own barriers for admission). We have framed portraits of long-dead young white men on our walls and dusty tomes full of the juvenilia of major poets to match. When friends heard I was comping, they’d turn their noses all the way up and tell me the Advocate was pretentious, the worst accusation you can make of a Harvard organization besides insinuating that it doesn’t have sufficient prestige. The organization has been accused of picking only its members’ friends, or worse, being a home only for well-off private-schooled white kids. We hear about students who self-select out of comp due to the perception that only some kinds of people can feel at home in this organization.
As a comper I would have been surprised to learn how fervently the Advocate tries to make its comp less daunting. We say things about the process that try to make it seem approachable, to dispel rumors of biased assessments, to increase transparency. We mean them. But the picture we paint also serves to reassure the membership that comp is just, and justifiable.

We say that our comp requires no experience, and will equip you with any and all skills you need. The idealized educational comp assesses how well you’ve osmosed the information and skill set we’ve supposedly provided, whether that involves analyzing poetry or fixing our website. This is a comforting thought: it makes the comp sound like a sort of benevolent free educational program, a productive use of time independent of prospective membership. Some members challenge that labeling the comp “educational” is condescending. I worry that claiming no experience is required obscures the preparation gap between, say, an English concentrator who went to prep school and a STEM concentrator who didn’t. We say our comp is entirely non-social, that your chances are not remotely affected by whether our members like you on a personal level. But when many boards select members based on how well candidates analyze creative work in a discussion setting, how can social skills not play in? And still: many compers do sign up because their friends are members. Those members either cold-shoulder their friends at meetings or risk making other compers feel disadvantaged by their lack of connections.

There’s uncertainty over whether to acknowledge the power differential, and how. Some want to professionalize the process, hoping that clarity and transparency will file down the ragged emotional edges of rejection. Others want to humanize it, earnestly reminding prospective members that they, too, were once terrified compers. Some attempt to undermine the hierarchy, insisting that the coming assessment is totally meaningless. We feel the need to go over and over how we can be a positive force on campus, or at least that there are tangible ways to do so, like banning sexual relationships between compers and members during the comp. And we are always implementing little changes that seem like they might help—like serving refreshments to compers and cutting the part of the first meeting where compers schmooze with board heads one on one under the guise of “asking questions not covered.” But the next semester we’d inevitably bring back the Q&A, because it put a face to the power structure. And we’re still going back and forth about whether to hold a celebratory social event for compers: some say it’s a nice treat, and others believe that these well-intentioned conversations serve as exercises in ethical reasoning or group therapy, assuaging our discomfort.

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We feel the need to be selective because everything else is. Harvard itself employs merit as a grounds for exclusion. No wonder the student body subdivides into impermeable little social cells: many of us are trying to recreate the ecstasy of the moment of acceptance into the College, the moment when we first tasted real prestige.

Since 2014, we’ve been asking members to fill out an anonymous annual survey. It turns out that we are indeed disproportionately rich, white, private-educated, and from New England. Based on this year’s sample of 55 respondents out of 78 current members, we’re 64 percent Caucasian, compared to 53 percent of the class of 2018. Though more than 65 percent of Harvard students receive financial aid, 68.6 percent of Advocate members receive none. (The Advocate does not have monetary dues; members are expected to spend two hours attempting to sell subscriptions to local businesses each semester, and may request an alternative two-hour task if they are uncomfortable doing so.) Just over 60 percent of us went to private schools. We’re also perfectly gender balanced, and only 72 percent straight, compared to 90.2 percent of the class of 2018. The average member values the personal importance of the Advocate community at 7 out of 10. As members who have taken any statistics whatsoever frequently remind us, the numbers, which fluctuate 10 percent or more year to year, have little statistical significance. I still

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Bias can make it difficult to distinguish between institutional problems and personal ones.

The survey also includes open-ended questions, asking members to report instances when they have been made to feel uncomfortable on the basis of class, race, gender, or sexual orientation. “I think the Advocate is in the process of developing a strong culture of inclusion and openness, which was not necessarily the case when I first joined,” wrote one member. But mostly—as is expected when you ask people to complain—they’re critical. “The Harvard public generally thinks of us as pretentious ivory tower aesthetes,” another member wrote. Some are deeply upsetting: “I began to dread going to meetings to the point of feeling physically ill because I felt so stupid and uncomfortable around everyone.”

We’ve spent a lot of meeting time this spring trying to make sense of the responses. In a small organization where everyone knows everyone else, bias and other noise can make it difficult to distinguish between institutional problems and personal ones. Still, anonymity gives a megaphone to those who might otherwise never speak up, and I think it’s important to take each response seriously in its biased yet vital subjectivity. As a whole, though, members are split between feeling things get better and getting worse, between prescribing modifications and feeling it’s hopeless.

Our conversations about inclusivity inadvertently and almost invariably become conversations about comp. Comp is an obvious proxy for otherwise abstract issues: it’s a concrete ritual with clear rules and clear outcomes, a ritual we explicitly control. We have a fresh shot at it every semester and can see our changes play out in real time. But this conversational slippage makes the line between members and nonmembers seem like the only frontier in the fight for belonging.

The most emphatic survey responses concerned the Advocate’s internal social scene. Many felt the community had “become tighter and more good-natured.” Others still felt unwelcome: “I definitely feel like I need to put on a bit of an act to be in the building or to interact with people in it.” “I’d be most proud,” wrote one member, “if a nonmember left our building thinking not ‘Wow, The Advocate is so cool I wish I were on,’ but instead ‘Wow, those people are so nice and really like each other.’” Some complained about cliques: “Oftentimes it seems like a certain group of people own the building and are not particularly welcoming to those who do not fit their mold.”

As a new member I was confronted by a conglomerate of well-dressed upperclassmen who spoke eloquently about books I hadn’t read and music I hadn’t heard of. I was faced, like high-school students everywhere, with a clique I desperately wanted to be a part of and didn’t know how to break into. When my parents visited that fall I cried to my dad for three hours about how I was never, ever going to make friends or be one of the cool kids. It turns out making it into the magazine’s membership doesn’t guarantee inclusion.

Eventually, with effort, you make friends. You’re not necessarily happy or cool, but you’re comfortable. You’ve had to wrench open a number of closed doors to get here, to grit your teeth through insecurity and exclusion. You assumed that when you finally got these doors open—the doors that keep compers from members and the Advocate’s social periphery from its core—they would stay open. You would be kinder and fight to make the community a better and more welcoming place. After you everyone else would be able to stroll through, as if you were Moses parting the Red Sea of exclusivity. But the doors lock behind you.

Being jaded won’t help. The beauty of college organizations is their rapid turnover: you can make drastic changes and in four years no one will remember things were ever not that way. I cannot eliminate the barriers to full inclusion, but I still have an imperative to be kind and welcoming and to wring every last drop of cynicism out of my demeanor. We need to be encouraging, to remind those who come after us that doors can open, that belonging is possible—and so is change. Some doors will still stick, however frequently we apply the WD-40 of institutional self-reflection to our rusty hinges. We will keep applying it. This building with its sticky doors has become our home, and we do not want to be alone here.

Berta Greenwald Ledecky Undergraduate Fellow
Lily Scherlis ’18 has not yet left the building.

SPORTS

“Feeling Fast”

Nomin-Erdene Jagdagdorj’s “very Mongolian attitude” toward water

With roots in Mongolia and Missouri, Nomin-Erdene Jagdagdorj didn’t exactly have sailing in her blood. “Yeah, we’re not really an aquatic people,” says the senior, who last year co-captained Harvard’s sailing team. “For Mongolians, and Missourians too…water is kind of a foreign concept.” Maybe that’s what drew her to it. Before trying out as a walk-on sailor during her first semester in Cambridge, she had been in a sailboat exactly once: on a “tiny, tiny lake” one summer day in Minnesota, where her friend’s family had a cabin and a little Sunfish. “My friend and her siblings were bored with this boat,” Jagdagdorj recalls. “But her grandfather was like, ‘I love sailing.’ And I was like, ‘What is a boat?”’

She soon found out. After joining the team, she spent a year mostly on the practice roster, learning her way around the mast and the mainsail and the jib and the halyard and the bow and the centerboard—and the water. The Charles River, Harvard’s home field, “is a famously shifty venue,” she says. “A lot of people get frustrated with that. The para-