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Harvard Business School Case Study: Gender Equity

By JODI KANTOR September 7, 2013

BOSTON — When the members of the Harvard Business School class of 2013 gathered in May to celebrate the end of their studies, there was little visible evidence of the experiment they had undergone for the last two years. As they stood amid the brick buildings named after businessmen from Morgan to Bloomberg, black-and-crimson caps and gowns united the 905 graduates into one genderless mass.

But during that week's festivities, the Class Day speaker, a standout female student, alluded to "the frustrations of a group of people who feel ignored." Others grumbled that another speechmaker, a former chief executive of a company in steep decline, was invited only because she was a woman. At a reception, a male student in tennis whites blurted out, as his friends laughed, that much of what had occurred at the school had "been a painful experience."

He and his classmates had been unwitting guinea pigs in what would have once sounded like a far-fetched feminist fantasy: What if Harvard Business School gave itself a gender makeover, changing its curriculum, rules and social rituals to foster female success?

The country's premier business training ground was trying to solve a seemingly intractable problem. Year after year, women who had arrived with the same test scores and grades as men fell behind. Attracting and retaining female professors was a losing battle; from 2006 to 2007, a third of the female junior faculty left.

Some students, like Sheryl Sandberg, class of '95, the Facebook executive and author of "Lean In," sailed through. Yet many Wall Street-hardened women confided that Harvard was worse than any trading floor, with first-year students divided into sections that took all their classes together and often developed the overheated dynamics of reality shows. Some male students, many with finance backgrounds, commandeered classroom discussions and hazed female students and younger faculty members, and openly ruminated on whom they would "kill,

sleep with or marry” (in cruder terms). Alcohol-soaked social events could be worse.

“You weren’t supposed to talk about it in open company,” said Kathleen L. McGinn, a professor who supervised a student study that revealed the grade gap. “It was a dirty secret that wasn’t discussed.”

But in 2010, Drew Gilpin Faust, Harvard’s first female president, appointed a new dean who pledged to do far more than his predecessors to remake gender relations at the business school. He and his team tried to change how students spoke, studied and socialized. The administrators installed stenographers in the classroom to guard against biased grading, provided private coaching — for some, after every class — for untenured female professors, and even departed from the hallowed case-study method.

The dean’s ambitions extended far beyond campus, to what Dr. Faust called in an interview an “obligation to articulate values.” The school saw itself as the standard-bearer for American business. Turning around its record on women, the new administrators assured themselves, could have an untold impact at other business schools, at companies populated by Harvard alumni and in the Fortune 500, where only 21 chief executives are women. The institution would become a laboratory for studying how women speak in group settings, the links between romantic relationships and professional status, and the use of everyday measurement tools to reduce bias.

“We have to lead the way, and then lead the world in doing it,” said Frances Frei, her words suggesting the school’s sense of mission but also its self-regard. Ms. Frei, a popular professor turned administrator who had become a target of student ire, was known for the word “unapologetic,” as in: we are unapologetic about the changes we are making.

By graduation, the school had become a markedly better place for female students, according to interviews with more than 70 professors, administrators and students, who cited more women participating in class, record numbers of women winning academic awards and a much-improved environment, down to the male students drifting through the cafeteria wearing T-shirts celebrating the 50th anniversary of the admission of women. Women at the school finally felt

like, “ ‘Hey, people like me are an equal part of this institution,’ ” said Rosabeth Moss Kanter, a longtime professor.

And yet even the deans pointed out that the experiment had brought unintended consequences and brand new issues. The grade gap had vaporized so fast that no one could quite say how it had happened. The interventions had prompted some students to revolt, wearing “Unapologetic” T-shirts to lacerate Ms. Frei for what they called intrusive social engineering. Twenty-seven-year-olds felt like they were “back in kindergarten or first grade,” said Sri Batchu, one of the graduating men.

Students were demanding more women on the faculty, a request the deans were struggling to fulfill. And they did not know what to do about developments like female students dressing as Playboy bunnies for parties and taking up the same sexual rating games as men. “At each turn, questions come up that we’ve never thought about before,” Nitin Nohria, the new dean, said in an interview.

The administrators had no sense of whether their lessons would last once their charges left campus. As faculty members pointed out, the more exquisitely gender-sensitive the school environment became, the less resemblance it bore to the real business world. “Are we trying to change the world 900 students at a time, or are we preparing students for the world in which they are about to go?” a female professor asked.

The Beginning

Nearly two years earlier, in the fall of 2011, Neda Navab sat in a class participation workshop, incredulous. The daughter of Iranian immigrants, Ms. Navab had been the president of her class at Columbia, advised chief executives as a McKinsey & Company consultant and trained women as entrepreneurs in Rwanda. Yet now that she had arrived at the business school at age 25, she was being taught how to raise her hand.

A second-year student, a former member of the military, stood in the front of the classroom issuing commands: Reach up assertively! No apologetic little half-waves! Ms. Navab exchanged amused glances with new friends. She had no idea that she was witnessing an assault on the school’s most urgent gender-related challenge.

Women at Harvard did fine on tests. But they lagged badly in class participation, a highly subjective measure that made up 50 percent of each final mark. Every year the same hierarchy emerged early on: investment bank and hedge fund veterans, often men, sliced through equations while others — including many women — sat frozen or spoke tentatively. The deans did not want to publicly dwell on the problem: that might make the women more self-conscious. But they lectured about respect and civility, expanded efforts like the hand-raising coaching and added stenographers in every class so professors would no longer rely on possibly biased memories of who had said what.

They rounded out the case-study method, in which professors cold-called students about a business's predicament, with a new course called Field, which grouped students into problem-solving teams. (Gender was not the sole rationale for the course, but the deans thought the format would help.) New grading software tools let professors instantly check their calling and marking patterns by gender. One professor, Mikolaj Piskorski, summarized Mr. Nohria's message later: "We're going to solve it at the school level, but each of you is responsible to identify what you are doing that gets you to this point."

Mr. Nohria, Ms. Frei and others involved in the project saw themselves as outsiders who had succeeded at the school and wanted to help others do the same. Ms. Frei, the chairwoman of the first-year curriculum, was the most vocal, with her mop of silver-brown hair and the drive of the college basketball player she had once been. "Someone says 'no' to me, and I just hear 'not yet,'" she said.

After years of observation, administrators and professors agreed that one particular factor was torpedoing female class participation grades: women, especially single women, often felt they had to choose between academic and social success.

One night that fall, Ms. Navab, who had laughed off the hand-raising seminar, sat at an Ethiopian restaurant wondering if she had made a bad choice. Her marketing midterm exam was the next day, but she had been invited on a very business-school kind of date: a new online dating [service](#) that paired small groups of singles for drinks was testing its product. Did Ms. Navab want to

come? “If I were in college, I would have said let’s do this after the midterm,” she said later.

But she wanted to meet someone soon, maybe at Harvard, which she and other students feared could be their “last chance among cream-of-the-crop-type people,” as she put it. Like other students, she had quickly discerned that her classmates tended to look at their social lives in market terms, implicitly ranking one another. And like others, she slipped into economic jargon to describe their status.

The men at the top of the heap worked in finance, drove luxury cars and advertised lavish weekend getaways on Instagram, many students observed in interviews. Some belonged to the so-called Section X, an on-again-off-again secret society of ultrawealthy, mostly male, mostly international students known for decadent parties and travel.

Women were more likely to be sized up on how they looked, Ms. Navab and others found. Many of them dressed as if Marc Jacobs were staging a photo shoot in a Technology and Operations Management class. Judging from comments from male friends about other women (“She’s kind of hot, but she’s so assertive”), Ms. Navab feared that seeming too ambitious could hurt what she half-jokingly called her “social cap,” referring to capitalization.

“I had no idea who, as a single woman, I was meant to be on campus,” she said later. Were her priorities “purely professional, were they academic, were they to start dating someone?”

As she scooped bread at the product-trial-slash-date at the Ethiopian restaurant, she realized that she had not caught the names of the men at the table. The group drank more and more. The next day she took the test hung over, her performance a “disaster,” she joked.

The deans did not know how to stop women from bartering away their academic promise in the dating marketplace, but they wanted to nudge the school in a more studious, less alcohol-drenched direction. “We cannot have it both ways,” said Youngme Moon, the dean of the M.B.A. program. “We cannot be a place that claims to be about leadership and then say we don’t care what goes on outside the classroom.”

But Harvard Business students were unusually powerful, the school's products and also its customers, paying more than \$50,000 in tuition per year. They were professionals, not undergraduates. One member of the class had played professional football; others had served in Afghanistan or had last names like Blankfein ([Alexander](#), son of Lloyd, chief executive of Goldman Sachs). They had little knowledge of the institutional history; the deans talked less about the depressing record on women than vague concepts like "culture" and "community" and "inclusion."

As the semester went on, many students felt increasingly baffled about the deans' seeming desire to be involved in their lives. They resented the additional work of the Field courses, which many saw as superfluous or even a scheme to keep them too busy for partying. Students used to form their own study groups, but now the deans did it for them.

As [Halloween](#) approached, some students planned to wear costumes to class, but at the last minute Ms. Frei, who wanted to set a serious tone and head off the potential for sexy pirate costumes, sent a note out prohibiting it, provoking more eye rolls. "How much responsibility does H.B.S. have?" Laura Merritt, a co-president of the class, asked later. "Do we have school uniforms? Where do you stop?"

A few days before the end of the fall semester, Amanda Upton, an investment banking veteran, stood before most of her classmates, lecturing and quizzing them about finance. Every term just before finals, the Women's Student Association organized a review session for each subject, led by a student who blitzed classmates through reams of material in an hour. Some of the first-years had not had a single female professor. Now Ms. Upton delivered a bravura performance, clearing up confusion about discounted cash flow and how to price bonds, tossing out Christmas candy as rewards.

Like many other women, Kate Lewis, the school newspaper editor, believed in the deans' efforts. But she thought Ms. Upton's turn did more to fortify the image of women than anything administrators had done. "It's the most powerful message: this girl knows it better than all of you," she said.

Breaking the Ice

One day in April 2012, the entire first-year class, including Brooke Boyarsky, a Texan known for cracking up her classmates with a mock PowerPoint presentation, reported to classrooms for a mandatory discussion about sexual harassment. As students soon learned, one woman had confided to faculty members that a male student she would not identify had groped her in an off-campus bar months before. Rather than dismissing the episode, the deans decided to exploit it: this was their chance to discuss the drinking scene and its consequences. “They could not have gone any more front-page than this,” Ms. Boyarsky said later.

Everyone in Ms. Boyarsky’s classes knew she was incisive and funny, but within the campus social taxonomy, she was overlooked — she was overweight and almost never drank much, stayed out late or dated. After a few minutes of listening to the stumbling conversation about sexual harassment, she raised her hand to make a different point, about the way the school’s social life revolved around appearance and money.

“Someone made the decision for me that I’m not pretty or wealthy enough to be in Section X,” she told her classmates, her voice breaking.

The room jumped to life. The students said they felt overwhelmed by the wealth that coursed through the school, the way it seemed to shape every aspect of social life — who joined activities that cost hundreds of dollars, who was invited to the parties hosted by the student living in a penthouse apartment at the Mandarin Oriental hotel in Boston. Some students would never have to seek work at all — they were at Harvard to learn to invest their families’ fortunes — and others were borrowing thousands of dollars a year just to keep up socially.

The discussion broke the ice, just not on the topic the deans had intended. “Until then, no one else had publicly said ‘Section X,’ ” Mr. Batchu said. Maybe it was because class was easier to talk about than gender, or maybe it was because class was the bigger divide — at the school and in the country.

That was only one out of 10 sessions. At most of the others, the men contributed little. Some of them, and even a few women, had grown to openly resent the deans’ emphasis on gender, using phrases like “ad nauseam” and “shoved down our throats,” protesting that this was not what they had paid to learn.

Patrick Erker was not among the naysayers — he considered himself a feminist and a fan of the deans. As an undergraduate at Duke, he had managed the women’s basketball team, wiping their sweat from the floor and picking up their dirty jerseys.

But as he silently listened to the discussion, he decided the setup was all wrong: a discussion of a sex-related episode they knew little about, with “89 other people judging every word,” led by professors who would be grading them later that semester.

“I’d like to be candid, but I paid half a million dollars to come here,” another man said in an interview, counting his lost wages. “I could blow up my network with one wrong comment.” The men were not insensitive, they said; they just considered the discussion a poor investment of their carefully hoarded social capital. Mr. Erker used the same words as many other students had to describe the mandatory meetings: “forced” and “patronizing.”

That week, Andrew Levine, the director of the annual spoof show, was notified by administrators that he was on academic and social probation because other students had consumed alcohol in the auditorium after a performance. (His crime: dining with visiting family instead of staying as he had promised in a contract.) He was barred from social events and put on academic probation as well.

That was just what students needed to believe their worst suspicions about the administration. Ms. Frei had not made the decision about Mr. Levine and worked to cancel his academic probation, he said later, but students called her a hypocrite, a leadership expert who led badly. Hundreds of students soon wore T-shirts that said “Free Andy” or “Unapologetic.”

“Daddy, why are the students hating on you?” Mr. Nohria’s teenage daughters asked him, he told students later.

A few days before commencement, [Nathan Bihlmaier](#), a second-year student, disappeared while celebrating with classmates in Portland, Me. He had last been seen so inebriated that a bartender had asked him to leave a pub. When the authorities told students that Mr. Bihlmaier’s body had been dredged from the

harbor, apparently after a fall, Mr. Nohria and Ms. Moon were standing beside them.

The first year of their experiment was ending with a catastrophe that brought home how little sway they really had over students' actions. Mr. Bihlmaier had not even been the drinking type. In the spirit of feminist celebration, Ms. Sandberg gave a graduation address at the deans' invitation, but during the festivities all eyes were on Mr. Bihlmaier's widow, visibly pregnant with their first child.

Amid all the turmoil, though, the deans saw cause for hope. The cruel classroom jokes, along with other forms of intimidation, were far rarer. Students were telling them about vigorous private conversations that had flowed from the halting public ones. Women's grades were rising — and despite the open resentment toward the deans, overall student satisfaction ratings were higher than they had been for years.

A Lopsided Situation

Even on the coldest nights of early 2013, Ms. Frei walked home from campus, clutching her iPhone and listening to a set of recordings made earlier in the day. Once her two small sons were in bed, she settled at her dining table, wearing pajamas and nursing a glass of wine, and fired up the digital files on her laptop. “Really? Again?” her wife, Anne Morriss, would ask.

Ms. Frei been promoted to dean of faculty recruiting, and she was on a quest to bolster the number of female professors, who made up a fifth of the tenured faculty. Female teachers, especially untenured ones, had faced various troubles over the years: uncertainty over maternity leave, a lack of opportunities to write papers with senior professors, and students who destroyed their confidence by pelting them with math questions they could not answer on the spot or commenting on what they wore.

“As a female faculty member, you are in an incredibly hostile teaching environment, and they do nothing to protect you,” said one woman who left without tenure. A current teacher said she was so afraid of a “wardrobe malfunction” that she wore only custom suits in class, her tops invisibly secured to her skin with double-sided tape.

Now Ms. Frei, the guardian of the female junior faculty, was watching virtually every minute of every class some of them taught, delivering tips on how to do better in the next class. She barred other professors from giving them advice, lest they get confused. But even some of Ms. Frei's allies were dubious.

At the end of every semester, students gave professors teaching scores from a low of 1 to a high of 7, and some of the female junior faculty scores looked beyond redemption. More of the male professors arrived at Harvard after long careers, regaling students with real-life experiences. Because the pool of businesswomen was smaller, female professors were more likely to be academics, and students saw female stars as exceptions.

“The female profs I had were clearly weaker than the male ones,” said Halle Tecco, a 2011 graduate. “They weren't able to really run the classroom the way the male ones could.”

Take the popular second-year courses team-taught by Richard S. Ruback, a top finance professor, and Royce G. Yudkoff, a co-founder of a private equity firm that managed billions of dollars. The men taught students, among other lessons, how to start a “search fund,” a pool of money to finance them while they found and acquired a company. In recent years, search funds had become one of the hottest, riskiest and most potentially lucrative pursuits for graduates of top business schools — shortcuts to becoming owners and chief executives.

The two professors were blunt and funny, pushing a student one moment, ribbing another one the next. They embodied the financial promise of a Harvard business degree: if the professors liked you, students knew, they might advise and even back you.

As Ms. Frei reviewed her tapes at night, making notes as she went along, she looked for ways to instill that confidence. The women, who plainly wanted to be liked, sometimes failed to assert their authority — say, by not calling out a student who arrived late. But when they were challenged, they turned too tough, responding defensively (“Where did you get that?”).

Ms. Frei urged them to project warmth and high expectations at the same time, to avoid trying to bolster their credibility with soliloquies about their own

research. “I think the class might be a little too much about you, and not enough about the students,” she would tell them the next day.

By the end of the semester, the teaching scores of the women had improved so much that she thought they were a mistake. One professor had shot to a 6 from a 4. Yet all the attention, along with other efforts to support female faculty, made no immediate impact on the numbers of female teachers. So few women were coming to teach at the school that evening out the numbers seemed almost impossible.

As their final semester drew to a close, the students were preoccupied with the looming question of their own employment. Like graduates before them, the class of 2013 would to some degree part by gender after graduation, with more men going into higher-paying areas like finance and more women going into lower-paying ones like marketing.

Ms. Navab, who had started dating one of the men — with an M.D. and an M.B.A. — from the Ethiopian dinner, had felt freer to focus on her career once she was paired off. She was happy with her job at a California start-up, but she pointed out that she and some other women never heard about many of the most lucrative jobs because the men traded contacts and tips among themselves.

This was the lopsided situation that women in business school were facing: in intellectual prestige, they were pulling even with or outpacing male peers, but they were not “[touching the money](#),” as Nori Gerardo Lietz, a real estate private equity investor and faculty member, put it. A few alumnae had founded promising start-ups like [Rent the Runway](#), an evening wear rental service, but when it came to reaping big financial rewards, most women were barely in the game.

At an extracurricular presentation the year before, a female student asked William Boyce, a co-founder of Highland Capital Partners, a [venture capital firm](#), for advice for women who wanted to go into his field. “Don’t,” he laughed, according to several students present. Male partners did not want them there, he continued, and he was doing them a favor by warning them.

Some women protested or walked out, but others said they believed he was telling the truth. (In interviews, Mr. Boyce denied saying women should not go

into venture capital, but an administrator said student complaints prompted the school to contact the firm, which he had left decades before.)

The deans had not focused on career choice, earning power or staying in the work force; they felt they first needed to address campus issues. Besides, the earning gap posed a dilemma: they were hoping fewer students would default to finance as a career. “Have the courage to make the choices early in your life that are determined by your passions,” Mr. Nohria told students.

Plenty of women had taken Mr. Ruback and Mr. Yudkoff’s classes on acquiring and running businesses, including Ms. Upton, who had delivered the crackerjack finance presentation. She counted 30 to 40 classmates planning search funds, all men except for a no-nonsense engineer named Jennifer Braus. The professors eventually decided to finance and advise Ms. Braus, hoping other Harvard women would follow. “Nothing succeeds like success,” Mr. Ruback said.

Ms. Upton decided to take a far lower-risk job managing a wealthy family’s investments in Pittsburgh, where her fiancé lived. “You can either be a frontier charger or have an easier, happier life,” she said.

Looking Ahead

Of all the ceremonies and receptions during graduation week, the most venerated was the George F. Baker Scholar Luncheon, for the top 5 percent of the class, held in a sunny dining room crowded with parents who looked alternately thrilled and intimidated by what their offspring had achieved.

In recent years, the glory of the luncheon had been dimmed by discomfort at the low number of female honorees. But this year, almost 40 percent of the Baker scholars were women. It was a remarkable rise that no one could precisely explain. Had the professors rid themselves of unconscious biases? Were the women performing better because of the improved environment? Or was the faculty easing up in grading women because they knew the desired outcome?

“To my head, all three happened,” Professor Piskorski said. But Mr. Nohria said he had no cause to think the professors had used the new software, and the subjective participation scores, to avoid gender gaps. “Sunshine is the best

disinfectant,” he said, a phrase that he said had guided him throughout his project.

One of the Baker scholars was Ms. Boyarsky, the classroom truth-teller. Two hours after the luncheon, she stepped up to a lectern to [address thousands of graduates, faculty members and parents](#). Of the two dozen or so men and only 2 women who had tried out before a student committee, she had beaten them all, with a witty, self-deprecating speech unlike any in the school’s memory.

“I entered H.B.S. as a truly ‘untraditional applicant’: morbidly obese,” she said.

The theme of her speech was finding the courage to make necessary but painful changes. “Courage is a brand new H.B.S. professor, younger than some of her students, teaching her very first class on her very first day,” she said. “Courage is one woman” — the one who reported the groping episode — “who wakes the entire school up to the fact that gender relations still have a long way to go at H.B.S.”

And, Ms. Boyarsky continued, she had lost more than 100 pounds during her final year at Harvard. “Courage was then me battling the urge to be defensive — something I believe I had been for a long time about this particular issue — and taking a hard, honest look within myself to figure out what had prevented change,” she said.

Even before she finished, her phone was buzzing with e-mails and texts from classmates. She was the girl everyone wished they had gotten to know better, the graduation-week equivalent of the person whose obituary made you wish you had followed her work. She had closed the two-year experiment by making the best possible case for it. “This is the student they chose to show off to the world,” Ms. Moon said. For the next academic year, she was arranging for second-year students to lead many of the trickiest conversations, realizing students were the most potent advocates.

The administrators and the class of 2013 were parting ways, their experiment continuing. The deans vowed to carry on but could not say how aggressively: whether they were willing to revise the tenure process to attract more female contenders, or allow only firms that hired and promoted female candidates to recruit on campus. “We made progress on the first-level things, but what it’s

permitting us to do is see, holy cow, how deep-seated the rest of this is,” Ms. Frei said.

The students were fanning out to their new jobs, full of suspense about their fates. Because of the unique nature of what they had experienced, they knew, every class alumni magazine update and reunion would be a referendum on how high the women could climb and what values the graduates instilled — the true verdict on the experiment in which they had taken part.

As Ms. Boyarsky glanced around her new job as a consultant at McKinsey in Dallas, she often noticed that she was outnumbered by men, but she spoke up anyway. She was dating more than she had at school, she added with shy enthusiasm.

“I am super excited to go to my 30th reunion,” she said.

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