

Cover Letter

Dear Dr. McKetta,

At the beginning of this course, I wasn't sure whether I had the ability to write an academic paper in English. Your wonderful comments gave me self-confidence and motivated me to do better each time. I even discovered a passion for English rhetoric, and I keep learning new things everyday.

I strive to explain a difficult issue with simple words, and this might be the strength of my essay. Thanks to you and my peer review group, I managed to improve it.

Introduction: I added a subtitle as you advised me to do. I also moved the thesis to the very end of my paragraph to meet the MLA requirements. I modified it for clarity purposes:

Old thesis: "Despite being committed to wealthy alumni, and consequently, to some legacies, Harvard strives to recruit deserving students. **New thesis**: "Despite its commitment to wealthy alumni, Harvard strives to recruit motivated, courageous, and deserving students."

Body paragraphs: I improved the transitions, and added, among other things, a passage about the Harvard Extension School. I was indeed *truly disappointed* to hear from one of my peer reviewers that "anyone can attend and earn a degree from Harvard, especially via their extension school" because "Harvard welcomes everyone who can pay" and that I am "not informed" as I live outside the US. I should open my eyes and "unplug from the Matrix." And yet, my methodology is simple: I write what I think, and I prove what I write. I also replaced "less deserving legacy students" by "some legacy students," as many of them work hard due to familiar pressure (thanks Christine for noticing it!).

Conclusion: I ended on a positive note this time!

Thank you sincerely,

Student

Student Name

Professor McKetta

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Harvard University, Where Meritocracy Meets Excellence:

Act with Passion, Learn with Patience, Succeed with Panache

The Price of Admission, Daniel Golden's satirical book, plays with the word *price*, asserting that elite colleges prioritize wealthy legacy students over other applicants (133). This oversimplification, however, enlightens the popular misconception of the word *price*. To advance academically, students need to invest time, not money. Time is limited, time is precious, time is the *price*, and Harvard College rewards those who invest it wisely: a successful admission requires both studying hard and having meaningful activities. Some students, however, use money as a pretext, a justification, or an excuse for failure. They mangle, denigrate, and insult meritocratic values, they blame Harvard admission officers, they blame hard-working students, and they blame the society for its unfairness. The high stakes explain this agitation: Harvard undergraduates represent our future leaders. They will govern countries, advise multinationals, and trade trillions of dollars at Wall Street. Admission officers decide of the future of the nation: failing to choose the right applicants will produce the wrong leaders. An important issue for students, parents, and indeed for all of society, is how this prestigious university maintains meritocracy while needing money. Despite its commitment to wealthy alumni, Harvard strives to recruit motivated, courageous, and deserving students.

While selecting applicants, Harvard uses grades as an indicator of motivation and courage. Since 1948, standardized tests enable to assess applicants regardless of their wealth or connections (Menand 2). Everyone must take the tests, and "the fact that Daddy went [to

Harvard] no longer sufficed” (2). Unsurprisingly, some students fail while others succeed: getting high SAT scores requires both hard work and patience. Stinebrickner and Stinebrickner revealed, in this regard, that studying longer results in higher grades (25), and the key of academic success lies in conscientiousness: “conscientious students are thought to be more motivated to perform well academically, are typically more organized, hard-working diligent, self-disciplined, and achievement-oriented” (Hattie 45); in other words, anyone with a strong desire to succeed can obtain high grades. Dawn Loggins, for instance, a former homeless girl and current Harvard student, asserts that “a lot of people use bad situations as an excuse. Instead of doing that, [she] used them as motivation to succeed and do well.” Some people still argue that living in harsh conditions lowers poor students’ academic performance; however, wealthy students suffer from relentless parental pressure and may experience “depression, anxiety, or somatic symptoms” (Luthar 4). Meritocracy does not reward the ones who have many problems, but the ones who have the courage and the motivation to overcome them.

Although motivation remains an important criterion, Harvard College considers students with special qualities, those who invested their time wisely. The Harvard Faculty Standing Committee on Admissions prefers motivated and passionate applicants who spend their time meaningfully (Vendler). Some lounge about while others play sports; some play games while others read books; some remain average while others become special. Harvard College admission officers do their jobs, and they do it right: they reward remarkable profiles and ignore the worthless ones. The admission standards hardly surprise: because Harvard is Harvard, students bear the burden of relentless excellence. The slightest faux pas, such as finding a question difficult, can damage the Harvard brand (Zhang), as the entire world expects Harvard students to remain exceptional academically, professionally and personally. The university rejects inevitably some interesting applications, as its admission rate does not

exceed six percent. To Indian students, however, “Harvard’s admission rate may appear almost welcoming” (“To Indian Students”). Indian Institutes of Technology admit about two percent of their applicants. In China, the prestigious Peking and Tsinghua colleges only accept “0.003 per cent of poor, rural youth” and “0.14 per cent of urban youth” (Li et al. 9). Compared to other prestigious institutions, Harvard welcomes more deserving students with special qualities.

Despite this openness, poor students should make efforts, get information, and apply. Technically, the university selects prospective students only among its applicants. A study from the National Bureau of Economic Research reveals, in this regard, that “the vast majority of very high-achieving students who are low-income do not apply to any selective college or university” (Hoxby and Avery 1). Despite Harvard’s communication about its financial aid, many talented poor students choose not to try (“How Aid Works”). The society pities them for not being admitted while they do not even apply. Neither Harvard, nor its admission officers are to blame: students have the responsibility to search for information about their dream schools, write convincing essays, and send their applications. Hoxby and Avery may object and explain that “many colleges look for low-income students where the college is instead of looking for low-income students where the students are” (44); however, Harvard’s communication is so effective that it “won world prestige of a sort rarely seen among social institutions,” even in the poorest areas (Keller and Keller 463). Students may purposely overlook Harvard because of self-perception or self-confidence, but they have to believe in their abilities, ideas, and strengths to overcome these problems themselves.

Money remains an even more dramatic excuse. While recruiting the best professors, Harvard strives to provide financial aids to needy students. The Harvard College website states that “\$0 [is the] amount that parents making less than \$65,000 are expected to contribute,” even though each full-time Harvard professor costs about \$200,000 per year to

the university (Wehr). The Harvard Extension School provides fewer scholarships, but charges four times less than Harvard College and two times less than Penn's College of Liberal and Professional Studies. Established respectively in 1636 and 1910, these Harvard schools' aim was – and still is – to offer high quality education to the deserving population regardless of money and social background. The Harvard Extension School welcomes people with numerous familial and professional commitments. All these students have the courage to devote every hour, every minute, every second of their precious free time to earn a Harvard degree. Harvard College and Extension students belong officially to the same community, to the same faculty, to the same family (“Is It Really Harvard?”). At the Commencement, the Harvard University President congratulates them in the same way and welcomes them “to the fellowship of educated women and men” (Faust). In both cases, admission and graduation require hard work, not money.

Paradoxically, Harvard must accept some legacy applicants so that more poor students can apply and get a scholarship. As stated before, Harvard needs money to recruit motivated, enthusiastic and qualified professors. The wealthy alumni provide indispensable financial resources for the Harvard Scholarship funds; in other words, seventy percent of the students take advantage of the thirty percent students' generous donations (Worland). Kenneth Griffin's \$150 million gift, for example, principally focuses “on supporting Harvard's financial aid program” and “inspire[s] other alumni and friends to contribute” (“Kenneth Griffin Makes Largest Gift”). Harvard insures that most students graduate debt-free, so that they can contribute in turn, and, perhaps most of all, help the next generation of students.

Harvard still aims to recruit deserving students despite its commitment to legacies. For students, there is no money problem, there is no admission problem, there is only a motivational problem. Many students indeed complain, whine, and keep self-pity instead of striving to succeed. What would happen if Harvard were accepting such people? It would lose

its prestige, and consequently, prevent students from grasping opportunities. As Sorbonne has learned to its sorrow, bad students kill universities; good students save them. Only 28 percent of undergraduates succeed and earn a three-year Bachelor in Economics and Management (Robin 2). These students have almost no homework, no standards, and no motivation. Even though Sorbonne still attracts people, it lost its prestige in France. Harvard University, on the contrary, selects the right students and enables them to get a bright future; a future full of hope, success, and leadership.

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