OPINION | COLLEGE TOWN

How students led a push to improve Harvard's intellectual climate

My peers were disengaged in class and censoring themselves outside it. The university wasn't going to fix that by itself.

By **Ariel Kohn** Updated October 10, 2026, 3:00 a.m.



DUMITRU/ADOBE

Ariel (Ari) Kohn, a 2026 graduate of Harvard College, cofounded the Intellectual Vitality Student Board on campus. She is currently a research fellow for the Program for Higher Education Research affiliated with Harvard's Council for Academic Freedom.

In my freshman seminar at Harvard on "Morality, Leadership, and Gray-Area Decisions," our professor asked us to debate: Should President Truman have dropped the two atomic bombs on Japan? We had two hours to discuss one of the most consequential moments in human history. Yet after 10 minutes the class had come to unanimous agreement: no.

My seminar was no aberration. The same frictionless dynamic pervaded student life beyond the classroom. My dorm had students from a dozen countries and every kind of upbringing. The college assigns such rooming groups in the belief that the big existential questions will follow, argued over cold pizza at 2 in the morning. Instead, the early-morning hours of our first months on campus were spent in solitude, poring over consulting-club slide decks and summer internship applications.

I hoped the searching conversations would come with time. But as we became more acculturated to campus life, our conversations grew more guarded. Your suite mate was also a future finals club gatekeeper, employer, recommender, or professional contact. Introducing a half-baked thought or provocative question in a room where everyone else seemed to know more than you simply wasn't worth the potential downside: being outed as a charlatan or, God forbid, a conservative. And because coursework did little to advance one's career or carefully tended reputation, there was little incentive to spend the marginal hour thinking about ideas — least of all ones everyone seemed already to agree on — than was strictly necessary to secure the A. In an increasingly unforgiving job market pushing recruiting deadlines earlier and earlier, it seemed the only sensible thing to do.

But this false consensus carried a hidden cost. A 2023 survey conducted by Harvard revealed that a mere third of graduating Harvard seniors felt free to speak authentically or share their opinions, even with their closest friends.

I came to understand the problems of self-censorship and student disengagement as deeply related to each other, and as partly a failure of institutional nerve. Harvard had grown wary of impressing any values upon its students at all, even those that undergird the liberal arts themselves: curiosity, open-mindedness, humility, charity, courage, and perseverance. Professors often tolerated laptops and phones in class, assigned readings they expected would not be completed, and hesitated to demand quality contributions in class for fear that students would simply migrate to an easier course. Meanwhile, the culture lavished prestige on the extracurricular achievements that crowded academic life out. Absent a compelling reason to take their education seriously, students read the institution's signals and invested where the returns were legible: the job offer, the network, the campus status.

I was not the first student to be concerned. In 2020, long before "constructive dialogue" was in the zeitgeist, a group of students began meeting with Harvard College's dean at the time, Rakesh Khurana, to explore what was missing from their campus experience. "Intellectual vitality" was the term they chose for the spirit of open and rigorous inquiry they felt was so fundamental, and so absent, from the classroom, dining hall, and residential spaces. Grounded in the virtues of humility and curiosity, intellectual vitality requires a willingness to treat disagreement not as an obstacle to understanding but as one of its conditions. When I joined the assembled group of impassioned students and faculty in the fall of 2023, we were setting out to seed intellectual vitality throughout campus life: in classrooms, residential houses, extracurricular organizations, public events, and the pages of campus publications.

Putting a new question at the center of campus culture

One of our first initiatives was a campus roadshow, presenting this new vision for Harvard's culture to student groups across the college. A troubling pattern quickly emerged: It was clear that much of the curiosity and enthusiasm for debate that students brought to Harvard had dissipated after they arrived. At a summit for student leaders, we ran an activity designed to draw 300 seasoned upperclassmen into disagreement: "Should Harvard have a core curriculum? If yes, go left; if no, go right." First, they hesitated. Then, almost as if soldered together, they all shuffled to the right. When we had asked the same question a week earlier to first-years gathered for campus leadership training, they had split almost evenly. They had argued, listened, and switched sides unabashedly as their minds were changed. Something had happened to the more experienced undergrads that was dulling the edges of independent thought.

The following year, our group, now formalized as the Intellectual Vitality Student Board, was invited to help design a new orientation module introducing all incoming students to the purpose and practice of Intellectual vitality. In my closing speech, I asked the incoming students to consider what, exactly, they had felt they were choosing when they decided to attend Harvard. This mattered because we had found in our conversations on campus that many students had never really considered the question. The prestige, the network, the professional advantages — all of that came bundled with the acceptance letter. What they hoped would happen to them intellectually once they arrived had scarcely entered the calculation.

To change the perception that Harvard primarily is a ticket to social status or a worldly career, we encouraged students to understand that admission required them to accept a certain intellectual bargain. Your convictions would be challenged, sometimes sharply, but in good faith; in return, you would learn how to defend them, revise them when necessary, and hone your own judgment without borrowing it from the crowd. You would leave better able to push back at the world when it pushed against you.

Accepting the bargain did not mean embracing disagreement for sport. Intellectual vitality could be embodied by students who rarely spoke in class; they did their hardest thinking on the page, or on long walks around Fresh Pond. The goal was, rather, to remain in the presence of an idea long enough for it to trouble your settled convictions. Sometimes that meant changing your mind, but more often it meant discovering why you did not. Either way, there was a peculiar pleasure in being made to think harder than you had intended.

To invite students into this joy and exhilaration of honest, open exchange, we organized faculty-student conversations around hot-button questions, the kind that might generate weeks of dueling op-eds in print in the Harvard Crimson newspaper but almost never had fostered an argument between people in the same room. At one point the Crimson published an advice article titled "Ethicist, Should I Let Go of My Zionist Friends?" It went viral and sparked online threats, bullying of the ethicist, and a campus witch hunt for who had submitted the anonymous question. So we brought some of the most embittered students on both sides into the same room over pizza. Faculty and religious leaders with strong views of their own moderated the conversation, stripping away the charged rhetoric and structuring the discussion to elicit greater clarity and understanding among everyone in the room.

When a report documenting unprecedented growth in intellectual-disability accommodations at elite colleges began ricocheting through anonymous online forums and faculty lounges, we cosponsored an event with Harvard Undergraduates for Disability Justice that brought outside activists, legal experts, and psychologists together with students and faculty to surface the questions and tensions people were discussing privately but reluctant to raise openly.

After Harvard adopted the International Holocaust Remembrance Association's definition of antisemitism, we hosted an event where two students — one in a keffiyeh, the other a former Israeli army soldier — exchanged biting but earnest arguments, pressing each other without personal attacks or deflection. Afterward, the two approached me separately with the same question: Where were the "extremists" they

were expecting to meet on the other side? After months of projecting fanaticism onto those with whom they disagreed, these students found that unlike online, on campus someone who challenged them vigorously but engaged thoughtfully face-to-face didn't even register as the "other side."

We reached the point where undergrad students could scarcely make it through the week without encountering a mention of Intellectual Vitality — in an event newsletter, an administrative email, or the Crimson. But we had also begun to see the limits of treating intellectual vitality primarily as a matter of better disagreement; it could not be separated from the rigor of academic life itself.

The faculty's part of the bargain

Inside the classroom, some fairly basic expectations had badly eroded: that students would do the reading rather than outsource it to AI, refrain from multitasking on their laptops during lectures, and ask difficult questions of one another. When students had not grappled closely enough with the material to press one another on it, they fell out of practice in the habits that make disagreement substantive: making precise claims, defending them with evidence, confronting serious objections, and revising views that no longer held up. A low-expectations equilibrium had set in: Students expected less from faculty, while professors kept a lid on their demands in order to preserve enrollment and positive student reviews.

The Intellectual Vitality Student Board set out to address this problem by convening faculty who taught required General Education courses in ethics and civics, and encouraging them to adopt common syllabus policies, making it harder for students to shop for the class sections with the least demanding set of expectations.

Within one semester, departments across the Faculty of Arts and Sciences began to follow suit, imposing their own standardized set of what was expected of students. To help matters, during my last semester before graduation, the faculty voted by an overwhelming 70 percent to cap A grades given out in each course.

Moreover, from 2024 to 2025, the share of graduating seniors who reported they felt free to express opinions about controversial topics on campus rose from 33 to 45 percent, according to senior survey data. Comfort expressing opposing views rose as well — from 35 to 43 percent in courses and from 35 to 47 percent in residential communities.

When most professors and administrators came of age, the value of a liberal arts education was largely taken for granted. Engagement with the broad existential questions of life, the "canon" of great literature, art, and history prepared you for a whole life of learning and contributing to society, not just a job. Whether you ended up in engineering or entertainment, you would lead a more fulfilling, productive, and adventurous life by being able to think critically, question assumptions, weigh competing values, and evaluate contested facts. And in turn our society, economy, and culture — all of us — would be better for it.

For my generation, the logic no longer holds. Against the backdrop of skyrocketing tuition costs and an unforgiving labor market, the value of “learning how to think” is no longer self-evident; we and our parents wonder how thinking applies to earning an actual living.

But the case for the liberal arts can be made, and a wide-ranging, varied education grounded in the enduring power of the intellectual virtues should not become a vestige of a bygone era. An increasingly uncertain future and the tsunami of AI make the argument for vigorous engagement with the liberal arts even more urgent.

My experience at Harvard gives me reason for hope: Students are hungry for this kind of intellectual life, one that prepares them for the challenges ahead by training them to ask themselves “How would I know if I were mistaken?” But without an explicit and ardent case for it from the university, students were not having that experience. Universities cannot afford such reticence.

Show 10 comments

©2026 Boston Globe Media Partners, LLC