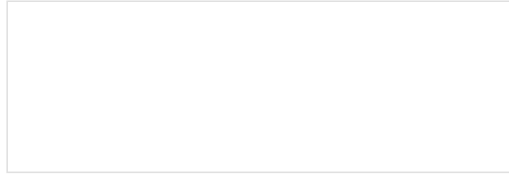


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Fellows Promote Genius

Continue Tradition

By GASTON DE LOS REYES, March 5, 1994

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In the 1920s, Harvard President A. Lawrence Lowell, Class of 1877, and Professor of Biological Chemistry Lawrence Joseph Henderson grew dissatisfied with what they saw as the rigid formalization of higher education.

Harvard, in their opinion, had grown so much that there was little room left for intellectual exploration. Something had to be done.

"I do not want to depreciate the Ph.D., but to provide an alternative path more suited to the encouragement of the rare and independent genius," Lowell said at the time.

In 1926, Henderson and several colleagues--including Professor of English John Livingston Lowes, Boston lawyer and Corporation member Charles P. Curtis '14 and Professor of Philosophy Alfred North Whitehead--produced a report proposing a solution.

The report discussed the value of a fellowship offered at Trinity College--a fellowship that Professor Whitehead had himself won--and suggested that Harvard found one of its own. They also recommended that a 200-person honors college be established as a subset of Harvard.

The honors college never materialized. And Lowell sought funds for the fellowship program without success.

With the fate of his dream in the balance, Lowell decided to give one million dollars of his own money, anonymously, to get the new Society of Fellows off the ground.

"The result was that, there being no visible source of the necessary funds," Lowell wrote, "I gave it myself, in a kind of desperation, although it took nearly all had."

The Society of Fellows was created in 1933. Sixty-one years later, it boasts 14 Noble Laureates, 50 current Harvard faculty members and famous names like McGeorge Bundy, B.F. Skinner, and Stanley Cavell.

Today, the society still provides what Lowell wanted for it: "an alter native path more suited to the encouragement of the rare and independent genius." It serves as a recruiting ground of sorts for high-caliber faculty.

"The purpose of the Society is to give men and women at an early stage of their scholarly careers an opportunity to pursue their studies in any department of the University, free from formal requirements," explains a description published by the society.

The society, which maintains offices at 78 Mt. Auburn St. and a dining room in Eliot House's Mentry, is composed of 12 senior fellows who select eight junior fellows annually for the three-year fellowships. The senior fellows, who hold long-term appointments, are Harvard faculty members.

The senior fellows begin the admissions process by sending letters to universities and research institutions around the world, soliciting nominations for the upcoming year's junior fellows.

After receiving nominations, the senior fellows write the nominees for applications. From more than 200 applications, the pool is reduced to about 40 people who are flown to the Society's offices at 78 Mount Auburn Street for interviews.

"Young scholars are invited to join the Society not primarily for what they have accomplished under the demands of traditional education, but rather for their intellectual promise and capability of independent, original contribution in their field of endeavor," explains a brochure published by the society in 1972.

When the society began in 1933, Lowell and the four men who wrote the report were all senior fellows. In their first year, they invited six junior fellows, three of whom had graduated *summa cum laude* from the College.

Three of the fellows went on to become famous Harvard professors: W.V.O. Quine, B.F. Skinner, and Garrett Birkhoff³².

The society met for its first dinner on Monday, September 25, 1933. The opening statement of principles was written by Lowell and has been read at the annual opening dinner ever since.

"You will practice the virtues and avoid the snares of the scholar," Lowell wrote. "You will be courteous to your elders who have explored to the point from which you may now advance, and helpful to your juniors who will progress further by reason of your labors."

In an interview this week, Quine, now Pierce Professor of Philosophy emeritus, described his time as one of the first junior fellows as "three idyllic years." Quine said he was in Czechoslovakia on a traveling fellowship after earning his Ph.D. when he received a cable from Whitehead announcing his selection as a junior fellow.

"It was a great break: we were in a deep depression, I was married and jobs were scarce," the professor said. Quine said he never even applied for the fellowship: "I think I might be the only junior fellow never interviewed."

The Society of Fellows has been part of Quine's life ever since, he said.

He regularly attended the Tuesday and Friday luncheons in the society's rooms in Eliot House until he was appointed senior fellow in 1984. Senior fellows are not permitted at the lunches so that conversation may be more free. The weekly event for all fellows, past and present, is the Monday night dinner, which Quine still attends once or twice a month.

Hollis Professor of Mathematics and Natural Philosophy Andrew M. Gleason, a former junior fellow who now chairs the society, said the society has changed since the time when Quine was a fellow.

"The Society was founded originally with the explicit purpose of getting people out of the [Ph.D. octopus]," Gleason said. To achieve this, the society established an age limit of 28 for junior fellows.

Since then, the age limit has been eliminated and most junior fellows today already have or are finishing their Ph.D.'s, Gleason said.

The Society has made other changes to keep up with the outside world, according to Gleason. After decades of being all-male, women now may be admitted to the society.

In some ways, the society has not fulfilled Lowell's expectations. The president originally expected the junior fellows to live and eat in the houses.

Since very few fellows have taken advantage of this benefit in recent years, the society has eliminated the housing option and boosted the annual stipend to its present level of \$35,000.

And the society has never played the critical role originally envisioned for it.

President James B. Conant '14 wrote in his first President's report in 1933 that "it is unnecessary to point out what a stimulating influence to the houses and the graduate schools the presence of these junior fellows will be."

In fact, most students—including some in Eliot M-entry—don't even know what the society is.

Regardless of this, most who have had contact with the society praise its importance. "It justifies itself as a very important recruiting ground for [Harvard's] faculty," Gleason said.

Lamont University Professor Amartya Sen, who was a prize fellow of Trinity College and is currently a senior fellow, cites the flexibility of the program as the most beneficial aspect of these fellowships for those involved.

Sen, whose formal training is in economics, is a professor in both the departments of economics and philosophy at Harvard.

"It was only as a prize Fellow at Trinity that I had the opportunity to take interest in other things," Sen said. "You are given the freedom to do what you like."

For Sen this meant philosophy, a subject which has become a life-long passion for him.

Ironically, the 61-year-old society may be one of the best examples of the interdisciplinary approach to learning advocated recently by President Neil L. Rudenstine.

Sen praises the interdisciplinary discussion which the Society fosters. "I regard it as extremely important to be able to communicate with people not in your field," he said.

Many junior fellows explore new fields while at Harvard, but few go as far as one recent fellow who took advantage of his new freedom to dedicate himself to chess. The fellow reportedly has gone on to compete in national chess tournaments.

Stephen Dao-Hui Hsu, a current junior fellow studying theoretical physics, says that, for scientists at least, the program is similar to being a post-doctoral student at any other school.

What makes the program special, Hsu says, is the "opportunity to get to know the other junior fellows."

In his president's report for the 1957-58 academic year, Nathan M. Pusey '28 gave an assessment of the society that may still apply today:

"It seems an understatement to say that the idea which sprang from the minds of men like President Lowell and Professors Henderson, Whitehead, and Lowes, has had influence of great significance in American higher education, even if it has not resulted in an example of how to circumvent the rigidity of doctoral requirements as President Lowell had hoped." **Crimson File**
Photo **AMARTYA SEN**




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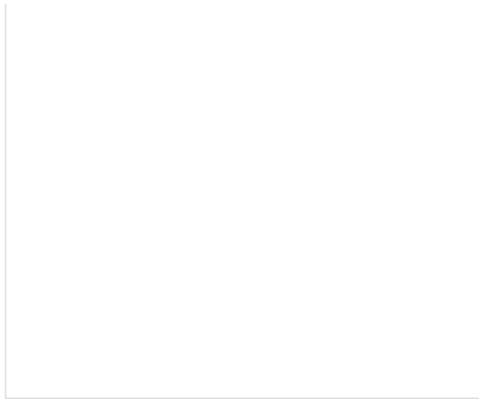
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