

‘HARVARD IS HARVARD’: WILL CONTROVERSY HARM UNIVERSITY’S REPUTATION?

January 5, 2024

By: Niki Griswold, Jason Laughlin, & Hilary Burns

There’s an expression: “It’s the Harvard of ...” A simple way to express that something is the best of the best.

Even the embarrassing spectacle of the school’s newly installed president resigning — after controversy surrounding her statements on the Israel-Hamas war, claims of campus antisemitism, and accusations of plagiarism in her scholarly work — may not be enough to tarnish the vaunted Harvard brand.

“The number of extraordinarily well-qualified people lining up around the block over and over again, who want to get in, who don’t get in because the number of acceptances is so small, that’s not going to change,” said Norman Ornstein, emeritus scholar at the conservative think tank the American Enterprise Institute.

But it’s unlikely the school emerges unscathed, said Jeffrey Sonnenfeld, a professor of leadership studies at the Yale School of Management. He criticized the Harvard Corporation, the school’s top governing board, for a lack of transparency and communication during the unfolding controversies, and for not taking a stronger, clearer stand.

“When your motto is ‘Veritas,’ the truth, then the brand is severely damaged if you are making excuses for falsehoods and for fraud, misrepresentations and plagiarism,” Sonnenfeld said.

“They should use this as a defining moment to say that, ‘A person we hired made some regrettable decisions that we were unaware of. We take responsibility for not having fully vetted it,’ and they should have given president [Claudine] Gay the respect for a dignified exit,” said Sonnenfeld.

Ornstein added that the circumstances surrounding Gay’s resignation are not just embarrassing for the university, but will contribute to the ongoing political battle, as they will fuel conservative lawmakers and right-wing groups who have pledged to root out “rot” at elite institutions of higher education.

“The motives of those who are running this are very clear,” Ornstein said. “This is part of a carefully

designed war on expertise, on elites, on higher education,” that is likely to continue.

At least one student who applied for early action at Harvard, and was accepted, said his opinion of the university has shifted in the wake of the controversies, although he is still planning to attend in the fall.

Joshua Rodriguez Ortiz, a 17-year-old senior at Billerica Memorial High School, was thrilled when he received his acceptance letter last month to Harvard, which he had long dreamed of attending. But as a Latino, first-generation college student, he said he was dismayed by the resignation of Gay, the school’s first Black president, and faulted the university for not doing more to support her in the face of what he saw as right-wing, politically motivated attacks.

“It’s really disheartening for so many minorities, and especially for Black students, to see this figure fall and Harvard almost failing to protect her,” Rodriguez Ortiz said.

Emily Osorio, a 17-year-old from New Orleans, has applied to Harvard and is awaiting a response. But as a Latina and first-generation college student, she said seeing what Gay endured in recent weeks has left her with some anxiety about the possibility of attending the school.

“If this happened to a woman of color in this position, who is overqualified, then how will prospective students of color be treated and welcomed into this environment?” Osorio said.

Ultimately, any criticism about how the school handled what some students see as increasing antisemitism on campus will take a back seat to the allure of Harvard, said Brian Taylor, managing partner of the admissions consulting company Ivy Coach. Jewish students, as well as Black students who might be dismayed by attacks against Gay, Taylor said, will still apply to and enroll at Harvard.

“Of course Jewish applicants and families are rightly upset ... but they’re not so short-sighted to eschew the Ivy League for second-tier schools,” he said.

Tamar Gelb, director of college counseling at Maimonides School, a private Jewish school in Brookline that serves students in pre-K through grade 12, said she has not seen a significant change in application patterns this season.

Maimonides students have always considered on-campus Jewish life and sentiment toward Israel in the college application process, she said, and the prestige of a Harvard education is still appealing to students who plan to apply there. So far, the lucky few who have been accepted haven’t changed their plans to attend.

“I think that everybody recognizes that the situation is quite fluid; it’s been fluid since Oct. 7, and it will continue to change,” Gelb said.

Mimi Doe, cofounder and chief executive of the college counseling company Top Tier Admissions, said she has noticed that some students who were accepted to Harvard during early action this year are

continuing to apply to other Ivy League schools, rather than committing to Harvard now — a departure from years past.

“It’s interesting and telling that this year there are students who are throwing their hat in the ring even though they have the golden apple in single choice early action from Harvard,” Doe said, but added she doesn’t believe that’s indicative of any larger trend for the university’s admissions or enrollment.

“The benefits will always outweigh [the concerns] just because of the brand and the reputation,” said Doe.

Meanwhile, in Cambridge, some Harvard students worry about the climate on campus and are frustrated with university leadership.