

Harvard Extension School • Bonobos • Sports Stars in Stitches

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The True Cost of Grade Inflation

Harvard leaders want to
curb the abundance of A's.
It might not be easy.

HES classes in the 1960s were taught to sailors on a Navy submarine.



Connie Askin, A.L.B. '93

The nonprofit CEO says HES “opened up the world,” recalling the “thrilling intellectual energy” in the classroom after a long workday and a bus ride into Cambridge.

only way I could get a degree,” says Morse, who concentrated in humanities and graduated *cum laude*. Some semesters she took four courses, other semesters only one or two. “And then there were times when, you know, I didn’t have electricity,” she says, because she was out in the woods leading a trip, “and so it was not possible to take classes. The flexibility was very important.”

Ariel Gamiño, A.L.M. '03, the HES alumni association president, took his own winding path through higher education. He arrived in the United States from Mexico at 17, and after learning English, studied computer science in community college before graduating from the University of Texas at Austin. He stumbled upon HES years later while living in Boston, when he found out that his employer would reimburse his course tuition.

At first, he just explored new interests—photography, psychology—but then he realized he could get a degree. Gamiño spent the next five years studying for a master’s in software engineering, eventually using his education to land a job in artificial intelligence. “People who attend the Extension School want to keep learning,” he says.

The average age of HES students is mid-30s, and most are mid-career, so transcripts and test scores don’t mean as much. Instead, with the earn-your-way-in model, “we get to see what type of academic work they can do now,”

hungry for a college education. She moved to Boston and got a job as a secretary, then enrolled in classes at HES.

Anna Soltys Morse, A.L.B. '18, was a child of academics for whom school never quite fit. After a failed start at college, she spent several years working as a wilderness guide and dogsledder. Now she works all over the world as an acrobat.

“This was the

Coleman, the DCE dean, says. “Can they handle the rigor of the program? And by the time they finish the three courses, they know what they’re getting into. And we know who they are.”

The courses themselves also retain much of the school’s founding DNA. There are now dozens of subject areas for students to choose from—including modern-day fields such as finance, digital media, and industrial psychology—but liberal arts remain at the heart of the curriculum. To earn a bachelor’s degree, for instance, students must take courses in the sciences, social sciences, and humanities, as well as in a foreign language and moral reasoning. Many HES classes are taught by Harvard faculty members (the exact number fluctuates, but this year, it’s roughly one-third of the courses). Other classes are led by faculty members from other universities or industry experts outside academia. Anthony Amore, the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum’s head of security and the lead investigator in the infamous unsolved 1990 heist, teaches a class on art crime, a part of the HES museum studies program; Hugh Fink, a former *Saturday Night Live* writer, teaches television comedy sketch writing.

In describing why they teach there, HES instructors often echo the Lowell Institute ethos. Kevin Madigan, the Winn research professor of ecclesiastical history at Harvard Divinity

School, talks about HES’s ability to distribute

Harvard’s “unparalleled blessings” to students around the world. Before online courses were the norm, he taught a Saturday morning seminar on campus for many years. “I was always impressed that students would drive up from New York on Friday night,” he says. “That’s dedication.”

Some travel from farther away. George Wendt (not the actor from *Cheers*), A.L.M. '11, who now teaches at HES, got a master’s in management while simultaneously attending law school at Tulane.

During summer and winter breaks, he would fly from New Orleans to take classes on Harvard’s campus. “You might have to sacrifice your sleep and your hairline, but it can be done,” he says. “And it’s absolutely worth it.”

Wendt’s frequent co-in-



Ariel Gamiño, A.L.M. '03

“When you’re taking classes,” says the software engineer, “you feel the weight of history—Harvard’s history, but also the Extension School’s.”