

3 December 2009

Drew Gilpin Faust, President of Harvard University
Massachusetts Hall

Steven E. Hyman, Provost
Massachusetts Hall

Michael Smith, Dean
Faculty of Arts and Sciences
University Hall

Dear President Faust, dear Provost Hyman, dear Dean Smith:

We write as faculty deeply concerned about the state of Harvard's libraries. As acknowledged by the recently issued report of the Task Force on the University Library, Harvard's libraries stand at a crossroads. The decisions made over the next few months promise to shape the future of the library for generations to come. In responding to the Task Force's report, we wish both to acknowledge the enormous amount of thought and analysis that has gone into its preparation and presentation and, no less, to enter into the process of consultation that it initiates and invites.

There is much in the report that we can embrace. We agree that the changing landscape of libraries and information technology requires a broad review and rethinking of strategies and policies. Harvard's libraries clearly could profit from centralization, for instance, in administrative functions, in vendor relations, and in shared information technology. Although we primarily are users of Harvard College Library (HCL), we are very aware of the intricate interconnections, intellectual as well as financial, among the various divisions of Harvard University Library (HUL). With this in mind, we support the report's opening statement that defines its purpose as, "not to wring resources out of the libraries, but rather to recommend reforms that would allow the libraries to invest their resources more heavily in academic priorities." Above all, our comments focus on that aspect of the report that most immediately concerns us as both scholars and teachers: namely, collections.

On this all-important subject, the report's figures are seriously misleading. The chart, "Total Library Acquisitions Expenditures FY 04–08" (p. 50), would make it appear that acquisitions have enjoyed a modest but fairly steady increase in recent years. More revealing is the subsequent chart, "Total Volumes Added per Year FY 03–08" (p. 51), which shows that despite such increases (some of them due to short-term, one-time cash infusions from extra-ordinary sources that in and of themselves constitute an acknowledgment of desperate need), the number of volumes added each year has suffered a rather more precipitous decline. Extending the charts backwards in time would show that while funds have held more or less constant over the past five years, actual and inflated dollars have declined over the course of the several previous decades. To focus on our immediate concern, namely, collections in HCL, we note that while

Harvard has spent far more (as much as 30% more) than either Yale or Princeton in the recent past, acquisitions at Widener have now either fallen or are in danger of falling behind both of these institutions (see Charts I–II, both generated within the Library, appended at the end of this letter). We have learned that with the support of its Provost, Princeton, without cutting staff, actually managed to increase its acquisitions budget last year, as did Columbia (half of the annual 8% promised to the new librarian). In contrast, Harvard’s library has had to contend with deep cuts. It is no longer a question of keeping up with the Joneses; we are already losing our position as the Jones of university libraries. Looking ahead, the picture becomes gloomier still: it has been projected that over the next two years the acquisition budget will be cut by as much as 25% per annum! This would be nothing short of a catastrophe.

While over the past twelve months, cries of “crisis” have become commonplace, in the case of the Library, the systematic erosion of resources has far deeper roots. The period of neglect extends back to the 1990s and has complex causes, among them, as noted in the report, the decline of the dollar, and the skyrocketing cost of journals and digital resources. Not noted in the report, however, and no less important, must be counted what can only be described as a failure of will from around 2000 on the part of the University to maintain the library. Still not as widely known as it should be is the fact that in recent years the library was forced to accept the burden of servicing the debt incurred as a result of the Widener renovations, an unprecedented shift that exemplifies the disastrous consequences of building without having raised sufficient funds. Past pleas from individuals, as well as from the FAS Standing Committee and the Visiting Committee, have had little or inadequate effect (apart, President Faust, from your enlightened one-time injection of acquisition funds).

We welcome the report’s expressed desire to see savings generated by reform reinvested in what it rightly calls “academic priorities.” Actions, however, speak louder than words, and recent actions do not bode well in terms of priorities. Staff cuts have left a single full-time bibliographer for all of Western Europe (English-language publications aside). Overall, Widener is down from ten bibliographers to six, and this at a time when, in light of the globalization of the curriculum, more bibliographical expertise is desperately needed. Over the same period of time, the library has created four positions in Public Communications that, inter alia, attend to blogs and Twitter postings for library users. Does this reflect a proper sense of priorities for the world’s greatest university research library?

On this note, the report speaks of the need to exploit new technologies to improve communication with library users. If the new version of HOLLIS is representative of such approaches, however, one can only be skeptical. Regular users and even librarians that we have spoken to feel the new HOLLIS represents a dumbing-down of a finely-tuned research instrument. Among other drawbacks, it does not permit searches by call number or subject headings. The much-touted “word cloud” generates verbiage as garbage; it even encodes a subtle condescension in suggesting random associations, as if users do not know what they are searching for. The report also emphasizes access over acquisitions: a tempting, even alluring, formula. The problems inherent in such an approach, however, are too easily glossed over. New publications of the kind required for cutting-edge research are not easily borrowed, and interlibrary loan remains inefficient, despite digitization, especially for students seeking to finish papers within a limited amount of time or scholars facing a deadline. The proposal to ship

students and scholars to an offsite depository ignores the realities of research, which often requires repeated access and comparison with items held elsewhere on campus. Unless handled with enormous care, consolidating special collections also makes little sense, because it might succeed only in rendering such materials largely inaccessible for teaching. Some old structures need to be shed, but not all such structures are simply hide-bound accidents of accretion. Some have a reason and an established, well-proven track record. Digitization is not a panacea. In some cases, due to ongoing subscription costs, a digitized book finally costs more than purchasing a monograph. Moreover, there remains little financial incentive for publishers and distributors to digitize precisely those specialized publications that set a research library such as Harvard apart.

We as a faculty are being asked to accept further drastic cuts to the library, which will in the end jeopardize future research and teaching. No doubt all parts of the University, the library included, must contribute to dealing with the severe budget crisis in which we find ourselves. Cuts in services may be temporary. Reductions in acquisitions are permanent and can never be made whole.

In conclusion, we welcome the report as an important contribution to an all-important debate about one of Harvard's unique, defining and indispensable resources, past, present and future. We can all agree with Steve Hyman that "[t]he Harvard Library collections are among this University's greatest treasures." Because it is so closely tied to Harvard's identity as a university, the Library is not simply another branch that must take its cuts along with everyone else. Not all cuts are equivalent. No amount of prudent pruning will help if one takes an axe to the trunk. The only good solution is to find ways to restore the acquisitions budget, making up not only for recent cuts, but for the past decade of cuts; otherwise, we risk an irreversible slide that will mark the period 1995–2015 as the onset of Widener's undoing as the world's greatest university research library.

Yours sincerely,

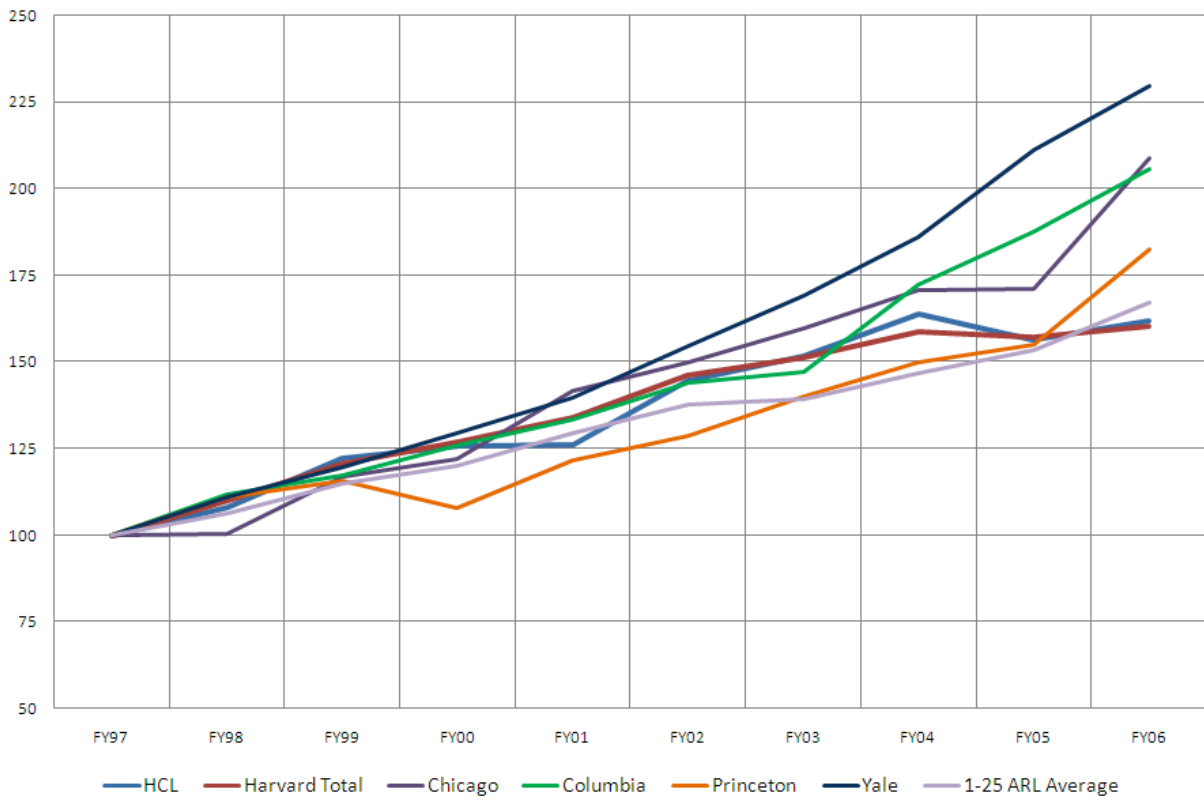
Ali Asani, Near eastern Languages and Literatures
David Armitage, History
Janet Beizer, Romance Languages & Literatures
Theodore C. Bestor, Anthropology
Ruth Bielfeldt, History of Art & Architecture
Suzanne Blier, History of Art & Architecture
Ann Blair, History
François Bovon, Divinity School
Lawrence Buell, English
Peter Burgard, German
Luis Fernández Cifuentes, Romance Languages & Literatures
Lisbeth Cohen, History
Shaye Cohen, Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations
Kathleen Coleman, Classics
Tom Cummins, History of Art & Architecture
Leo Damrosch, English
Emma Dench, Classics
Leland de la Durantaye, English

Daniel Donoghue, English
John Duffy, Classics
Caroline Elkins, History
Mark Elliott, East Asian Languages and Civilizations
James Engell, English
Brad Epps, Romance Languages & Literatures
Frank Fehrenbach, History of Art
Michael Flier, Slavic
Patrick Ford, Celtic
Peter Galison, History of Science/Joseph Pellegrino University Professor
Sean Gallagher, Music
Margorie Garber, English/Comparative Literature/Visual & Environmental Studies
Henry Louis Gates Jr., English/African-American Studies/A. Fletcher University Professor
Mary Gaylord, Romance Languages and Literatures
Luis Manuel Giron-Negron, Romance Languages
Peter Gomes, Plummer Professor of Christian Morals
Andrew Gordon, History
Maria Gough, History of Art & Architecture
Jorie Graham, English
Steven Greenblatt, English/John Cogan University Professor
Virginie Greene, Romance Languages & Literature
Jeffrey F. Hamburger, History of Art & Architecture
John Hamilton, Comparative Literature
James Hankins, History
Joseph Harris, English/Folklore
Wolfhart Heinrichs, Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations
Albert Henrichs, Classics
Michael Herzfeld, Anthropology
Hue-Tam Ho Tai, History
Alice Jardine, Romance Languages & Literature/Women, Gender & Sexuality
Andrew Jewett, History/Social Studies
Christopher Jones, Classics/History
Cemal Kafadar, History
Matthew Kaiser, English
Sean Kelly, Philosophy
Thomas Kelly, Music
Mark Kishlansky, History
Arthur Kleinman, Anthropology
Jim Kloppenberg, History
Smita Lahiri, Anthropology
Michele Lamont, Sociology/African-American Studies
Jill Lepore, History/History and Literature
Mary Lewis, History
Barbara Lewalski, English
Elizabeth Lyman, English
Peter Machinist, Near Eastern Languages and Civilizations
Michael McCormick, History
Christie McDonald, Comparative Literature/Romance Languages & Literature
Catherine McKenna, Celtic
Steven Mitchell, German/Folklore
Richard Moran, Philosophy
Gregory Nagy, Classics, Director of the Center for Hellenic Studies
Afsaneh Najmabadi, History/ Women, Gender, and Sexuality
Guir Necipoglu, History of Art and Architecture

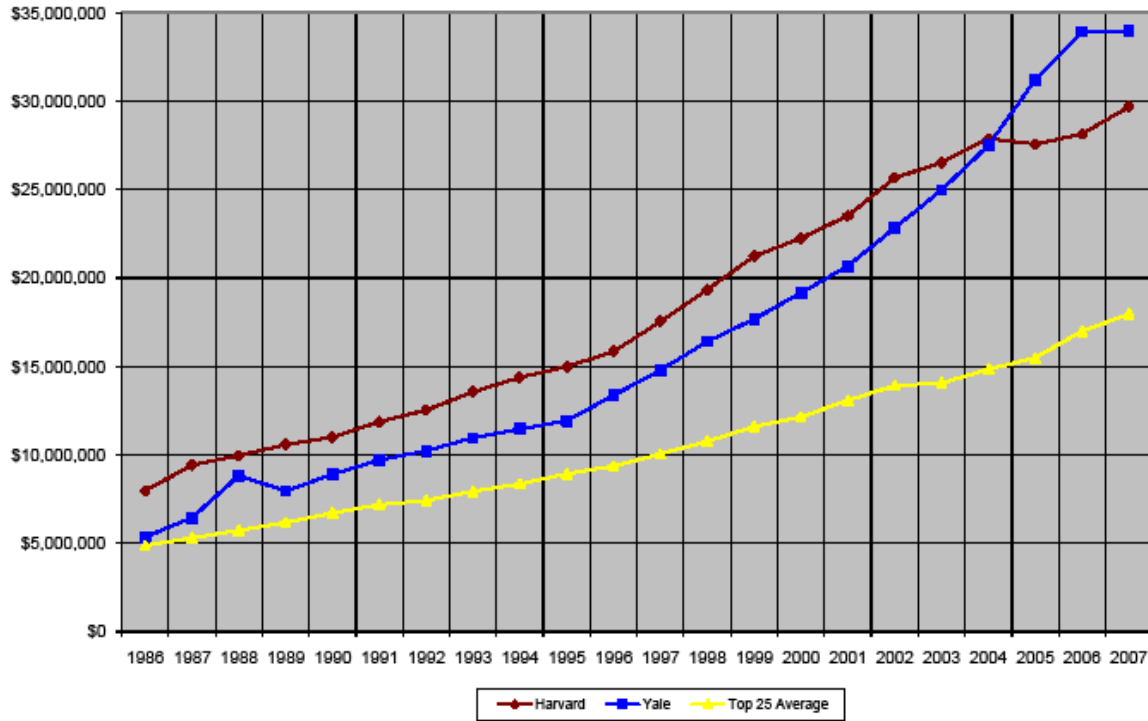
Tomás Ó Cathasaigh, Celtic
Carol Oja, Music
Edward Roger Owen, History
Stephen Owen, East Asian Languages & Civilizations/James Bryan Conant University Professor
Steven Ozment, History
Alina Payne, History of Art & Architecture
Julie Peters, English/Comparative Literature
Donald Pfister, OEB, Dean of Harvard Summer School
Leah Price, English
Jeanne Follansbee Quinn, History and Literature
Alexander Rehding, Music
Eric Rentschler, German
Jennifer Roberts, History of Art & Architecture
Andrew Romig, History & Literature
Judith Ryan, German
Susanna Siegel, Philosophy
Eckehard Simon, German
James Simpson, English
P. Oktor Skjaervo, Near Eastern Languages & Civilizations
Daniel Smail, History
Werner Sollers, African-American Studies
Doris Sommer, Romance Languages & Literatures/African & African American Studies
John Stilgoe, Visual & Environmental Studies
Gisela Striker, Classics/Philosophy
Susan Suleiman, Comparative Literature/Romance Languages & Literature
Maria Tatar, German
Richard Tarrant, Classics
Xiaofei Tian, East Asian Languages and Civilizations
Richard Thomas, Classics
William Todd, Slavic/Comparative Literature
Richard Tuck, Government
Leonard van der Kuijp, Sanskrit
Laurel Thatcher Ulrich, History/300th Anniversary University Professor
Helen Vendler, English/Arthur Kingsley Porter University Professor
Eugene Wang, History of Art & Architecture
Nicholas Watson, English
Michael Witzel, Sanskrit
Christoph Wolff, Music/Adams University Professor
Henri Zerner, History of Art & Architecture
Jan M. Ziolkowski, Classics, Director of Dumbarton Okas

cc: Fellows of Harvard College
Board of Overseers of Harvard College
Visiting Committee to the Harvard College Library
FAS Standing Committee on the Library
Implementation Working Group of the Provostial Task Force on Harvard Libraries
Robert Darnton, Director of HUL
Nancy Cline, Librarian of Harvard College Library
Daniel Donoghue, English
Jeffrey Hamburger, History of Art & Architecture
Richard Wrangham, Vice-Chair, FAS Standing Committee on the Library
Elizabeth Johnson, Chief of Staff for the Librarian of Harvard College

Index Chart: Materials Expenditures for Harvard, HCL, and Selected Peer Libraries, FY1997-2006



Library Material Expenditures
 Harvard, Yale + Top 25 ARL Libraries Average



December 3, 2009

Daniel G. Donoghue
John P. Marquand Professor of English

Jeffrey F. Hamburger
Kuno Francke Professor of German Art and Culture

Richard F. Thomas
Professor of Greek and Latin; Harvard College Professor

Dear Daniel, Jeffrey, and Richard:

As faculty members of the FAS Library Committee, we strongly support the core message of your letter to President Faust, Dean Smith, and Provost Hyman. The primacy and excellence of the Harvard Library are under such serious threat that the long-term interests of the University are at stake. We whole-heartedly endorse the call for restoring the acquisitions budget and prioritizing the needs of the library system.

Sincerely,

Faculty Members of the FAS Standing Committee on the Library

Mohammed Shahab Ahmed, *Assistant Professor of Islamic Studies*
Joyce E. Chaplin, *James Duncan Phillips Professor of Early American History;*
Director of the Charles Warren Center for Studies in American History
Stacey A. Combes, *Assistant Professor of Organismic and Evolutionary Biology*
Tom Conley, *Abbott Lawrence Lowell Professor of Romance Languages and Literatures;*
Chair of Visual and Environmental Studies; Master of Kirkland House
Farish A. Jenkins, Jr., *Professor of Biology and Curator of Vertebrate Paleontology;*
Professor of Anatomy in the Harvard-MIT Division of Health Sciences and Technology;
Alexander Agassiz Professor of Zoology in the Museum of Comparative Zoology
Curtis T. McMullen, *Maria Moors Cabot Professor of the Natural Sciences*
Stephanie Sandler, *Ernest E. Monrad Professor of Slavic Languages and Literatures*
Stuart M. Shieber, *James O. Welch, Jr. and Virginia B. Welch Professor of Computer*
Science; Harvard College Professor; Faculty Director, Office for Scholarly
Communication
Xiaofei Tian, *Professor of Chinese Literature*
Nicholas Watson, *Professor of English*
Richard Wrangham, *Vice-Chair, Ruth Moore Professor of Biological Anthropology;*
Curator of Primate Behavioral Biology in the Peabody Museum of Archaeology
and Ethnology; Harvard College Professor; Master of Currier House

Cc: Robert Darnton, *Chair, Carl H. Pforzheimer University Professor and*
Director of the Harvard University Library
Nancy M. Cline, *Roy E. Larsen Librarian of Harvard College*