

February 13, 2002

President Lawrence Summers
Office of the President
Harvard University
Massachusetts Hall
Cambridge, MA 02138

Dear President Summers,

We met several months ago exactly one week after you addressed the freshman class for the first time in Tercentenary Theater. At the picnic for first-year students, I finally worked up the resolve to ask you about your personal thoughts on student entrepreneurship. As I recall, you expressed concern that running a business as a student would take up time that could be better spent learning from some of the greatest minds in the world.

During the fall semester, I took your words into account, spending no more than a couple of hours each month on my S corporation and 501(c)3 non-profit organization, simply to update financial records and file tax returns. I spent the majority of my time like every other student, working on problem sets and papers for my various courses. Gradually, I found myself growing dissatisfied, especially when rumors of the University's general disdain for the thoughts of undergraduate freshmen were substantiated by my first-hand experience.

At first, I thought that maybe I was not doing enough as a student to make my feelings of dissatisfaction known. During my admissions interview in Byerly Hall, in fact, I had been told that lack of "student initiative" was the real reason behind that day's *Crimson* article concerning uncaring professors. To clarify that I did not fit into the (unfounded and wholly incorrect) stereotype of the lazy undergraduate, I sent a detailed e-mail to my computer science professor regarding a particularly poorly written midterm. His reply of, "Thank you for your comments," was unsatisfactory at best. When the next midterm was nearly twice as long, and just as poorly written, I felt justified in concluding that my earlier comments were completely ignored. At the end of the term, I sent another lengthy message to the same professor, this time receiving back, "Thank you for your *detailed* comments." Through my friends, I later learned that my class was not the only one where the curve had been converted into a tool designed to compensate for lack of effort in teaching.

My academic unhappiness during the fall term led me to reconsider many of the decisions that I made leading up to it. I had known for a very long time that I was more interested in entrepreneurship than computer programming, but I thought that I could still fit into the existing Harvard framework. Once I knew that studying programming alone would be impossible for me, I began contemplating a joint concentration between the history of science and economics.

In preparation for the new semester, I began looking for courses that better matched my real interests. When a guest lecturer in Computer Science 50 advocated enrolling in a course at the Law School about the internet and its impact on society, I was thrilled. The course's content was exactly what I was looking for, and better yet, the course's professor actually expressed interest in having me in his course.

My excitement did not last long, as my proctors soon informed me that freshmen are not allowed to cross-register; I would have to petition the Administrative Board to make an exception. I argued that there was no good reason for me *not* to take Professor Zittrain's course. I had found a class where I was interested in the material, capable of performing well, welcomed in by the professor, and able to attend within my schedule's constraints.

The verdict came back with no explanation given for the rejection, other than the fact that I was a freshman, and freshmen cannot cross-register. Incredulous at the short-sightedness of those who you rightfully described as "some of the greatest minds in the world," I thought back to your welcoming speech from September 2, 2001. In it, you stated three main points:

"First, follow your passion, not your calculation...Follow a program towards your objectives...do what catches your imagination...and don't let anything stand in your way.

"Second, the faculty is here for you. There is no more important responsibility for any of us as members of the faculty than teaching and working with you, the students of Harvard College...Do not feel that you are ever wasting anyone's time pursuing your curiosity or your interest...

"The last thing I would say is focus on ideas...It's a time to learn. It's a time to expose yourself, as you likely will only do during this period in your lifetime, to ideas that are completely different from what you have done, what you have seen, perhaps even from what you will see..."

It is not hard to detect the degree of irony present in my current situation. In trying to follow my passion for technology and business—fields with ideas that are constantly evolving—I have encountered resistance purely for the sake of resistance, and from the Harvard faculty, no less.

Even if you cannot sympathize with my current position, then I hope that you at least take away from this letter the message that Harvard has some very real problems. The University's antiquated and inflexible policies (of which admissions officers are seemingly unaware) have indubitably squelched numerous opportunities for motivated students to learn. That is one problem. The ego of the faculty as a whole is another. I found the ease with which some faculty members dismissed your words to be unsettling. The treatment that I received during the first semester from professors and preceptors was anything but welcoming. Thirdly—and I believe this stems partly from the second problem—faculty members' unwillingness to recognize authority at any of the twelve schools but their own is absurd. Competition between Harvard's schools is not the same as competition in a free market economy. It is detrimental to students, and accordingly, should not be tolerated.

Therefore, I must ask exactly what has been accomplished through the unconditional prohibition of cross-registration for freshmen, and what I stand to gain by *not* taking Professor Zittrain's class. It appears that the Administrative Board, instead of acting as a medium for exceptions to be made where appropriate, has chosen to manifest itself as an automated rejection stamp with the incidental, but not insignificant, side-effect of stifling educational opportunity. In the words of Henry David Thoreau, "Any fool can make a rule, and every fool will mind it." I do not consider myself a fool, and apparently, neither does the admissions committee of the best university in the world.

At one of the orientation assemblies for freshmen early this year, I distinctly remember an Assistant Dean telling us that, "The admissions committee never makes mistakes." I must question that statement. If my initiative as an entrepreneur played into the admissions

committee's decision to accept me at Harvard, while Harvard itself was governed by policies unfavorable to entrepreneurs, then I must wonder if my presence here represents the committee's first mistake.

Harvard should not delude itself into thinking that it is incapable of making mistakes; the people who make up the university are only human. I am not asking for the impossible: a moratorium on future mistakes, but rather that when one is made, it should be acknowledged, and fixed.

Sincerely yours,

Aaron Greenspan
Class of 2005

CC: Dean Harry Lewis
Dean Jeremy Knowles
Dean Elizabeth Studley Nathans
Dean Philip Bean
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