

Harry R. Lewis
Gordon McKay Professor
of Computer Science
Dean of Harvard College

University Hall, Harvard College
Cambridge, MA 02138
E-mail: lewis@harvard.edu
Phone: (617) 495-1555
FAX: (617) 496-8268

SLOW DOWN

Getting More out of Harvard by Doing Less

Dear Harvard student,

Students arriving at Harvard have gained admission by participating and excelling in a variety of academic and nonacademic activities in their secondary schools. We hope that you will continue to cultivate many of the qualities that distinguished you in your precollege years — your pursuit of excellence, your strength of character, and your ability to balance your academic drive with participation and success in extracurricular activities.

And yet college is different from high school in important ways, and some habits acquired in anticipation of applying to college may not serve you as well while you are here. You may succeed more fully at the things that will be most important to you if you enter Harvard with an open mind about the possibilities available to you, but gradually spend more of your time on fewer things you discover you truly love. You may balance your life better if you participate in some activities purely for fun, rather than to achieve a leadership role that you hope might be a distinctive credential for postgraduate employment. The human relationships you form in unstructured time with your roommates and friends may have a stronger influence on your later life than the content of some of the courses you are taking.

This letter offers some suggestions about how to get the most out of Harvard. Each suggestion requires making choices, which may be hard choices, between doing more things and leaving some possibilities aside. In a larger sense, these suggestions are meant to start you towards a fulfilling life after college, perhaps many years after you leave here. In high school one's academic choices are limited, and most Harvard students have taken the most demanding choice available where there was any choice at all. Many high schools have counseled students that a longer list of activities, with as many leadership roles as possible, would impress college admissions committees more than a shorter list with fewer titles. Yet in later life most of what we do outside our jobs we do because we want to do it, not because we are in any tangible way rewarded for doing it. College is a transition period; we will certainly give you grades and transcripts attesting to some of the things you have done here, but much of what you do, including many of the most important and rewarding and formative things you do, will be recorded on no piece of paper you take with you, but only as imprints on your mind and soul.

It may seem hypocritical for us at the same time, perhaps, to offer you Advanced Standing and to advise you not to accept it; or to explain how to qualify for a joint concentration and to discourage you from pursuing one; or to offer other opportunities and to suggest that you should not take them. But the most important thing you need to master is the capacity to make choices that are appropriate to you, recognizing that flexibility in your schedule, unstructured time in your day, and evenings spent with your friends rather than your books are all, in a

larger sense, essential for your education. In advising you to think about slowing down and limiting your structured activities, I do not mean to discourage you from high achievement, indeed from the pursuit of extraordinary excellence, in your chosen path. But you are more likely to sustain the intense effort needed to accomplish first-rate work in one area if you allow yourself some leisure time, some recreation, some time for solitude, rather than packing your schedule with so many activities that you have no time to think about why you are doing what you are doing.

Here, then, are some ideas to consider. Talk about them with the people who know you best, and whom you trust; consult your freshman or concentration adviser about them. Then consult yourself. Remember that you — not those giving you advice — will be most affected by your decisions.

- *Don't try to get every detail of your academic program nailed down ahead of time.* You do, of course, want to do some advance planning, to browse the *Courses of Instruction* and the *Fields of Concentration*, to read the important parts of the *Handbook for Students* so you understand that you have to pass 32 half-courses to graduate, etc. But you don't need to know as a freshman which four courses you will take during the spring of your junior year. You won't even need to know *exactly* what those four courses will be when that term begins, since you will be able to make adjustments easily according to how interesting they look to you as you visit classes during the opening week of the term.

We ask you to fill out a "Plan of Study" at the time you select a concentration, so by that time you will need to demonstrate that you understand the rules of your concentration well enough to have designed one way of satisfying its requirements, and also one way of satisfying associated Core requirements. The Plan of Study is signed by you and by a representative of the concentration, certifying that if you get credit for the courses listed on the form, the concentration will recommend you for a degree. But you don't *have* to take precisely those courses, and in practice almost no student winds up as a graduating senior having taken exactly the courses listed on his or her Plan of Study filed as a freshman. Interests shift, new courses appear, existing courses are removed from the catalog or get new instructors, etc. Courses change, and you will change as well; it is wise to recognize from the beginning that you will want to be able to respond to your own shifting interests as well as changes made to the course catalog. The study card you file at the beginning of each term can vary from the Plan of Study, though it remains your responsibility to ensure that the courses you actually take will satisfy your graduation requirements, just as your original Plan of Study would have done.

- *Think very carefully before deciding to graduate in three years under the Advanced Standing program.* More than half of our entering freshmen are eligible for advanced standing on the basis of their Advanced Placement test scores. Almost all these students ultimately choose to stay at Harvard for the full four years: only about 30 graduate in three years, and another 25 complete undergraduate requirements in three years but remain in residence in the Houses to complete Masters' degrees their fourth year.

The reason why most eligible students don't leave Harvard in three years is that they like it here and don't want to leave any sooner than they must. Purely in academic terms, each student has the opportunity to sample only a few pages of our massive course catalog even

in four years; the chance to take more courses, whether to branch out or to go deeper into a particular subject, is all but irreplaceable once one graduates from college.

Advanced standing is particularly problematic for students with multidisciplinary or interdisciplinary interests. If you're not sure whether you want to study history or physics, a three year program may require you to make that decision before you have been exposed to these subjects at the college level. If you want to integrate two fields of knowledge, such as psychology and computer science, you need time to take courses in both fields and time also for their intellectual synthesis to mature in your mind.

Planning to graduate early may seem to be a no-risk proposition, but maintaining that option may limit your course choices every term. Especially during the freshman year, which should be a time of experimentation and exploration, the premature commitment to a concentration required if you plan to graduate in three years may distort your academic program. It can seem that a burden has been relieved if you simply relax and assume you will graduate in four years instead of three, and pace your coursework accordingly.

The one irrefutable fact about graduating in three years is that it saves money. Yet we hope that with recent adjustments in Harvard's financial aid program, the incentives to leave in three years purely for financial reasons have been minimized. There is certainly no reason to think that a life path that may be open to you at the age of 21, say, after three years in college, will be lost if you instead get a year's more education and graduate at 22. Professional schools, including both business and medical schools, increasingly favor mature applicants who have more on their record than an abbreviated and intense undergraduate education.

If you *do* choose to graduate in three years, you should consider the possibility of taking a year off before going on to graduate or professional school. At that point you will have been on a pretty fast academic track for most of your life; a year invested in work or travel before you resume your studies may pay dividends forever.

- *Don't think you're doing something strange or wrong if you take a term or a year off from Harvard before you graduate.* If your motivation is flagging, or your grades are not what you think they should be, or you're just not interested in what you're studying, take some time off to refresh yourself and get your focus back. Harvard has a very liberal attitude about voluntary time off; readmission, and even a guaranteed room in your House, are automatic if you file the paperwork on time. Students who are struggling almost always do better after some time off.

- *Studying or working abroad can give you a new perspective both on your Harvard life and on the world.* Going abroad to work or study is a wonderful opportunity for students who are doing well and are enjoying themselves here but have interests that they wish to explore outside the gates of this academic community. You can learn much from foreign study, from an internship, from field work, or from working in a professional office. After a year of review and reflection, the Harvard Faculty has approved new study abroad rules from which you may benefit; we urge you to look to a term or a year of foreign study as an option that may benefit you intellectually and broaden your horizons in nonacademic ways. Study or work abroad can provide a new perspective that brings into sharper focus what you are studying at Harvard.

- *Planning your time away will make it more productive.* Deciding to take time away from Harvard may well engage you in a serious and difficult discussion with your family, who may, with every good intention, regard a decision to take time off as an admission of some kind of failure, or may simply have trouble hearing that the career path on which you arrived at Harvard now holds less interest for you than it used to. The Office of Career Services can help you make a constructive plan for your time away, and freshman and concentration advisers, Senior Tutors, Assistant Deans of Freshmen, and counselors at the Bureau of Study Counsel can help you think through your decision and how to explain it to others. Parents may even worry that if you leave, you will never come back. All evidence is against that worry; Harvard's six-year graduation rate is more than 97 per cent, one of the highest in the country, and the roughly 50 students per class year who don't graduate within six years of matriculation include a few who transfer to other universities, some who take more than six years to graduate due to health problems or family obligations, and a Bill Gates or two, but not many who simply disappoint and never amount to anything.

- *Be cautious about doing a joint concentration.* Many students who are interested in more than one thing want to study them both while at Harvard, and there is no reason not to do that. Many science students have deep interests in music, for example. Often a student's first instinct is to sign up for a "double major," a concept that does not even exist in our curriculum. A joint concentration is meant to be a program that integrates two fields and aims towards a research thesis bridging the areas. In other words, a joint concentration in X and Y is meant for people who have an interest in the intersection of X and Y, not just in both X and Y independently.

If you are interested in studying two subjects, the sensible course is often to pick one as the field of concentration and to take selected courses in the other. You will be able to seek advice from faculty in the second field about what program of courses to pursue, unburdened by that department's rules for concentrators. Joint concentrations almost always have many rigid requirements, and once those are agreed upon by you and both departments, any change requires coordination of all three parties. It's rarely worth the trouble — certainly not for the negligible benefit of getting both departmental names on your diploma.

There are exceptions to this broad advice. Students from certain foreign countries may find it advantageous to have the name of some scientific or technical field on their diplomas. Some departments have courses that are open only to concentrators, providing an unintended incentive to sign up for a concentration even if you don't expect to graduate in it. And certain fields, such as Women's Studies, are often combined with other fields to create joint concentrations.

- *Don't assume that a special concentration is the way to accommodate your multiple interests.* Students often think of turning to Special Concentrations when they cannot decide among three or more strong academic interests. Rather than spending energy on the intentionally difficult process of designing an individual concentration, take courses and seek advice that will help you decide which interest best suits you. As with joint concentrations, your real intellectual objectives may be achievable without a plan of study that bears a particular name. Special concentrations best serve students engaged in emerging fields that have some intellectual coherence but don't fit in existing academic departments.

- *Don't be afraid to change concentrations, or to switch to a non-honors program.* Students are sometimes inhibited from switching fields because they have “only” a few courses to go in the field they now dislike, or because with a late start they can't achieve everything that other students will have achieved in the new field. Balanced against the disadvantages of flagging motivation to study the old field and the opportunity for intellectual joy in the new field, such inhibitions against the change may be unwise.

On the other hand, should you discover late in your Harvard career that you do not want to finish the concentration program in which you are enrolled, you may have the option to finish a basic (“non-honors”) program in that field. Honors tracks are designed to prepare students to do advanced work in a particular field and to engage independent research, but after studying a field somewhat intensively for a time, some students find that their intellectual development has drawn them in other directions. In that case the flexibility of a more limited concentration program and the opportunity to take courses, and perhaps even do independent work, in other fields may outweigh the advantages of pursuing advanced work in the concentration field.

- *Don't choose a concentration for reasons of professional preparation.* It's a mistake to think that there is an optimal course of study leading to a particular postgraduate career. Many students have concentrated in Economics thinking it would prepare them for life in the business world, or in Biology thinking it is the route to medical school. These perceptions are inaccurate and can keep you from getting the full benefit of a liberal arts education. You gain more from being intellectually engaged with a subject you love than you could acquire in professional training. Professional schools by no means look with disfavor on students who have concentrated in History or in the humanities. The Office for Career Services is an excellent source of advice on what these graduate schools do expect in the way of academic preparation.

- *Make choices that leave you more choice, more flexibility.* This is a more generalized version of the previous pieces of advice; it may be the most important advice of all. Think of your freedom of choice — of what courses to take, of how to spend your Sunday afternoons, whatever — as a commodity that is precious in and of itself. Don't construct a schedule for yourself that wastes that freedom. Learn to do constructive things with your time not because you have to (under the schedule and the ground rules you have constructed for yourself) but because you want to. For most of the rest of your life you will be reading a book or playing an instrument or going to a lecture in the evening simply because it is interesting and fun. Get yourself in that frame of mind sooner, and you will be a happier and more interesting person later. Empty time is not a vacuum to be filled: it is the thing that enables the other things on your mind to be creatively rearranged, like the empty square in the 4×4 puzzle which makes it possible to move the other 15 pieces around.

- *Leave something for after you graduate.* If you decide late in your years here that you want to go to medical school, don't feel you have to cram the pre-med courses into your senior year when you should be getting the most out of your thesis. Slow down — plan to register at Harvard or elsewhere to take those courses when you can give them due attention. Likewise, if you've been a Music concentrator and you fall in love with archaeology because of a Core course you take your junior year, don't feel you have to switch concentrations — take another course or two, and consider taking more after you graduate, at night, in summer school, or, if you want to pursue it seriously, as a special student after graduation or as a graduate student.

- *Look inside yourself for the question you are really asking.* Students often present deep questions in a superficial or instrumental form about how they can do several things simultaneously. A student who asks, “How can I do a joint concentration in Music and English?” probably wants to know something more profound, such as “How can I keep my interests in literature and in music alive simultaneously?” If you are asking how to do something complicated, ask yourself why you want to do it, and try to achieve your major objectives without necessarily constructing a nexus which, in theory, would allow you to achieve everything and to give up nothing. You may wind up dissatisfied with everything instead, your freedom lost rather than enhanced.

Don’t be afraid to raise with your adviser a question of substance, for example about the importance or wisdom of some intellectual inclination you may have, rather than questions that address only rules and how to satisfy them. Questions don’t need to have clear and crisp answers to be worth asking.

- *Don’t try to do two major extracurricular activities simultaneously.* Taking this advice requires classifying extracurricular commitments into “major,” of which you should probably have at most one, and “minor,” which might involve a meeting a week, a few hours of volunteering, or some recreational athletic participation that does more to relieve than to create stress. But if you’re starting on the varsity lacrosse team, you probably shouldn’t accept the lead in the House musical the same term. If you are the go-to person for a weekly publication, you probably shouldn’t also be the manager of a conference that will be bringing five hundred students to campus. There are exceptions to this rule too — some people are exceptionally good managers. But before you take on too many simultaneous major extracurricular commitments, you should at least pause to ask yourself if you are trying to prove to someone, either yourself or another, that you are superman or superwoman, and maybe even setting yourself up for failure in that endeavor. Or if, perhaps, you are trying to avoid studying a subject that no longer interests you.

- *Join a student group and work to change it, rather than starting a new one.* The imagination and innovations of our students are a constant source of amazement. New publications, new service groups, and new musical and theatrical groups spring into existence every year, stimulated by the energies of individual students with special interests. So many of our students are natural leaders that it should not be surprising that they often wish to establish niches of special interest to them not filled by existing groups.

Some of the growth in the numbers of student organizations has come from the increasing diversity of the College on many dimensions. Where once there was a single Asian American Association, there are now also groups centered on subpopulations of the Asian continent, and on religious or artistic cultures unique to Asian peoples. There are now nine *a cappella* groups, each with a distinctive repertoire.

Yet sometimes organizations come into existence simply because groups of students cannot agree on a common agenda. For example, there used to be two Republican clubs, which merged when the leadership recognized that there was strength in unity. Groups born out of protest against the intransigence of established associations rarely survive their founders’ graduation. It is not hard to start a new student group at Harvard, but it is hard to launch one that gains the organizational and financial stability it needs to survive. It can be a frustrating experience

to start something and see it fail, or to feel that one's personal energy is all that keeps it going. The skills involved in working with others towards common (even if not identical) goals can be as important in later life as a talent for entrepreneurial innovation.

- *Don't ignore your health, physical and emotional.* It is characteristic of students to confuse enormous energy and the capacity for extraordinary efforts with something more like immortality. Your mind and body will break down if you don't relax, exercise, eat well, and most of all, sleep. Give yourself a break — take a few hours just to go to an athletic event, a movie, a theatrical production on campus, a rock concert downtown. Sit outside and read a novel, go to a place of worship, find a pleasant place off-campus where you can be alone with your thoughts. Hang out with your friends, play frisbee, keep up the dining hall conversation till everyone else has left. It won't hurt, and will probably only help, your academic performance.

By the same token, get away from Cambridge over vacations, and don't come back early. Your academic work will be better and more productive if you are not burned out from having done it continuously for too many months.

- *Don't expect yourself to be perfect.* You've already accomplished a lot just to arrive here, but life is complicated and every failure offers constructive lessons about yourself. Find subjects you are happy studying, and things you are happy doing, even if you are not going to be the best in the world at them. Do the things that matter most to you as well as you can possibly do them, but don't be hard on yourself if your best at many things is not as good as someone else's best. Viewed from the distance of their 25th reunions, most Harvard graduates remember their friends, a few of their teachers, and their coaches, artistic directors, and other mentors better than they remember what they learned in most of their courses. Enjoy your experience here, and the many people who are here along with you, and your Harvard education will sustain you for life.

- *Finally, don't treat my advice — or anyone else's — as rules you must follow!* What matters is that you come to understand what you want; the challenge is to give yourself enough breathing room to discover your own loves and how to pursue them, your own ambitions and how to achieve them.

It's your life, even at Harvard. Enjoy it.

Harry R. Lewis

Dean of Harvard College