



## General F\*\*\*ups and College Admissions

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<https://justiceinschools.org>

In April 2017, Harvard College Admissions Officers revoked admissions offers to at least ten prospective students in response to messages they sent through a privately-run Facebook group that spun off of a university-sponsored group. After students received their offers of admission, Harvard admissions officers created a general Facebook Class of 2021 group for all accepted students. Soon, students began forming chats with subgroups of students who had similar interests with one another.<sup>2</sup> One student suggested a subgroup for students who liked memes. Soon after, a student within the meme group suggested making a more “R-rated” meme chat.

This messaging group was entitled “Harvard memes for horny bourgeois teens” and later, “General Fuckups.” In order to join this R-rated group, students first had to post a provocative meme to the larger meme group. Once in this smaller, vetted group, students openly posted memes and other images mocking child abuse, the Holocaust, Mexicans, and others (see Appendix 1).

Several students in the splinter group, presumably made uncomfortable by what they were seeing, sent screenshots of the memes to the Harvard College Admissions Office. In April, employees in the Admissions Office emailed the approximately ten students who posted the offensive memes, asking them to disclose screen shots to the admissions office as well as to explain their actions. One week later, ten students in the group received letters informing them that their admissions decision was revoked.

These consequences represented a shift in approach for the College. The previous year, in Spring 2016, a small group of admitted students had sent racist and anti-feminist GroupMe messages. Despite expressions of concern, the Admissions Office declined to revoke admissions offers to those students on the grounds that they were “not [yet] matriculated.” Their analysis had clearly changed by Spring 2017. On the other hand, the Admissions Office did not revoke admissions offers to any students who were in the smaller R-rated group but did not post.<sup>3</sup>

### “We know we want good kids”

No one has publicly challenged Harvard’s right to either make or revoke admissions offers based on an applicant’s character. The College admissions page clearly explains that applicants are evaluated on a wide variety of dimensions including leadership, moral character, and whether other students would want to spend time with them on campus (see Appendix 2). The College is also clear that “an offer of admission may be rescinded if a student engages in behavior that brings into question his or her

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<sup>1</sup> We are grateful to Carrie James and Emily Weinstein for conversations and feedback about this case. All information about Harvard admissions has been curated from public sources; we have no “insider” or privileged access to Harvard College Admissions Office procedures or decisions.

<https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/06/06/531591202/harvard-rescinds-admission-of-10-students-over-obscene-facebook-messages> <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2017/6/5/2021-offers-rescinded-memes/>

<sup>2</sup> <https://www.npr.org/sections/ed/2017/06/06/531591202/harvard-rescinds-admission-of-10-students-overobscene-facebook-messages>

<sup>3</sup> <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2017/6/5/2021-offers-rescinded-memes/>

honesty, maturity, or moral character.”<sup>44</sup> When and how the College—or any selective college or university—assesses students’ “moral character,” however, is a complicated business. As “Alex,” an admissions officer from a prestigious liberal arts school put it: “We know we want good kids...[but] how do you define good kids?”

“Good kids” are not necessarily “perfect kids.” Colleges and universities realize that part of growing up is making mistakes, sometimes significant ones. (Some students may even spend time as “general fuckups” before finding their way into a more academically engaged, socially responsible, and productive life!) But what is the line between a developmentally-appropriate “learning experience” and an act or pattern that is disqualifying? What if a student is full of potential but is a “late bloomer?”

Admissions officers often view prior *disciplinary* violations with a developmental lens. They ask: Has this student matured? Is this a student who would be a danger to our campus? Is this student going to uphold the values of our institution? They know they will never have perfect predictive knowledge. As Alex explained, any time a student commits a sexual assault, that means the admissions office got something wrong. Nonetheless, they try their best to assess student growth and propensity for future inappropriate action.

*Academic* violations, on the other hand, seem to be assessed far more strictly. Every admissions officer interviewed for this case affirmed that any incident of plagiarism or cheating in high school would automatically disqualify a student from admission, no matter how many years ago the incident took place. At the same time, lesser incidents may be met with greater ambiguity. One admissions officer from a selective university, for example, accepted a student who had failed to report another student for plagiarizing work. This was a violation of the school’s honor code, but because he was a bystander to rather than perpetrator of plagiarism, he was deemed eligible for admission.

### **“We do not have the time to Facebook stalk you”**

Admissions officers at Harvard and other colleges and universities that practice “holistic” admission attempt to assess applicants’ character based on their essays, activities, letters of reference, and in some cases interviews. It is an admittedly limited pool of evidence, but it does have the advantage of being both egalitarian and controlled, in that they get a comparable body of evidence from each applicant. This is not to say that the process is invariable. Sometimes high school guidance counselors report student indiscretions to admissions officers. The admissions office then works together with the guidance counselor to understand what happened and determine whether it should figure into the admissions deliberations. On the other hand, many high school counselors are now opting out of communicating with the University, adopting instead a blanket policy that “we do not report disciplinary violations at our school.” Admissions officers thus face a moral gray zone in deciding whether and how to incorporate information that is communicated by some counselors but not others.

While most admissions officers remain open to guidance counselors’ reaching out about additional concerns or considerations, they do not affirmatively search for compromising information. Particularly at highly competitive schools with skyrocketing application rates, admissions offices simply do not have the time or the resources to search Facebook, Instagram, or Google. One liberal arts college admissions officer explained, “There are 20,000 of you applying; we do not have the time to Facebook stalk you.” (Harvard might be pleased to be handling merely 20,000 applications; in 2017, the Harvard Admissions Office fielded applications from nearly 40,000 prospective undergraduates!)

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<sup>4</sup> <http://college.usatoday.com/2017/06/05/at-least-10-who-got-into-harvard-lose-admission-over-offensivememes/>

While admissions officers at highly competitive schools may not seek to find or follow applicants' digital footprints, they are aware of what is posted on university-sponsored social media sites such as The Harvard Class of 2021 Accepted Students Page. The Admissions Office informs accepted students on the homepage of the Facebook group: "As a reminder, Harvard College reserves the right to withdraw an offer of admission under various conditions including if an admitted student engages in behavior that brings into question his or her honesty, maturity, or moral character."<sup>5</sup> Hamilton College, a competitive liberal arts school in upstate New York, similarly warns: "You might want to keep in mind that this is an 'official' Hamilton College Facebook group, set up by administrators from Hamilton. Given that you are all already admitted into the Class of 2018, we want to remind you not to do (or say) anything inappropriate to cause us to have to re-visit your decision."<sup>6</sup>

What constitutes inappropriate, dishonest, immature, or immoral behavior, however, is left deliberately vague. There is no clear code of conduct for students. Ultimately, the Admissions Office's judgement of honesty, maturity or moral character is largely left up to individual discretion. One admissions officer described his rule of thumb as: "if you don't want your grandma seeing this, you shouldn't comment it."

Furthermore, the boundaries of official social media sites are also often poorly delineated. "General Fuckups," for instance, was a closed-member private spin-off of an open Facebook group about memes, which was itself an independent group set up by students who were interacting in the sponsored site. How many moves away from an official university website do students need to take before they can have some assurance that they will not be subject to official scrutiny—or is such scrutiny always appropriate?

Finally, admissions officers need not search students' digital footprints on their own in order to have disturbing evidence of improper behavior come their way. For decades, soon after admissions decisions are sent out, rejected students or their parents have written to highly selective colleges like Harvard to complain about a student whom the college accepted. The letter writers issue charges of resume padding, cheating, plagiarism, bullying, physical or sexual assault, and other failings. Admissions officers have tended to ignore such "take down" letters, on the grounds that they are arbitrary, outside normal admissions procedures, sent after the decision is made, and often impossible to confirm. In recent years, however, writers have been submitting virtually incontrovertible digital evidence to support their claims. As these "take down" letters move from lamentation into accusation, ignoring them becomes more difficult. What happens when there is firm evidence (in the form of videos, lengthy text threads, or Instastories, say) of plagiarism or sexual assault?

## **Coda**

Harvard's Admissions Office has a policy of refusing to communicate about or comment on individual cases. As a result, although initial reports about the rescinded admissions offers were accurate, there is a significant postscript to students' fates that was not reported. Harvard maintains an annual "Z list" of students who are admitted in June, long after the normal admissions season is over. In recent years, approximately 30-100 students have been admitted from the "Z list." The one condition on their acceptance is that they take a gap year before attending. Some choose not to matriculate, as they have already put down deposits elsewhere and gotten excited about attending an alternate school. But many are even more excited to be admitted to Harvard, and they accept the offer. At least some of the students whose offers of admission were rescinded in April 2017 by Harvard for posting outrageous memes on "Harvard memes for horny bourgeois teens" were contacted in the summer of 2017 and

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<sup>5</sup> <http://www.thecrimson.com/article/2017/6/5/2021-offers-rescinded-memes/> Interview.

offered “Z list” admission. Many accepted the offer, took a 2017-18 gap year, and matriculated at Harvard with the freshman class in Fall 2018.

**To cite this case study:**

Levinson, M. & Mehrotra, S. (2018). General F\*\*\*ups & College Admissions. *Justice in Schools*.  
<https://www.justiceinschools.org/harvard-admissions-policy-and-social-media>

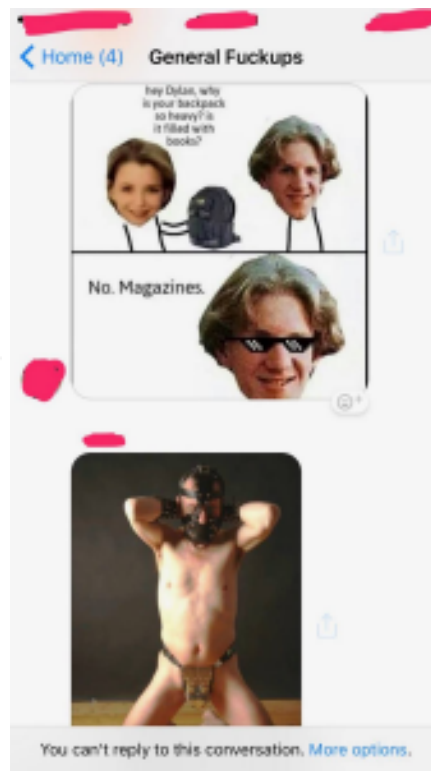
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**Appendix 1**

Source: <https://thetab.com/us/2017/06/05/harvard-memes-rescinded-69413> The Tab is a university news network run by students

Harvard memes for horny bourgeois teens

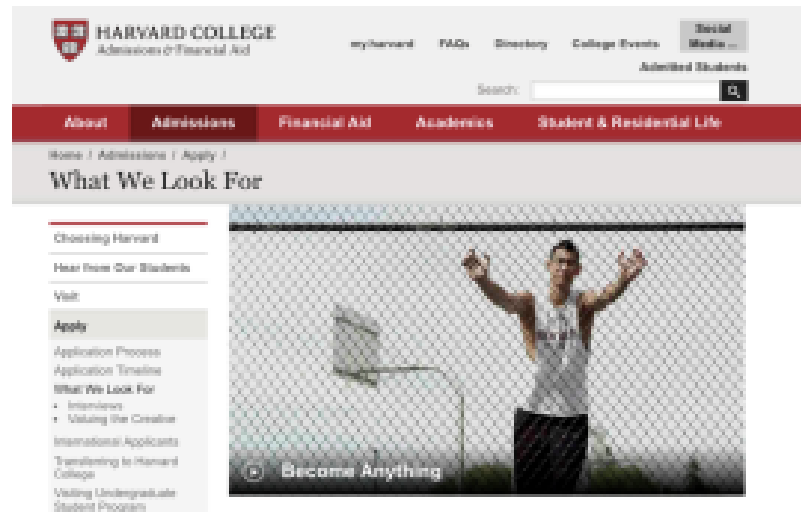
205 unread messages





## Appendix 2

Source: <https://college.harvard.edu/admissions/application-process/what-we-look>  
Official Harvard College Page: "What We Look For"

The image is a screenshot of the Harvard College Admissions website. At the top, there is a navigation bar with the Harvard College logo and the text 'HARVARD COLLEGE Admissions & Financial Aid'. To the right of the logo are links for 'myharvard', 'FAQs', 'Directory', 'College Events', and 'Social Media...'. Below the navigation bar is a search bar with the text 'Search:' and a magnifying glass icon. A red horizontal bar contains the main navigation menu with links for 'About', 'Admissions', 'Financial Aid', 'Academics', and 'Student & Residential Life'. Below this bar, the breadcrumb trail reads 'Home / Admissions / Apply / What We Look For'. On the left side, there is a sidebar menu with categories: 'Choosing Harvard', 'Hear from Our Students', 'Visit', and 'Apply'. Under 'Apply', there are links for 'Application Process', 'Application Timeline', 'What We Look For' (which is highlighted), 'Interviews', 'Making the Choice', 'International Applicants', 'Transferring to Harvard College', and 'Visiting Undergraduate Student Program'. The main content area features a large photograph of a young man in a white tank top and dark shorts, standing in front of a chain-link fence with his arms raised in a celebratory gesture. The text 'Become Anything' is overlaid at the bottom of the photo. The overall design is clean and professional, with a focus on the student's achievement.

## How Your Application is Considered

In our admissions process, we give careful, individual attention to each applicant. We seek to identify students who will be the best educators of one another and their professors—individuals who will inspire those around them during their College years and beyond.

As we read and discuss your application, many questions will be on our minds. Some things we consider:

### Growth and potential

- Have you reached your maximum academic and personal potential?
- Have you been stretching yourself?
- Have you been working to capacity in your academic pursuits, your full-time or part-time employment, or other areas?
- Do you have reserve power to do more?
- How have you used your time?
- Do you have initiative? Are you a self-starter? What motivates you?
- Do you have a direction yet? What is it? If not, are you exploring many things?
- Where will you be in one, five, or 25 years? Will you contribute something to those around you?
- What sort of human being are you now? What sort of human being will you be in the future?

### **Contribution to the Harvard community**

- Will you be able to stand up to the pressures and freedoms of College life?
- Will you contribute something to Harvard and to your classmates? Will you benefit from your Harvard experience?
- Would other students want to room with you, share a meal, be in a seminar together, be teammates, or collaborate in a closely knit extracurricular group?

Our admissions process enables us to give deliberate and meticulous consideration of each applicant as a whole person. It is labor intensive, but permits extraordinary flexibility and the possibility of changing decisions virtually until the day the Admissions Committee mails them. This is especially important since we are always receiving new information about applicants.

Of course, no process is perfect. Inevitably, some students who are not admitted will see great success, and even with a 97 to 98 percent graduation rate, some admitted students might have been better served at another institution. However, we do everything possible to make the best admissions decisions for each student.

### **Interests and activities**

- Do you care deeply about anything—intellectual? Extracurricular? Personal?
- What have you learned from your interests? What have you done with your interests? How have you achieved results? With what success or failure? What have you learned as a result?
- In terms of extracurricular, athletic, community, or family commitments, have you taken full advantage of opportunities?
- What is the quality of your activities? Do you appear to have a genuine commitment or leadership role?
- If you have not had much time in high school for extracurricular pursuits due to familial, work, or other obligations, what do you hope to explore at Harvard with your additional free time?

### **Character and personality**

- What choices have you made for yourself? Why?
- Are you a late bloomer?
- How open are you to new ideas and people?
- What about your maturity, character, leadership, self-confidence, warmth of personality, sense of humor, energy, concern for others, and grace under pressure?