



May 10, 2022

Dr. Lawrence S. Bacow
President
Harvard University
Massachusetts Hall
Cambridge, MA 02138

Dear Larry,

It was with great fanfare that Harvard recently released its long-awaited report on its legacy regarding slavery. Your letter starts with this: “Veritas is more than Harvard’s motto. It is the very reason we exist. Through research and scholarship, *we seek to uncover truth...*” (my emphasis added).

Nothing could be further from the truth than the assertion that Harvard seeks to “uncover truth.” In fact, the opposite is resoundingly the case. Truth requires a commitment to rigorous investigation, analyzing data and approaching questions objectively and openly **and** putting aside opinion, bias, and political correctness. The very essence of a liberal arts education is to teach students to grapple with uncomfortable and difficult issues, learning the value of respectfully listening and considering opposing viewpoints and seeking evidence that conflicts with ingoing assumptions. The principles they take away will shape how they behave as adults and will be hugely influential in their contributions to society.

Harvard obscures truth when it is inconvenient to the flavor-of-the-moment political narrative that the University invariably feels the need to embrace, and the academy all-too-often lets opinions shape facts rather than vice versa. This has come to define not just Harvard, but many if not most other colleges and universities as well. Recent poignant examples of this at Harvard, to name just a few, include the cancellation of Professor Roland Fryer, the University’s approach to Covid, the stifling of free speech and open debate on campus and allowing students to disrupt or cancel speakers whose views do not align with University viewpoints, and public stances you have taken on various political issues of the day that regurgitate uninformed and often superficial media narratives. This is intellectual laziness and portrays complicated issues as simple matters of black and white. (I’ve written to you regarding a couple of these public missives, to which I never got a response.)

Over the past decade, Harvard and others have stifled open discourse which does exactly the opposite of uncovering truth. It is this climate on US campuses that has set the tone for the repression of debate in the public square, fomenting mistrust and further dividing our country while threatening its democratic principles. Both history and current events are fraught with complexity, and universities should be places where such complexity should be studied and debated openly and vigorously; unfortunately, all too often they are portrayed as a simplistic choice between right versus wrong by students, faculty and administrators alike who, because of their preset opinions, are unwilling to be challenged by nuance or facts. The dustbin of history is littered with societies that have embarked on such a path.



The case of Roland Fryer presents an interesting contrast to last week's *mea culpa*. By anyone's definition, Dr. Fryer is a superstar--or at least he was before he was cancelled in 2018. Born into poverty, he was abandoned by his mother and was raised in a crack house for a significant portion of his formative years. By some miraculous twist of fate, when he got to college, he discovered that he was good at math—excellent actually--and went on to become at age 30 the youngest tenured Black professor in Harvard history. In 2015, he won the John Bates Clark Medal, which is awarded annually to an American economist under the age of 40 “who is judged to have made the most significant contribution to economic thought and knowledge.” Previous winners include Andrei Schleifer, Larry Summers, Paul Krugman, Sandy Grossman, Joe Stiglitz and Martin Feldstein, to name just a few.

Roland Fryer is everything Harvard purports to stand for: a brilliant African American man bereft of opportunities who through hard work and a commitment to intellectual integrity rose to become one of the most accomplished researchers in the world in his field. I know this to be true—my foundation and several others funded EdLabs, the research lab he founded and led at Harvard. Roland is apolitical—he just seeks the truth (like Harvard purports to) no matter how uncomfortable the answer.

Roland's research was groundbreaking and had real world impact in bettering the lives of underprivileged black and brown kids. In education, his work uncovered the practices and policies of the best charter schools to understand what policies increased achievement for disadvantaged black and brown kids. Having isolated critical levers for student success, he took these policies and ran large experiments on the ground in Houston, Denver and Chicago. He worked in partnership with Houston Public Schools leadership to hire and train principals and held meetings with community leaders and parents to ensure the work was understood and embraced. The outcomes were dramatically positive. As a group, the 20,000 students in those experiments closed the achievement gap in secondary school math in five years and in elementary in three. And over 95% of those students were accepted to a two or four-year college (not all enrolled but they were admitted).

What got him in trouble was his research into police use of force, which at the time (and still is) was one of the most highly debated social topics in the country. He wrote the only data driven paper on the subject. The data evaluated the federal government's investigations into police departments and found that such investigations and the way they were being handled actually cost more Black lives in the long run than police shootings themselves, because police departments pulled back when they were investigated in a highly politicized environment resulting in a dramatic increase in crime. And while the data showed that while it was true that there is a significant racial bias and profiling in routine traffic stops, statistically there was no such bias in shootings by police.

The upshot of the work was that he used the data to inform how to regulate police departments that did have unknown bias in a way that didn't cause officers to completely disengage, which was exactly what happened nationwide in the aftermath of the tragic George Floyd shooting with disastrous consequences. Yet the findings flew in the face of a superficial narrative that was popular in the media and inside your hallowed halls. And what did Dr. Fryer get in return? Death threats and significant pushback when the data proved to be unimpeachable. And Harvard did nothing to protect him or defend his work during this entire saga.



And what happened next is truly disgusting--- a disgruntled Harvard employee filed a ginned up and extremely flimsy sexual harassment complaint against him in which many (including me) firmly believe was an orchestrated effort to discredit him. And discredit him it did! This YouTube video is a good account of the whole saga. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=m8xW0lk3Wlw>

Despite being well-aware that there was ample evidence from multiple reliable sources that the case lacked credibility and real evidence of wrongdoing, you and the rest of the Harvard Administration shamefully did not defend him from his politically motivated detractors. Harvard leadership had multiple opportunities to exonerate him but demurred. The result: he was effectively cancelled and the punishment--a two-year suspension, his research lab closed, his staff of 26 let go and a myriad of truly demeaning restrictions were imposed on him were he to return—was far outside what would have been reasonable had he actually been guilty of what he was accused of.

Were the University to practice what it preaches vis a vis equity and social justice, it would cherish and promote such an accomplished academic whose work had impact on some of the most difficult problems our country faces, yet exactly the opposite happened. We should ask ourselves why, and the reason is not because he made occasional sarcastic and harmless jokes to his colleagues, which was part of the culture in which he was raised.

With regard to Covid, in March of 2020 Harvard was the first major institution to close its campus and set higher ed (and perhaps the entire country) on a course of lockdowns that changed the trajectory of history forever. Within a twenty-four hour window, you closed the campus, sending all students home prior to spring break (to infect their parents and grandparents who were at dramatically higher risk of serious illness --not a mystery in March 2020), and cancelled the Ivy League basketball tournament. These two decisions were the tipping point for the entire country—others figured “well if Harvard is doing this, they must know something.”

And the dominos fell nationwide—schools at every level followed suit and went remote. More inexplicable was by the fall of 2020 when the data worldwide clearly demonstrated that young people were not at risk of severe health outcomes from COVID, rather than use data for decision making, Harvard stayed remote, ignoring data and clinging to this one size-fits-all policy that morphed into the national norm. When you finally allowed a small subset of students to return to campus even though their classes would not be held in person, you enacted campus policies that forced students out into the community for food, recreation and fitness, rather than containing Harvard’s young low-risk population on campus in a social and academic environment that would allow them to thrive, while protecting the non-Harvard Cambridge community. Many students who were not “allowed” to come back to campus came anyway, renting apartments in Cambridge driving out graduate students and local community members from affordable and attainable housing options.

Being viewed as a leader comes with a responsibility and has consequences; Harvard’s poor choices were seen as the right policy for other higher ed institutions, particularly in blue states, as COVID devolved into a political issue. And we all know the consequences; increased suicide rates, depression and learning loss for an entire generation of Americans ages 5-22 that were at minimal risk.



I realize this is a politically fraught position to take, but what is indisputable is that as a society we euphemistically chose our parents over our children with no debate about the long-term consequences. And in my opinion, Harvard played a huge role in that decision without any discussion or consideration of the enormous societal trade-offs.

It was little more than a mild inconvenience for the elite class to work from home (or their second or third ones), enjoy happy hour cocktails via Zoom, get their kids tutoring and have their groceries delivered (I am still floored by the hubris it takes to believe that it is too dangerous to risk going to a grocery store but fine to pay someone else \$15/hr. to take that risk for you) while the working class, bereft of computers, physical space, childcare and broadband, suffered the most. And anyone who questioned it, including many highly accomplished scientists, armed with data and history from past pandemics, were systematically shut down, subjects of an active smear campaign orchestrated by public health officials at the highest levels of government. This is now well-documented.

If Harvard was true to its motto, it would and should have played a leadership role in fostering an open national discussion on the biggest issue of our lifetime, an issue fraught with complexity and amplified by a highly politicized environment. And if not at the beginning, certainly over the last year after the vaccines had been rolled out. Locking down teenagers and making them wear masks all the time given the data we had as far back as two years ago was indefensible then, but was even more indefensible in 2021 and 2022, given vaccines and natural immunity from prior infection.

Yet you forced the community to reinforce a false narrative that you were keeping students safe by having them attend classes remotely, severely restricting their social activities and sports, and mandating masks outside (there has never been any credible evidence of outdoor spread) when the data clearly showed they were never not safe in the first place. And the cost—isolation, fear, extensive mental health issues in what were previously normal teenagers, and a complete lack of resilience—far outweighs the benefits. Speaking of data and uncovering truth, I am sure you are aware that not a single college student has died from Covid in the State of Massachusetts yet there has been an epidemic of suicides nationwide and in Massachusetts at colleges where students were living under highly restrictive, isolating environments.

The Ivy League suspended sports for the entire 2020-21 academic year. Every other Division I athletic conference played a full winter and spring schedule, and most played in the fall. Was the Ivy policy a matter of uncovering truth through research and scholarship? And do they not do such at every other Division I university other than the eight Ivies? Many US colleges were open in person the entire 2020-21 school year with no negative health outcomes. If Harvard strives “to uncover truth,” why did you not continually examine these counterfactuals to inform your decisions, particularly given that all students and faculty were required to be vaccinated, and actually use that data to come to a different decision?

Today, Harvard continues to mandate boosters for all students regardless of natural antibodies as a result of prior infection. Is this a result of uncovering truth through research and scholarship? Because there are reams of data that show that one is no more likely to contract the current variants from an



unvaccinated person than from a vaccinated or boosted one (and actually some evidence to the contrary) and that natural antibodies provide more protection than mRNA vaccines. Why should a healthy young person who is vaccinated and has had Omicron be forced to have a booster immediately afterwards when they have developed the antibodies naturally?

From a societal perspective, we are now left to grapple with the long-term effects of draconian lockdowns which include increased suicides, depression, mental illness, and increased mortality from untreated chronic disease, as well as acute labor shortages, rampant inflation, economic devastation, severe learning loss, social unrest, increased crime rates and the hollowing out of once great cities. And the real tragedy is that the people that could least afford it were disproportionately hurt the most. Was it worth it? Hard to know, but if Harvard had really “followed the science” and sought to uncover truth, it certainly would have set a better example for the rest of the country.

As an aside, it is worth noting that after our politicians and “elite” research universities chose the path of aggressive lockdowns, the probability of any serious analysis ever being undertaken as to whether this was the right course is effectively zero. By falling prey to the politicization of Covid, these leaders taught students to succumb to fear, rather than rationally consider evidence. A data-driven, apolitical assessment (the kind Harvard supposedly prides itself on) of the cost to society of lives lost to Covid relative to lives destroyed or damaged by the consequences of the lockdowns and social isolation ought to be done, but of course won't be.

Mitch Daniels, Purdue's outstanding President and a courageous national leader, had this to say in his commencement speech last May:

“This last year, many of your elders failed this fundamental test of leadership. They let their understandable human fear of uncertainty overcome their duty to balance all the interests for which they were responsible. They hid behind the advice of experts in one field but ignored the warnings of experts in other realms that they might do harm beyond the good they hoped to accomplish. Sometimes they let what might be termed the mad pursuit of zero, in this case zero risk of anyone contracting the virus, block out other competing concerns, like the protection of mental health, the educational needs of small children, or the survival of small businesses. Pursuing one goal to the utter exclusion of all others is not to make a choice but to run from it. It's not leadership; it's abdication. I feel confident your Purdue preparation won't let you fall prey to it.

But there's a companion quality you'll need to be the leaders you can be. That's the willingness to take risks. Not reckless ones, but the risks that still remain after all the evidence has been considered...”

Truer words were never spoken. In stark contrast, perhaps no other single decision taken under your watch more clearly defines where Harvard is today ideologically than the choice of this month's



commencement speaker, who no doubt was chosen specifically for her “bravery” in totally locking down her country’s citizens for eighteen months. Like too many things at Harvard these days, this curious choice is completely out of touch with the mainstream of our country. Over the last two years, we have devolved into a society where people in blue states drove alone in their own cars wearing masks, crossed the street to avoid other pedestrians, ratted out their neighbors for having gatherings and wiped down groceries that they ordered online, and Harvard celebrates this! And by choosing Jacinda Ardern to address its graduating class, the University’s clear message is that we should emulate New Zealand, which absent China imposed the most draconian Covid restrictions on its citizenry.

It is certainly true that Harvard is not the only elite institution to stray far from its stated mission. Over the past few years, a collaborative effort between RealClearEducation, The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) and CollegePulse created the College Free Speech Rankings to measure the attitudes of American college students toward free expression. Nearly 20,000 students are surveyed annually to come up with a composite ranking. In 2021, Harvard ranked 130 out of 154.

It would be extremely valuable if every faculty member and administrator re-read Harvard’s Free Speech Guidelines, which have been in place since 1990, and there was a required two-week workshop on productive open discourse for all incoming freshman and graduate students, because what it says bears little resemblance to the current reality on campus. And rhetorically, if students can’t express their opinions freely, how are they going to “uncover truth?” In FIRE’s rating of due process safeguards, Harvard gets an F for Non-Sexual Misconduct allegations and a D for Sexual Misconduct allegations.

<https://www.thefire.org/schools/harvard-university/#due-process-tab>

At HBS, where both of my sons are current students, this semester has brought numerous cancelled discussions and outright censorship of cases about Saudi Arabia, China and the Ukraine.

On Thursday, a research center at BIDMC was forced to postpone a multidisciplinary panel on autism awareness because an undergraduate-authored petition condemned the University for publicizing the event. Listing it on a schedule in a Weekly Update email was deemed by students to be implicit support for the event and somehow offensive to those that suffer from autism. The list goes on and on.

Last week the *Harvard Crimson* published an unsigned editorial endorsing BDS. As you are probably aware, this has created quite a firestorm both on campus, in Boston and in the American Jewish community writ large. I don’t need to tell you about how misinformed this position is or what the anti-Semitic implications are. It’s sickening but not surprising. Jewish students, already uncomfortable in the current campus climate, feel even more alienated. This open letter to the Editorial Board puts its finger on the same problem at the *Crimson* that this letter addresses, namely that “a newspaper’s most fundamental obligation, especially vital in our times, is to seek truth.”

<https://www.thecrimson.com/article/2022/5/9/open-letter-of-dissent/>

The editorial comes hot on the heels of a *Crimson* attack on the Harvard College Israel Trek, playing up a tiny protest of Israel’s U.S. Ambassador’s recent visit to the Kennedy School, and it’s fawning over the “Israel Apartheid Week” nonsense that intentionally coincided with Passover. Prattling on about “white



privilege” (well over half of Israel’s Jews are of Middle Eastern or North African descent and the ones from Europe were refugees from the Holocaust—that’s “white privilege?”) and “power imbalance” was particularly tone deaf during the week of Holocaust Remembrance Day. Classy.

Were Harvard to actually undertake a boycott of Israel, it would mean that Harvard scholars could not collaborate with Israeli academics on ground-breaking technologies, life-saving medications and other critical scientific advances, and no Israeli students could matriculate at any of Harvard’s schools. If any of the terms “Black, Chinese, Saudi, Iranian, Pacific Islander or LGBTQ” were substituted for Israeli, would the Editorial Board have taken such a position? I don’t think so.

The reality that a leader whose parents fled the Holocaust has bent over backwards to show solidarity toward every minority group with some sort of grievance while ignoring the enormous festering problem of anti-Semitism and Israel hate in Harvard Square is shameful. Is this because you have fallen prey to the campus climate which I describe and defending Jews and Jewish values is so politically controversial that you yourself are afraid of being cancelled?

When questioned at a faculty meeting last week about the editorial, amidst a bunch of doublespeak the best you could muster was: “I would hope that every member of our campus community would condemn hatred and bigotry on our campus in any form, whether or not it appears as a swastika or a noose.” Seriously? Perhaps you should consider having a candid conversation or two with the Israeli and Jewish students at the Kennedy School, Hillel or Harvard Chabad and hear how and why they feel physically threatened.

So back to Harvard and the Legacy of Slavery. The fact that there were slaves in Massachusetts in the 1700s or that any of Harvard’s benefactors or founders owned them should not be a groundbreaking revelation to anyone. I wholeheartedly agree that Harvard is indeed in dire need of some painful self-reflection, so I applaud this effort, but while you are at it, how about some genuine introspection about the current state of affairs in Cambridge in addition to self-flagellating over events that took place some fifteen generations ago?

I couldn’t agree more with the Committee’s recommendation to focus on K-12 education, particularly on STEM and higher education access and success. The One8 Foundation has been doing this important work by supporting and implementing programs in each of these areas in Massachusetts for almost a decade with promising results. Well, they were even more promising until schools were closed for almost two years, and the setbacks students have suffered are both unimaginable and unconscionable. It is a Herculean task to consolidate and build on the gains students had and have made in these programs, but we and our educator partners are doing it no thanks to Harvard and other educational institutions who lacked true leadership by starting and extending lockdowns in schools without weighing the very considerable tradeoffs to students and families.

The learning loss and attendant social and emotional problems suffered in underprivileged communities during Covid is the single largest regressive tax in our lifetime. A widely read McKinsey report on the subject estimates that learning loss due to Covid will add \$128-\$188 **billion per year** to existing racial



achievement gaps in the United States. <https://www.mckinsey.com/industries/education/our-insights/covid-19-and-education-the-lingering-effects-of-unfinished-learning>. That fact that Harvard is setting aside \$100 million to address 300 years of racial injustice is admirable, but a strong display of leadership by fully reopening the campus in the fall of 2020 (or not closing it in the first place) based upon data and setting an example for school districts in urban areas rather than continuing to prioritize a small group of older privileged professors and administrators in the Harvard community would have been far more impactful.

Another example of the disingenuous nature of what Harvard says versus what Harvard does is showcased in this Committee recommendation: “Moreover, in an effort to invest in current and future generations of scholars within and outside of the University, we recommend that Harvard—already home to many scholars and programmatic endeavors related to slavery and its legacies in and beyond education—provide ongoing financial support for scholarship and curricula that seek to understand, analyze, and promote solutions to persistent racial inequities that plague descendant communities.” Dr. Roland Fryer was the poster child for exactly what the recommendation prescribes, and he was fulfilling the vision spectacularly well—until you allowed him to be forced out and closed his lab.

Recent national polls consistently show that 65% of Americans think the country is on the wrong track. Our current and future leaders need the tools to be able to think critically and solve very complicated and complex problems. By and large, the current climate on university campuses today, where stifling of open debate and unwillingness to reach across lines of difference has become the norm, is not equipping students with the ability to do that.

Students need to learn how to deal with the diversity of the world they will live and work in after college. They must interact and learn from faculty and fellow students with ideologically diverse perspectives. Yet how can they at Harvard when the great majority of faculty (78%) identify as liberal or very liberal? In a 2021 *Harvard Crimson* survey of faculty, only 3% identified as conservative and 19% as moderate. With each passing year, Harvard resembles more of the dystopian tale told in the book *1984* than the beacon of truth and research it aspires to be.

As you know, I spent much of my professional career working for Harvard, first as a senior portfolio manager at Harvard Management Company and then as an outside manager for the endowment after I left HMC to start my own firm. I was once very proud of the fact that my and my colleagues’ efforts were furthering Harvard’s mission and that the endowment would provide the resources for my alma mater to reach even greater heights. Frankly, I am now embarrassed by it.

History has shown that the pursuit of liberty and democratic values requires leaders of character, integrity, and indefatigable commitment. Real leadership is often lonely and always grueling. More often than not, glass needs to be broken. Leaders who have delivered social change were not worried about the popularity of their choices because they were devoted to serving others to drive towards a more just society – their decisions reflect this commitment. High impact leaders consider the consequences of their decision-making, ultimately choosing the best of all less-than-perfect alternatives. If you really seek truth, one must acknowledge that in a rapidly changing world of different peoples, divergent



perspectives and unique cultures, there is a huge difference between facts and “truth.” Intellectual truth requires nuance alongside creative and innovative solutions based on hard data and respectful compromise.

The world thirsts for high impact leaders with courage. And for Harvard to produce such leaders, they need strong role models. The noble purpose of higher education is to teach students so that they can develop into leaders with intellectual curiosity and the skills and experience to analyze hard data and seek out challenging perspectives; only then can they use results-oriented analysis and respectful debate to devise solutions. Viewed through this lens, Harvard is flailing, if not failing. If an institution demands that its students are indoctrinated with one sanctioned view of the world, then the degrees it confers are meaningless.

My late business partner was fond of saying that everyone is entitled to their own opinion but not their own facts. He’d roll over in his grave if he knew this was no longer the case both on campuses and in the wider world. Nothing more eloquently illustrates this than this moving and deeply disturbing essay by the brilliant Dara Horn. https://bariweiss.substack.com/p/at-harvard-facts-are-for-losers?s=r&utm_campaign=post&utm_medium=email . At Harvard, not only do you tolerate the blurring the lines between fact and fantasy, but by submitting to the woke mob you actively encourage it!

It will take strong and courageous leadership to arrest the downward spiral of a once great university, but it’s not too late. Sadly, I am dubious the body formerly known as the President and Fellows of Harvard College is even aware that a crisis exists, much less the extent of it.

Sincerely,

Jonathon S. Jacobson, MBA '87

Cc: Timothy R. Barakett
Kenneth I. Chenault
Mariano-Florentino Cuellar
Paul J. Finnegan
William F. Lee
Biddy Martin
Karen Gordon Mills
Diana L. Nelson
Penny Pritzker
David M. Rubenstein
Shirley M. Tilghman
Theodore V. Wells