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Harvard Business School Case Study: Gender Equity

BOSTON — When the members of the Harvard Business School class of 2013 gathered in May to celebrate the end of their studies, there was little visible evidence of the experiment they had undergone for the last two years. As they stood amid the brick buildings named after businessmen from Morgan to Bloomberg, black-and-crimson caps and gowns united the 905 graduates into one genderless mass.

But during that week's festivities, the Class Day speaker, a standout female student, alluded to "the frustrations of a group of people who feel ignored." Others grumbled that another speechmaker, a former chief executive of a company in steep decline, was invited only because she was a woman. At a reception, a male student in tennis whites blurted out, as his friends laughed, that much of what had occurred at the school had "been a painful experience."

He and his classmates had been unwitting guinea pigs in what would have once sounded like a far-fetched feminist fantasy: What if Harvard Business School gave itself a gender makeover, changing its curriculum, rules and social rituals to foster female success?

The country's premier business training ground was trying to solve a seemingly intractable problem. Year after year, women who

year-olds felt like they were "back in kindergarten or first grade," said Sri Batchu, one of the graduating men.

Students were demanding more women on the faculty, a request the deans were struggling to fulfill. And they did not know what to do about developments like female students dressing as Playboy bunnies for parties and taking up the same sexual rating games as men. "At each turn, questions come up that we've never thought about before," Nitin Nohria, the new dean, said in an interview.

The administrators had no sense of whether their lessons would last once their charges left campus. As faculty members pointed out, the more exquisitely gender-sensitive the school environment became, the less resemblance it bore to the real business world. "Are we trying to change the world 900 students at a time, or are we preparing students for the world in which they are about to go?" a female professor asked.

The Beginning

Nearly two years earlier, in the fall of 2011, Neda Navab sat in a class participation workshop, incredulous. The daughter of Iranian immigrants, Ms. Navab had been the president of her class at Columbia, advised chief executives as a McKinsey &

"I had no idea who, as a single woman, I was meant to be on campus," she said later. Were her priorities "purely professional, were they academic, were they to start dating someone?"

As she scooped bread at the product-trial-slash-date at the Ethiopian restaurant, she realized that she had not caught the names of

That was only one out of 10 sessions. At most of the others, the men contributed little. Some of them, and even a few women, had grown to openly resent the deans' emphasis on gender, using phrases like "ad nauseam" and "shoved down our throats," protesting that this was not what they had paid to learn.

Patrick Erker was not among the naysayers — he considered himself a feminist and a fan of the deans. As an undergraduate at Duke, he had managed the women's basketball team, wiping their sweat from the floor and picking up their dirty jerseys.

But as he silently listened to the discussion, he decided the setup was all wrong: a discussion of a sex-related episode they knew little about, with "89 other people judging every word," led by professors who would be grading them later that semester.

with real-life experiences. Because the pool of businesswomen was smaller, female professors were more likely to be academics, and students saw female stars as exceptions.

"The female profs I had were clearly weaker than the male ones," said Halle Tecco, a 2011 graduate. "They weren't able to really run the classroom the way the male ones could."

Take the popular second-year courses team-taught by Richard S. Ruback, a top finance professor, and Royce G. Yudkoff, a co-founder of a private equity firm that managed billions of dollars. The men taught students, among other lessons, how to start a "search fund," a pool of money to finance them while they found and acquired a company. In recent years, search funds had become one of the hottest, riskiest and most potentially lucrative pursuits for graduates of top business schools — shortcuts to becoming owners and chief executives.

The two professors were blunt and funny, pushing a student one moment, ribbing another one the next. They embodied the financial promise of a Harvard business degree: if the professors liked you, students knew, they might advise and even back you.

As Ms. Frei reviewed her tapes at night, making notes as she went along, she looked for ways to instill that confidence. The women, who plainly wanted to be liked, sometimes failed to assert their authority — say, by not calling out a student who arrived late. But when they were challenged, they turned too tough, responding defensively ("Where did you get that?").

Ms. Frei urged them to project warmth and high expectations at the same time, to avoid trying to bolster their credibility with soliloquies about their own research. "I think the class might be a little too much about you, and not enough about the students," she would tell them the next day.

By the end of the semester, the teaching scores of the women had improved so much that she thought they were a mistake. One professor had shot to a 6 from a 4. Yet all the attention, along with other efforts to support female faculty, made no immediate impact on the numbers of female teachers. So few women were coming to teach at the school that evening out the numbers seemed almost impossible.

As their final semester drew to a close, the students were preoccupied with the looming question of their own employment. Like graduates before them, the class of 2013 would to some degree part by gender after graduation, with more men going into higher-paying areas like finance and more women going into lower-paying ones like marketing.

Ms. Navab, who had started dating one of the men — with an M.D. and an M.B.A. — from the Ethiopian dinner, had felt freer to focus on her career once she was paired off. She was happy with her job at a Californ

