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Alumnus interruptus

How University, Inc. is controlling the message to its graduates — and funding base

By HARVEY SILVERGLATE | November 16, 2006



Harvard is accustomed to turning other universities green with envy. So it comes as no surprise that its alumni publication, *Harvard* magazine, which is largely financially self-sufficient and editorially independent of the university, has become a model to which other universities aspire. But rather than take pride in the bi-monthly's stellar 108-year-old reputation, university administrators effectively declared war on *Harvard* magazine earlier this year when they brought out an in-house competitor. The new rag, *The Yard* — which Harvard sends four times a year to alumni, big donors, and parents of students — strikes a decidedly more self-flattering tone than its independent counterpart.

Why the change, and why now? In a word, the answer is: fundraising. As the *Wall Street Journal* reported in June, "fund-raisers determined that Harvard magazine was no longer serving their best interests."

In an era when corporations and politicians pay public-relations consultants big bucks to control the “message,” one would hope that universities, devoted to the “free marketplace of ideas,” would resist the trend. Yet in recent years, Harvard, like almost all universities, has been eager to limit how much the public in general, and alumni in particular, learn about what’s really happening on campus. This is especially true as many universities continue to sacrifice traditional academic values — free speech, academic freedom, and fair disciplinary proceedings — in favor of censorship and closed administrative proceedings that function as kangaroo courts, in a misguided attempt to avoid controversies that might gain public attention.

The reality is that alumni fund a major portion of private universities’ budgets, and even public institutions are increasingly dependent on former students to supplement stagnant or decreasing state education budgets. Many states, including Massachusetts, began scaling back higher-education funds in the mid 1990s. In 2001, an economic recession caused even more drastic budget cuts. The University of Massachusetts system, for example, lost 5.1 percent of its annual budget that year, prompting a 24 percent spike in tuition at the flagship campus at Amherst and a halt to all library acquisitions. Public higher-education budgets have been relatively stagnant ever since.

Growing increasingly anxious, officials at public universities turned toward upbeat alumni mags to buoy fundraising efforts. Over the past 15 years, schools that had never previously published alumni mags began cranking out thousands of the things, including UMass, which, in spite of its dwindling coffers, launched magazines for its larger campuses in 1996.

Interestingly, despite all the work done by colleges to generate self-congratulatory publicity to court alumni donors, many schools saw the percentage of graduates giving in recent years *decrease*. In fact, the alumni-participation rate across US institutions of higher education has decreased every year since 2001 and now stands at a lackluster 12.4 percent, according to the Council for Aid to Education. At Harvard, 24 percent of grads donated money in fiscal year 2006 — a steady decline from 27 percent in FY 2001.

These downward numbers could reflect any number of realities: the squeeze on alums who are trying to put their own children and grandchildren through school, say, or cultural trends away from institutional loyalties of any kind. One thing is certain, though: “Rah rah” alumni magazines are apparently not rekindling morale or boosting alumni giving. If anything, it could be that the blather disseminated by university PR offices is provoking cynicism and backlash.

How do I look?

The image-above-all mentality is part of a lamentable trend “Freedom Watch” has long identified as “the corporatization of higher education.” Increasingly, university presidents operate more like CEOs than academic leaders: they emphasize the bottom line, large endowments, *U.S. News and World Report* rankings, and highly visible campus construction (and donor-naming) projects, while they neglect or marginalize academic excellence, intellectual inquiry, academic freedom, and students’ rights.

Recent experiences with my own alma maters, Princeton and Harvard Law School, offer good examples of how the Ivies are sacrificing openness and frankness to the Almighty Image, especially when it comes to hiding some very un-academic steps taken by administrators. In the spring of 2005, Princeton associate dean of students Hilary Herbold punished editors of the *Nassau Weekly*, a student literary magazine, for publishing a satirical article that parodied the Holocaust. I wrote to Dean Herbold to complain, since parody is clearly protected by free-speech and academic-freedom doctrines. The dean assured me that while students at Princeton “are free to express their opinions,” racial or ethnic “slurs” fell out of bounds.

Because the dean appeared not to understand the role of parody in free discourse, I wrote a protest letter to the *Princeton Alumni Weekly*. They sent a reporter to tape record an interview with me about free speech and academic freedom. When the Q&A-style interview appeared on May 11, 2005, it quoted much of what I said about a variety of colleges and universities that were engaged in censorship. But not a word of my criticism of Dean Herbold’s censoring the *Nassau Weekly* had survived the editor’s red pen. My complaint about censorship had itself been censored!

Harvard Law School has betrayed a similar attitude. For many decades, the law-school community has been blessed with an independent, student-edited newspaper, the *Harvard Law Record*. It covers, in occasionally discomfiting detail, the controversies that regularly engulf that school — notably, whether frank speech and parodies on matters of race, gender, and sexual orientation should be censored. The *Record* was widely distributed among law-school alumni, mailed free to all members of the Harvard Law School Alumni Association as a benefit of membership.

With little fanfare, the administration persuaded the alumni association to pull distribution of the *Record* and substitute a long-standing official law-school publication, the *Harvard Law School Bulletin*. Earlier this year, I complained to the new law-school dean, Elena Kagan, about this action taken under her predecessor, Robert Clark. Although a highly regarded free-speech advocate both on and off campus (a welcome change from her predecessor), Kagan defended

this switch. Acknowledging that the *Bulletin* would cast the law school in a more flattering light, Kagan pointed out that the independent *Record* is still available to alumni who bother to access it online, while admitting that the law school was — properly, in her view — now getting its own message out.

The Harvard Law School's latest attempt to control communications with alumni recalls an incident about which I wrote a 1996 op-ed column in the *Wall Street Journal*. In that piece, I criticized the law school's then-newly-enacted "Sexual Harassment Guidelines," a censorship code adopted in the wake of a highly distasteful, but fully protected (by academic freedom) parody of a *Harvard Law Review* article about feminist scholarship. A member of the then-dean's office was overheard complaining that he would not mind if Silverglate were to publish an article in some academic journal, but not in a newspaper widely read by wealthy donors. Harvard Law School cannot, of course, control the *Wall Street Journal*. But the university has now stepped up control over other publications that reach its alumni.

A sampling of local alumni glossies reveals a near-universal practice of praising the university, even if it means demeaning the intelligence of alums. *Harvard* magazine covered every angle of the forced resignation of former president Lawrence Summers earlier this year, printing scathing letters from alums and even including a sympathetic interview with the departed chief this fall. Meanwhile, its rival in-house publication *The Yard* conspicuously turned a blind eye to the controversy that was, of course, the nine-foot gorilla in the Harvard living room.

Boston University's alumni mag, *Bostonia*, deserves some credit for an investigative piece on grade inflation in its fall 2006 issue. But recent editions have also been heavy on self-congratulation, running articles such as a profile of BU students who aided Hurricane Katrina victims over spring break, and a puff piece on new president Robert A. Brown's inauguration, which breathlessly reported that he is committed to "excellence, connectivity, engagement, and inclusion."

Boston College magazine might take the prize for bias in 2006. In a shameless bit of puffery, editor Ben Birnbaum, also a university vice-president, assigned himself a summer 2006 cover-story profile of his boss, university president Rev. William P. Leahy, S.J. The piece, under the pretext of describing a typical week in the life of a college president, mainly reiterated statistics that show a tremendous level of growth under Leahy's leadership — numbers alumni are already bombarded with during fundraising campaigns. Birnbaum did address the most common criticism of Leahy: that he's rarely on campus long enough to meet with undergrads. But missing altogether was any line of questioning over matters of much graver significance: increased student and faculty concern over gay rights on campus, for example, or attempts by

the president's office to rein in an independent student newspaper — topics that have captured national media attention and surely would have piqued the interest of most alumni.

Disgruntled alums

Aside from opening their wallets in fewer numbers, alumni at various schools are showing signs of vocal discontent. At Dartmouth, alumni staged a previously unthinkable coup. Over the past couple of decades, the distinguished liberal-arts college had established a dismal record on free-speech issues, thanks largely to a notoriously overzealous speech-code policy that elevated vague notions of “community” over values of academic freedom. A long drawn-out battle between the university and a controversial conservative student publication, the *Dartmouth Review*, which has been around since 1980, added further fuel to the campus culture war engulfing Hanover.

Silicon Valley entrepreneur T.J. Rodgers, disgusted with the culture of censorship at his alma mater, garnered enough grassroots support to win election to the Dartmouth Board of Trustees (defeating three institutionally favored candidates) in 2004. (Disclosure: I have on occasion acted as an informal adviser to Rodgers on academic freedom issues.) Two more alums ran on similar platforms and were elected the following year. This did not give the insurgents anywhere near a majority of the 18-member board, but, as Dylan taught us, “you don't need a weatherman to know which way the wind blows.”

The administration, to its credit, reacted by eliminating the speech restrictions, but supporters of the status quo had fits of apoplexy over the idea that alums should have as much power as Rodgers and his allies had gained — through democratic means. The administration-friendly alumni organization immediately tried to ram through modifications of the electoral system. It was clear to anyone following the saga that the proposed new constitution sought to make it more difficult for dissident challengers to join the board. And yet an alumni association spokesperson, in a brazen display of Orwellian doublespeak, maintained that the proposed new constitution “significantly improves the democratic processes of electing alumni trustees” and would create a “vastly stronger alumni organization.”

Signaling their independence, Dartmouth alums, who collectively have the power to change the board's electoral system, voted down the proposal 51-49 percent, a stunning defeat for the entrenched powers that previously could count on a supine alumni body to approve whatever administration-friendly decisions were handed down. Merle Adelman, first vice-president of the established alumni association, tried put the best face on the affair by telling *Inside Higher Education* that, while the association “regrets” the defeat, “we are pleased to see the record

number of alumni voices heard.” What Adelman did not say was that these wrong-headed efforts to control the message were beginning to wake up a sleeping tiger. This growing alumni rebellion will not likely stop at Dartmouth and will not be assuaged by upbeat propaganda issued by their alma maters.

In an act of rebellion similar to the Dartmouth affair, hundreds of disconcerted alumni of Rutgers University pooled their resources, along with those of students and faculty members, to place an ad in a 1998 issue of the Rutgers alumni magazine to denounce the university’s hefty investment in varsity sports. The president’s office intervened and blocked the magazine’s editor from running the ad. The alumni, with the help of the ACLU of New Jersey, sued and scored a major victory when the court ruled in 2002 that Rutgers had violated their First Amendment rights. Not surprisingly, the administration’s unseemly efforts to control its alumni have backfired: the percentage of Rutgers alumni giving has dropped every year since the school’s bid at censorship: from 13 percent in 1999, to 9.4 percent in 2005.

Brave students and faculty have long protested trends in higher education that compromise their rights through the rise of speech and “harassment” codes. Such regulations limit constitutionally and academically protected speech, theatre, artwork, and publications, and are capriciously enforced by often-secret internal administrative proceedings that deny students any semblance of due process. As Alan Charles Kors and I pointed out in our 1998 book, *The Shadow University: The Betrayal of Liberty on America’s Campuses*, academic freedom is being sacrificed so that academic administrators can play-act as empire-builders and careerists rather than serve as educators. The typical modern college president’s goal is to have no controversy, no trouble “on my watch,” we wrote.

One major problem facing campus administrators accustomed to having little or no blowback from alumni is that their graduates are among the most Web-savvy members of our society who are increasingly turning to the blogosphere and the Web sites of student newspapers that remain, by and large, fairly independent. For administrators to think that they can mold alumni opinion by monopolizing the universities’ messages sent to grads ignores the growing realities of our increasingly sophisticated and informed electronic-media-saturated culture.

Now that no-nonsense alumni are seeing through the smoke and mirrors, cutting off donations and asserting control of alumni associations and boards of trustees, colleges may have no choice but to pay attention to the rising chorus of voices saying “enough!”

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