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How Some Would Level the Playing Field: Free Harvard Degrees

By STEPHANIE SAUL

Should Harvard be free?

That is the provocative question posed by a slate of candidates running for the Board of Overseers at Harvard, which helps set strategy for the university. They say Harvard makes so much money from its \$37.6 bil-

lion endowment that it should stop charging tuition to undergraduates.

But they have tied the notion to another, equally provocative question: Does Harvard short-change Asian-Americans in admissions?

Their argument is that if Harvard were free, more highly qualified students from all back-

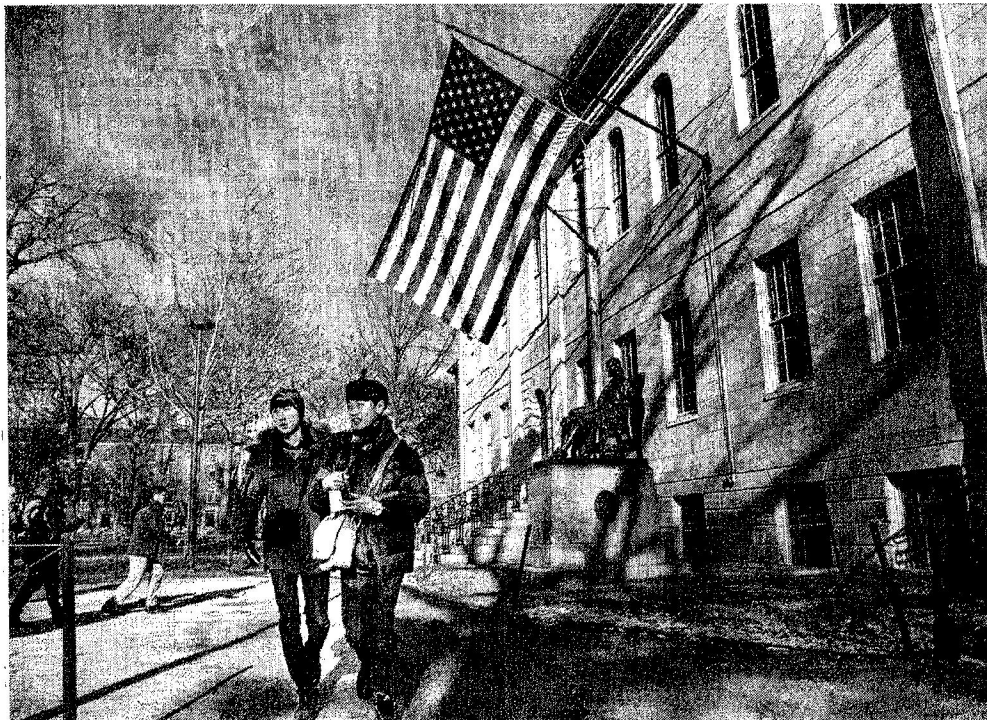
grounds would apply, and the university would no longer have trouble balancing its class for racial or ethnic diversity — making sure, they say, that Asian-Americans do not lose out.

The slate of five candidates was put together by Ron Unz, a conservative California software entrepreneur who has sponsored ballot initiatives opposing bilin-

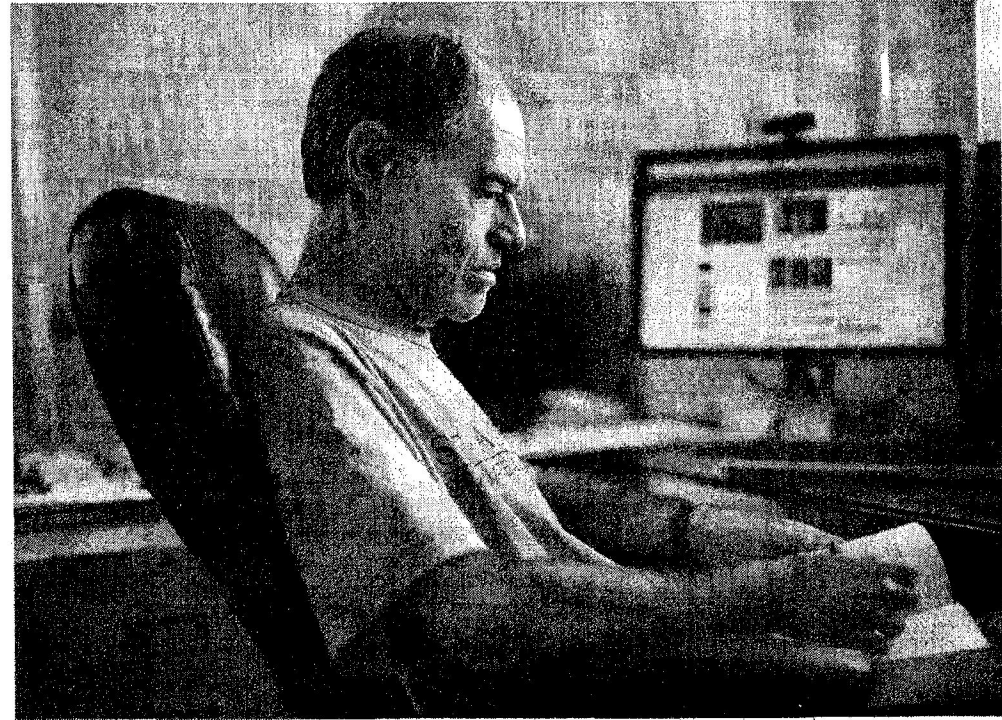
gual education. Although the campaign, “Free Harvard, Fair Harvard,” includes one left-leaning member — the consumer advocate Ralph Nader — Mr. Unz and the other three candidates have written or testified extensively against affirmative action, opposing race-based admissions.

Their positions are in lock step

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CHARLIE MAHONEY FOR THE NEW YORK TIMES



JIM WILSON/THE NEW YORK TIMES

At left, tourists and prospective students visited the Harvard campus in Cambridge, Mass., on Thursday. Ron Unz, right, has organized a slate of candidates for the university's Board of Overseers.

How Some Would Level the Playing Field: Tuition-Free Harvard Diplomas

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with claims in a federal lawsuit accusing the university of discriminating against Asian-Americans in admissions. Harvard has denied the accusations.

Coincidence or not, the plaintiffs in that case are seeking from Harvard exactly what the Unz slate wants: disclosure of data showing how the university's freshman class is selected each year.

The politically charged data holds the potential to reveal whether Harvard bypasses better-qualified Asian-American candidates in favor of whites, blacks, Hispanics and the children of the wealthy and powerful, the group argues.

"Our focus is entirely on greater transparency in admissions," Mr. Unz said, "namely urging Harvard to provide much more detailed information on how they select the very small slice of applicants receiving offers of admission, in order to curb the huge potential abuse possible under the entirely opaque system."

Whatever the political motivations of the slate, Mr. Unz, a Harvard alumnus, and the other members have hit on two increasingly contentious issues in

higher education: ballooning college costs and affirmative action.

The expense of college has become a hot topic in the presidential race, with several candidates proposing solutions ranging from government-financed tuition to private investors' financing of school expenses in exchange for a share of an individual's future earnings. Lawmakers on Capitol Hill have proposed an idea similar to the one held by Mr. Unz's slate — that college endowments be tapped to cover tuition.

The United States Supreme Court is considering whether race should be used as a factor in college admissions. As so-called underrepresented minorities — blacks, Hispanics and Native Americans — get a boost at Harvard and many other colleges, some Asian-Americans are among those who say they are not treated fairly.

If Harvard abolishes tuition for undergrads, Mr. Nader said, "it will ricochet across the Ivy League."

Maybe. Officials at Harvard suggested that even if the slate were to win, the idea is a non-starter, pointing out that the endowment is split into thousands of funds designated for specific uses that have nothing to do with

undergraduates.

"There is a common misconception that endowments, including Harvard's, can be accessed like bank accounts, used for anything at any time as long as funds are available," Jeff Neal, a Harvard spokesman, said. "In reality, Harvard's flexibility in spending from the endowment is limited by the fact that it must be maintained in perpetuity and that it is largely restricted by the explicit wishes of those who contributed the endowed funds."

Mr. Neal also said that although tuition is high, Harvard, like many universities with large endowments, is generous with financial aid, awarding more than \$1.4 billion to undergraduates in the past decade.

But Mr. Unz says that even with potential aid, prospective low-income applicants may be discouraged by the published tuition of \$45,000 a year.

The idea of free tuition paid for by endowment income has also gained traction in Congress. College endowments held \$516 billion in 2014, with 74 percent of the money held by 11 percent of institutions, according to a Congressional Research Service report in December. The average return in 2014 was 15.5 percent, the report said, but the colleges spent only

4.4 percent. By law, those are tax-exempt earnings.

Lawmakers have proposed requiring that about 90 colleges with endowments of \$1 billion or more spend about 25 percent of their annual earnings for tuition assistance — or forfeit their tax exemptions.

Representative Tom Reed, a New York Republican who is behind the proposal, said this would

A debate touching on high college costs and affirmative action.

partly address a crisis in college costs for low- and middle-income families.

At universities like Harvard with large endowments, Mr. Reed said, "if my math is correct, that would essentially wipe out any tuition bill that a child would be responsible for."

Mr. Unz, whose 2012 data analysis of admissions at Harvard and other Ivy League institutions is cited in the case against the university, said his slate was not pressing to abolish affirmative

action at Harvard, but was only seeking more information. But several members of the group are known for their past advocacy against using race in admissions.

One is Lee C. Cheng, a Harvard graduate and chief legal counsel for the online electronics retailer Newegg.com. He is co-founder of an organization that filed a brief in support of the white plaintiff in the lawsuit against the University of Texas that is before the Supreme Court.

Mr. Cheng is also quoted in the suit against Harvard, which was brought by Students for Fair Admissions.

Another member of the slate is Stuart Taylor Jr., a former reporter for The New York Times who got his law degree from Harvard and is co-author of a 2012 book contending that affirmative action harms minority students. And another is Stephen Hsu, a physicist and vice president at Michigan State University who has written against the use of race in college admissions.

Mr. Nader, who also got his law degree from Harvard, said the admissions system has been "bollixed up for decades" by legacies and other preferences.

In court documents filed in the University of Texas case, Har-

vard says a victory for the plaintiffs in the Students for Fair Admissions lawsuit would overturn its efforts to build a racially diverse class.

The Board of Overseers, with 30 members elected for rotating six-year terms, is the second most powerful board at the university. Members are generally elected from nominees selected by the Harvard Alumni Association.

To be placed on the ballot, other candidates must get petitions signed this month by 201 Harvard graduates.

Mr. Unz, who these days is busy collecting signatures, believes his group stands a good chance. Part of his strategy apparently relies on low turnout among the 320,000 or so alumni, combined with the hope that an estimated 15,000 to 20,000 Asian-American graduates will be energized by the "Fair Harvard" plank.

This is not the first time a candidate slate has tried to influence the board. In one case, in 1991, a Harvard Law School student named Barack Obama was one of three candidates running on a slate called the Harvard-Radcliffe Alumni Against Apartheid.

It lost.