

## Harvard as an Urban College

It is a curious phenomenon at Harvard that students are attracted to the College in part because of its Cambridge location and its proximity to Boston, and yet seniors often report that they have rarely ventured into either city. Certainly there is so much happening on the Harvard campus that it can be hard to keep up with the opportunities within walking distance beyond it. On one fairly typical evening this spring, for example, those tired of studying could dine with and hear a lecture by author Pamela Thomas-Graham, attend a reading by Nobel-Prizewinning poet Seamus Heaney, join an organized rally protesting Harvard's labor practices, or listen to a panel on the importance of getting more sleep. Any of these options was likely to be more interesting than the MBTA ("T") subway ride into Boston just to take in a newly released movie.

Yet there are some utterly unparalleled opportunities in Boston and Cambridge, all of them are easy to reach by public transportation, and most require little advanced planning. The Museum of Fine Arts is a marvel; one can get lost in it for days, without even leaving a single century or continent. It's 85 cents away on the T, and a Harvard student ID is all one needs to get in free. A few steps away is the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum, a gem on a more manageable scale. It's a bit harder to get into Symphony Hall, but student-priced rush tickets are often available just before concerts by the Boston Symphony Orchestra; and there are many other performances of note in this famous building. For a different kind of enjoyment, Fenway Park is right on the Green Line; most Red Sox games do not sell out, and tickets are often available on the street around game time for a few dollars. (A judge recently ruled that buying and selling tickets is not illegal as long as the amount paid is no more than the price printed on the ticket.)

The day-to-day life of the city is as attractive as its great monuments. There are inexpensive and interesting eateries everywhere: a short bus ride on Massachusetts Avenue in either direction from Harvard Square can transport a student to Greece, Jamaica, or the Middle East, and a subway ride across the river can reveal the delights of Asia in Chinatown or of Italy in the North End. For the determined explorer, these are just appetizers.

Students line the banks of the Charles River reading on warm days, but the Boston Common and Public Garden provide a different perspective and equally comfortable grass on which to study. Including smaller parks scattered throughout Boston and Cambridge neighborhoods, there is more green space in the area than in most American cities—students can easily find a personal

favorite place in which to “people watch” while they ponder Wittgenstein.

No city is totally safe, and we advise anyone walking around Boston or Cambridge before or after dark to keep their wits about them, to be aware of their surroundings, and to be sensitive to their own security. But most parts of Boston and Cambridge are delightful on a warm afternoon and safe after dark, and a good long walk can be an education in itself. There are structured walking tours, including the famous Freedom Trail that covers many Revolutionary War sites, and the Black Heritage Trail, which includes a large collection of sites pertaining to the lives of free African-Americans before the Civil War. Boston is small enough geographically that natural destinations can easily result in interesting walks. For example, I took a freshman advisee to a Red Sox game one Sunday in September, and she walked

back to Harvard; it took an hour or so, but it began a four-year habit of walking around Boston and Cambridge. A walk along the Boston waterfront would take in skyscrapers, museums, the Aquarium, and the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to see a truly mammoth construction project in full swing—the “Big Dig” depression of the central vehicular artery through the city and the erection of the largest central-stayed suspension bridge in the world.

Harvard is deeply embedded in local history—and the nation’s—and yet was

very much isolated from Boston with an independent history for many years after its founding. The John Hancock Tower in Copley Square has a splendid observation point from its top floor, from which one can see just how far “Newtowne,” as Cambridge was originally called, really would have been from colonial Boston. The Hancock observation deck also has topographical models of the city at various points in its history, so one can see how the Back Bay really is filled land, created in the 19th century out of a river basin that once isolated the peninsula of Boston.

Six U.S. presidents graduated from Harvard, and students can easily visit historical sites in the area for the three of them who grew up locally. At the Adams National Historical Site in Quincy, they can learn about the world in which John and John Quincy Adams lived. The John F. Kennedy Library and

Museum in Dorchester illuminates the life and work of a more modern president. Both sites are accessible on the Red Line for 85 cents.

Harvard also has connections to Boston and Cambridge through its own architecture and artwork, and it is not hard to weave together interesting points of comparison in the urban area. Charles Bulfinch, who designed University Hall where the “John Harvard” statue sits, was also the architect of the Massachusetts State House, with its golden dome atop Beacon Hill. Henry H. Richardson, the master of the neoromanesque style exemplified by Sever Hall and Austin Hall at Harvard, also designed the magnificent Trinity Church in Copley Square. John Singer Sargent produced the murals

memorializing the First World War at the top of Widener Library's main staircase; his more famous paintings adorn the walls of major Boston art museums.

The cities of Boston and Cambridge should ideally be an extension of the Harvard campus, and I would urge parents dropping off their children at Harvard to take them on a commercial tour, such as the Duck Tour, just for fun, orientation, and encouragement to explore. Students who take the time to make the cities their own will leave Harvard with stronger connections to the place.