

# The Harvard Crimson

## Affirmative Scapegoating

By [J. LORAND MATORY](#) 5 days ago

An open secret circulates in University Hall: Compared to their peers at other institutions, Harvard students are deeply unhappy and dissatisfied with their campus experience. The recent “[I, Too, Am Harvard](#)” campaign reveals some of the reasons for this discontent, and, through [The Diversity Report](#), minority students make concrete suggestions about much that needs to be done. However, an overarching lesson in these developments must not be missed. As a Harvard alumnus, former Harvard professor, and parent of a graduating senior, I have come to understand this lesson firsthand.

Two years ago, a very highly accomplished Harvard classmate of mine—a white male—told me, “At Harvard, we never really learned anything in class. We were smart enough to bullshit our way through.” My friend had evidently mastered the art of the superior gesture, clever ellipsis, and obscure allusion that embarrassed his audience (including many professors) into presuming his intelligence and not demanding proof for his pronouncements. By contrast, I tended to read the whole book, underline, summarize, and highlight in search of evidence for my own often contrary interpretations. He graduated cum laude; I graduated magna. And we are both at the top of our professions.

At Harvard and in the U.S. generally, some people’s lack of melanin confers an automatic benefit of the doubt. On the other hand, I still hesitate to leave any probative detail out of my publications. The disadvantage is that I write long. But I make points that come out of my distinctive experience.

My friend’s revelation also helped me understand what several white female faculty colleagues told me during the 18 years that I taught at Harvard. They said the key to demonstrating authority in department and in general faculty meetings is just to speak. Just speak, even if you haven’t yet figured out what you want to say. Due to my own racial insecurities, I needed to formulate my ideas evidentially and syllogistically before I talked. Some of my colleagues in the academy, however, hid their equally human insecurities behind a shiny armor of whiteness and opaque language, or silence.

On more than one occasion at Harvard faculty meetings, when a questionable decision was announced, I would turn to an older, white male colleague and whisper, “What happened?” One such colleague whispered back, “I don’t know. I’ve been here for 30 years, and sometimes I still don’t know what’s going on!” He had no more courage to speak up than I did.

However, there was one occasion when parliamentary procedure was violated so unfairly that I stood up and said no. I was virtually alone in the subsequent fight. But I called the bluff because Harvard belongs to no one more than it belongs to me, and I have a permanent stake in Harvard’s fairness to all, and, because of my race, a greater stake than most.

But it is not black students and faculty alone who feel the need to prove ourselves against doubters (even if we do so more than others). So I fully understand the sentiments behind the editorial that helped provoke the “I, Too, Am Harvard” Campaign.

In November 2012, Sarah R. Siskind ’14 wrote a column in The Crimson in which she lamented, “I am kept up at night by the thought that simply because my father has attended and donated to the University, I might have taken the spot of a more qualified applicant.” However, she took comfort in pointing a finger at her brown and black classmates, even claiming that her campaign was an attempt to spare them the humiliation of having their degrees regarded as worthless.

In her article and a presentation in the “Harvard Speaks” lecture series, Siskind says she is “picking on” racial affirmative action: first because the real indices of disadvantage are poverty, femaleness, descent from the enslaved, Jewishness, etc., and not “race” (which is but a false proxy), and second, because, to her, the products of affirmative action are like “visually impaired pilots.”

Through clever ellipsis, Siskind pretends that white women, whose sex is equally visible, have not been the greatest beneficiaries of affirmative action. She also forgets that it took a world war to secure equal rights for Jews. She confesses that the legacy of racial slavery can never be righted, but she sweeps under the rug the well-documented forms of ongoing racial discrimination and exclusion that affirmative action has been used, quite effectively, to offset.

So why does Siskind bring up her legacy status and father’s donations, and then assume they won’t make her one more “visually impaired pilot?” Because of her confidence that people who look like her (or her father) will be in power and therefore keep the secret of her own dangerous impairments? Siskind’s gymnastic effort to question the worth of race as one of the numerous characteristics considered in admissions, while leaving the issue of her unearned privileges unquestioned, is no balanced analysis and no expression of concern for the stigmatized. The problem of racism is and has always entailed the taken-for-granted privileges of some races, as well as the explicit handicapping and exclusion of others.

So what is it that distinguishes black students and faculty from others, like Siskind?

Throughout the history of both the U.S. and Harvard, we have been unable to hide. The canonization of the Declaration of Independence alongside the maintenance of racialized slavery branded black people as uniquely and hereditarily unworthy of the equality of opportunity promised to every other citizen.

And our nation has yet to supersede this history. A recent study showed that emailed appeals for mentorship from equally qualified people were considerably more likely to be answered if the sender’s name seemed to belong to a white male. Similarly distinct and significant is the effect of applicants’ race on job and bank loan applications and of defendants’ race on conviction rates and length of imprisonment for equal crimes. Such cases demonstrate not just the reality of systemic discrimination but also the processes by which white people of all classes benefit from their own form of affirmative action every day of their lives.

But I have no doubt that America and Harvard belong to me and I to them. One reason is that the role of being the perennial Constitutional Other of the nation and of the University gives many black people a clarity of mission unclouded by the option, available to Siskind, of pointing a finger at others in order to hide their own vulnerability. The “I, Too, Am Harvard” campaign exemplifies this insight. Therefore, I urge the Harvard community to follow The Diversity Report with care. They stand to learn a great deal about what many have chosen to overlook.

And to all you fellow sons and daughters of Harvard—whatever your color, ethnicity, region of origin, gender, sexual orientation, class, or professional rank: Can you feel the alienation that we feel, in a place you have every right to feel is your own? The “I, Too, Am Harvard” campaign is the proverbial “canary in the coalmine.” Once we all see ourselves in that coalmine, we may find a path toward cleaner air.

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