

Other Publications

Faculty Scholarship

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e-Harvard.400

Eli Noam

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Harvard at 400

VISIONS OF THE UNIVERSITY IN 2036

IMAGINING THE FUTURE—however risky it is to make predictions—can be a comforting activity, even a productive one. And although psychologist Daniel Gilbert's 2006 book *Stumbling on Happiness* makes a strong case that humans aren't very good at forecasting what will make them happy even a few days hence (much less in 25 years!), it seems that human nature also compels us to build some castles in the air—and maybe even try to move in.

Building that castle, like all human achievements, starts with an idea. Every creation springs from a vision of something that does not exist, but might. Such first stirrings, neither plans nor blueprints, are closer to desires. And desire, as the prime motive

force, is essential. Holding in mind a detailed image of a wished-for outcome can be a powerful step in creating that very result.

We asked a baker's dozen plus one of diverse Harvardians to share their images of what the University ought to be a mere quarter-century from now. Not to predict what it will become, just to lay out what each contributor would *like* to see in a four-centuries-old academy. Taken together, the varied visions don't so much compete with as complement each other: these small discourses resemble less a chessboard than a bouquet to alma mater. With gratitude to all participants, we invite you to draw near, look, and inhale.

~CRAIG LAMBERT



A Yardstick of Service

by BILL GATES

WHEN I SPOKE at Harvard's commencement a few years back, I admitted to just how limited my worldview was when I studied there, and how little I knew about the terrible problems and inequities facing the world's poor.

At its 375th anniversary, Harvard is a much different place than it was in the early 1970s: more diverse, less isolated, more focused on the wider world beyond the confines of Cambridge. More faculty members are concentrating on research and projects that directly help the poor, and more students are pursuing experiences and careers in community and public service.

For example, Paul Farmer's work in community health and human rights, and the inexpensive "lab-on-a-chip" medical diagnostic devices of George Whitesides, are leading to breakthroughs in healthcare in the developing world. Nearly 20 percent of graduating seniors applied for Teach for America last year, and Harvard applications to that program have increased by more than 50 percent in the past two years.

In her 2010 Commencement address, President Drew Faust articulated two fundamental purposes of higher education: to equip students "with the capacity to lead fulfilled, meaningful, and successful lives," and "the development of talent in service of a better world."

As the University contemplates what kind of institution it wants to be a quarter-century from now, it's my hope that this embrace of a broader worldview grows exponentially, stimulated by strong institutional leadership and exemplary action by students and faculty alike.

I remain, at my core, a technologist and an optimist. I see in my work every day the remarkable impact that innova-

tion can have in education, development, global health, and energy. Those breakthroughs are born of basic science and creative collaboration among the best and brightest.

Harvard is a unique institution whose position and talent represent a tremendous resource for the world. With such immense advantages come real responsibilities.

Harvard started its life dedicated to service, and I can't think of a better way to chart a future course than to clearly articulate a mission for the University that calls on students, faculty, staff, and alumni to dedicate at least part of their lives to helping solve the world's biggest problems in whatever way they can. I would challenge Harvard to judge itself over the next 25 years by the same yardstick I proposed to the class of 2007—namely, that it not only had improved the lives of its students, but the lives of the world. As I said then:

I hope you will reflect on what you've done with your talent and energy. I hope you will judge yourselves not on your professional accomplishments alone, but also on how well you work to address the world's deepest inequities, on how well you treat people a world away who have nothing in common with you but their humanity.

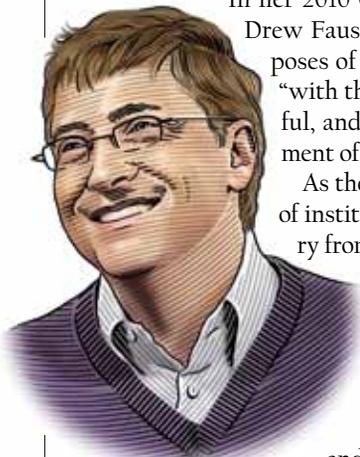
This would be a legacy worth cheering about.

Bill Gates '77, LL.D. '07, is the founder and co-chair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation and chairman of Microsoft.

e-Harvard.400

by ELI M. NOAM and NADINE STROSSEN

HARVARD STARTED as a small local seminary. Students and faculty got there by foot, boat, or horseback. Information arrived the same way. But in the nineteenth century, transportation and communications improved rapidly and Harvard became a university to the nation. With the arrival of the jet plane, it reached the world. How should the new, powerful means of electronic communication shape Harvard's scope?



Bill Gates



Eli M. Noam and Nadine Strossen

They have already enabled new forms of online and distance education. For-profit and public universities and second-tier private universities have used these enthusiastically—though not always successfully—to expand their reach and serve nontraditional student pools. But should an elite university such as Harvard extend exclusive Ivy League education beyond campus?

Inevitably, it will, driven by competition with other institutions and economic pressures to spread high costs across a larger student base. Doing so can also further Harvard's core mission of offering the best education to the best minds around the world. Expanding access to Harvard's courses via communications media would help erode barriers to the free flow of ideas and information, and democratize learning.

But e-Harvard must honor certain principles.

First, the value of a Harvard degree cannot be diluted. Admission standards for e-students must be at least as rigorous as for Cambridge-based students.

Second, any outreach must go both ways. As knowledge grows, it becomes impossible for the University to support specialists in all subjects. A course on, say, medieval Persian poetry might have to be imported online to the handful of interested students, and Harvard would similarly transmit some of its courses to Iran. The University's role becomes one of quality control and the creation of global consortium relationships with other leading educational institutions.

Third, any online education must involve more interaction, not less. Education is more than knowledge transfer. It is also a process of socialization and empowerment through mentoring, "peering," hands-on experience, and freewheeling exchanges that push intellectual boundaries. In this respect, online education now seems a lesser version of the real thing. But in time the tables will be turned; e-Harvard will need to include well-crafted 3-D lectures by star professors, "virtual worlds" and simulations for skills training, interactive Socratic programs for thinking on one's feet, and social networking for peer exchanges.

Fourth, online and campus-based education must be blended in a "click-and-brick" experience. Online students would have to spend time in Cambridge, even as campus-based students spend significant time elsewhere while still taking Harvard courses online.

Fifth, online activity must be justified on educational, not financial, grounds. A quality online curriculum actually costs more than the traditional blackboard-and-chalk method. Furthermore, any expansion to poor countries will have to be affordable there. Together with high selectivity, these factors will check the profitability of most programs.

Sixth, a Harvard education should not end at graduation. E-Harvard should add a "lifetime maintenance and upgrade contract" for knowledge and skills. This will lead to diminished distinctions among students, alumni, and instructors.

In the past, students came to Harvard. In the future, Harvard will come to the students, wherever they are.

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Farm the Yard

by BILL MCKIBBEN

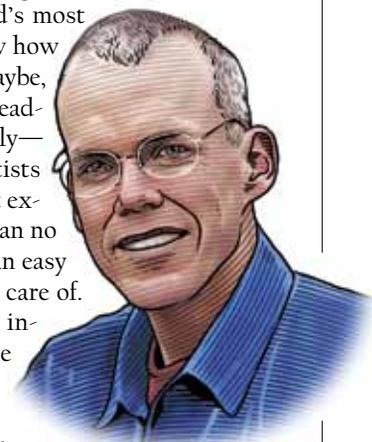
WHEN HARVARD WAS FOUNDED, most of its students arrived rich in practical experience, and in need of some *abstraction*: colonists knew how to plow, how to build, how to work the physical world. Higher education was for adding a layer of mediation: some Latin, some classics, some theology.

Today, 375 years later, students arrive fully mediated: they've spent endless hours in front of a screen and, chances are, very few in contact with the natural world. They can't, most of them, do very much that *isn't* abstract. They've changed, 180 degrees, and so that which higher education provides should change as well. If college is about supplying what's missing, then it's time to dig up a good chunk of the Yard and plant a garden.

Does that seem absurd? Haven't we gone well beyond the moment when graduates of the world's most prestigious university need to know how to do something with their *hands*? Maybe, but maybe not. On a planet that's headed into a very stormy future (literally—thanks to a warmer climate, scientists are now observing some of the most extreme weather ever recorded), we can no longer blithely dismiss farming as an easy task someone else will always take care of. (Calories per capita are no longer increasing on this planet.) The same applies to providing the energy we need, and performing all the other physical tasks that for a couple of centuries have seemed less important to those at the top of the heap. We may need to actually do something *real* again—not just for our security, but for our over-abstracted souls.

Indeed, the U.S. Department of Agriculture reported last year that the number of farms in America is increasing for the first time in 150 years, and increasingly it is well-educated young people who are doing the growing. I know recent Harvard graduates who are running exemplary small farms—and making more high-stakes decisions in a day than their classmates who took the obvious route to Goldman Sachs.

So I hope that by 2036 the College is teaching classes in agri-



Bill McKibben