BEGINNING OF A NEW ADVENTURE. EXCITEMENT. TAKING INITIATIVE. A NEW OPPORTUNITY. EXTRAVAGANCE. OBSESSION. BAD DECISION. IGNORANCE. FAILURE TO REALIZE YOU'VE BEEN A FOOL.

# THE FOOL .

# CONTENTS

# HUMOR ME.

## Learning to take laughter seriously--or to seriously laugh

BY CADE WILLIAMS '23



THE SERIOUS .

Ah, April Fools' Day! It's the one day of the year on which many of us fully embrace our inner court jester, proudly embodying it for the rest of the world to experience and, hopefully, enjoy. A day filled with pranks and tricks, laughter and mirth, carnivalesque tomfoolery, and above all, humor. When most of us think of "The Funny," we likely hold it up as the antithesis of "The Serious." The first mode of being is one to be shared with family, friends, and maybe that one cool coworker or Teaching Fellow; the latter is characterized by formality and strictness. But the line between "The Funny" and "The Serious" is much more blurry than it might seem at first glance. The *Independent* spoke to three Harvard professors who are exploring the boundaries of this dichotomy to discover the importance of humor and how the serious and the satirical often interact with and depend upon each other.

Dr. Katherine Leach teaches in Harvard's Department of Celtic Languages and Literatures where she studies medieval and early modern healing practices. While her research is not directly focused on humor, she often encounters humorous remedies and charms while poring over antique manuscripts. "Having a sense of humor is not a new thing," emphasizes Leach. "Some of these charms were probably copied down because they're amusing and because they're funny." In true April Fools' fashion, she mentions that she sometimes encounters scatological prank spells such as, "a recipe for making a candle so that you can make someone fart when they light a candle. Or like a candle that can't be extinguished, not even by the strongest fart. So that kind of stuff is funny."

Part of Leach's work is exploring the often fluid boundaries between science, magic, and religion. This involves taking seriously things that might today be considered absurd or illogical; some charms, she says, "are funny and it feels like maybe they were meant to be funny. Some of them are funny to us, but were meant to be taken seriously back then." One example she cites is a cure for snakebites and other wounds, which "instructs users to pluck the feathers from around the anus of a chicken … and then put the rooster's freshly-plucked anus on the wound, and it was thought to be able to suck out the poison." Though seemingly far-fetched, the efficacy of this remedy is currently being studied by a researcher in Europe. In fact, some similarly strange remedies, such as a "magical" salve for eye styes, have been tested and proven to be effective in the past.

In addition to encountering humorous charms and remedies in her studies, Leach has also been experimenting with humor as a pedagogical method, primarily on TikTok. Prior to using TikTok, Leach made "edutainment"-style YouTube videos for her class "Magic and Faith in Medieval Medicine," which aimed to educate viewers in a way that was simultaneously informative and entertaining. Explaining her shift to TikTok, Leach says, "over the break I was thinking about how much fun I had [with YouTube], but also how much work it took, and it wasn't something that was sustainable. At the same time I went down a very deep TikTok hole, I think as we all probably have been doing, and I thought it would be fun to just do some TikToks and just see what happened with it. And it's been really fun!"

Leach made her first post in February, and has since made a range of TikTok videos with titles like, "Icelandic folklore: Coins in your scrotum!" "Chicken butts to cure wounds!" and "Some gross ingredients in medieval love potions." Leach sees TikTok as offering "an interesting way to escape" from the worries of the pandemic. "It's relevant to today, but it's so far in the past and detached enough that it's not too much. It's not too real, but it's also applicable."

Dr. Leach finds that using humor can be a helpful way to pique students' interest in topics and areas of study that they might not otherwise encounter, and she isn't alone in this sentiment. Dr.

Saul Zaritt, professor of Yiddish literature in Harvard's Comparative Literature and Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations Departments, uses humor to explore conceptions of Jewish modernity. "Before I started here in 2016," Zaritt explains, "I went to the chair of one of my departments and they asked me, 'Which courses might you teach with higher enrollments?' My chair suggested either a class on the Holocaust or on Jewish humor.' I decided on Jewish humor, whether that was a good choice or not I can't say."

Zaritt's course "Jews, Humor, and the Politics of Laughter" uses what he describes as "the Myth of Jewish Humor" to think through Jewish modernity. "For me, it's a way of pulling the rug out in some way from students that come to take the course," says Zaritt. "Many come in thinking they have an idea of what Jewish humor is or how it works or what its mechanisms are. One of the goals of the course is not just to expose it as a myth, but to think about why Jews would be associated with humor, or what humor does in particular in the 20th and 21st centuries." Much of the work in this class is an investigation of humor as both a form of protest or critique and as something that contributes to and supports certain hierarchies.

Humor, in Zaritt's eyes, is important in a number of ways. It has the capacity to open up new avenues of socialization and invites us to participate in almost "conspiratorial" relationships with people with whom we might not otherwise associate. Additionally, it allows for "a kind of emotional, psychological, or even intellectual experience that you wouldn't be allowed otherwise," says Zaritt. But perhaps most importantly, "Humor allows you to articulate something that you wouldn't be able to say clearly. Freud says it has a similar logic to the dream. It has an economy to it. A joke short-circuits certain modes of explanation that would slow your thinking down and allow for rejection or reframing. A joke gets



THE FUNNY.

you right where the thing itself is, or allows you to approach the thing itself, to the core which is usually traumatic."

This view of humor as a way of broaching the traumatic has led Zaritt to reject the myth of humor as therapy. He says, "what it should do is make you feel deeply uncomfortable. So if the thing itself is already deeply discomforting, like the pandemic, and you're already helpless in front of it, there's very little that humor can do."

For Zaritt, this idea that humor should be discomforting rather than therapeutic is especially pertinent when thinking through "the Myth of Jewish Humor." There is an "idea that Jews have used humor to cope with the trials of their constant and eternal suffering," he explains, "and often these kinds of jokes are interpreted as a sort of wellspring of Jewish tradition or seen as a kind of asset of the Jewish people. If it's indeed an asset, it's not a particularly comforting or effective one. It's about articulating and rearticulating the conditions of Jewish Modernity rather than announcing an easy and neat solution of some kind."

Dr. J. Christian Greer, a visiting scholar of esotericism at Harvard Divinity School's Center for the Study of World Religions, also rejects the notion of humor as therapeutic, though the reasoning behind this rejection differs from Zaritt's. In his studies, Greer has found that "humor runs like a red thread through the esoteric spiritualities that emerged in the postwar North America counter-culture, and that their insistence on taking humor seriously has delegitimated them in the eyes of scholars."

For Greer, viewing humor as a form of therapy or as a coping mechanism is "looking in the wrong end of the telescope." In his perspective, humans are "the animal that laughs. We begin as homo ludens, the laughing ape, and so play is our natural function. Humor and laughter is our, I believe, earliest mode of communication along with crying. So I re-

fuse this hierarchy that would put seriousness above humor. In fact, I think it's the interplay of both that makes us human."

Much of Greer's work is focused on promoting humor as an important and even revolutionary aspect of religious experience and broader human socialization. Greer was introduced to the revolutionary potential of humor at a young age after reading Burton Raffel's translation of *Don Quixote*. He describes the novel as deeply influential, providing him with an absurdist viewpoint of the

**"HUMOR IS NOT SOMETHING LIMITED TO APRIL FOOLS'-STYLE PRANKS, NOR IS IT SOMETHING THAT NECESSARILY STANDS IN OPPOSITION TO THE SERIOUS. RATHER, HUMOR AND THE SERIOUS ARE INFLUENCING EACH OTHER CONSTANTLY."**

world. "By being saturated in this particular text, I was never able to take myself or anyone else too serious," explains Greer, "I think not taking yourself too serious allows for a deeper form of sincerity, because you realize that everyone else is just as human as you are […] I think it really is the antidote to a culture that wants to take itself too seriously."

Many of the countercultural groups that Greer studies staunchly defended the power of humor and absurdity. He points to the "pranks" and avant-garde performances of groups such as the Merry Pranksters and the

Yippies. For these groups, humor existed outside of traditionally hierarchical power structures, and consequently, it could be used to disrupt the status quo. Revolution, then, was not about violence or political militancy, but about the promotion of humor and joy. Their belief was that, "a new world, a more spiritually evolved world, would be born out of spontaneous eruptions of laughter and mirth and joy and peace and love," Greers shares. "That would be the cauldron out of which a new world would be born and not a revolution."

While each of these scholars approaches humor in their own way, they all believe that humor is something to be taken seriously. Humor is not something limited to April Fools'-style pranks, nor is it something that necessarily stands in opposition to the serious. Rather, humor and the serious are influencing each other constantly. Leach finds humor to be a helpful pedagogical tool and a way to provide an escape in difficult times. For Zaritt, "Humor is asking a deep question, but not asking for your permission." It is not something we control but something that, like modernity itself, is "happening to us in a way that's similar to how laughter works."

Greer cites the Russian literary theorist Mikhail Bakhtin, who wrote in the opening of his book *Rabelais and His World*: 'Laughter is the least studied human phenomenon.' "That's precisely the problem with humanity," Greer concludes. As he suggests, the power and potential of laughter cannot be overlooked: "I think the moment that we begin to take laughter seriously is the moment that we'll find ourselves on the path to a better world."

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY ARSH DHILLON '23

FOR THOSE INTERESTED IN LEARNING MORE ABOUT THE TOPICS IN THIS ARTICLE:

DR. KATHERINE LEACH (@EDU_KATED ON TIKTOK) SUGGESTS THAT READERS, "KEEP AN EYE ON FOLKLORE AND MYTHOLOGY IN THE COURSE CATALOG. WE RUN A WITCHCRAFT CLASS THAT'S REALLY FUN, AND NEXT YEAR I MIGHT BE TEACHING "MAGIC AND FAITH IN MEDIEVAL MEDICINE" AND GENED 1097."

DR. SAUL ZARITT WILL BE ON LEAVE IN THE NEXT ACADEMIC YEAR, BUT HE WILL BE TEACHING "JEWS, HUMOR, AND THE POLITICS OF LAUGHTER" IN THE FALL OF 2022 OR THE SPRING OF 2023.

DR. J. CHRISTIAN GREER IS TEACHING "VISIONS OF THE OCCULT: INTRODUCTION TO WESTERN ESOTERICISM" ONLINE THROUGH THE UNIVERSITY OF AMSTERDAM IN THE SUMMER OF 2021.

# Ginger Gems, Revisited

## An entrepreneurial journey continues

### by KATE TUNNELL '24



dial up Susanne Greelish, co-founder and creative director of GingerGems, a candied ginger brand delivering treats like turmeric, and sesame coated ginger bites, on a Thursday evening to see if I might be able to catch the always-busy woman between tasks. Sure enough, when she answers the phone she is stringing bracelets for her other business, a jewelry company, Dovera Designs. Apart from GingerGems, her newest business venture, Greelish is a longtime partner at Dovera. The task at hand does not stop her from launching into a detailed and animated discussion with me about where her businesses are at this stage of the pandemic since we last spoke at the Cambridge Unified Farmers Market in November of 2020.

It appears that entrepreneurial women have not given up hope for businesses they began at the outset of the pandemic. Rather, they took their efforts into fourth gear. Among the other business women I have spoken to and observed, Greelish is a continual reminder of the power of dedication in the face of hurdles and uncertainty. When the world shut down, creating a wall for her budding food business, she did not let go when things were at their toughest. And now, with the strength GingerGems built chipping it away, Greelish and her company have emerged on the other side of the slowly eroding wall. Although her business is still growing, she has managed several hurdles on the way to success.

However, progress does not mean rest. "I haven't even eaten dinner yet!" remarks Greelish as we chat about her new ventures. GingerGems, Greelish's delectable homemade candied ginger, is now in approximately 10 stores in Massachusetts, including Pemberton Farms in Cambridge and Russo's in Watertown. With little prompting on my part, Greelish launches into an explanation of her new flavor in development which she believes will definitely be number one. Among other updates, the candied ginger now has fun new packaging, which is available to view on their updated website.

Because Greelish prevailed during the toughest times, the height of the pandemic, she is still here to seize rising opportunities as shops begin to open up and function at higher capacity; they can invest and grow as opposed to just getting by. "It's starting to open up." says Greelish. "There's more traffic on the streets and more people out. You just get the feeling…"

Stay tuned for the promising, and currently confidential business ventures of Greelish and her Gems. "I can't focus on just one thing, I focus on whatever needs to be done that day," she exclaims. Evidently, lots is brewing.

The excitement of Greelish's business initiatives continues. Connecting with clien-

## "GREELISH IS A CONTINUAL REMINDER OF THE POWER OF DEDICATION IN THE FACE OF HURDLES AND UNCERTAINTY."

tele and developing a reputation of good character can be defining factors for small business owners. It seems this characteristic of Greelish's has led her to develop important relationships where it matters. Trust is a huge element of the entrepreneurial business in the current climate. Greelish's years in the food business render her a trusted advisor to many.

"A lot of people will buy GingerGems because whenI tell them it's good, they believe me!" Greelish exclaims. The same surely cannot be said for every salesperson in America.

With all this activity, Greelish doesn't even know if she'll be able to spend her Fridays at the Charles River Farmers Market, the sunny square where I first met her this fall. But who else can sell the goods like Greelish? The core of the dilemma is that she is protective of her business, as any loyal creator would

be! She wants everything done how she envisions it, with the best quality possible. Her dedication to her product makes delegation difficult, a trend that is common in many other female, small-business owners. My current boss, the CEO of a farm, Sweet Wheel Farm and Flowers, so often cannot tear herself from the stand where her employees sell fruits and baked scones, for she adores telling customers about the organic produce and freshly baked scones. Despite the other ten things she has to do that day, the quality of her product and the way the customer sees it comes first.

"I don't have enough hours in the day," chuckles Greelish. "At night I'm crafting bracelets, during the day I'm going to meetings… and I have to do Dovera work… and I have to clean my car." In the world of an entrepreneur, there are no scheduled days off or people to clean your car while you do the heavy lifting. Work and life become intertwined, one in the same. Our conversation wraps up as Greelish finishes expanding on her around-the-clock hours and remembers, "I haven't even eaten dinner yet!"

I leave Greelish to her weaving and dinner-making adventures with a smile on my face. This is just the beginning of her business; if the spicy ginger candies can survive the torrents of the pandemic, I cannot wait to see what comes next.

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PHOTO BY KATE TUNNELL '24

# Coding Should Be The New "Language Requirement"

by VIRAT TALWAR '23

In its mission statement, Harvard College aims to "educate the [...] citizen-leaders of our society" and create "conditions for social transformation" by imbuing its students with the skills and experiences to do just that: lead and transform. For centuries, Harvard has successfully fulfilled this promise, educating everyone from the second President of the United States John Adams to the real-life characters of *The Social Network*. More recently, though, prestigious undergraduate institutions like Harvard have had their value propositions questioned, with notable critics like Peter Thiel even offering prospective students money to forgo their degrees in favor of pursuing ideas that will create value. One of the most stinging criticisms came from a recent Harvard graduate whose article, "Harvard Creates Managers Instead of Elites," argued that Harvard students are trapped in a hamster-wheel of "optionality" in careers such as management consulting because "Harvard has abdicated its directive to guide students to achieve great things."

Despite its stated mission, Harvard is not teeing its students up to make the impact it promises. Harvard prides itself on exposing its students to a range of new ideas and skills through three curriculum requirements: General Education (Gen Ed), Expository Writing (Expos) and Language Requirement. Logic would suggest that the solution—or at least part of it—can be found by examining these requirements. Of the three, there is one in particular that should not be a requirement: the Language Requirement. Conversely, Harvard doesn't require it's students to know a skill whose importance increases every day: coding.. If Harvard wishes to fulfill its mission, the college needs to update its requirements to reflect the needs of a digital world. For starters, Harvard should replace the language requirement with a programming requirement.

To understand why Harvard should require it's students to learn how to code, it's helpful to break down why expository writing is important enough to be considered a requirement. The ability to communicate ideas well and clearly through writing is not only fundamental to being a leader or enactor of change , it's also a basic skill that serves one well in life—be it transcribing the conversations of your iconoclastic teacher, complaining your priest is abusing his power, or even just shouting into the void that your university's curriculum needs to change. The ability to write articulately and convincingly gives the writer leverage. What is leverage? In engineering, a lever is something that is designed to give its operator a mechanical advantage, like a pulley. Ancient Egyptians certainly couldn't lift the enormous blocks that made the pyramid by hand; they used pulleys and other levers to gain a disproportionate advantage with respect to their strength.

Similarly, knowing how to write articulately and convincingly gives you a disproportionate advantage because by doing so you are able to spread ideas far more easily and efficiently than somebody that just gets in unstructured dialogues. Leverage is anything that gives you a disproportionate advantage – capital, status, knowledge. This leverage is then compounded by media—something that has been increasingly accessible since the printing of the *Gutenberg Bible*, and is almost universally accessible today. Media allows you to self-publish, which means it's totally permissionless, and it has minimal costs of replication, in that for each person to read what you have written costs you almost nothing.

This formula of writing plus media gives you permissionless leverage with no marginal costs of replication. That means I can write this essay and post it on my blog without anyone else's permission, and anyone in the world will be able to consume my ideas. On top of that, I could even monetize my blog in a few minutes using tools like Substack or Ghost. Today, anyone who knows how to write well enough can use this method to drive change (and earn money) while they sleep, without answering to anybody. A fantastic example of this (and probably the poster boy for paid blogs) is Ben Thompson—who writes Stratechery, a blog on technology and media. Thompson has been writing the blog—which costs $120 a year—for almost eight years and has approximately 25,000 paying subscribers. For almost all of recorded history, writing plus media existed in a category of its own in the hierarchy of leverage. This is likely why Harvard introduced Expos back in 1872, in order to ensure each of the leaders it was shaping had the tools to take advantage of permissionless leverage with no marginal costs to efficiently affect impact. But for a few decades now, writing has not been alone. It has a fierce and often more potent competitor that Harvard must acknowledge: code.

Code is the other side of the "permissionless leverage with no marginal costs of replication" coin. Unlike writing, code actualizes the cliche "actions speak louder than words." It allows the author to communicate their ideas and vision through instantiation. For the first time in human history, thinkers can not only tell people their hypothesis for how the world should work—no matter how crazy—but actually test that hypothesis at low cost by building something that reflects the hypothesis and letting the world use it. The perfect example of this is Bitcoin. Satoshi Nakamoto, Bitcoin's unknown creator(s),

> "ANY HUMANITIES PERSON GETTING HALFWAY THROUGH COLLEGE AND REALIZING THEY DON'T UNDERSTAND BASIC PROGRAMMING IS ANALOGOUS TO A STEM MAJOR GETTING HALFWAY THROUGH COLLEGE AND REALIZING, 'I'M HALF-WAY THROUGH COLLEGE AND I DON'T EVEN KNOW HOW TO WRITE A DAMN ESSAY.'"

had a radical hypothesis that they communicated in writing, and then released in code to test it. Vitalik Buterin and Gavin Wood realized that decentralized blockchains had even more potential to create a world of better governance and finance and demonstrated this by authoring Ethereum. Today, Bitcoin and Ethereum combined are valued at well over a trillion dollars and counting.

Had Satoshi, Vitalik and Wood only been able to pull the lever of the written word, these ideas would probably have been published in some sparingly-read journal and receded into obscurity because of their complexity and divergence from legacy systems. However, as that trillion dollar market capitalization shows, it is more powerful to see ideas instantiated—no matter how experimental—than it is to read a manifesto. For that reason, it seems obvious that Harvard, which is educating its students to be agents of change for those parts of society that may need re-invention, not just reform, should ensure they know how to pull both of the most fundamental levers for change, so they can go out into the world and decide which one to use and when.

On the other hand, the same certainly does not hold for languages. Proficiency in a language other than English is a valuable skill, not only in that it opens the door to opportunities abroad and different cultures, but also because learning and maintaining another language is good for your brain. I do not mean to disparage foreign language study: German language and literature is part of my joint concentration, and anybody who knows me will

be sure to tell you how much I enjoy studying German and the high regard in which I hold the German department at Harvard. Languages are just not required for Harvard to fulfill its mission, and so needn't be a requirement for its students. It isn't necessary to speak a foreign language in order to be a citizen-leader. Information, by way of technology, is more accessible than it ever has been, bridging the gap between languages and cultures. One need only look at the burgeoning start-up sectors in Africa or countries like India, with its extremely varied languages and cultures, to demonstrate mastery of a language is no longer necessary to incite change or create an impact.

"The language requirement is outdated," says a member of the Harvard class of 2020, who took Spanish to fulfill his language requirement. "Having to take a course I knew I wouldn't continue meant I truly got nothing out of it." This low regard for the language requirement leads to its perversion amongst a large number of the cohort who do not place out and find themselves having to take a year long beginner course. Each undergraduate has a friend, or even a group of friends, in a similar position. In order to expend the least effort in fulfilling their language requirement, they choose a language they might have taken in high school, or one which they have absolutely no intention of continuing to study.

Of course, there are a number of students who have always wanted to learn a language, and who undertake the study of French, Arabic, and perhaps even Zulu or Pidgin. They might even choose to study it further through their concentration or as a language citation. Perhaps the skill will be of use to them in their future careers, for research, or just to read their favorite book in the original language. But most of this subset will always have wanted to study a language, and so would be likely to take one up at college even if there were no language requirement. In fact, many students choose to continue to study a language, or even pick up a new one, despite having placed out of the language requirement.

Out of my blocking group of seven, all of whom placed out of the language requirement, four of us have continued to take courses in Harvard's language departments, of which two are learning new languages. One of us is concentrating in a language, while each of the other three are considering earning language citations or secondaries. After all, we are the students that are relevant to the language department: the ones who have a genuine interest in pursuing a language. The language departments' existence is certainly not predicated on the four bored students in the back of a ten person introductory class who are only there because they have to be. In fact, as any professor especially in the era of Zoom will attest, disengagement is contagious, and so it follows that having the disengaged students who are merely in introductory language classes because they have to be is counter-productive and actually hampers the learning of those who are genuinely interested.

How on earth Harvard presumes these poor souls learning how to say "ball" and "mother" in complex languages will translate to a "transformative" experience for these students and their communities is beyond me. This issue is exacerbated by the opportunity cost of so many students having to take 2 semesters of a course which will be useless to them—unless they're at a restaurant in Berlin and order a coffee in German to impress their attractive server. The student now have only 29 of 32 course slots (in the average case) free, 28 if they are placed into the year-long Expos program. Wouldn't it be better to replace these 2 courses for everyone with the study of something that gives you a universal, invaluable skill?

This is where a coding requirement comes in. Unfortunately, it is not as simple as making Introduction to Computer Science (CS50) mandatory. For starters, a serious problem with CS50 is that around 40% of its students take it SAT/UNSAT. As any Harvard student knows, taking a course SAT/UNSAT, although intended to allow you to explore a new field with lower stakes, ultimately just results in under-prioritizing the SAT/UNSAT course in order to devote more time to letter-graded courses, which—to put it bluntly—actually matter. I took CS50 and the main thing I got out of it is the ability to not entirely fraudulently put "Familiar with Python, C++ and JavaScript" on my resumé. Even if Harvard were to make it mandatory that people take CS50 letter graded—although this would be a start—it wouldn't be enough. "I actually don't think I gained any practical skills from CS50," remarks an Economics concentrator from the Class of 2022, "because I felt there was a large discrepancy between the lectures and the problem sets […] Also, they tried to stuff too many languages into one semester, which is not nearly enough time to develop a solid enough grasp of that language."

Taking it a step further, CS50's way of introducing coding, with its merch, fair and other bells and whistles is outdated. That approach might have worked ten or fifteen years ago when the CS department was trying to attract students to programming, a quirky skill that had made people who sat in the same seats as you billionaires and might do the same for you too! But CS50 is now mainstream – it is even more popular than Economics 10a, the introductory course that was until recently the most popular course in the catalogue.

On top of that , programming has quickly become an indispensable skill—one that forward-thinking people recognize will be essential for problem solving not just to add more                    value in future jobs,

whatever they might be, but also in life.

Perhaps the best solution is a more clinical course, which, like Expos, is high intensity, harshly graded, and offers sections that target different concepts so undergraduates can select those that interest them and are relevant to their fields. An engineering student from the class of 2022, who requested not to be named, points to more focused and in-depth versions of bootcamps, such as those offered in Harvard's School of Engineering and Applied Sciences for the programming language MATLAB. Although these bootcamps are short, he emphasised how their focus and subject-orientation could be invaluable for students, especially in STEM or the Social Sciences. "Essentially I think that an improvement could be the provision of more of these sorts of bootcamps with narrow scope for different disciplines and different languages."

These sorts of courses would introduce students to programming languages like Python, R, or Stata, and do far more than encourage enrollment in other Computer Science courses. "For higher level courses coding experience is taken as a given. It's generally not even listed as pre-requisite and does not have much support." he adds. Thus, these courses would also enhance the learning experience (its "transformative"-ness) by eliminating significant barriers to entry to courses in other departments, such as Statistics, Biology, or Engineering, that are coding based.  Another avenue could be a more general introductory course that lands somewhere in the middle of CS50 and CS1, which offers a slower paced introduction to computer science, suggests a recently graduated Computer Science concentrator. This is not an accusation that Harvard has virtually no Computer Science department or that it is abysmal. This argument is simply criticizing a failure on Harvard's part.

Of course, two semesters of programming won't turn a Harvard first-year into Mark Zuckerberg, but two semesters of Expos hardly yields rising Simone de Beauvoirs either. But just as it is impossible to take a humanities course without having to write essays, it will soon be impossible to

take STEM or  even social science courses without having to use at least basic R—if this isn't the case within the next five years, then Harvard will be outdated. Any humanities person getting halfway through college and realizing they don't understand basic programming is analogous to a STEM major getting halfway through college and realizing "I'm half-way through college and I don't even know how to write a damn essay." It is a skill so essential that Harvard should provide a failsafe, just as it does with Expos.

The most common response to this argument from other Harvard students is: "Surely I can just hire someone who knows how to code." For those who say this and also defend the language requirement, get this: you can also hire a translator, and guess what? They cost less. For those who understand why the language requirement is outdated but still pose this question when faced with a coding requirement: this might be true for businesses and entrepreneurs who have been established for a long time. These are (in most cases) people who graduated college before the widespread adoption of mobile phones; they generally have the lever of capital, reputation, experience or some combination of the three to back them up.

A hedge fund manager like Ray Dalio can hire quants that code instead of doing it himself because he has the bandwidth to pay them mouth-watering salaries so that he may use their leverage for his capital gain. However, for our digitally-native generation, setting up any business, especially one that is looking to achieve scale and have a great impact, will need technical know-how. It need not be exhaustive: knowing the fundamentals of any system, be it programming or even rocket science, helps form a framework to conjure ideas, understand what works and why, and make key decisions regarding scaling and functionality in an informed way—Elon Musk isn't building the rockets himself, but listen to him speak and you know he has a good enough idea about what's going on. In fact, it's more than reasonable to assume that even Ray Dalio has a general understanding of the code his programmers are writing. If the aspiring founder of a high-potential business is hiring someone to build

the product for them because they can't code the fundamentals, the person they are hiring will flip them the bird, steal their idea, and just do it themselves (for corroboration, watch *The Social Network*). Just as writing a really good essay requires a grasp of constructing sentences and then targeted learning can teach the rest, so building software requires a fundamental understanding of code.

"Another argument for this point is that all Harvard students know how to speak at least one language, whereas not all Harvard students know how to code," says Oskar Schulz '22, an Economics concentrator in the class of 2023. "As long as you can speak one language, whether it's English or American Sign Language, you can communicate: after that, it's easy to go from one to N easily, whereas with coding, if you don't know how to code, you have to go from zero to one. That's a far greater jump." Schulz is referring here to the model most easily found in Peter Thiel and Blake Masters' book *Zero to One*. The basic argument is that replication is easy, whereas the initial jump from no knowledge to enough knowledge to replicate to more knowledge is the real barrier to entry in any system of understanding.

Once somebody understands what grammar is, they can learn (with varying difficulty) the grammar of other languages. However, if somebody understands neither basic grammar nor its function, learning a language is much more difficult, as they will not be able to replicate with reference to a "1". In fact, it is only because one

spends the first eight to ten years of their life learning and studying their native language that they can use it as a base layer for a foreign language. In our lifetimes technological progress is going to continue to accelerate such that code will be as much of a base layer for life as language has been for the last two millennia—in much of the  world, it probably already is. Societies will adopt blockchain technologies, Elon Musk will put chips in our brains and Google will drive us all around .

Code will, of course, be at the foundation of this. If each of us at leading institutions aren't taught this base layer now, we will not even be able to keep abreast with these developments such that we have enough knowledge to have a educated opinion about these technologies. This is a problem because, if history is anything to go on, a few of us might hold public office one day. As any antitrust hearing with a big-tech company CEO reveals, it's imperative for public officials to have some understanding of technological developments in order to make good policy decisions about them.

Ultimately, no coding requirement will be perfect. To say so would be part idealistic and part stupid. Like with the language requirement, there will be people who slack here as well. Indeed, every couple of years a few English or Philosophy concentrators  will come along who will never use the skills learned again, but

at the absolute worst it will be a net-neutral outcome to the current state of the language requirement – for this to come to pass, the value-proposition of understanding basic code will have to diminish over the coming years, while the world's average English proficiency, which is currently rising, will have to decrease. I doff my hat to anybody who genuinely believes in this scenario, because they are living in a past century.

VIRAT TALWAR '23 (VIRATTALWAR@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) IS SURFING POORLY, FAILING AT KETO AND PRETENDING TO READ PROUST.

ILLUSTRATION BY GOGO TAUBMAN '24

# Lowell, Cabot...Quincy!

## by GRACE VON OISTE '24 & YASMINE BAZOS '24

On Thursday, March 4th, we woke up to our phones buzzing. As we opened our eyes and rolled over to look at our screens, we saw an email notification with a subject line that read Welcome to Lowell! Elated by the relief of not having been quadded, Grace called her mom to tell her the good news, then ran into our roommates' bedrooms at 5 a.m., screaming, "guys, we got Lowell!"

"Literally get out of our room, it's fake!" our roommates yelled. "Read the email." Their excitement, or lack thereof, did not seem to match ours. The infamous Lowell, one of the best Harvard Houses, would be ours for the next three years! But then, as we reread the email, we realized we had been pranked. Perhaps it was the email address, kermitkatherine007@gmail.com, that gave it away. Or perhaps it was the fact that it was Thursday, March 4th, and Housing Day was not until Friday, March 12th. Regardless, we had a feeling this was, indeed, a fake housing assignment. We each retreated to our rooms, reminiscing on what it had felt like to be in Lowell—even if it was for just a second. This prank, we later learned, was courtesy of The Harvard Lampoon.

For the next week our blocking group patiently awaited the announcement of our housing assignments. For those of us who are extremely superstitious, even saying the names of certain Houses that week was considered taboo. We prayed to the river gods and tried to send good karma our way—until the fateful day arrived.

On the morning of the 12th, three of us gathered together, joined virtually by the rest of our blocking group on Facetime. We waited on the Housing Day Zoom group, dancing around the kitchen as the housing team played music, until the moderator announced that our House links were available. Our hearts beat fast as looks of excitement and apprehension filled every square of the Zoom screen. Clicking the link, we hoped our gullibleness might have somehow landed us somewhere desirable. But what we saw on

> ## "BUT WHAT WE SAW ON THE SCREEN WAS NOT LOWELL HOUSE AT ALL. 'WELCOME TO CABOT!' OUR COMPUTER SCREEN DOOMED."

the screen was not Lowell house at all. Welcome to Cabot! our computer screen doomed.

Our hearts sank. One blockmate started tearing up; another looked absolutely horrified. Not to be dramatic, but going from Lowell to Cabot felt like losing a beachfront property with a six-car garage for a property in the middle of the woods with no parking. No one spoke. We were speechless. The idea of the assignment being a joke crossed our minds, but it seemed impossible. Every name on the Zoom screen and in the chat was followed by the word Cabot; one person's name was Cabot Dean.

"Guys, just wait. It could be a joke," one of my roommates said. A joke? Again? Five minutes had already passed since we found out we were in Cabot. As we were about to close the computer and accept our fate, a video popped up on the screen. The video showed Harvard students running through a house with a bunch of question marks until finally, they entered a room and the words WELCOME TO QUINCY shone on the screen.

Though every House eventually becomes home, our blocking group, "Half Dozen," couldn't have been more thrilled to finally have one straight answer—and a House to be thrilled about.

GRACE VON OISTE '24 (GVONOISTE@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) AND YASMINE BAZOS '24 (YASMINEBAZOS@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) WILL ALWAYS REMEMBER THEIR SHARED EXPERIENCE.

ILLUSTRATION BY ELLIE HAMILTON '23

# TALK IS CHEAP

*Are Harvard Students Discussing Politics Less during the Biden-Harris Administration?*

## BY ELEANOR FITZGIBBONS '23

After four years of conversations revolving around politics and the man in the White House, the United States is now two months into Joe Biden's presidency, and conversations about politics at Harvard are seemingly few and far between. It's not as though there isn't anything to talk about. The nation is still in the middle of a global pandemic, and Biden signed a $1.9 trillion dollar relief bill earlier this month. The US has rejoined the World Health Organization and the Paris Climate Agreement, and Biden has already signed 37 executive orders since he entered office. So why aren't Harvard students talking about all this?

Donald Trump polarized student opinions more than Biden has; most Harvard students seemed to have an opinion on Trump, whether they loved or hated him. Many conversations on Harvard's campus regarding Trump in the last year were also centered around the pandemic. Students debated the best course of action to handle COVID-19, and conversations inevitably led to politics and back to Trump.

Since Biden has been in office, even political conversations with regard to the pandemic have dwindled. Anna Wolf '23 offers an explanation for this pattern. "I think Trump politicized the pandemic, and because [the pandemic] impacts our daily lives so much, people had no choice but to involve themselves in politics." Biden's administration has actively tried to distance COVID-19 from politics, and its efforts have been reasonably successful so far. Politicians from both sides of the aisle have been encouraging their constituents to receive the vaccine, and one could argue that the pandemic is slowly becoming less of a partisan issue. Wolf ties this phenomenon back to conversations on campus as she says, "Now that COVID-19 isn't a political game, politics are less relevant for everyday Americans."

Outside of the pandemic, Harvard students also used to discuss Donald Trump's character and personality more than they do Biden's. Due to the polarizing nature of Trump, his administration perhaps lent itself more easily to casual conversations. Ryan Stanford '23 says, "I feel like, leading up to the previous election and while Trump was in office, I heard a lot more political discussion happening in my social circles." There certainly was more conversation material regarding Trump that was outside of strictly political conversations during the previous administration.

During Trump's presidency, Harvard students could often be heard discussing the former president's personal life along with his administration's policies. Carli Cooperstein '24 comments, "I've found that since Biden has taken office, I've still been engaging in conversations with my friends about politics, though I

> ## "DONALD TRUMP POLARIZED STUDENT OPINIONS MORE THAN BIDEN HAS; MOST HARVARD STUDENTS SEEMED TO HAVE AN OPINION ON TRUMP, WHETHER THEY LOVED OR HATED HIM."

think these conversations take place less frequently and were more topical under Trump due to the prevalence of controversial events that took place during his presidency." This pattern furthers the proposition that Biden's presidency has provided less material for casual conversation due to the commander-in-chief at its helm.

While it may seem as though Harvard students are now discussing politics less often on campus, it may be the case that political discourse under the new administration is not as frequent but is more substantive. Tobias Edelstein '23 agrees with Cooperstein's earlier comment that student discourse during Biden's administration is "definitely less topical" now than it was under Trump. Edelstein expresses gratitude for the shift away from topical conversations, "largely because of how volatile they can be." He adds, "I'm happy to discuss politics with peers but conversations turn into arguments too often in the status quo." From the pattern of discourse at Harvard, it seems as though the status quo of conversations turning into debates will not be a long-lasting legacy of Trump's presidency. Instead, conversations on campus are becoming less combative as the country moves forward under a less polarizing president.

Additionally, the departure from superficial discourse has allowed for the country to pay more attention to issues previously stifled in the media. Anti-Asian American and Pacific Islander hate has increased enormously ever since the beginning of the pandemic, yet the media and Harvard didn't properly address the concern until this month. Regardless of whether or not social justice issues are receiving the attention they deserve both in the media and in public discourse, people all over the country are still impacted by them. It is a privilege to be able to pick and choose which issues to discuss, and one that Harvard students should not forget.

Harvard students are glad to depart from a time when shallow discussions detracted from important debates that need to be had in this country. Cooperstein remarks, "I think one aspect of Harvard that is truly special is that the majority of the students are very well-informed and interested in talking about what's going on in our country." Though the buzz of Trump is now relatively absent from the media and campus conversation, Harvard students have not stopped caring about politics and are looking forward to a return to substantive conversations during Biden's administration.

ELEANOR FITZGIBBONS '23 (EFITZGIBBONS@ HARVARD.EDU) IS THE VICE PRESIDENT OF THE INDEPENDENT.

ILLUSTRATION BY ARSH DHILLON '23

# Hello Kitty Says ACAB

## How progressives are utilizing internet memes to fight the alt-right

### by CHRISTIAN BROWDER '23

In recent years, meme culture, or the culture surrounding the internet's breed of comedy, has become analogous to various online subcultures—including gaming, incels, and the alt-right. This association, while not universal, makes sense: a high degree of cultural cross-pollination is an inherent characteristic of the internet. Of meme culture's interplaying groups, the alt-right is most damaging, possessing the ability to materialize their influence. In true parasitic fashion, the alt-right has embedded itself within general meme culture and established a recruitment pipeline. To date, we have seen neither an antidote nor an alternative to this issue. However, that may be changing as there is a progressive counterculture growing within the meme community. In other words, progressives are using the avenue of memes to reclaim internet culture from the alt-right.

Understanding the significance of progressive meme counterculture and the alt-right pipeline requires at least a brief history lesson in meme culture, which consists of influenceable audiences, fringe communities, and Pepe the Frog.

The life of Pepe the Frog began in 2005 when Matt Furie produced the character for his comic, *Boy's Club*. The frog, and his contagious catchphrases, quickly grew in popularity as he became fodder for meme creators. Pepe evolved into a staple of meme culture, boasting countless variations and an omnipresent position within mainstream media. Peak popularity was achieved sometime between 2014 and 2016, with Pepe's wholesome, relatable image being shared by the likes of Nicki Minaj and other celebrities. Pepe's social and cultural immortality made for an alluring target, and targeted he became.

While the general meme ecosystem was busy enjoying innocent Pepe memes, there was a toxicity brewing below the surface. That toxicity had a now-familiar source: alt-right safe havens such as 4chan and Reddit. While the casual meme viewer may have only known Pepe as the Frog who would frown in solidarity with you when feeling sad, the alt-right knew a very different Pepe. This Pepe often wore a hitler mustache and invoked sexist, racist, homophobic, and anti-Semitic ideologies. Bigoted humor has always been a commonly dismissed trope of internet trolls, but this mixture of influence was a cultural poison—a poison we have yet to fully rid ourselves of.

By 2016, the bleeding of the alt-right's Pepe into the mainstream produced tangible effects. Pepe was invoked at white supremacist rallies right beside confederate flags and swastikas. The frog had been appropriated by the alt-right, and consequently, Pepe was classified as a hate symbol by the Anti-Defamation League in September 2016. The need for this classification is indicative of a phenomenon that went unchecked for nearly a decade —the existence of a meme culture to the alt-right pipeline. This non-intuitive mechanism was the subject of a 2018 internet analysis study, titled "On the Origins of Memes" by Means of Fringe Web Communities.

The study condenses its findings into several terrifyingly plain takeaways: first, alt-right fringe communities hold more influence over the entire meme ecosystem than any other community; second, seemingly neutral memes are used in conjunction with other memes to incite hate or influence public opinion; third, in order to ensure content dissemination, fringe communities will keep their memes popular for enough time so that their potential impacts are realized.

If there is one more conclusion to draw from the study's discoveries it is this: so long as fringe communities possess the highest volume of internet influence, their pipelines will remain intact. The key, then, is to disrupt the virality of alt-right fringe humor. Rising to this challenge, a coalition of progressive content creators, spreading from twitter to reddit, is working to redefine the aesthetics of the meme
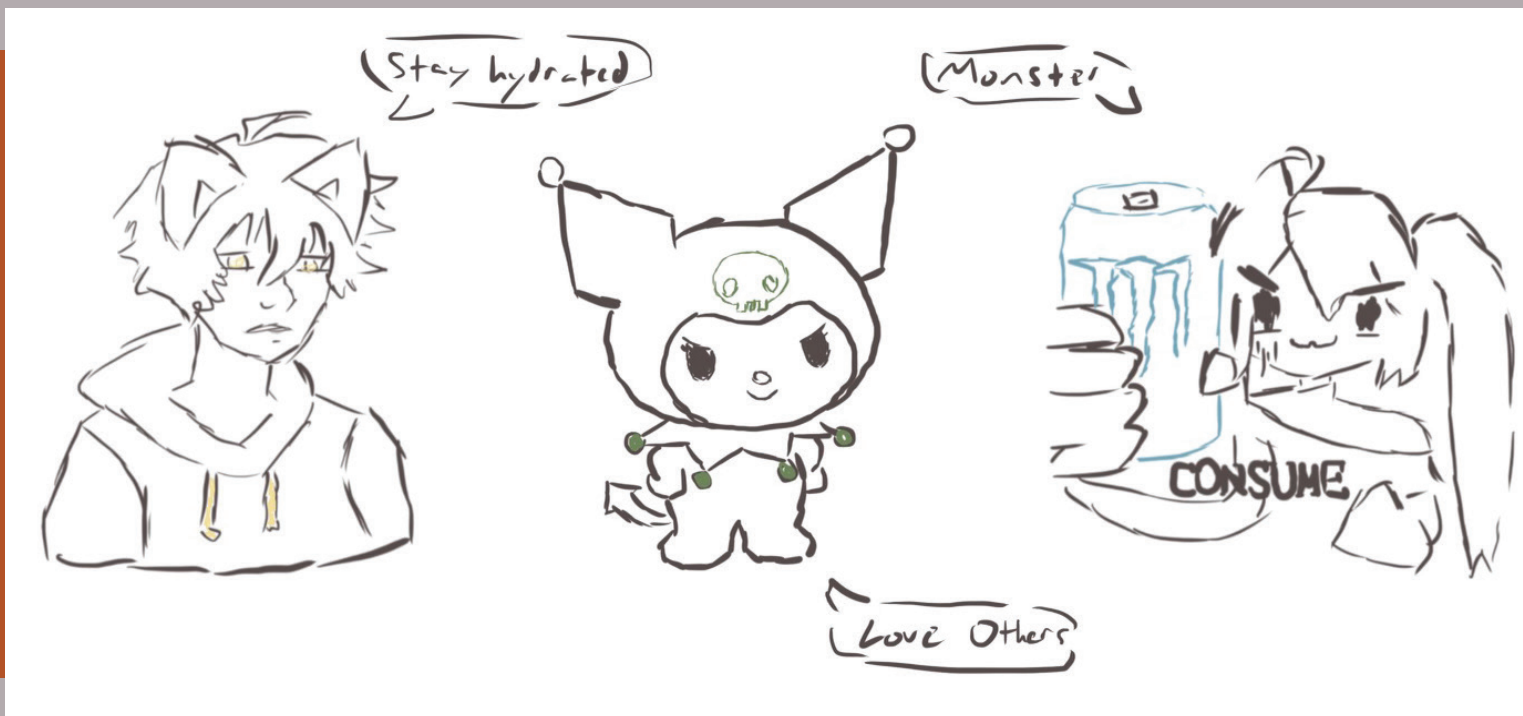


*A depiction of three different characters from the progressive meme culture.*

industry. In an economy where the primary currency was once divisive as often as it was neutral, there is an accelerating drive to position inclusivity as the primary currency. This is to say, what makes a meme funny—its divisiveness, its neutrality, or its inclusivity?

The progressive counterculture's task is to alter the content that the meme economy values. This ambition differentiates the counterculture as a novel effort, and not a cultural trend. Ideologically speaking, many memes are neither alt-right nor progressive—merely bits of neutrally charged humor. But progressive creators are not interested in encouraging a neutral humor status quo; they would prefer a positive status quo in which cultural and comedic currencies are rooted in principles of morality. This desire is indicative of the counterculture's truly revolutionary aim—which is to value inclusivity in an arena that historically values exclusivity.

This approach of recalibrating meme culture attacks the alt-right on two fronts. On one front, by transferring value away from divisiveness and onto inclusivity, progressives are necessarily reducing the maximum amount of influence the alt-right can continue to exert. On the other, progressives are creating a unique style of memes that widens the consumer base, meaning the alt-right's grip is becoming increasingly diluted. These effects of progressive counter-culturalism synergize into what is best described as a reclamation of internet influence.

To achieve its aims, the counterculture relies on aesthetics. Aesthetics in this particular context means the intersection of ethos, art, diversity, philosophy, and crucially, pastel colors. While this counterculture community is a more recent development than the alt-right fringe communities that have existed since the early 2000s, its emphasis on a welcoming aesthetic over a defining ideology has already shown promising results. Instagram meme account @on_a_downward_spiral boasts nearly 300k followers and unashamedly declares in its bio: "if ur transphobic, racist, overall terrible u WILL be blocked." Another Instagram account, @seize_the_memes is even more outspoken in their political dispositions with a string of descriptions in their bio, including "pro-Marxism, pro-feminism, pro-BLM, anti-capitalism, anti-gender binary," among many more. This page has over 200k followers, far from an easy feat even for the most politically neutral meme pages.

What does all of this say about the counterculture? The successes of wildly different progressive meme pages signals that it is not politics that draws consumers into this type of content. Rather, it is a deeper underlying principle all these pages seem to share: respect for human dignity—basic kindness, empathy, and inclusivity of various groups. However, I would be remiss to gloss over the visuals and irony these content creators invoke as well. No progressive meme counterculture is complete without its arsenal of pastel color palettes, celebrations of diversity, deconstruction of antiquated social norms, reflections on the human condition, and occasional bouts of existentialism.

In witnessing the advent of a new cultural push-back, one might wonder if they should support it. Before answering, I would clarify that progressive meme culture is only a push-back community insofar as it is working to dismantle the use of bigotry within comedy. And certainly, some individual creators in the sect possess non-mainstream beliefs, but the essence of this coalition is one of universality, collaboration, and appreciation—hardly anything to be fearful of. Another critical notation to make on the support of progressivism is that of the groups' politics.

Politics within the progressive community are neither homogeneous nor all-consuming. Unlike the alt-right, where the entire syndicate is predicated upon a set of bigoted beliefs, the progressive community is not based upon any specific principle other than that of human dignity.

With that being said, the progressive meme counterculture is something Harvard students should support. Not only is it working to dismantle a deadly radicalization pipeline, but it is also a great reminder that we are all intrinsically valuable, beautiful humans. It is also very funny.

CHRISTIAN BROWDER '23 (CHRISTIANBROWDER@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) THINKS ONE CRUCIAL STEP TO FLATTENING HIERARCHIES IS THAT EVERYONE DISCOVERS THEIR INNER CATBOY AND GIRLBOSS.

ILLUSTRATION BY CHRISTIAN BROWDER '23

# WEIGHT ROOM MADNESS

## Potential scenarios that may have led to the drastically different weight rooms

### by OLIVER ADLER '24

**#1**: Some of the athletes in the women's tournament advocated for there to be a weight room with only one rack of weights.

#2: The men were originally supposed to play at the University of San Antonio (the location of the women's tournament) and use the one-rack weight room, while the women were supposed to play in Indianapolis with a sufficient amount of weights. However, a senior at the University of San Antonio pulled a classic senior prank and switched the plane tickets of the two groups, causing all sorts of weight room and non-weight room chaos.

#3: Aliens.

#4: A group of pirates hijacked a truck of implements designated for the women's tournament, leaving only one rack of weights as a sign that they mean business.

#5: A group of pirates, who are also gym rats, hijacked a truck of implements designated for the women's tournament, leaving only one rack of weights as a sign that these pirates are in really good shape and should not be toiled with.

#6: The "rest of the weights" that "totally existed" and were in the weight room the night before the competitors got to the hotel were the center of a competition of thievery between two rival thieves.

#7:

"So we have 30 benches, 40 barbells, 300 dumbbells, 50 kettlebells, and various other gym equipment. That should be sufficient for the men in Indianapolis, right?"

"I don't know, maybe throw in another 15 dumbbells for them."

"I just remembered the women's tournament. They're going to need some of those weights."

"Yeah, you're right. Redirect those 15 dumbbells to San Antonio."

#8:

"Oh my gosh, we forgot to provide a weight room for the women's tournament. What are we going to do?!"

"Relax. What does a weight room look like anyways? A few dozen dumbbells, a few benches, and some barbells? That's enough for 68 people, right?"

"I mean, I know I was panicked before, but we're the NCAA, not the Government. We can't just toss money around like them."

"So what, like half of that?"

"Something like that."

#9:

"Well, it seems we've got everything prepared for the tournaments: men's and women's."

"Hotels, Covid-19 tests, referees, access to practice and weight room facilities. All this worked out?"

"Weight rooms. Let me check that one out...yep. Says here we have weight rooms in both Indianapolis and San Antonio."

"And they're about the same or relatively the same?"

"More or less."

"Sounds good to me."

#10:

"Everything's set for the tournaments."

"Weight rooms? What about weight rooms? Weight rooms are the most important part."

"It says here that we have weight rooms in Indianapolis and San Antonio. 300 dumbbells, 30 benches, 40 barbells, 50 kettlebells, and various other implements to Indiana. 15 dumbbells to Texas. Sounds good?"

"Wait a minute, this is insane. We need 350 dumbbells in Texas."

"Good call."

Some of these scenarios are exaggerated. The men's tournament weight room only had 200 dumbbells and the women's tournament had 10.

NCAA President Mark Emmert has since apologized for the discrepancy in men and women's weight rooms, stating, "this is not something that should have happened and, should we ever conduct a tournament like this again, will ever happen again."

In response to outcry from athletes, public officials, and celebrities, the NCAA revamped weight rooms in San Antonio overnight, making them nearly identical to those in Indianapolis. For many who have fought for equality in sports and fought against the NCAA as an organization, this situation is an unsurprising disappointment. For those in support of the NCAA as an organization, reevaluate yourself.

*OLIVER ADLER '24 (OLIVERADLER@COLLEGE.HARVARD.EDU) HAS NEVER BEEN IN A WEIGHT ROOM.*

*PHOTOS TAKEN BY NCAA MARCH MADNESS ATHLETES*



THE MEN'S .

## "'I JUST REMEMBERED THE WOMEN'S TOURNAMENT.'"



THE WOMEN'S .

WE BELONG TO NoOne BUT OURSELVES