

Student Records: The Harvard Experience

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THE PASSAGE OF THE FAMILY EDUCATION RIGHTS AND PRIVACY ACT in 1974, the concern and confusion surrounding the Buckley Amendment, and the questionable use of student records by government agencies have made particularly timely the discussion of access to and confidentiality of student records. But I will touch upon these important subjects only in passing, leaving to my colleagues their detailed discussion. My aim in this paper is largely historical, to show through the experience of one large and old university the research use of student records and the importance of their permanent retention for researchers of the future.

The ubiquitous student-folder did not appear upon the Harvard scene until the 1890s. Nevertheless, for the two and one-half centuries previous to that decade, the records of students at Harvard are many and varied. While we cannot produce a detailed record for every student who attended Harvard in the seventeenth century, we can for many. Student records for this period are found among the papers of the university presidents and in the recorded minutes of the Harvard Corporation and Board of Overseers, the two Harvard governing bodies, as well as in surviving diaries and commonplace books. Detailed records of student board, room, and other expenses may be found in the records of the steward, butler, and treasurer. A close study of these records will indicate how much (and in some cases what type) food a student ate, how much beer he drank, and how much he was fined for various infractions of the college laws. In the majority of cases, this information can be determined for individuals. Through an overall study of such material, the individual student can be placed within the social and intellectual tenor of his times.

By the third decade of the eighteenth century, an organized faculty was formed at Harvard, and their records became another important source of information on students. As is still the case in some small, private secondary schools, the Harvard faculty of this period discussed students individually, particularly if academic failings or conduct were in question. The results of these discussions appear in the minutes of the Harvard faculty and are an unbroken record of information about individual students from the 1720s to the end of the nineteenth century. For the record of the eighteenth century, the District Reports and Disorders Papers are important also. The former consist of the records of how students kept their rooms and who their roommates were, and what repairs were required; the latter concern participation of students in various riots and disruptions.

Beginning early in the nineteenth century, student records became more numerous and more varied. We have available for different periods such records as absences from recitation, admission books, class rank lists, concentration cards, course lists, disciplinary material, final returns, general exams, grade sheets, language requirement results, parentage cards, prayer cut records (daily chapel attendance

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was compulsory at Harvard until 1886), rank scales, record cards, summons books, and withdrawals. Marking or grading, as we know it, was a nineteenth-century development. Before that, at least at Harvard, academic grading was a matter of pass or fail. To make academic judgment of a student, the tutor, instructor, or professor relied largely on themes, forensics, and recitations.

The issuance of grades at Harvard began in 1827 with the aggregate system. Under this system students received a certain number of points or aggregates for themes, recitations, orations, and other endeavors. The total number of aggregates accumulated during a four-year period determined academic rank within a class. Thus, by looking at the system as a whole, biographers and other researchers can determine the comparative academic achievement of such nineteenth-century Harvard notables as James Russell Lowell, Oliver Wendell Holmes, and Henry David Thoreau. For the decade between 1876 and 1886, students were marked by a combination of aggregates and percentages. In 1886 came the present letter system of marking.

This is not an exhaustive (and I hope not an exhausting) recitation of the student records available for research at Harvard for the period ending with the nineteenth century. What I hope to show is that there is a rich body of student records available for researchers at the university and, I am sure, at many of its sister institutions. With very few exceptions, these records prior to the 1890s are fully available to competent scholars to use in a great variety of ways. Recently, a biographer sent for my inspection sixty double-spaced typewritten pages of information that he had accumulated on the college career of Henry Adams, A.B. 1858. This information was culled from the great variety of our official student records and from supplementary material in our collections on Harvard professors, student publications, organizations, and biographical class material. One manuscript volume kept by a Harvard undergraduate organization contains a pornographic poem in Henry Adams's unmistakable handwriting. This poem and the other material discovered in the Harvard Archives by the biographer reveal much about the education of Henry Adams that does not appear in his book of that title.

We have now come to the dawn of the twentieth century and to the era of the student folder and student record card. The Harvard University Archives contains approximately six-thousand Hollinger boxes of student folders for the period circa 1890 through 1970, and about one-hundred Hollinger boxes of student grade-cards. Until the 1920s the folders were thin, containing the basic information on the application form, the secondary school grades, and letters of recommendation. Beginning in the 1920s, the amount of information, and its variety and diversity, accumulated until, in the 1950s, there gradually emerged a folder of material containing a detailed account of the child and youth from birth to the age of approximately twenty-two. Restricted now? Of course. But, a century from now, a biographer's dream.

The content of the Harvard student folders of the past forty years has changed, of course, by administrative whim and by state and federal regulation. The typical Harvard folder over this period, however, contains an application form with date and place of birth; citizenship; father's and mother's names, place of birth, nationality, education, and occupation; parent's marital status; school attended by applicant; extracurricular activities; list of offices held; honors received; teams played on; names of persons recommending applicant; essays on why applicant wants to go to college and why to Harvard; a photograph; and the applicant's autograph. At some periods, an essay on a particularly significant educational experience has been

required as well. Also in the folder are generally found the applicant's secondary-school transcript, a report on health, college semester grade reports, application for house assignment, administrative board reports on academic status, and details of various college encounters and experiences such as probation and leaves of absence. Of particular interest for the scholar are the letters of recommendation and comment written by teachers, principals, parents, tutors, and professors. It has long been the custom at Harvard to ask the parents of incoming freshmen for a letter of comment on their son. They reveal much about both the parents and the student. If only we had such letters by John and Susanna Adams about their son John, or from Increase and Maria Mather about their son Cotton, or from Thomas and Lydia Hancock about their nephew John. We do have them, presumably, for the twentieth century John Adams's, Cotton Mathers, and John Hancocks who have gone to Harvard.

Once a student is admitted to Harvard, a folder is created for him and, through his freshman year, is on file in the freshman dean's office. After the freshman year, the folder is transferred to the house (Harvard has a house system for upperclassmen similar to the college system at Oxford and Cambridge) where, generally, he will reside until graduation. It is here that the bulk of the file accumulates. The folders remain in the house after graduation, for the five-year period when professors are called upon most to write letters of recommendation. A number of professors have been particularly talented at writing these letters. Some are masterpieces of insight and prose style. How priceless would be similar letters written by Plato about Aristotle or by and about other great teacher-student relationships through the ages. Harvard does not claim, to my knowledge, any Platos or Aristotles; but it is obvious that such letters will prove invaluable to those who study and write about such Harvard men as John F. Kennedy and Henry Kissinger. The student folders containing this important research material are kept strictly confidential. When they are transferred to the archives, five years after the student graduates, the folders are kept in a room with special locks and may be recalled only by the dean of the college or the registrar of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences.

The most extensive use of Harvard's student records of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries has been made by Samuel Eliot Morison in his extensive and detailed histories of Harvard, and by my predecessor as Harvard archivist, Clifford K. Shipton, in writing volumes 4 through 17 of the series known as *Sibley's Harvard Graduates*. Besides serving as custodian of the Harvard University Archives and as director of the American Antiquarian Society, C. K. Shipton continued a project begun by Harvard Librarian John Langdon Sibley in the 1850s of gathering together all known information about Harvard graduates and presenting it in the form of compendious biographies. Sibley covered the classes of 1642 through 1689. After Sibley's death, the biographical project languished for half a century. In the 1930s, C. K. Shipton assumed the mantle of Sibley editor. By the time of his death, in December 1973, he had completed work on the members of the Class of 1771. One may wonder at the usefulness of producing a biography of every one of Harvard's graduates; but until the nineteenth century most of the prominent men, particularly in New England, who received a college education received it at Harvard or at Yale. In these brief biographies is gathered together all available information about the graduate's writings, his ancestors and descendants, and other matters that may serve as sources for research. Shipton always considered his biographies of obscure graduates more important than biographies of the famous. For gathered here, in these seventeen volumes, is a storehouse of information on the origins, occupations,

beliefs, and accomplishments of several thousand educated men of the American colonial period. These volumes have already served as the basis for many studies, sociological as well as historical. On the first two decades of the subjects' lives, most of the detail in them is based on Harvard student records.

Harvard student disciplinary records have figured prominently in the Sibley-Shipton biographies. As already mentioned, there is much of this material available in the steward's and butler's records of the seventeenth century and in the faculty records of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Another good source is the disorders papers, recording instances of student insurgence and unrest that have occurred periodically throughout Harvard's history, from rancid butter riots in the seventeenth century to the student political and social unrest of the 1960s and early 1970s. All was recorded at Harvard, much has been preserved. The need for the confidential treatment of such material is obvious. None has been released yet concerning students of the twentieth century or even the end of the nineteenth, such as some material I came across recently marked "Cases of cheating and lying, 1890-1898." But in the perspective of history, after the elapse of a century or two, does it really injure our sensibilities or prove embarrassing to distant descendants to know that John Hancock, A.B. 1754, while in college, was involved in getting a Negro slave drunk and was degraded four places in rank (but was restored upon humble confession); that Robert Treat Paine, A.B. 1754, forged a paper as a student; that Elbridge Gerry, A.B. 1762, was admonished for negligence in attending college prayers; that Samuel Adams, A.B. 1740, was "fined for drinking prohibited liquors"; or that Henry David Thoreau, A.B. 1837, was admonished for making a noise at prayers? I think not. Such information has certainly added to the interest of the Sibley-Shipton accounts, delighted genealogists, and can aid biographers and other researchers in developing a more complete picture of the man and of the milieu, social customs, and behavior of his era.

Harvard student records of the seventeenth through the nineteenth centuries have been used extensively by numerous researchers besides Morison and Shipton. Recent studies have included such subjects as the occupations of fathers and sons, the economic and social background of nineteenth-century Harvard professors who were also Harvard graduates, religious backgrounds of students, parentage and social backgrounds of college athletes, early lives and backgrounds of naval officers, and separate accounts of student disorders at Harvard in the 1760s and 1830s. The last named use, by Robert A. P. McCaughey, about a student rebellion of the 1830s, is significantly entitled: *The Usable Past*. There are many ways that we can learn from the past through the varied use of student records.

What of research use of student records of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, the greatest concern in most colleges and universities? As I have mentioned, these records of the student-folder era at Harvard are still considered highly confidential. Nevertheless, qualified researchers with the permission of the literary heirs and the consent of appropriate Harvard officials have made detailed use of Harvard undergraduate and graduate records for biographical, literary, and political studies of such well-known former Harvard students as E.E. Cummings, John Dos Passos, Thomas Wolfe, Theodore Roosevelt, W. E. B. DuBois, Alan Seeger, John Reed, Wallace Stevens, Robert Frost, T. S. Eliot, and Syngman Rhee. Even richer and more nearly complete records exist, presumably, for such more recent Harvard luminaries as Christian A. Herter, John Phillips Marquand, Norman Mailer, John Updike, Henry Kissinger, Eliot Richardson, James Gould Cozens, and the three Kennedy brothers. When the need for privacy diminishes and

with the consent of the heirs, a rich collection of material lies waiting for the scholar. May it be preserved.

While those of us who are archivists and historians may realize and appreciate the value of student records for research in the social sciences and the humanities, similar feelings may not be shared by "hard-nosed" administrators and legislators. To them the problems, both real and imaginary, of confidentiality, and legal and storage considerations, may make the retention of these records more bother than they feel the records are worth. Possibly, the great value of student records for medical research, with promised or at least anticipated, immediately useful and tangible results, may help convince them of the necessity for the retention of the materials.

A great deal of medical research had been done at Harvard through the use of student records. Although medical records at the university, in the form that we usually envision them, go back only about fifty years, there are related records that are nearly a century old. The most important of these were compiled through the efforts of Dudley Allen Sargent, assistant professor of physical training and director of the Hemenway Gymnasium from 1879 through 1919. During that forty year period, Sargent gathered and bound in large folio volumes detailed physical and strength test measurements on all Harvard students. These records, together with records of athletic participation, have provided and will provide in the future source material for medical research. I should also mention that Sargent and his associates took nude photographs of most students. These have been used extensively for the study of body types. I do not, I hope, need to add that these are stored under secure conditions with very limited access, at Harvard's Peabody Museum of Archeology and Ethnology. I suppose it could be argued, at least facetiously, that since our scientific community does not hesitate to publish photographs of scantily clad native chiefs from New Guinea or the South American jungles, that community should not hesitate to feature photographs in the *National Geographic* or *Natural History Magazine* of Harvard graduates who became our chiefs of state.

Harvard does have a Committee on Research and the Use of Human Subjects that governs the use of student medical records. Information for outside researchers generally is provided only in coded or numbered form. Psychiatric records, which do not come under the jurisdiction of the Harvard Archives, have not been used so far for research. As the chairman of the Committee on Research and the Use of Human Subjects pointed out to me, medical records are much more objective and statistical than psychiatric records. The patient input is much clearer in physical medical records and less prone to subjective interpretation. With the consent of the students concerned, some investigations have been made to determine whether there is a correlation between those who visit the Harvard Health Services for medical and those who visit for psychiatric reasons. Results are not fully conclusive, but through the use of student records it has been found that those who have psychiatric problems tend to have physical problems as well.

Early in this century, Harvard admission records were used for a study of longevity. Admission records, from the beginning, have generally included date of birth. The information, combined with the usually accessible death dates, led to useful conclusions on the longevity of one large segment of college educated Americans.

The Sargent physical and strength measurement records, as well as later student records, both medical and academic, have been used by Ralph S. Paffenbarger, Albert Damon, and others for studies of chronic disease in former college students, particularly the study of early precursors of fatal coronary heart disease, precursors of suicide in early and middle life, characteristics in youth predisposing to fatal

stroke in later years, and characteristics in youth predisposing to hypertension, suicide, and accidental death in later life. Some of their conclusions are that high blood pressure, cigarette smoking, and failure to participate in sports predispose toward heart disease and stroke. Early signs of suicide tendency were identified in the studies and brought to the attention of college and university administrators and health officials. Among the conclusions of the researchers were that health educators should be encouraged to mold good health habits among students and to initiate long-term programs formulated to reduce or delay death from coronary disease and stroke. Suggested approaches include weight control, regular physical exercise, and abstinence from cigarette smoking both as students and in later life.

Another major study at Harvard, employing both medical and other types of student records, is The Harvard Study of Adult Development (The Grant Study). For this project, under the current directorship of George E. Vaillant, 268 college sophomores were studied in great depth in 1939–42 and have been followed at roughly two year intervals ever since. These were Harvard students selected for reasons of physical and psychological health, and they now comprise a resource that is useful in studying the determinants of healthy adaptation to retirement and to the aging process, as well as the study of the antecedents of mental health and/or mental illness. Another similar study was begun with Harvard students in 1964–65.

Other medically oriented studies at Harvard have included equipment design and a comparison of the longevity of Harvard oarsmen with those who did not participate in college sports. The potential value of these student records for future research is incalculable; the benefits for mankind are tremendous.

We have considered the historical and medical use of student records, but there is also the legal factor for purposes of social security and other benefit information. Also, during the past decade, with its questioning of established procedures, the university lawyers have frequently called upon the Harvard Archives for background material on procedures a century or two centuries old. A couple of years ago, the university was challenged as to whether it had been and was making proper use of scholarship money left by one William Stoughton, a member of the Class of 1650, who had died in 1701. Through the use of the scholarship records in the archives, which have taken many different forms over the centuries, the law researchers were able to determine, with but few omissions, the identity and place of residence (an important factor in this case) of recipients of Stoughton scholarship aid. Had it been necessary for them to extend their research back a full two and one-half centuries to Stoughton's death, I believe they could have, with a few gaps, done so. There were a number of scholarships available at Harvard by the eighteenth century. John Adams benefited from the Hollis scholarship and John Hancock from the Flynt scholarship.

We have had it brought to our attention, many times, that seemingly obscure student records can yield "pay dirt." Until the 1890s, library charging records were regularly maintained and preserved at Harvard. For the nineteenth century, these are in large, bound, folio volumes with a page for each student for each academic year. By examining these records, scholars can determine what Ralph Waldo Emerson or Henry David Thoreau or Theodore Roosevelt read as students, the volumes and authors who may have helped to shape their thinking at an impressionable age. Possibly, a study of the college reading of Richard Henry Dana and Francis Parkman would reveal that there was more than eye trouble that made the former take leave of absence from college for two years before the mast and the latter hit the Oregon Trail. There is at least a chance that their early college reading as well as

their physical afflictions may have influenced them toward non-academic adventure.

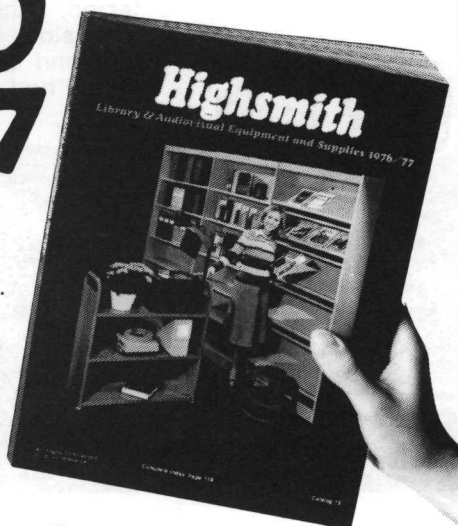
Several days before I began writing this paper, a member of our staff had the occasion to examine one of our most obscure and little-used files, the correspondence for the Sheldon Fellowships for student study abroad. There in the records for the period just prior to the First World War was discovered a cache of T. S. Eliot material, letters of comment on him by well-known Harvard professors and Eliot's own reports on his study abroad. Close examination of this material, I think, will reveal influences on his early poetry. There may be similar material in this small box of correspondence about Eliot's contemporaries Conrad Aiken and Walter Lippmann. We had not had time yet to look.

Through more than three centuries of wars, fires, and political and social change, Harvard has been fortunate enough to preserve its records from destruction. We are living now in a period of change and unrest, uncertain even of the moral and ethical character of our government. It is a period when those responsible for the creation and retention of student records question the advisability of saving this material. I am reminded of my visits to numerous Anglican churches and cathedrals in England, where Oliver Cromwell's Roundheads, the English seventeenth-century Red Guards, acting out of political and religious fervor, wreaked havoc with memorials, smashed stained-glass windows, and destroyed other features of artistic and historic merit. These treasures had existed for three centuries before the Roundheads and have existed, in a marred condition, for three centuries since. I urge my fellow archivists and administrators to preserve student records, to act with deliberation and judgment, so that we will not be classed as the archival Roundheads of the twentieth century.

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