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Harvard to Punish Membership in Single-Gender Organizations



Photo: Harvard Public Affairs & Communications

Harvard University announced recently that it will prevent members of single-gender social organizations that are unrecognized by the University from serving in leadership roles in campus organizations and athletic teams. They will also be prevented from receiving the College's endorsement for prestigious scholarships like the Rhodes and Marshall. The primary target seems to be Final Clubs, a Harvard-specific social organization that has traditionally been all male, though there are now female only Final Clubs. They are loosely analogous to fraternities and sororities, though they typically do not provide housing. Final Clubs have no formal association with Harvard other than that their members are Harvard undergrads.

President Drew Gilpin Faust, responding to the recommendations of Dean's report in a letter to the Harvard community entitled, "Letter on Single-Gender Social Organizations," writes:

Over time, Harvard has transformed its undergraduate student body as it has welcomed women, minorities, international students, and students of limited financial means as an increasing proportion of its population. But campus culture has not changed as rapidly as student demography. In recent months, we have been forcefully reminded that diversity is not equivalent to inclusion and belonging, and we have rededicated ourselves to achieving a campus where all members fully belong and thrive. For us to make progress on this shared endeavor, we must address deeply rooted gender attitudes, and the related issues of sexual misconduct, points underscored by the work of the Task Force on the Prevention of Sexual Assault.

...

A truly inclusive community requires that students have the opportunity to participate in the life of the campus free from exclusion on arbitrary grounds. Although the fraternities, sororities, and final clubs are not formally recognized by the College, they play an unmistakable and growing role in student life, in many cases enacting forms of privilege and exclusion at odds with our deepest values. The College cannot ignore these organizations if it is to advance our shared commitment to broadening opportunity and making Harvard a campus for all of its students. Nor can it endorse selection criteria that reject much of the student body merely because of gender. As reflected by the University's decision to withdraw recognition of the male final clubs in 1984, those practices are inconsistent with the educational

environment the College seeks to create. They encourage a form of self-segregation that undermines the promise offered by Harvard's diverse student body. And they do not serve our students well when they step outside our gates into a society where gender-based discrimination is understood as unwise, unenlightened, and untenable.

She then addresses the recommendations of Dean Rakesh Khurana:

I agree with the judgment that, at this time, the College should not adopt a rule prohibiting students from joining unrecognized social organizations that retain discriminatory membership policies. Students will decide for themselves whether to engage with these organizations, as members or otherwise. But just as students have choice, so too the College must determine for itself the structure of activities that it funds or endorses (including through fellowship recommendations from the dean), or that otherwise occur under its auspices. Captains of intercollegiate sports teams and leaders of organizations funded, sponsored, or recognized by Harvard College in a very real sense represent the College. They benefit from its resources. They operate under its name. Especially as it seeks to break down structural barriers to an effectively inclusive campus, the College is right to ensure that the areas in which it provides resources and endorsement advance and reinforce its values of non-discrimination.

As Faust writes, this new Harvard policy is part of the University's attempts to change "campus culture" around gender. Though Faust uses the language of inclusion and non-discrimination, the policy appears clearly focused on all-male Final Clubs with an attempt to address sexual misconduct on campus. As *Harvard Magazine* notes in its article on the policy, "Single-gender organizations that are recognized by the University, such as the South Asian Men's Collective or the Association of Black Harvard Women, won't be affected."



Photo: Harvard Public Affairs & Communications

Sexual misconduct is clearly a challenge and has been the focus of much college and university administrative time and energy across the country since the Department of Education (DOE) issued its now infamous “[Dear Colleague letter](#)” in 2011. [Many colleges, including Harvard](#), have found themselves under investigation by the DOE for possible violations of Federal law over how they handle sexual misconduct and harassment.

As complicated as the issue of sexual misconduct is, this policy seems likely to be both ineffectual and, more importantly, unjust. First, creating coed Final Clubs does not go to the root of the problem, which is alcohol use and abuse among undergraduates. Schools all over the country know this problem has no easy solution. Most students go to university for the social interactions with their peers and [alcohol is inevitably part of those interactions](#), even on allegedly dry campuses.

Second, the policy punishes individuals on the basis of whom they associate with. The Foundation for Individual Rights in Education (FIRE) was strongly critical of the decision as a violation of students’ right to freedom of association. In [an article](#) entitled, “Harvard Brings Back the Blacklist for Final Club, Fraternity, Sorority Students,” FIRE writes:

Harvard’s decision simply demonstrates that it is willing to sacrifice students’ basic freedom of association to the whims of whoever occupies the administrative suites today,” said FIRE co-founder, civil liberties attorney, and Harvard Law alumnus Harvey Silverglate. “Who’s to say that Harvard’s leaders five years from now won’t decide that Catholics or Republicans should be blacklisted because they might not line up with Harvard’s preferred values?”

The concerns about freedom of association seem quite legitimate to me. As a President of a single gender college, I particularly find the language of “self-segregation” problematic. The young men who attend Saint John’s University consciously choose, as part of their education, to “self-segregate” in Saint John’s dorms and on campus in the evenings when Bennies have returned to CSB. The notion that Johnnies need to defend that choice or are implicitly accused of have “unenlightened” ideas about gender is highly offensive. The Harvard administration would never imply that the choices of women at Wellesley or Smith or Mount Holyoke or the American Association of University Women are cause for concern.

We certainly need to think hard about how to address issues of sexual misconduct on campus, but stereotyping men who might choose to socialize with other men and punishing them in the absence of any evidence of bad behavior does not seem likely to improve campus culture.

[Michael Hemesath](#) | May 12th, 2016 | Categories: [Higher Education](#) | [0 Comments](#)

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Michael Hemesath is the 13th president of Saint John's University. A 1981 SJU graduate, Hemesath is the first layperson appointed to a full presidential term at SJU. You can find him on Twitter [at] [PrezHemesath](#).