



To: Larry Bacow, President; Alan M. Garber, Provost; Katie Lapp, Executive Vice President; Thomas Hollister, CFO; Deans of the Harvard College, Graduate, and Professional Schools
From: The Undersigned Presidents of the College, Graduate, and Professional School Student Bodies
Date: May 29, 2020
Re: An Appeal to You Regarding Tuition, Healthcare, and Debt Relief

Dear Harvard Leadership,

We, the undersigned student body presidents of Harvard College and the Harvard Graduate and Professional Schools, on behalf of members of the greater student body, write to you to highlight the top issues being faced not only by Harvard students, but by students across the United States and the world. Among these issues are record unemployment rates, short- and long-term impacts to our earnings, and a heavy debt burden that will take decades to recover.

We understand that the university is facing a wide variety of serious challenges. At the same time, Harvard also has more, and more potent, assets than most: alumni who could be persuaded to donate, lobbyists and supportive Congresspeople in Washington, faculty who are heralded as leaders in their fields, hedge fund managers to help navigate the economic crisis, and the power of the press – as seen in President Bacow’s recent NY Times op-ed¹ – among others. Harvard is more equipped to weather this storm than most institutions of higher education. In addition, affordable access to learning opportunities is critical if universities are to fulfill their mission of educating students regardless of financial need. Therefore, we are asking you to use the power of this University to advocate with us for three broad proposals:

- Offering tuition relief, particularly for graduate schools with limited financial aid resources, with priority given to those students with the greatest financial need
- Providing subsidies for healthcare extensions for all graduating students
- Lobbying in Washington and in the Massachusetts state legislature for immediate student loan debt relief

Tuition Relief

Although classes are still being held virtually, students join Harvard not merely because of the information conveyed in classes, but for a broad-ranging set of experiences and opportunities that both help them grow as people and deepen their personal and professional ties. Although no fault of the University, this experience has been drastically altered by the current pandemic. Students are no longer benefiting from university expenses for Space and Occupancy, or for Supplies and Equipment, expenses that totaled \$649 million USD for the 2019 fiscal year.²

We recommend that the school prioritize our most vulnerable students for tuition relief: students who have received no or limited grant-based financial assistance with backgrounds that are low income, first

¹ <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/03/17/opinion/corona-harvard-stanford-mit.html>

² https://finance.harvard.edu/files/fad/files/fy19_harvard_financial_report.pdf

generation, and from developing countries. While several of the graduate schools issue scholarships and grants on the basis of need only, that is not the case at several schools including but not limited to: Harvard Kennedy School, Harvard Divinity School, and the Harvard School of Public Health. Without any tuition relief, the University places these students at risk of financial delinquency for striving to invest in their higher education, or shuts them out of the opportunity to receive a Harvard education at all.

Additionally, in recognition of the negative economic outlook, we strongly urge all Harvard Schools to enact a tuition freeze, and further lower the costs of tuition for FY 2020-2021 should classes be online as opposed to in-person. We want to encourage the admin to work with each individual school to tailor relief to those students.

While we recognize the university's uncertain fiscal outlook, we are concerned that an increase in tuition reflects a lack of acknowledgement for the financial situation of students facing a worsening job market, and uncertain access to funding. We also ask that Harvard either does not charge, or prorates, the facility and recreation fees for graduate students who are unable to use school facilities if there is distance learning in the fall.³ For schools that do not itemize facilities or activities fees, an amount commensurate to those fees at other schools should be deducted from student term bills. The sunk cost of going to graduate school should not be magnified by increasing tuition at a time where there is fundamental financial instability.

Free or Subsidized Healthcare Coverage Extensions for All Graduating Students

Graduating students are facing the prospect of being uninsured in the middle of a global pandemic. Unemployment is skyrocketing, those over 26 will be unable to go back on parental health insurance, and students under 26 are more likely to have uninsured parents, particularly in light of job losses. Even with insurance obtained, students may need to switch doctors and mental health counselors during an extremely uncertain period, when continuity of care is critical. Therefore, in light of the recent approval to extend Student Health Insurance Plan coverage for graduating students, we further propose that Harvard work with state regulators and Blue Cross Blue Shield of Massachusetts to allow graduates to remain on the Student Health Insurance Plan for free or at a subsidized cost through December 2020. While we greatly appreciate the efforts underway to sell an extension of coverage to graduating students, we want to emphasize that our graduating students need affordable coverage, likely requiring a subsidy from the university.

Lobbying in Washington and in the Massachusetts state legislature for immediate student relief

Harvard typically spends around \$0.6 million USD per year on higher education lobbying,⁴ and efforts have intensified to deal with the fall-out from Covid-19 this year.⁵ We are disappointed to read that the American Council on Education, a group Harvard works closely with, has lobbied Congress to delay student loan relief while advocating for funds for universities under the CARES Act.⁶ These policies prioritize institutions at the neglect of their students.

³ <https://gsas.harvard.edu/admissions/tuition-fees>

⁴ <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2020/2/21/bacow-lobbying-2019/>

⁵ <https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2020/4/8/harvard-coronavirus-lobbying-higher-education/>

⁶ <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2020/04/21/college-groups-tell-congress-put-debt-cancellation>

Facing 25% unemployment and a deleveraging cycle for the next two to three years, students desperately need substantial aid now. Moreover, most states disqualify students from receiving unemployment compensation. Therefore, we propose that Harvard direct some of its lobbying efforts in the State House, White House, Congress, and the Department of Education for direct-to-student relief policies such as cancelling a portion of student debt and expanding unemployment eligibility to students. Politicians in Harvard's own backyard such as Senator Warren and Congresswoman Pressley have already put forward comprehensive student debt relief plans and we ask the University to coordinate its efforts with them. In this respect, we ask the university to lead by example. Furthermore, as some of our graduate schools provide their own loan programs to students, we ask that those programs similarly institute loan repayment relief.

Other Schools' Responses

Notable schools' response to students' financial concerns have included the following actions:

- University of Pennsylvania is working to extend its student health insurance plan for its graduates to December 2020.
- Mercer County Community College has reduced Summer Tuition by 20% for Summer Classes⁷
- St. Augustine's University, an Historically Black College or University (HBCU) has reduced tuition for the fall semester by 15%⁸
- Aultman College of Nursing and Health Sciences is reducing tuition by 30% beginning this fall for students pursuing a bachelor's in social work
- Thomas Edison State University approved a reduction \$145 per credit for in-state New Jersey residents and a reduction of \$35 per credit for out-of-state students

Notably, most of these schools do not have financial resources that are comparable to Harvard.

Conclusion

We understand that the university faces a series of difficult and unprecedented decisions, and that puts you in an unenviable position. Nevertheless, you are called to exercise leadership. We ask the University to weigh its actions in consideration of students. The university, with its endowment and its fundraising capabilities, has more capacity to take on the brunt of this financial crisis compared to individual students.

We commend the University's commitment to continue paying staff and employees whose jobs have been suspended during this time, and we understand that student tuition is a part of the University's operating revenues, and we do not, in any way, seek to undermine the university's commitments to paying support staff, facilities staff, hourly workers, and faculty without tenure. In considering the use of the endowment as a rainy day fund to cover present day expenditures, we hope you will weigh heavily the extraordinary circumstances of today over preserving the endowment for the future.⁹ Moreover, we believe the decisions that Harvard makes during this time will greatly impact students' perception of the University and that support in light of unforeseen difficulties will naturally foster a greater willingness to donate in the future.

⁷ http://mccc.edu/pr/General/2020/COVID_tuition_reduction.html

⁸ <https://www.cbs17.com/news/local-news/wake-county-news/st-augustines-university-announces-15-tuition-reduction/>

⁹ https://ssir.org/articles/entry/endowment_for_a_rainy_day#

We hope Harvard recognizes the importance of demonstrating its support for students as the internationally recognized leader of higher education.

Sincerely,

Charlene Wang, HKS Student Body President 2019-2020

Lucas Buyon, HSPH Student Body President 2019-2020

Danica Liongson, HGSD Student Body President 2019-2020

Kristína Moss Gudrun Gunnarsdóttir, HGSE Student Council President 2019-2020

James Mathew, Harvard College Student Body President 2020-2021

Michael Wen, HKS Interim Student Body President 2020

Malini Srikrishna, Harvard Divinity School Student Association President, 2020-2021

Alexis Turner, GSAS Student Body President, 2020-2021

Annie Plachta, HBS Student Association Co-President, 2020-2021

Caleb Bradford, HBS Student Association Co-President, 2020-2021

William Qian, SEAS Graduate Council Co-President, 2020-2021

Rachel Zoll, SEAS Graduate Council Co-President, 2020-2021

Sana Haider, HSPH Student Body President, 2020-2021

Noelle Graham, HLS Student Body Co-President, 2020-2021

William Wright, HLS Student Body Co-President, 2020-2021

LaShyra Nolen, HMS/HSDM Student Council President 2019-2020

Nicky Joseph, HMS Student Council President 2018-2019

Chanthia Ma, Harvard Graduate Council President, 2020-2021

Joshua "Jo Jo" Freundel, Harvard Graduate Council Vice President, 2020-2021