

arranging deities, laying out the carpets, and bustling through the kitchen to assemble a home-cooked dinner for around 120 people. As the processions began, seniors read bajans from pamphlets as they performed a ritual traditionally undertaken by adults; it was a rite of passage, though only those familiar would read it as such.

The sense of belonging and fulfillment was stronger than I had felt since returning to campus after the pandemic's remote year. I was also reminded that it isn't impossible to knit together a vision of cultural celebration with one of cross-cultural diffusion. The Diwali festivities attracted friends I knew from all backgrounds South Asian

and non-South Asian. It seemed we did have before us a salad bowl, but one where we could learn from each other's unique cultures while celebrating our own. ▢

Berta Greenwald Ledecky Fellow Swathi Kella '23 is always looking for new ingredients in Harvard's cultural salad.

The Truth About Imposter Syndrome

Thoughts on a perennial undergraduate complaint

by REBECCA E.J. CADENHEAD

IN THE FIRST few months of my freshman year, I was told, pointedly, all the time, that I *deserved to be here*. School administrators obviously think that imposter syndrome—which the SEAS Graduate Council defines as “a collection of feelings of inadequacy that persist despite evident success”—is enough of a concern to preemptively assure students that they are, in fact, worthy of being students. Speeches from deans and conversations with professors all seemed intent on affirming my presence at Harvard, which was not something I'd ever questioned until it seemed like other people expected me to.

Sure enough, there came a point where

I wondered if I had imposter syndrome. Things were going wrong; I enrolled in a tricky math class because I was *good at math* and found out that even if that were true (and I wasn't sure it was) I hated linear algebra so much that I couldn't get out of bed and go to lecture. I had promised my mother I wouldn't skip class, and so I told myself that I would watch the lecture recordings (I never did) and avoided the subject when she asked how I was.

I had a similar experience with my economics class, which felt especially problematic because I was supposed to study applied math-economics. The one class that I *did* actually enjoy, on existential philosophy and religion, forced me to reevaluate

whether I knew how to write an essay. By the end of my first semester, I became so insecure that I developed an irritating habit of tacking “*do you know what I mean?*” onto my sentences in a genuine, though desperate, plea for affirmation.

I signed up for a women's empowerment program at Harvard's Institute of Politics because I thought it might help: a weekly, hour-long discussion group and seminar where we would theoretically eliminate our latent imposter syndrome. The group was more or less a rehashing of Sheryl Sandberg's 2013 bestseller *Lean In*; our guests included business executives, political leaders, and a motivational speaker, all of whom encouraged us to attain power in the name of feminism. It wasn't effective.

The problem, I realized, was that others assumed that I merely *felt* like an imposter, whereas I knew that on some level, I really *was* an imposter—I had been faking it for quite a long time. In high school, I was

motivated enough to function on five hours of sleep and spend my summers sequestered in a microbiology lab. But that “motivation” was really just a sublimation of my all-consuming desire to make into an Ivy-League school—once I'd gotten in, it disappeared. I had been admitted because of a version of me that didn't really exist.

Like a lot of other students here, I constructed such a persona because I wanted the privilege afforded by Harvard. We are aware that the average Harvard alum earns \$85,000 a year 10 years after graduating, while all other graduates earn around \$34,000. We know that there are companies that pay their employees six-figure salaries right after graduation and usually only recruit from Harvard or similar schools, and



that there are lower-paying but still elite professions (politics, publishing, journalism) where Harvard can help us. More than anything, we want its name on our resumes, a tacit stamp of our deservingness.

We feel the need to act like the kind of person who has earned all this, which is something of an impossible task since such disproportionate privilege cannot actually be earned, only given. Perhaps “imposter syndrome” is actually just the inevitable failure of this act; perhaps, like the “women’s empowerment” group, certain discussions of imposter syndrome don’t actually attend to the real mental health concerns associated with academic pressure, so much as validate a desire for power and privilege. Ultimately, I think we *should* question whether we’re worthy of the enormous benefits of having gone to Harvard. Really, there’s a way in which “imposter syndrome” is a form of self-awareness.

THE ODDS are shrinking. At Harvard, the number of applicants grows every year, while the number of openings remains the same. Increasingly, only the most exceptional students will get in, or those who appear exceptional. Some of my classmates have completed groundbreaking scientific research, are youth poet laureates, Olympians, or world-famous activists. Many were high school class presidents or debate champions. At least a few lie about their achievements; during my first year an acquaintance quietly left campus after the College found out that he’d fabricated much of his application.

I suspect that even more students strategically exaggerate or embellish aspects of their identity during the application process, intent on making themselves as appealing as possible. William R. Fitzsimmons, the Dean of Admissions and Financial aid, has famously said that a majority of Harvard’s applicants are qualified to get in, meaning they have the ability to do the work assigned to Harvard students. But last year only 3.43 percent got in, because it’s a holistic admissions process and because Harvard isn’t just an educational institution but also a community; choosing good community members requires more than just looking at raw numbers.

To prove that we have what it takes, many prospective students put on a performance. I certainly did. There was a period in which it was more important for me to channel who I believed a Harvard student was, pantomiming their interests and their voice and

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their sense of drive, than draw from my own authentic desires. I spent hundreds of hours preparing for science fairs or in orchestra practices not because I really wanted to, but because I thought I should want to.

I had unconsciously constructed a version of myself whom I thought could make it into Harvard; this person was not only inauthentic, but unsustainable. It didn’t mean that I thought I wasn’t smart or wasn’t qualified to get in; but I, like many of my classmates, felt pressured to prove our worth. Rather than a false belief about ourselves, “imposter syndrome” was the result of the cognitive dissonance between who we knew we were and who we thought we should appear to be. The irony of the phrase is that it refers to a feeling that one has fooled others, which could actually only arise from putting on some kind of conscious performance, truthful or not.

The facts of my own identity made the stakes of the performance higher—my blackness and my female-ness made it all the more necessary, I thought, to convince others I was exceptional. Like other applicants of color, I felt pressured to act. In our freshman year, a friend got back her admissions file, which revealed that after reading her essay, admissions counselors wrote that she fit a “demographic” they wanted to fill (poor, black, from a bad neighborhood). Ironically, she had written the essay to appeal to just that kind of reading—she thought they’d rather read trauma porn than learn what her life was actually like. But seeing the file still stung her.

All of this is predictable; asking someone who *really wants something* to show you who they are is probably less likely to yield a true representation than a character they’d prefer to present. The performance doesn’t end when we come to school; we want to appear intelligent to others, and we want to fulfill the expectations we have for ourselves as Harvard students. Thus, the campus is populated by students primed to act as if they’re exceptional, which is not necessarily the same as *being* exceptional.

OF COURSE, even if we know that we are acting, we still have no way of knowing who else is doing the same thing. We constantly meet

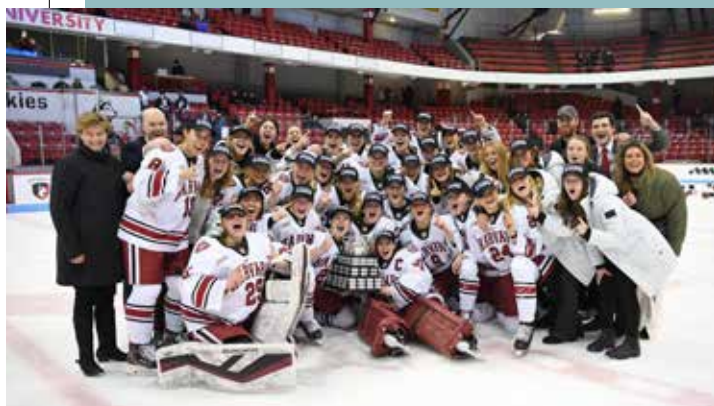
other students who appear smarter than us, more gifted, generally *better*, unaware that part of this appearance might be projection. It’s mentally taxing; the first time I witnessed one of my classmates have a breakdown over this dynamic was the week before school started. We were on a trip as part of Harvard’s First-Year Outdoor Program, which takes hundreds of first-years into the woods of New England before orientation. On our last night, sitting at a trailhead on the side of a highway where a bus would collect us the next day, a girl in the group burst out: “I feel like I don’t deserve to be here.”

She thought that she’d only gotten in because her dad had gone to Harvard, a feeling solidified by a week spent hearing about the high-school achievements of everybody else in the group. I vaguely recall telling her that she wouldn’t have gotten in if she didn’t have the academic ability to succeed, though privately I didn’t think it was a bad thing for her to think about the influence of privilege on her admission. Others assured her that she just had imposter syndrome, a reaction I found a little odd: telling her that she had imposter syndrome seemed to deflect from something important, though I couldn’t quite articulate what at the time.

I reached my own breaking point that February, after being accepted onto the staff of the features board of *The Harvard Advocate*, the school’s literary magazine. As with many student-run organizations at Harvard, *The Advocate* has selective membership determined through a “comp,” a practice whose most meaningful effect may be reproducing the dynamics of the admissions process (a well-known consulting group on campus boasts that its comp’s acceptance rate is the same as the College’s).

I comped *The Advocate* with several of my friends, some of whom I thought were just as good if not better at writing than me, though they were all eventually cut. In fact, I was one of three to be chosen that fall, out of what I eventually learned were more than 50 students. Being the only freshman on the board initially felt flattering, but as I surveyed the writing of other board members and listened to them talk in meetings, it became overwhelming. They were better writers than me.

Winter Sports Wrap



HARVARD ATHLETIC COMMUNICATIONS

In a standout season, the Crimson defeated Boston College 5-4 to win its fifteenth Beanpot—and first since 2015.

Basketball. It was an unusual scene on March 13: a Yale-Princeton battle for the Ivy League basketball title—at Harvard's Lavietes Pavilion. The Crimson men had lost to the host of the Ivy League tournament in their last two appearances—and missed out this March in their year to host after an injury-riddled season in which guard Noah Kirkwood '22 filled in at forward to replace several absent big men (see harvardmag.com/kirkwood-pivot-22). The team fought hard; all six losses to the League's top three teams came by single-digit margins. But in the end, Harvard (13-12, 5-8 Ivy), finished sixth. The women (13-13, 7-7) fared better. Thanks to strong performances by Tess Sussman '22, McKenzie Forbes '23, and Lola Mullaney '24, the Crimson crushed Dartmouth by 33 points to clinch the final spot in the Ivy League Tournament. There, they lost 72-67 to eventual-champion Princeton, behind good showings from Forbes, Mullaney, and Harmoni Turner '24. With that loss, the 40-year Harvard coaching career of Kathy Delaney-Smith concluded (see sidebar for in-depth coverage).

Hockey. In an outstanding season for women's hockey, the team finished with a 22-10-1 record, earning its first NCAA Tournament appearance since 2015 and its most wins since that year. The women also captured the Ivy League crown (its first since 2013-2014), won the regular

season Eastern College Athletic Conference (ECAC) title (first since 2008), and triumphed in the 2022 Beanpot tournament (first since 2015). They fell in the opening round of the NCAA Championship to powerhouse Minnesota Duluth. The men (21-10-3) also stood out. Behind 47 saves from goaltender Mitchell Gibson '23 and an overtime goal from Matthew Coronato '25, the Crimson upset number-one seed Quinnipiac in the ECAC championship game and scored a spot in the NCAA Championship. There, they fell in the first round to Minnesota State.

Squash, swimming and diving, and track. High-quality outcomes were had all around for other Crimson winter sports. Women's squash earned its seventh straight national title, with four student-athletes earning All-American honors (first team: Hana Moataz '22, Marina Stefanoni '24, Amina Yousry '22. Second team: Habiba Eldafrawy '25); the men's squad earned its third straight title and Victor Crouin '22 placed first in the country....Men's and women's swimming and diving both won Ivy League Titles, too. School, meet, and pool records were set by Dean Farris '22, Jared Simpson '23, Umitcan Gures '23, and Raphael Marcoux '22 in the 200-meter relay, with a time of 1:24.06. Gures set the same trio of records in the 100-yard butterfly, in 44.89. For the women, Georgina Milne '22 won the Ron Keenhold Career High Point Diver Award for cumulative points over four years, while Katie Laverty '25 captured the Rick Gilbert Award for recording the meet's most diving points.... Harvard women's track finished first in the Ivy League Indoor Championships, and the men finished second. A highlight: in the women's mile, Maia Ramden '24, Anna Juul '22, and Judy Pendergast '22 finished first, second, and third.

—JACOB SWEET

They were smarter than me, or maybe they just knew more or spoke more eloquently, perhaps a combination of all three. I knew that I hadn't deserved to get on the board.

For a while I kept my feelings to myself, possibly afraid that verbalizing it would make it true (or make others see that it was true). Eventually I couldn't bear it and told an instructor who had seemed impressed that I was on the features board: "Well, I'm not as good as the rest of them." He laughed and told me that I just had imposter syndrome, to which I flatly said, "No, I don't."

I've been wondering why I felt such a need to tell him that. I suppose it would've felt a little entitled to say otherwise. In retrospect, maybe I did have some form of imposter syndrome, though I certainly was the weakest writer on the board at the time. Whatever the case, this episode marked a period in which, finally, I felt liberated from the psychodrama of my freshman year. According to most academic literature about "imposter syndrome," sufferers are terrified that they'll be exposed by others as a fraud—eliminating this possibility by exposing my own feelings of inadequacy gave me relief. ▢

Berta Greenwald Ledecy Undergraduate Fellow
Rebecca E.J. Cadenhead '24 no longer fears imposter syndrome.

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