



Episode 590: Take That, Harvard: The Free Harvard/Fair Harvard Campaign Gains Steam

Guest: Ron Unz

WOODS: You're always up to something interesting, but for some reason this particular campaign of yours really caught my eye. I guess we're both Harvard alums. I didn't realize that you went there. What house did you live in?

UNZ: Oh, I was in South House right before they renamed it Cabot House.

WOODS: Oh, so you were in the quad.

UNZ: Exactly.

WOODS: Ah, I always thought being in the quad I would feel a little bit removed from the rest of the campus because you have to take a shuttle bus to get there.

UNZ: That was certainly true. I mean, you know, usually I walked, but it wasn't that far a distance.

WOODS: Well, I was assigned — this was back when they had just decided no longer to let people indicate house preferences; they were just going to randomly assign you to a house. So I was assigned to the house that still had this lingering artsy aspect to it, which I had nothing in common with whatsoever. That was Adams House.

UNZ: Ah, Adams House, sure, sure.

WOODS: Yeah, I mean, it's a beautiful house. A little dank and dark, but it's got a beautiful library in it, and on a cold night I wouldn't have to trudge to the library. I had a nice place to study. All right, I'm reminiscing too much. Let's talk about what you're up to with Harvard. You've got kind of a two-fold program here. Let's start with the one that might be less controversial in some circles but certainly is highly controversial to the people who manage Harvard's finances, and that is your argument regarding the payment of tuition. And when you look at the graphs that you have, it's absolutely overwhelming. When you look at the amount of money Harvard earns on the basis of its endowment and then you look at the amount of money Harvard takes in from tuition payments, the tuition payments almost don't even register on the graph. So your conclusion, then, is Harvard should do what?

UNZ: Well, Harvard essentially should abolish undergraduate tuition, because the dollars it receives are absolutely negligible, just as you say, in comparison with their annual investment income. I mean, they basically, Harvard earns on the average 25 times more money each year from its investment income than from its undergraduate tuition. So the logical thing is – whether it's right for Harvard to remain tax exempt is another story – but at the very least, Harvard should abolish undergraduate tuition.

WOODS: Now, there are some legal aspects to this that people at Harvard have thrown back at you. It's interesting, by the way, they feel the need to acknowledge you, which is revealing. Normally you would think they'd just ignore something like this, but they've come back with the claim that the endowment money is in some way legally encumbered and most of it couldn't be used for tuition payment anyway. What did you find about that?

UNZ: Well, what they're saying is perfectly true in that most of it could not be used to cover the same costs as undergraduate tuition, but they don't need most of it. In other words, right now if Harvard can reallocate 4% of its annual investment income, that would be enough to abolish tuition, and the encumbrance, which they've claimed to some media outlets, is that 70% of Harvard's endowment is restricted to certain uses. But that means 30% is completely unrestricted, which is a lot more than the 4% they need to abolish tuition. Furthermore, roughly half of Harvard's annual donations are completely unrestricted, and that sum comes to another \$500 million a year that swamps the amount of money they could get from tuition. So really, to some extent Harvard's trying to blow a little smoke by the media, and I think as soon as the media starts looking into the facts and figures a little bit more clearly, Harvard's attempts will become unsuccessful.

WOODS: How about this question: why should it do this? Why should Harvard get rid of tuition? It can do it, but there are a lot of things that can be done that there's no moral obligation to do. Why should Harvard do this? They're a private institution. They can do what they want.

UNZ: Right, but you have to ask yourself, what is Harvard's purpose in existence. In other words, if the purpose of Harvard University is investing in mortgage derivative securities and private equity tranches, then obviously all their money should be used for that purpose, or at least as much as possible. If the purpose of Harvard is providing a higher education to deserving students, then it simply makes no sense for Harvard to extract large sums of money, sometimes overwhelmingly large sums of money – up to \$240,000 for four years – from families that have a lot less money than Harvard does. I mean, Harvard's a fine institution. I have warm feelings toward it and everything like that. But it's crazy that the seventh largest hedge fund in the world is not only tax exempt but charges tuition for people going to its classes.

WOODS: I read an article that you wrote not too long ago – in fact, we're going to link to it at TomWoods.com/590 – about your recent trip to Cambridge, and you brought all your paperwork and signatures and so on with you. And I guess these are signatures of alumni who are interested in your proposal, and you even mention in the story

standing out in the cold in Harvard Square trying to publicize your campaign. And surely, people are inured in Cambridge to the sight of somebody standing at a table promoting his cause.

UNZ: Exactly. Let me explain. Because of the severe East Coast storm, I decided to really take an early flight so that if the flight were cancelled because of weather, I'd have another day to get out there by the deadline. So I ended up taking an overnight flight Saturday night, getting in Sunday morning, and Harvard's offices didn't open until Monday. So that gave me an extra day out there, and I decided, since I have a day in Cambridge, I might as well take the temperature, so to speak, of the Harvard community by setting up a table and putting up some signs and seeing how many local people would be supporting our project and possibly agreeing to sign the petitions that would get us on the Overseer ballot.

And as it happened, virtually everybody who stopped and asked questions and listened to my answers about why I was there and what we were doing really was quite supportive. Only a few of them were Harvard alumni who could sign our Overseer petitions, but the vast majority of the people there were certainly supportive, and that includes the students. I mean, what we're talking about is a very necessary firm aimed at Harvard University, something that returns it to its proper mission, which is education rather than being a hedge fund. And I think that's something that the vast majority of Harvard alumni who end up voting for the Overseer election will end up supporting as well in a few months' time.

WOODS: Don't they come back at you with, we offer very, very generous financial aid packages to people so that everybody can attend Harvard anyway?

UNZ: Well again, that's a bit of a smokescreen that they've been using for a number of years to sort of pull the wool over the eyes of the media. The truth is anybody who comes from a family whose income is less than \$65,000 a year certainly gets a free education at Harvard. I mean, that I'll certainly grant them. And financial aid is provided to families whose incomes are above that.

But the example I cite, which really shows that financial aid isn't quite as much as they're making it out to be, is the case of a pair of New York City public school teachers. And because New York City is a very expensive place to live, incomes go a lot less far there. So if you're a married pair of New York City public school teachers, and your son or daughter is smart and hard working enough to get into Harvard, the odds are you probably have to spend your entire life savings or the bulk of it to pay for tuition and room and board over the four years. And with Harvard's endowment up now to \$38 billion, I think it's unconscionable that middle class families have to pay such a huge fraction of their life savings to cover their student's tuition at Harvard, and I think it's much more sensible that Harvard pay for it itself.

And you know, we're talking about, again, what amounts to one of the world's largest hedge funds with some little college or school or something attached off to one side for tax purposes, and it's really absurd that a hedge fund with \$38 billion remains

entirely tax free. But at the very least, they shouldn't charge parents huge amounts of money in tuition to have their children attend.

WOODS: Ron, remind me when you — you ran for governor of California some years ago. When was that?

UNZ: Oh, it was a long time ago. It was actually over 20 years ago. It was 1994.

WOODS: Weren't there — how many candidates were there? You did pretty well, I thought.

UNZ: Yeah, I mean, I was very unhappy with Pete Wilson's policies. He was the incumbent Republican governor, and I ended up getting just over a third of the vote in my campaign against him. So you know, coming from nowhere with zero name recognition and everything like that, you know, we certainly did reasonably well. Though to be honest, I never expected to win and, naturally enough, I didn't.

WOODS: Well, I mention that because you're not any stranger to controversy, and I wonder if that has something to do with why you have gotten some media attention as a result of this campaign, and Harvard, I suppose by consequence, has felt the need to respond to you.

UNZ: Well, it's less my campaign — my really very long shot campaign for governor 20 years ago, but since then I've been involved in a lot of other political campaigns. For example, I led the successful campaign to dismantle bilingual education in California a few years after that, and following the success in California, I did very similar campaigns in a number of other states around the country, including Massachusetts, where we won by a huge margin. And I have been involved in a number of other political activities since then, most of them much more successful than my original race in the primary against Pete Wilson.

So you know, because of a lot of political experience that way, I think I've developed a lot of experience in dealing with the media and providing stories of the sort the media are more likely to cover, and that's one of the reasons we were able to get the very nice initial coverage in *The New York Times*. And with *The New York Times* covering our campaign to — our Free Harvard/Fair Harvard campaign for the Board of Overseers, it's obviously a lot easier to get other media outlets interested.

And one thing that really astonished me was a couple of weeks ago, before we'd even finished collecting the necessary signatures to get on the Harvard Overseer ballot, *Harvard* magazine — really high quality alumni magazine — actually came out with a 9,000-word article about our campaign. Really a very detailed, very comprehensive, very even-handed article. So in some ways, when you're talking about trying to sway the opinions of the 300,000 Harvard alumni, probably *Harvard* magazine and *The Harvard Crimson* and publications like that are among the most important media outlets to target, even in some ways maybe more important than, say, *The New*

York Times, because those are the publications that the alumni read to decide what really is going on and which side they should take in the controversy.

WOODS: Now I want to turn to the issue of Harvard admissions, because this will be perhaps even more interesting still to some of my listeners, but first, let's pause for a brief message.

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All right, admissions at Harvard. Again, in the abstract if Harvard is a truly private institution, we know that strictly speaking it can do what it wants, but that doesn't mean we can't be critical of what it does. And you have been arguing that there needs to be more openness, more transparency out of Harvard to explain to the public how it is they make their decisions, what are the criteria they use to decide whether or not to admit a particular candidate, and that if they had this greater transparency they would be able to respond to some of the suspicions, some of the criticism that has been directed their way by you and by other people that suspect that there's something that's not altogether above board about the way they're admitting people. Am I more or less right?

UNZ: Oh, absolutely. Now, you know, on sort of the touchy issue of affirmative action, I've been absolutely opposed to affirmative action for decades, I mean, going back to the mid 1970s. And in fact, one of the things that sort of prompted this particular focus of mine dealing with Harvard was a few years ago I ended up writing a very long, 30,000-word article analyzing the admissions process at Harvard and a lot of the other elite Ivy League universities and really arguing the process was far more unfair in a wide variety of ways, including outright corruption, than a lot of people really had realized.

And one of the things really I was able to find in the statistics was very strong evidence that Harvard and the other Ivy League schools seem to have more or less an almost exclusive policy of racial quotas targeting Asian Americans. In other words, there are some very strange statistics where you see huge changes in the size of the Asian American population and no changes whatsoever in the number of Asians admitted to Harvard. In some cases, for example, in some of the Ivies, even a decline.

So it seems to me when you look at the whole affirmative action issue, the modern system of affirmative action was given a sort of stamp of approval by the Supreme Court in the famous Bakke decision. And what's interesting about the Bakke decision is the Supreme Court specifically cited Harvard's admissions policies, the Harvard holistic method as being the proper way to handle racial admissions issues in American universities. In other words, that by taking into account all the different factors regarding individuals rather than using any sort of racial quota system, which would be illegal, Harvard was showing the right way other universities should handle affirmative action. And that decision has been reaffirmed repeatedly by the U.S. Supreme Court and other legal bodies for the last probably 30 years now, 35 years.

But what's interesting is that when you look at the actual data surrounding Harvard, there's very strong evidence that Harvard has a system of racial quotas, exactly the same sort of quotas the Supreme Court ruled were completely unconstitutional. So if turns out the Harvard holistic method is really fraudulent and that Harvard has been practicing illegal racial quotas for all these years, it raises a lot of issues as to how these elite universities have really been handling that subject and whether they're doing it properly.

Now, as I said early on, the slate of candidates we right now have running for the Board of Overseers on these twin issues of free Harvard and fair Harvard, abolishing tuition and adding to the transparency of admissions, have mixed feelings about affirmative action. So it's not an issue that we're addressing. But what we feel very strongly is that Harvard should release more data on how they select their students, should increase their transparency. And that way we can find out whether or not Harvard has actually been following a system of hidden racial quotas, as I and many other people suspect. And that could have very broad implications for American higher education in general. So we do believe it's very important that when Harvard gives out an amount of golden tickets to all these students around the country — only about 6 or 7% of them are accepted for admissions every year — it's important that the process be fair and not nearly as corrupt as it seems to be, according to many journalists and others who have investigated it.

WOODS: All right, I can see that the particulars of it are not being emphasized in your campaign because you have people who have a variety of opinions on the subject, but since I'm talking to you specifically, I do want to draw out from you what you believe you found in your own research into the numbers. What do you actually think Harvard is doing? I mean, I think we all know what they're doing, but in the same way we all knew that Harvard had a big endowment, but I didn't realize how big until I realized you could get rid of tuition it's so big. Likewise, I bet you I won't be surprised by what they're doing, but maybe by the scope of it I might be.

UNZ: Well, again, it's hard to say exactly what internally goes on in the admissions committee, but it's certainly very odd that when you look at not only Harvard but across all the Ivy League universities, the number of Asians they admit every year, Asian Americans, has converged almost exactly identical numbers over the last 25 years. Now, during that same period of time there's been a very large increase in America's Asian American population. So there are many more Asians. They seem to be doing quite well in school. There certainly seems to be evidence that they're applying to Harvard in large numbers.

Yet, it's very odd that all of these universities are admitting almost identical numbers of Asians every year, which seems very similar to what they were doing 60 or 70 or 80 years ago during the era of the Jewish quotas. Now, you know, everybody knows the Ivies had a Jewish quota in like the 1920s, and everybody also knows that all the high Harvard and other Ivy League administrators repeatedly and dishonestly claimed they did not have Jewish quotas, and when you look at these numbers today, there's far more evidence that the Ivy League has an Asian quota than there ever had been of the

Jewish quota. And if the Ivy League is practicing a system of Asian quotas, it makes you very suspicious toward other quotas they might have in their admissions system.

But even leaving aside the racial aspects and affirmative action issue, there's a tremendous amount of evidence that there's a huge amount of outright corruption in the admissions to Harvard and the rest of the Ivy League. For example, a very good book that came out about 10 years ago by a Pulitzer Prize-winning journalist, Daniel Golden, really went through all the evidence of the corruption in the process. And when I say corruption, I mean there seems to be a lot of evidence that if families know the right people and they're willing to pay a few million dollars in bribes to Harvard or the other Ivy League schools, they can get their undeserving son or daughter admitted. And I just don't think that sort of corruption has a place in America's most distinguished universities and centers of higher learning.

I mean, in other words, the point I make many times in my articles is these institutions many times produce America's elites. If America's ruling elites are selected by a corrupt system, we'll end up with corrupt elites. And if you look at what's happened on Wall Street, what's happened in so many aspects of our society in the last 20 or 30 years, I think we've gotten exactly the sort of corrupt ruling elites that you'd expect having been produced by a corrupt process.

WOODS: Wow, there's a lot there. Let me see what I want to take out of this. Let's say something about these Asian quotas for a minute. The interesting thing is if it were to come to light that Harvard had had some kind of a black quota — we can't admit more than X% of the freshman class who are black, let's say — well, this would be all over the headlines, and there would be so-called civil rights leaders all over the place. There'd be candlelight vigils at Harvard; there'd be hunger strikes; there'd be reeducation camps, whatever. The whole kit and caboodle would be there. Yet, when this happens and is obviously happening to the point where anyone who's not a complete idiot knows that it's happening, with Asians there's pretty much no response.

Now, I want to share one anecdote from my own experience that I wonder if it throws any light on this at all. But when I was an undergraduate there, my experience with most of the Asian students was they all favored affirmative action. They all favored affirmative action for blacks and Hispanics at Harvard, and they were sure to make sure you knew that they — you know, it's the usual virtue signaling to make sure everybody knows they hold the officially approved view. It was a small minority of the Asian population that said, no, this is unfair, and it's unfair to Asians. And one Asian friend I had called it "Asian guilt." They feel some kind of weird guilt about their own success, so in order to expiate, in order to feel better about themselves they go around basically echoing standard left-wing talking points. What do you think?

UNZ: I think there's certainly an element of that. I mean, the truth is most of the students that are at elite universities tend to go with the flow politically —

WOODS: Yeah.

UNZ: — of these sorts of issues. So you know, it's not only the Asian students. I mean, I assume that the vast majority of the white students at Harvard say very much the same thing, that you know, they support diversity; they support affirmative action; they support all those policies.

You know, it's also interesting that when you look at some of the evidence of how the admissions process is handled, there does seem to be a clear bias in many cases toward students applying who have on their resume support for a lot of ideologically liberal positions and organizations. In other words, Harvard claims they admit people based on diversity and merit rather than ideology, but there's a lot of evidence that if somebody had telltales on their admissions record that showed they were more conservative, let alone right wing, they might have a harder time getting admitted. So the fact that most of the Asians and most of the whites at Harvard seem to tilt more toward the liberal side may have to do with, you know, the sort of people who get admitted to Harvard, regardless of —

WOODS: I just wonder why aren't there — why don't Asian groups have their own political leaders who stand up and defend their interests to the extent that a Jesse Jackson or an Al Sharpton will do for black Americans? Where are those people? Why don't they exist?

UNZ: Well, I mean, they do exist. I mean, they don't get as much attention from the media.

WOODS: But I can't name any. I can't think of one.

UNZ: Well, for example, one of the people on our Slate is Lee Chang, who's the founder of the Asian American Legal Foundation, which has been focused exactly on these discriminatory issues. Earlier this year, 64 separate Asian American organizations together filed a complaint against Harvard over evidence of its bias and discrimination against Asians, you know, these Asian quota issues. So these organizations exist, and they try to get attention. But the truth is the media simply doesn't cover them as much. I mean, the same way, for example, there are some conservatives black, but the media gives much more attention to more liberal or pro-affirmative action blacks than they do to the other cases.

And part of it, again, is I think the media does have a tilt. The mainstream media does have a tilt in that direction. And also, it's true that Asians tend to be much less politically active than certain other groups in American society, much more willing to sort of go with the flow politically. And at these elite institutions, the flow tends to be much more in a sort of pro-affirmative action, pro-liberal direction, and that's partly because so many of the faculty members lean in that direction. And there are a lot of other factors involved. I mean, by and large, there certainly are Asian activists and groups and individuals who are on the other side, but they just don't get as much attention. And that may change, partly because of our campaign.

WOODS: Yeah, true, true. When is the next election for the Board of Overseers?

UNZ: Well, the vote — it's a vote-by-mail system. In other words, the ballots are sent out to over 300,000 Harvard alumni. I believe the ballots go out towards the beginning of April, and people then have about a month or a little bit more to mail them back with their selections. And I think, you know, so long as we do get on the ballot, and we certainly filed far more than the number of signatures we would need to get on the ballot, I think we have a pretty good chance of winning, simply because we're focusing attention on these issues in a way that I think may surprise a lot of the alumni.

In other words, many of the alumni probably were quite unaware of just how absurdly large Harvard's endowment and investment income have become, and also of the strong evidence of corruption and, you know, ethnic bias and racial bias in the Harvard admissions process. So by getting a lot of attention on these issues and showing that we're really supporting a necessary reform of Harvard, I think we'll certainly have a reasonable chance of getting some of our members elected to the Harvard Board of Overseers. And if we win, despite the obvious opposition of Harvard University itself, I think there's a very good chance that Harvard will listen to that verdict and will take many of the steps that we're advocating.

WOODS: Let me say a little something about the process of electing the Board of Overseers, and I think it's also the alumni association, that they elect at the same time. I voted every single year in that election. I get that ballot; I look it over, and basically the way I make my decision is — I don't know any of these people. I look at their description, and I say, who will do the least damage. Like, who is the least bad? Which one is signaling the fewest ideological associations that would be offensive to me, and then I vote on that basis. But generally, in the descriptions of each candidate I don't usually see a very significant statement of their vision for Harvard. I see a lot about their background and then some platitudes about how I want to bring Harvard into the 21st century, I want Harvard to still be at the forefront of research. We never get anything nearly as provocative or specific as what you're calling for, so I would think your candidates are going to stick out like a sore thumb.

UNZ: That's exactly correct. And that's one of the reasons I'm reasonably optimistic about our chances. We will be taking strong positions on important issues, as compared to really what amounts to almost the boilerplate of most of those other candidates.

WOODS: Yeah.

UNZ: Now, it's interesting. I probably vote maybe in one-third of the elections. In other words, just as in your case, I sort of look over the names of the people. I usually haven't heard of any of them. I look over their statements, which are vague, sort of boilerplatish-like statements. And sometimes I bother filling in a few of the checkboxes, and many times I don't. And for that reason, it's not the sort of election that normally galvanizes the Harvard community. In this case, when we're talking about simple things, like Harvard returning to the standards of quality admissions, rather than these sorts of corrupt admissions practices, revealing more how they select these students, and then taking the obvious step of abolishing tuition when the

dollars are totally unnecessary, I think we really will have a pretty good chance of getting some of our people elected.

And the thing to remember is one issue in the past that gave me the idea of trying something like this — I mean, I've been writing articles urging Harvard to take these steps for years — for *years*. Harvard has totally ignored them. In fact, early this year I published a column in *The New York Times*, again saying that Harvard should abolish tuition as being unnecessary. Harvard paid no attention. And then I started thinking, what way is there possibly to put pressure on an institution as inward-looking and entrenched as Harvard on these issues of admissions bias and tuition. And I suddenly remembered that 25 years ago, there had been those South Africa activists that tried to get Harvard to divest from South Africa. Harvard totally ignored them. But as soon as they nominated a slate of candidates for the Harvard Board of Overseers and one of those candidates won, Harvard immediately began divesting from South Africa.

So in the same way, with the slate of candidates running on a clear platform on these important issues, if some or even most of us end up winning, I think there's a very good chance Harvard will abolish tuition and will start instituting the sort of transparency in admissions that we're calling for. And if Harvard follows that — I mean, that's really the other important thing about our campaign. If Harvard follows these suggestions of ours and does what we're urging, I think a lot of other elite universities will naturally follow suit. Stanford, Yale, Princeton, all of those universities could just as easily abolish tuition as Harvard, because their endowments are nearly as large. And there's so much unhappiness about these universities for their biased and unfair admissions processes. I think there'd be a lot of pressure on them to also increase the transparency that they practice so that people can really tell what's going on with the admissions process and whether it's really true that the process is as corrupt as a lot of people think based on the evidence.

WOODS: Ron, tell people about your website, because I'm going to link specifically to the article that I told people about. I'll link to that at TomWoods.com/590. But you have a really good site with a lot of great links that somebody could be very informed in a very short time, so tell people about that.

UNZ: I'm afraid that's for the future. We're right now in the process of putting up our website, and it probably will be available by the end of this week, but for now —

WOODS: Oh yeah, I didn't mean the site related to this campaign; I didn't even know you were going to do that. I meant your Ron Unz site.

UNZ: Oh, exactly, exactly. There's a site that I have, RonUnz.org, which provides a sort of compendium of some of my articles, and there's also *The Unz Review*, which is a sort of webzine providing a wide variety of different, important, interesting, and controversial views from the Left, from the Right, from all over. And later, probably by the end of this week, we'll also have a specific website up providing a comprehensive collection of the articles, media stories, and columns regarding this particular campaign of ours, because it's very important that people have a place that

they can go to to find out what's really going on with our effort. But probably the best site right now for people would be *The Unz Review* website, Unz.com, which basically would provide the columns and articles I've written on these issues, including that very long, 30,000-word analysis of the elite Harvard and Ivy League admissions policies that I published a few years ago, which really was the original basis for this effort and why I felt something had to be done about these corrupt practices.

WOODS: Well, that website is Unz — and is it .com, you said?

UNZ: .com.

WOODS: Okay, Unz.com, so people should check that out, check out your article at TomWoods.com/590. I'll try and maybe tweet out on Twitter when I get — I hope you'll send me the link to the site that you were talking about. When that goes live I'll try to get you a little traffic for that. And plus, I should have you on more, because you're always talking about something interesting, and I don't always agree with it, which makes it even more fun. But in this case, I really like to see Harvard squirm, so this is really a lot of fun for me, and I appreciate both your time and this campaign that you're behind.

UNZ: Well, great to discuss it with you.