

Proposal
to establish the

Harvard-Radcliffe Women's Center

at Hilles Library

This proposal is submitted by
Ilana Sichel, Marcel LaFlamme,
Carolyn Amole, Anat Maytal, and Emily Douglas

This proposal is endorsed by
Association of Black Harvard Women
Athena Theatre Company
Bisexual, Gay, Lesbian, Transgender and Supporters' Alliance
Fallen Angels
Girlspot
Harvard Ballet Company
Latinas Unidas
Office of Sexual Assault Prevention and Response
Radcliffe Rugby
Radcliffe Union of Students
The Seneca
Society of Arab Students
Students for Choice
Women in Business
Women's Leadership Project

ABSTRACT

Students have been clamoring for a women's center for over thirty years. A space dedicated to the support and betterment of women's experiences at Harvard College is vitally necessary, given the dearth, since the disintegration of Radcliffe College, of female-controlled space in the college. The conversion of Hilles into flexible space for student group use offers an unprecedented opportunity to establish a women's center that will be sufficiently spacious, well-trafficked, and, perhaps most importantly, fully supported by the administration. Such a women's center will respond to a need currently unmet anywhere at Harvard: for a space that explicitly articulates that women indeed do have a place at Harvard, a space that tells the story of women's crucial role both in Harvard history and in Harvard's continuing educational excellence today.

This proposal first outlines why Harvard might need a women's center at all. Second, the proposal discusses the history of the struggle for a women's center at Harvard. Knowledge of historical background is crucial to understanding why previous attempts at a women's center have failed and why a women's center at Hilles, by contrast, is poised to succeed. Finally, the proposal will detail physical layout for the women's center, describing the ways each architectural dimension will promote our over-arching goals: networking and cooperation between women's groups; the provision and centralization of comprehensive resource material; and the memorialization of women's history at Radcliffe and at Harvard.

The proposed Harvard-Radcliffe Women's Center (HRCW) would actively seek to serve and involve all undergraduates, regardless of gender identity or expression, interested in women's issues.

WHY A WOMEN'S CENTER?

Our founding question is clear: why do women at Harvard need a center? Indeed, why does Harvard as a whole need a women's center? We will first address this question by looking at the history of women at Harvard.

After its founding as the "Harvard Annex" in 1879, the institution soon to be called Radcliffe accommodated female students without ever employing its own faculty. In Radcliffe Yard, female students were taught by the same professors who taught male students in Harvard Yard. The path to full coeducation began during World War II as classrooms were integrated, and moved further forward at the beginning of the 1970's when men and women slowly began to live together in the Houses. The first of Radcliffe's two major steps away from undergraduate education took place in 1977, when in signing the "non-merger merger" agreement Radcliffe ceded many of its educational responsibilities to Harvard. Nonetheless, women still were admitted to "Harvard-Radcliffe" and received a diploma different from the one men received when graduating. The second phase of the process took place in 1999 when an official merger fully transformed Radcliffe into the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, thereby removing the name "Radcliffe" from women's admissions certificates and diplomas.

Radcliffe's gradual evolution from an undergraduate academic institution to an Institute for Advanced Study has serious ramifications for women's lives at Harvard. For over a century, women at Harvard enjoyed a huge amount of physical space designated as theirs as well as structural support on an administrative level. While their male counterparts governed and populated (in practice, if not always in name) the Administration, the Yard, and all of the Houses, Radcliffe students could use the facilities up Garden Street. This area was, and largely remains, the only part of the University whose buildings are named for prominent women, and whose walls proudly display their portraits. Until this fall, the area now known merely as "The Quadrangle" was officially called "The Radcliffe Quadrangle." This change is indicative of a progressive erasure of Radcliffe which by turn is precipitating declining student awareness of the history of women at Harvard. Women comprise half of the undergraduate student body, but this

demographic group—cutting across all lines of ethnicity, class, and religion—lacks a visual representation of their history and contributions to Harvard. Consequently, institutional memory loses a long and rich tradition of female scholarship at Harvard, a tradition to which current students are never exposed. By contrast, male students are reminded daily of a celebrated history of men's work at Harvard—portraits, statues, names of buildings and other iconography all reflect back to students nearly four centuries of male success at Harvard. Yet as previously mentioned, the Radcliffe name is becoming a relic recognized only by some female athletes and history buffs. Establishing a physical space to mark the living legacy of women at Harvard would be an important milestone in Harvard-Radcliffe history. A women's center at Harvard would not only memorialize Radcliffe history but would also explicitly demonstrate Harvard's commitment to the support and betterment of women's experiences at Harvard.

Such a space would be a non-discriminatory destination for students of all genders who are committed to the advancement and well-being of women at this university. The Harvard-Radcliffe Women's Center would provide a centralized home for all groups concerned with women's issues, ranging from ethnicity-based groups like the Association for Black Harvard Women to community service programs like Strong Women Strong Girls. (Please see "A Proposed Women's Center Layout" for a detailed summary of the functions and services of the center.) The Harvard Foundation for Intercultural and Race Relations provides an excellent example of the kind of clearinghouse function that a Women's Center would serve. Part of the Foundation's mission is to "improve relations among racial and ethnic groups within the University and to enhance the quality of our common life." Part of the Women's Center's goal would be to perform a similar task for groups that organize around gender. We also intend to establish a council, much like the Board of the Harvard Foundation, comprised of representatives from all of the groups that are based in the Center. We plan to formally include interested faculty and administrators in the Center. Such involvement may range from advising to an open invitation to drop by to relax and look at the resources.

Women's centers are established at all of Harvard's peer institutions. Indeed, Harvard is the only Ivy League university that lacks this important space. Hundreds of institutions with firm non-discrimination clauses have established centers that uphold the tenets of equality of access and opportunity. We envision the Harvard-Radcliffe Women's Center as a space available to students of all genders and political persuasions who are committed to the betterment of women at Harvard. Running the Center in such a way would exemplify the full potential of an ethos of non-discrimination: all members of the Harvard community could use the Center's space and resources, given a demonstration of their commitment to the well-being of female students at Harvard.

THE STRUGGLE FOR A WOMEN'S CENTER AT HARVARD

Though Harvard University is known for its early establishment of women's college, Radcliffe, its integration of women into Harvard College in the 1970's, and the creation of a Women's Studies degree program by the 1980's, Harvard still does not have a women's center. The struggle for such a center at Harvard has lasted for over thirty years.

The first effort to bring a women's center to Harvard was organized by an ad-hoc group of female students called "The Friends of the Women's Center." The Radcliffe Union of Students provided the group with \$600 in financial support to launch the opening of Harvard's first women's center on October 28, 1971. The women's center was located in the basement of Moors Hall in North House (now Pforzheimer House). However, without faculty or administrative support, students' time and resources alone were too limited to maintain the center. The lack of consistent funding led to the closure of the women's center.

In June 1971, Harvard and Radcliffe signed a "non-merger merger" agreement, officially putting Harvard in charge of the dorm life of Radcliffe women. This merger led to second attempt at a women's center at Harvard in the fall of 1974. With more support from alumni and

some administrators, a women's center was opened at Phillips Brooks House for Radcliffe undergraduate students, employees, faculty wives, and other women affiliated with the University. However, as the Harvard Crimson reported in November 1974, the center suffered from a lack of publicity and its small space. Located in Phillips Brooks House in a tiny room on the second floor, the women's center faltered while Harvard and Radcliffe continued with its merger agreements.

As a result of the 1971 "non-merger merger," the class of 1976 was the first class in which women were integrated into both the Houses and the first-year dorms. In the wake of fuller co-education, it was not until the fall of 1979 that the Women's Clearinghouse, a counseling and referral service for female undergraduates, opened a women's center opened in the basement of Lehman Hall. The members made a groundbreaking contract in 1979 with Dean of Students Archie C. Epps, III, stipulating that the University would formally recognize the need for a support organization for women at Harvard. The University agreed to provide a room for the center, as well as funds to pay for its phone bills, coffee for open houses, and a contribution for the payment of three College work-study program staffers. Dean Epps and the Women's Clearinghouse members agreed that Harvard would pay \$1350 per year for the duration of the contract. However, the center did not succeed because the University backed out of its own agreement. Harvard actually provided much less funding, a maximum of \$400 in total—far from the \$1350 initially promised.

The University decided to end its funding agreement with the Women's Clearinghouse in September 1982. Marlyn Lewis, '70, who inherited responsibility for advising the center when she became Dean of Co-education, claimed that the two main reasons why the University cut funds was because the University does not finance student organizations and that the Administration was not satisfied that significant numbers of women on campus were being served by the center. However, as the Harvard Crimson reported on December 2, 1982, that reasoning was unsubstantiated. On the contrary, lack of funding—not lack of interest—led to gradual disintegration of the women's center. Recording many female undergraduates' sense of need for and deeply-rooted commitment to the women's center—opinions that continue to be held today—the Crimson wrote:

While it is true that the University does not fund student organizations in general, the Women's Center is not a typical student organization. For one thing, it serves not only undergraduates, but all women in the Harvard community. And although instituted by undergraduates, the center addresses concerns which are really the responsibility of the Administration...If the University is concerned, as it claims to be, with eliminating discrimination that can be subtle as well as overt it should be just as interested in eliminating such discrimination against women as it is in ridding the campus of bias against racial minority groups. A University which has funds for a Race Relations Foundation should have funds for a women's center...

As for the objection to continued funding on the grounds that the Women's Center does not serve enough Harvard women, the numbers say otherwise. Four hundred and fifty people participated in the Take Back the Night March two years ago; hundreds more took part in last year's Rape Awareness Weekend. Open houses attract between 15 and 30 undergraduates to the center every other Friday afternoon and women's groups like the Radcliffe Lesbians Association and Among Women, a discussion group, actually use it as a meeting place. Last year's ERA action teams worked out of the Clearinghouse, as will this year's Pro-Choice Action Committee. The center is open every day and attracts dozens of women because of its library, information it provides on issues of concern to women and its free coffee. Some of these women make their first feminist contacts at the center: it creates networks among women the new Rape/Sexual Harassment Hotline grew out of early discussions at the center, as did the women's Self-defense course at Currier House. The center expects to involve hundreds more in this year's Women's Health Week. The numbers are there: it's the money that's missing.

The Women's Center will continue to operate, on a shoestring budget staffed by volunteers. With some funds from the new Student Council, the Radcliffe Union of Students and Radcliffe College, the staffers hope to implement some of their major projects like Women's Health Week, even if they can't pay

their phone bill. Surely University Hall must rethink its decision on financing the Women's Center. If the Administration's commitment to eliminating discrimination against women on campus exists at all it exists in funding for the Women's Center.

The women's center in Lehman Hall eventually closed down due to lack of funding and support from the administration. Eight years later, on May 3, 1990, Radcliffe established the Lyman Common Room (LCR) on the top floor of Agassiz House as a women's center for use by both male and female students. However, the single room was not what female students envisioned for their women's center. As the Crimson reported in April 1991:

In spite of what appear to be some similar goals, Radcliffe administrators and students advocating for a Women's Center are working at cross-purposes. Although the LCR could fulfill many—if not all—of the functions of the proposed Women's Center, students continue to demand the immediate creation of a separate multi-room facility located nearer to Harvard Yard. And Radcliffe deans continue to ignore the importance of student involvement with a patronizing 'we know what's best for you' attitude toward both the LCR and the question of a Women's Center. Both groups are going to have to compromise if either of them wants to achieve anything.

In June of 1990, student activists collected over 1,000 signatures in a petition drive to call for a fully-staffed and funded women's center at Harvard. The petition commended the creation of the Lyman space but argued that it did not meet the need for a more comprehensive women's center that would act not only as a central information and support service but would also provide Harvard with a new forum for discussing issues of gender and society. Students said the single room provided by Radcliffe for use by undergraduates was too small, inconveniently located and inaccessible. Moreover, Radcliffe had eventually planned to reorganize Agassiz House, and students knew the Lyman Common Room served as a temporary accommodation and expected to lose what little space they had there.

At the same time, as the Crimson reports in April 1991, students knew their vision for an independent multi-room facility was futile. They were eager to focus on the LCR, sought out an active role in running the space and began to work there towards the programming goals of a women's center. They knew that successful LCR programs could easily be moved to a women's center if that proved necessary. While the LCR was not a multi-room facility, many of the proposed women's center functions could have effectively be run from the single room. For example, the LCR could have housed a library of gender-related readings and films and developed a database of local women's resources that could serve as a referral service. In order to foster connections between undergraduate women, the LCR could have acted as a home to a coalition of women in extracurricular activities.

However, even these compromised goals could not be met because the Radcliffe administration was "unwilling to meet them halfway" as the Crimson reported. "Since the creation of the LCR, it has been run by administrative fiat, with absolute resistance to giving students a part in the actual running of the room." While an LCR task force that included students was created in the spring of 1990, it rarely met and no decisions relevant to the room were debated in task force meetings. "The room was designed, decorated, budgeted and staffed without any student input," the Crimson wrote. While the Radcliffe administration said that all student groups should feel free to use the room whenever they like, the Crimson wrote, "But if the Radcliffe deans are going to call the LCR the Center for Women and view it as the first step towards a women's center they are going to have to relinquish a little control. Students will not get actively involved in a 'space' if it is only an administratively-controlled space."

Then in October 1999, Harvard and Radcliffe officially merged, mandating that Radcliffe cut all formal ties to undergraduate groups and in June 2002. The Lyman Common Room thus ceased to function as a women's center. Radcliffe's primary relationships with undergraduates now take the form of research partnerships, mentorships, and externship programs. The academic

focus of Radcliffe prevents the Institute and its Dean, Drew Gilpin Faust, from lobbying for a women's center for undergraduates. A clear positive effect of the merger was the creation of the Ann Radcliffe Trust, which aims to raise awareness of women's issues and funds groups or students who are interested in planning a project that deals with women's issues within the College. An annual contribution of \$50,000 from the Institute is a major source of funding for the Trust.

As this brief history indicates, the efforts for a women's center at Harvard failed because of the absence of faculty and administrative support. Students alone, limited by both time and resources, could not establish and maintain a women's center without the backing of the administration. At the same time, students need to be centrally involved—the Lyman Common Room seems to have failed in part because students did not feel that their voices were heard in its planning and management. However, not all college women have been denied administrative support and funding for a women's center; it is thus certainly not indicative of any inherent eventual failure for all women's centers. Indeed, administrative support has led to the success and sustainability of women's centers at many other schools, including Yale, Princeton, Cornell, Dartmouth, Brown, Columbia, University of Pennsylvania, Duke, Stanford, Vanderbilt, Caltech, MIT, Notre Dame, Tulane, Northwestern, and hundreds of other colleges and universities across the nation. A women's center in Hilles would succeed where past attempts at women's centers at Harvard have failed because it would have sufficient funding, space, resources, and perhaps most importantly, administrative commitment and support.

A PROPOSED WOMEN'S CENTER LAYOUT

In terms of physical space within Hilles, the Women's Center would encompass two interconnected rooms, with a common entrance and foyer area. In the foyer, directly opposite the door and visible from the corridor, would be locking glass cases containing displays about the history of women at Radcliffe College and Harvard University. A collaboration between the Women's Center, the Schlesinger Library, and the Ann Radcliffe Trust would bring together the archive materials, the funds, and the space to curate a permanent, museum-quality exhibition about the history of Radcliffe and Harvard women. Although a similar display exists on the grounds of the Radcliffe Institute for Advanced Study, no such exhibition currently exists on the undergraduate campus, and the former Radcliffe Quadrangle would be an altogether fitting site to commemorate the rich institutional history of Radcliffe College and the contributions women have made to the life of the entire university. As the Radcliffe Institute increasingly turns its eyes toward the future and becomes a center for general scholarly research, Harvard undergraduates see an urgent need to memorialize the legacy of Radcliffe College and to connect us to our predecessors.

The first of the two rooms would be a large meeting room and resource center, housing a long conference table and chairs for formal meetings as well as printed materials of interest to Harvard women. A revolving rack would provide students with cards giving basic advice and contact information for organizations addressing eating disorders, sexual assault, and other issues of concern to women—making this information more widely available to Harvard students, and simultaneously helping student groups like ECHO, Response, and Contact and university initiatives like the Office for Sexual Assault Prevention and Response, as well as Boston-based community groups, to reach their target audiences. In fact, none of the undergraduate peer counseling groups currently have offices in the Quad, so perhaps one night a week the Women's Center could serve as a satellite arm of these groups' main offices in order to better reach Quad residents.

Elsewhere in the resource center, a file cabinet would centralize career, mentoring, and internship opportunities that are currently administered through separate branches of the university and essentially publicized by word-of-mouth. One student recently joked at an RUS meeting dedicated to further exploring the possibility of the HRCW, "Yale and Princeton may

each have a women's center, but Harvard has 24 centers!" Though amusing, the statement accurately reflects the lengths to which students must go in order to acquire information about women's resources. Such centralization would ensure that students are aware of groups that may be of interest to them, and would provide a wide array of groups with ever-growing membership and ideas. UC grants and other outside funding could establish a small reference library of feminist and women's history books, along with subscriptions to magazines ranging from *Vogue* to *Ms.* Large whiteboards could serve as master calendars, both for publicizing events staged by sponsor organizations and for reserving space in the Women's Center itself. A broad coalition of sponsor organizations would be asked to recruit volunteers to staff the resource center for a certain number of hours per week, and staffers could be trained at the beginning of each semester to effectively direct students to the resources they are looking for—and other serendipities besides.

The second room would be a social space and informal meeting room, with couches, localized lighting, and a hammock contributing to an casual atmosphere where students could congregate and idle away the afternoon. Organizations that prefer not to meet around a conference table could also use the space for brainstorming sessions, small speaker events, or rehearsals. By default, both rooms would be open to all Harvard students, though they could also be reserved ahead of time by sponsor organizations. Organizations would benefit from having a predictable space to hold meetings, rather than negotiating with individual Houses for use of common rooms. Furthermore, students who attended meetings for one organization would know exactly when and where other organizations were meeting, and the possibility of this "common ground" would engender more frequent collaboration between women's organizations that currently do very little in tandem. The fluid nature of these spaces, both social and "official," could give birth to and house ad hoc reading groups and advocacy campaigns that draw on the membership of more established organizations. By making the Center open to all students as individuals, but asking organizations who want to use the space more formally to support the Center as sponsors, the Women's Center would be an essentially inclusive project, while asking something in return from groups who use it as a launchpad for their own endeavors. Sponsor organizations would name one liaison to a steering committee that would meet monthly to democratically administer the Center's space and resources. This participatory approach to governance would ensure that no single organization or faction would dominate the Center, so that it remains a resource and a second home for all students interested in women's issues and initiatives across the university.