

## **Open Minds, New Possibilities**

Though it is sometimes an object of considerable suspicion, the academic calendar is essential to our educational system. Students could not study 12 months a year without interruption, and still make the best use of their educational opportunities. The land should lie fallow for a few months to be fertile for the next sowing. Harvard does have a summer term, but even the few Harvard students who attend it are not studying year-round; there are substantial breaks before and after summer school.

Why should there be an annual cycle of intense periods of intellectual cultivation alternating with times when most students are following nonacademic pursuits? The brain does not require a period of recovery from labor as the body does. Even if it did, the nonacademic activities of most students over the summer hardly allow for mental relaxation. Many write for newspapers, program computers, do research in laboratories, intern in hospitals, organize political campaigns, or manage summer camps. These are not leisurely activities, even though they do not require the physical labor that some other students undertake.

Of course most students need to make money over the summer, so that they can spend it to attend college during the other months. So there is a natural fiscal aspect to the academic cycle. But the process of intellectual refreshment is as important as the refilling of purses. Not because it is easier to work hard after one has been relaxing, but because it is easier to understand something when all of the informational ingredients have been simmering on the back burner for a month or two. We understand things better when we have not been thinking about them for awhile.

Many times I have heard an advisee say to me in September, "You know, I have been thinking about it, and I have decided to do X." That never happens in November or March. "X" in this case might be applying to graduate school, or working for a time instead of going to graduate school right away; changing concentrations from science to nonscience, or vice versa; taking up a research project, or dropping one in order to pursue another interest; giving up a sport to study, or cutting back an academic plan to devote more time to debating or politics. In many cases these decisions have not really been the subject of a direct mental assault, but simply reflect the way the pieces of the puzzle settled in place after a period of jostling by the summer's travails.

Students, though they don't like to admit it, study hard at Harvard; and they sometimes get trapped into a narrow line of thinking by the day to day intensity of their studies. Vacations, which are rarely spent in relaxation, provide them the opportunity to realize what they have discovered while they were studying, and to gain the courage to act on what they have assimilated. A term or a year off can provide the same kind of respite for sorting things out; almost invariably students who take time off to reconsider their priorities or to address confusions of direction return to Harvard with renewed energy and clarity of vision.

Most academic changes of path are positive acts; not getting out of one field, but getting into another. The opportunity to come to a decision to let go of what we used to think we loved, and to embrace something new we have discovered, is a precious freedom available in college to a degree that cannot be recaptured later. And it is a special freedom of colleges like ours, that do not simply train students in disciplines they had chosen before arriving here, but also show them new possibilities, teach them to open their minds, and urge upon them the courage to act on what they have learned.