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Fewer Alumni Give to College

Percentage of alumni who contribute is lowest since 1989

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> The percentage of Harvard alumni who donate to the College has declined steadily since 2001 and hit a 16-year low last fiscal year, according to data provided by the University.

> That figure, known as the "participation rate," now stands at 40 percent—the lowest rate since 1989. The rate fluctuated throughout the 1990s, peaking most recently in 2001 when it reached 48 percent.

Vice President for Alumni Affairs and Development Donella M. Rapier said Harvard has compared its numbers to eight peer institutions, and participation rates have recently declined at four. Three schools have maintained constant rates, and one school's rate has increased.

Princeton University is considered a leader in alumni participation; according to its website, its rate is unchanged since 2001 at about 59 percent.

But Harvard has traditionally assigned great importance to its alumni giving rate in encouraging gifts both large and small.

Harvard College Fund literature notes that "prospective students, faculty, and the media view alumni participation as a vote of confidence in the institution."

Rapier said that competition with fellow charities for the donations of Harvard alumni has increased during the 1990s as other non-profits have grown in number and sophistication.

"We support and encourage their participation in multiple charities," Rapier wrote in an e-mail. "In some years, however, it may not be feasible for these donors to give to all of the charities that are meaningful to them."

Communications barriers may also contribute to Harvard's suffering participation rate, Rapier said.

In their attempts to contact alumni, Harvard fundraisers now face e-mail spam filters, alumni who only have unlisted cell phone numbers, and overflowing e-mail inboxes.

But participation began falling in 2001, the year that marked the start of the tenure of University President Lawrence H. Summers, whose January comments on women in science incited nationwide controversy.

In an interview with the Boston Globe earlier this month, Rapier called alumni response to Summers "quite mixed."

"A number of people have been incredibly supportive of the president and all he is trying to do, and some have asked questions," she told the Globe.

Rapier told The Crimson that she has a "strong sense...that our alumni are highly supportive of the President and his vision for Harvard's future."

THE NATIONAL PICTURE

The University still stands far above most educational institutions in soliciting donations from large numbers of alumni.

Nationwide, the average participation rate was 12.8 percent in 2004, the most recent year for which data is available, according to the Council for Aid to Education (CAE). Across surveyed institutions, alumni participation dropped a single percentage point from 2001 to 2004, declining each year.

But the institutions surveyed by the CAE may not be comparable to Harvard, Rapier wrote.

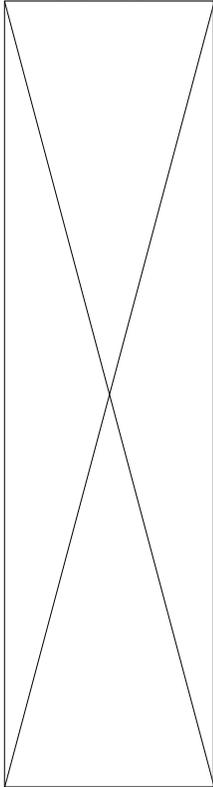
Ann E. Kaplan, director of the CAE survey, offered one possible explanation for Harvard's decline.

As universities expand their records to include more alumni, the rising alumni count can artificially lower the percentage of contributors, she wrote in an e-mail.

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However, this phenomenon has not been a "significant factor" for Harvard, Rapier wrote.

In a press release earlier this year analyzing the national downturn, Kaplan said participation rates can decline if institutions concentrate on landing large contributions, rather than on increasing the number of alumni donors.

Indeed, Harvard fundraisers have yielded record donations, raising \$590 million in fiscal year 2005, its second-highest annual total. The sum reflects both large gifts and contributions from donors who are not alumni.

But Rapier said the declining alumni participation does not reflect a change in strategy to land larger gifts and target non-alumni.

"New areas of focus for Harvard development are being done by new staff, while we continue to invest in the Harvard College Fund and our other annual fund efforts," Rapier said in an e-mail.

A NOT-SO-TAXING DECISION

Harvard could see an uptick in donations through the end of the year as the result of a tax provision passed by Congress in the wake of Hurricane Katrina.

The provision enables donors to deduct up to 100 percent of their adjusted gross income when they contribute to charities, rather than the usual 50 percent deduction.

While many charities are aggressively marketing this provision to donors, Harvard has no such plans, Rapier wrote in an e-mail earlier this month.

However, Rapier wrote that Harvard has included a blurb explaining the provision in the alumni newsletter, and has fielded inquiries from donors.

Harvard's declining participation rate was first reported in the Boston Globe earlier this month.

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