

**Mark Elliott, Vice Provost of Harvard University:**

## **“Our admission decisions are made irrespective of the ability to pay or nationality”**

**He would like for students to travel to foreign countries as a part of their education and to learn that theirs is not the only way to see the world.**

By Felipe T. Edwards

The academic life of an ivory tower isolated from a mundane world is diametrically opposed to the vision of Harvard University, which encourages its students and faculty to travel as an integral part of their studies and research. It also seeks to attract the best students and professors from all over the world into their classrooms.

Harvard’s Vice Provost for International Affairs, Mark Elliott, will visit the Regional Office of the David Rockefeller Center for Latin American Studies (DRCLAS) in Santiago next week. Founded in 1994, the DRCLAS Regional Office makes manifest the university’s commitment to help its students and faculty get to know the continent better and contribute to solving some of its problems.

As shared by Mr. Elliot in a telephone interview last Tuesday, attracting the most talented students from all over the world was one of the objectives of the university’s Harvard Financial Aid Initiative, started in 2007.

**—The Initiative means that any undergraduate student, from the U.S., from Chile, or from anywhere else in the world, whose family earns \$60,000 or less per year, will be considered on merit alone and, if accepted, will not be charged tuition. Is that correct?**

—That’s exactly what it means. Admission decisions for undergraduates are made irrespective of the ability to pay and it is made on a passport-blind basis. We provide scholarships solely on the basis of financial need.

**—Few students in Chile or Latin America consider studying in the U.S. or Europe as undergraduates.**

—Most Americans don’t think of going abroad for their undergraduate degrees either. The situation in Chile is normal. The students who are interested are a special kind of student, and we want to attract as many of them as possible. The Harvard Financial Aid Initiative makes it much easier for us to do that.

**—Your application process gives great weight to essays submitted by the applicants and on written recommendations from their teachers, which do not exist in other countries.**

—The basic philosophy is to try to look at the whole person. In most places you take one test and that decides it. To base the selection on one type of information is insufficient. (Essays, recommendations and interviews) give those who make admission decisions a much better idea of who it is that they are looking at.

**—With so many highly talented and diverse students applying to Harvard from all over the world, at the end of the day is there something a bit arbitrary about who gets in and who doesn’t?**

—When 95% of those applying do not get in, there is a judgment involved. I would not go so far as to say it is arbitrary, but I would recognize that among the many students who are denied admissions there are doubtless a very, very large number who would do very well here.

### **Harvard in Latin America**

**—DRCLAS has been around since 1994 and opened its Regional Office in Santiago in 2002. What has the Rockefeller Center meant to the university over the past 22 years.**

—The David Rockefeller Center represents the university’s brain trust on Latin America, in all fields of knowledge and in all parts of the

region. Centers created earlier, in the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, on Russian, Chinese or European studies, were focused on creating a cadre of people with strong language skills and deep local knowledge of those regions that would be relevant to policy studies.

**—But the Rockefeller Center went far beyond that earlier model.**

—It was created in 1994, in a post-Cold War world, led by Professor John Coatsworth, who had a very broad vision for an integrated center that would include social sciences and the humanities, as well as expertise in the business world, in law, in public health, in medicine and in public policy. This academic vision was shared with a very generous donor, David Rockefeller, who believed in Harvard's ability to materialize it, and in President Neil Rudenstine's leadership, who saw that a wider center would be able to have a bigger impact both on and outside the campus.

**—Since its founding, the Rockefeller Center has sponsored about 400 doctorates on subjects related to Latin America and the Santiago Regional Office has received more than 830 students coming to Chile alone in various programs. Why do you think it is so important for students to leave the confines of Cambridge as part of their education?**

—I think about that a lot. Harvard prides itself on training leaders for the future. Among the qualities we expect of leaders are those that go along with being a citizen of the world. Only if you can transcend your limitations, I think, can you claim to be in a position to think creatively about different problems. There are different ways to take students out of their familiar ways of thinking, but one of the most obvious is to ensure that they have an opportunity to spend some time abroad. It will expose them to a different way of being, to a different culture, different language, different foods, different ways of paying a bus fare.

**—Doesn't that experience and the value of that kind of education work both ways, in students going abroad and also in the way that**

**the university accepts applications from students and faculty from all over the world?**

—Absolutely it does. Right now roughly one third of the faculty across the university are from outside the United States. Overall, 22% of students are classified as international, and in the Kennedy School of Government it is around 51%.

### **The power of the professors**

**—Would it be completely out of the range of the possible for Harvard to create a campus outside of Cambridge?**

—This is a topic that my predecessor (Professor Jorge I. Domínguez, Vice Provost for International Affairs 2006-2015) thought about a great deal. I think that so long as the faculty are not interested in supporting such a venture, it will not be something that the university would do. As far as I can see, there is no appetite to build campuses outside of Cambridge and Boston. I've talked to many colleagues about this and they say that "Harvard is here, and there is no way to reproduce it anywhere else".

**— The faculty at Harvard has a great deal to say about the running of the university, don't they?**

—That's right.

**—And how does that work without it becoming complete chaos?**

—I think that the answer to that question lies in the fact that we are all committed to excellence in teaching and in scholarship. Any kind of policy or program at the university is measured against that standard: Is it good for research? Is it good for teaching? Is it good for scholarship? Even though we do not see eye-to-eye on everything by any means, there is a broad consensus on a few basics that enable us to avoid the chaos that you're talking about. We survive by a code of respect for differences of opinion. We have discussions, and things are pretty transparent. It seems to be working almost 400 years later.

## **A symbiotic relationship**

# **Teaching and research strengthen each other**

—Is there a symbiotic relationship between teaching and research? Particularly at the undergraduate level, some would place a greater emphasis on a professor's ability to teach rather than on being at the cutting edge of new research.

—I think that teaching and being on the cutting edge of research often go hand-in-hand. I can't think of a single example of one of our top researchers who doesn't bring the work that he or she does into the classroom, particularly for undergraduates. I'll speak from my own experience. Taking research from a pretty high level and trying to make that intelligible to undergraduates who are smart students but who are not specialists requires a process of translation. If they don't understand you, then you've failed. If they do, then you know that you've got something.

—That relies on an active participation in class by the students.

—The expectation here is that if you don't understand something you will ask questions. I think one of the biggest achievements of higher education in the United States is that you create

an environment where the free exchange of ideas becomes possible. You might find that you can change a student's opinion, or you might find that the student changes yours. Harvard did not invent this model. We borrowed it from research universities in Germany. Teaching makes you a better researcher, and research makes you a better teacher.

—And that works even though teaching and research require different abilities?

—They require different abilities, but we have lots of resources that are helping to turn good researchers into good instructors. We certainly pay more attention to that now than we did a generation ago when I was in graduate school. But that's never going to change the fact that some people will be great lecturers and others not as much. There's a wide range of teaching, and a lot of the teaching doesn't happen necessarily in the classroom. It can happen during office hours, over coffee, in the lab.

—Or it can happen traveling to Latin America.

—Definitely.