January 14, 2013

Trinity College

GREETINGS FROM HARVARD!

--It’s humbling to be here at the Royal Irish Academy at the invitation of Trinity College.

--Harvard was founded in 1636 and is America’s oldest university – But Trinity was founded in 1592 and had already graduated a generation of students before the books that became Harvard College had even arrived in the New World.

--Harvard has 6,500 undergraduates – But Trinity has 11,500.

--Harvard has 42 intercollegiate sports, the most of any Division 1 university in America – But Trinity has 50 Club sports, including American football.

--And the list goes on...

It’s also humbling for me personally because my wife and I ran the Dublin Marathon in the 1980s and finished near the back of the pack, not surprising given Ireland’s great running history.
But more than humbled, I am truly honored to be here to support the launch of a pioneering program that could be transformative for Ireland – and one that is vitally important for its future. The adoption of broader criteria for college admission – using a process called holistic admissions – will send a clear message to the young people of Ireland that the gates of Trinity and all universities are open wider than ever before to those who bring excellence in all its forms.

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--When I met Dean Patrick Geoghegan last summer, it was clear that Trinity and the Central Applications Office had already developed the expertise to move forward with a proposal that reflects the best practices of holistic admissions.

--Trinity’s Provost, Dr. Patrick Prendergast, had made admissions reform a key priority of his presidency upon taking office.

--And the support of the Irish government for such reforms has been unequivocal, especially from the
inspiring Minister for Education, Mr. Quinn, who has called on the sector to “apply international benchmarks” and develop “possible options for change.”

Trinity is the right university to run this study on behalf of the sector. As the highest ranked University and the one that superficially benefits most from the existing system, it has the moral authority, even the moral obligation, to attempt something new.

Trinity also has a long history of supporting alternative admissions routes, pioneering the Trinity Access Program twenty years ago to increase the numbers of non-traditional students. Trinity’s experience with such innovation has demonstrated the advantage of testing a new idea on a small scale. This approach offers possibilities of scaling holistic admissions up if proven successful.

But make no mistake about it: the stakes are high—

—Every country must do everything in its power to
make the most of the talents of all its young people. Not only is this the right thing for any just society to do: it is imperative for economic success.

--In the U.S., students from the poorest economic backgrounds are seven times less likely to graduate from college than those from the most affluent families. It is not lack of promise or talent, but the lack of a level playing field that produces this unhappy result. If we continue to waste talent on such a scale, our economy and our role in world affairs will be greatly diminished in the generations ahead.

--In our country, we have used a stark metaphor to talk about our challenges in education:

The battle for America’s moral and economic future will be won or lost in our classrooms, especially those serving less affluent students in our inner cities and rural areas.

Perhaps one could say the same for Ireland.
There is no nation that can boast a level playing field for students from poor and modest economic backgrounds when it comes to standardized testing for college admission. Selecting students solely on the results of such testing unfairly handicaps a large segment of society. --Affluent students have greater access to secondary schools that prepare them better for standardized tests --Affluent students have the money to repeat senior year if they are not satisfied with test results --Affluent students also have the money to spend on “Grinds” – “test prep” in American parlance that can cost many thousands of dollars in the U.S.

Two questions worth pondering:
--If a student who has had every possible advantage in preparing for a test scores a bit higher than one who had no such advantages, does the higher scorer really have more potential?
--Should a few points on a test that was not taken on a level playing field severely alter one’s life chances?

Holistic admissions takes into account everything about an individual. It does not rely only on a rigid point system to award places at university because to do so ignores the often unequal contexts in which the results were obtained. And while it evaluates students’ past achievements, holistic admissions focuses more on what students will do in the future.

--Academic achievement as measured by standardized testing is important, but it is just one of many factors in choosing students for a university. Relying on testing alone can emphasize rote learning and conformity at the expense of creativity, intellectual curiosity, love of learning, and innovation.

--Standardized tests are used in the context of other academic information such as daily work in the classroom over a long period of time. Attention is paid to how students have performed academically within
their secondary schools – just as Trinity’s Relative Performance Rank will be used.

--Anyone who is truly unusual academically is, of course, admitted, and the proposed system here would ensure that this would happen.

--Many other criteria including community service, work experience, and extracurricular activities such as arts, music, dance and athletics are considered. While we are mindful that students from modest economic backgrounds often have less access to certain extracurricular opportunities, we know that the energy, drive, and commitment necessary to achieve excellence in such activities – and others more accessible to all – are factors that can determine success at university and in later life.

--Perhaps most important of all are human qualities such as leadership, strength of character, and the ability to overcome adversity.
Let me offer a brief overview of how Harvard conducts its holistic admissions process. Many other public and private colleges follow similar procedures.

--Admissions Committee members read each application a number of times, with special faculty reviews for the work submitted by poets, mathematicians, musicians and others with special talents.

--Our formal Admissions Committee meets from January 23 until March 19 to make the selections.

--The student’s entire application – the two teacher recommendations, the secondary school’s overall recommendation and transcript of grades, essays, the extracurricular and employment activity sheet and the optional portfolio – are projected on to a screen so that all members of the Admissions Committee can see what the original readers saw.

--There is often a lengthy discussion, sometimes up to an hour, and a majority vote determines admission.

--Our admissions committee seeks students who will contribute to our educational environment by
stimulating and even inspiring their fellow classmates and faculty during their four years in Cambridge. One of the most valuable aspects of the Harvard experience is the opportunity to live with and learn from classmates who come from a wide array of ethnic, cultural, religious, and economic backgrounds. Such an experience is critically important in preparing our students to contribute to an increasingly diverse society – and a complex world – throughout their lives.

--As our admissions committee discusses applicants, we ask ourselves about factors that might have had some influence on a student’s performance such as home or job responsibilities or a serious illness. We extrapolate from past decisions a student might have made to get a clearer picture of how the student will use our resources. We take particular note of students who have made the utmost of opportunities presented to them throughout their lives.

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Consider the challenges that many Harvard students have faced in their lives:

--some had been homeless or orphaned or victims of abuse

--Some came from families who experienced long periods of unemployment

--Some lived in single parent homes or had both parents working full-time jobs to survive economically

--Some prepared family meals, paid bills, and helped ill parents or grandparents

--Some babysat or helped younger siblings in other ways

--Some worked in the family small businesses as I did or at a variety of other jobs to help with the family finances

--Some worked many hours on the family farm, as did a memorable Harvard alumnus who worked over 40 hours per week during the school year and up to 90 hours per week during the summer. He did so because his father had passed away and his brother was disabled.
Shouldn’t the sacrifices and strength of character demonstrated by such a student be taken into account when universities make their admissions decisions?

During the past decade, we have made major changes in our financial aid program at Harvard – changes that apply equally to international students and U.S. citizens. As a result, we have had 30% increase in the number of students from poor and modest economic backgrounds. They now comprise about 25% of our undergraduate student body.

Were I at Harvard today, I would have been one of these students. My parents did not go to college and, among other things, we ran a small “mom and pop” convenience store/petrol station. I can speak personally to the transformative power of higher education and the profound effect it can have on one’s life.

I am happy to report that with our new financial aid program our graduation rate has remained at 98%,
and there has been no lowering of academic standards. We have taken special care to ensure that these new students are given the advising and encouragement they need to succeed. Clearly, Trinity has the kind of support services necessary for the success of this new experiment given their twenty-year experience with the Trinity Access Program.

Holistic admissions processes are of increasing interest around the world:
-- In China where reliance on the Gao Kao, a 3 day college entrance exam, is the subject of some concern.
-- In France at “Sciences Po” where there has been a successful experiment seeking students from poor and modest income backgrounds.
-- In the UK, the University of Manchester had a conference 1-1/2 years ago to discuss how European and other universities are making efforts to attract more students from less affluent backgrounds. At this conference and at many others I have attended in recent
years, holistic admissions is viewed as a key element in encouraging more economic diversity in higher education — and for including more individuals who may not test well but who are otherwise enormously talented.

--Universities around the world are undergoing rapid changes. Their traditional roles of creating new knowledge of all kinds and educating leaders for old, new, and yet to be imagined professions are in the process of being re-defined. More than ever, universities must do everything they can to be the engines of opportunity they aspire to be.

Harvard has changed enormously in my lifetime. As you may have guessed from my name, I am Irish-American. In 1963 I was a senior at a Catholic high school 15 miles from Harvard. I had never visited this seemingly inaccessible institution, but I was still interested in applying. The first two teachers I asked to write recommendations to Harvard refused, saying that Harvard
was anti-Catholic and that I would be better off at a Catholic college.  
They said Harvard was filled with atheists, communists and rich snobs and that I would flunk out and lose my soul…
So it sounded just terrific and of course I went…

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Although, I have not traced my Irish roots because of my fear that my ancestors may have been horse thieves or worse, I have visited Ireland a fair number of times. I often stay with Joe and Rita Sherry, my quasi-relatives from Clarinbridge on the west coast – which, by the way, has Ireland’s best oyster festival and recently won the All-Irish Club hurling championship.

They and their fellow villagers personify the rare strength of character and enormous potential of the Ireland that Trinity’s holistic admissions process could help nurture in the generations ahead.

Trinity’s message to the young people of
Clarinbridge - and to those throughout Ireland - is that with hard work anything is possible, including admission to Trinity or to any university in the world.