

Deepika Sawhney, Assignment 1 – A710U Transformational Models in Higher Education

In a short paper of 1-2 pages, describe the one big thing you would change about education at Harvard University. Forget about how likely this change is to happen: focus on why and how you think the change would be beneficial. No outside sources required. Due Friday, February 18 by 11:59PM.

Ultimately higher education is a business with revenue streams, expenses to manage and a mandate to keep it a going concern. However, there is a moral imperative overlaid on the business.

Harvard is an elite institution, with academic and financial success. There is no reason to change unless the moral imperative forces it to examine its past. According to the Harvard Charter of 1650, it was committed to “*the education of the English and Indian youth of this country*”⁽¹⁾. I would like to see Harvard live up to that charter, by creating a separate college exclusively for Native American and indigenous (AIAN) students. The college should have dedicated housing, culturally appropriate student supports, programming, mentoring and financial assistance. The students would take the same courses that all Harvard undergraduates take but with additional scaffolding to ensure that they are academically, socially and mentally resilient.

Harvard admitted 3.4% of the applicants for the class of 2025. Over 57 thousand high school graduates across the world applied for less than 2000 spots. About 1.2% of the admitted class was Native American ⁽²⁾. Nationally there have been worrisome trends with undergraduate enrollment decreasing in the AIAN community. Only approximately 24% of all 18–24-year-olds are enrolled in college, versus the national average of 41%⁽³⁾. The low education achievement rates translate to low socio-economic wellbeing. There is very high need⁽⁴⁾.

Primary and secondary education disruptions due to Covid has harmed minority communities disproportionately. College education is not within reach for many such students. Most teenagers, without college counseling, are unable to navigate the admissions and aid application process, let alone the subtleties of elite university applications. Those that manage look to Harvard with hope. But Harvard is constrained by its real estate confines for freshmen dormitories, and its reputation for selectivity. For the new college initiative to be successful, the university would need to do much: modify its admission criteria and process, build new housing and other facilities, hire more faculty and administration staff, and do a lot of other groundwork, etc.

A focus on AIAN has not been without precedent at Harvard. The Harvard University Native American Program (HUNAP)⁽¹⁾ has been creating community and opportunities for admitted students as well as engaging in relevant research for the past fifty years. It can function as the springboard for the new college initiative as Harvard increases the number of AIAN students admitted to the undergraduate program. Providing more AIAN youth with access to a quality tertiary education will have a beneficial effect on the entire community by creating role models and paths to careers and lifelong incomes. Creating a separate college may also enable Harvard to continue its avowed mission for greater diversity as the outcomes of the US Supreme Court

decision on the lawsuit brought by Edward Blum and the Students For Fair Admissions organization is uncertain.

The initiative will not be successful with a “build it and they will come” philosophy regardless of Harvard’s reputation. The university should actively collaborate with the Indian Nations, understand their needs and aspirations for their youth, while building trusting relationships. Harvard should strive for community engagement through outreach to tribal and Indigenous people’s high schools and parent communities which would be sending applicants. Furthermore, it should partner with Tribal Colleges and Universities (TCUs) to understand the complexities of appropriately serving this student population. It should seek their help in creating its programming and offer exchange programs of students and faculty for mutual benefit. The traditional elite college thinking where universities ‘compete’ for the best students would have to be transformed into a striving for common good and sharing of expertise.

The enrollment size of the new college would depend on many factors, most importantly the trust established between university and the student’s home community. The change would require visionary leadership and an activation of Harvard’s collective conscience. It would mean investing in a very expensive undergraduate program with perhaps little revenues or expectations of large donations from grateful alumni in the immediate future. It will not be a prudent fiscal move. However, it would be the right thing to do.

Harvard can lead by example and reap the benefits of being on the right side of history.

References:

1. (2022, February), *About/Mission*; Harvard University Native American Program, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. <https://hunap.harvard.edu/mission>
2. Lu V.E. & Tsotsong D.T. (2021, April), *Harvard College Accepts Record-Low 3.43% of Applicants to Class of 2025*, The Crimson, Harvard University, Cambridge, MA. <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2021/4/7/harvard-admissions-2025/>
3. (2021, November), *Native American Students in Higher Education*; Factsheets; PNPI: Post-Secondary National Policy Institute, Washington, DC. <https://pnpi.org/native-american-students/#>
4. Asante-Muhammad D. & Ramirez K, (2019, November), *The Economic Reality Of Native Americans And The Need For Immediate Repair*, NCRC National Community Reinvestment Coalition. <https://ncrc.org/the-economic-reality-of-native-americans-and-the-need-for-immediate-repair/>