

# Harvard's Latest Enfeeblement of Liberal Education

COMMENTARY

By [Peter Berkowitz](#) - RCP Contributor  
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Harvard University's maladroit defenestration of Ronald Sullivan and his wife, Stephanie Robinson, struck a blow against liberal education. Many of Harvard's own left-liberal luminaries are up in arms. But the university's disgraceful act can come as no surprise to anyone who has been paying attention for the last few decades to higher education in general and to Harvard in particular.

On May 11, the Harvard Crimson [reported](#) that Dean of the College Rakesh Khurana informed Winthrop House residents by email that morning that he would not renew Sullivan and Robinson — both of whom teach at Harvard Law School and will keep their positions there — as Winthrop faculty deans. The first African Americans to head one of Harvard's 12 residential houses, Sullivan and Robinson had served in that position for 10 years.

The trouble began in January when Professor Sullivan — faculty director of the Harvard Criminal Justice Institute and the Harvard Trial Advocacy Workshop — announced that he would serve on the legal team representing film producer Harvey Weinstein, who faces criminal charges of rape and other sexual misconduct (Sullivan [left](#) Weinstein's defense team on Friday, May 10, the day before Dean Khurana made public his decision). Students protested angrily. They claimed that Sullivan caused them to feel unsafe by taking Weinstein as a client. They alleged that Sullivan's decision was [“trauma-inducing.”](#) They demanded his ouster on the grounds that he had rendered himself unfit to lead Winthrop House.

Sullivan emailed Winthrop House students to explain that it was the duty of defense lawyers in the American criminal justice system to represent those accused of crimes, including those who are unpopular. “It is particularly important for this category of unpopular defendant to receive the same process as everyone else – perhaps even more important,” Sullivan [wrote](#). “To the degree we deny unpopular defendants basic due process rights we cease to be the country we imagine ourselves to be.”

To accommodate students who might be sincerely discomfited when confiding intimate details of abuse to one of Weinstein’s lawyers, Sullivan announced in another email the appointment of a special dean at Winthrop House to serve as a point person to whom students could report allegations of sexual misconduct.

Nevertheless, in March Dean Khurana initiated a [“Winthrop House climate review.”](#) Earlier this month, with the investigation complete, Khurana [wrote](#) to Winthrop House students to inform them that he was compelled to terminate Sullivan and Robinson, because “students and staff have continued to communicate concerns about the climate in Winthrop House” that are “serious and numerous.”

Lucy Caldwell [reported](#) in The New Republic that over the course of the last decade a number of issues have arisen regarding Sullivan’s handling of personnel matters at Winthrop House. Harvard’s pretext, however, is transparent. The timing of Dean Khurana’s climate review leaves little doubt that the reason for Sullivan’s termination is the vociferous student opposition to his representation of Weinstein.

How could it be otherwise? For decades, Harvard has been sedulously creating a campus climate hostile to liberal education and its moral presuppositions. The university has long encouraged the belief that when the opinions or feelings of progressive students come into conflict with the

imperatives of free speech, due process, rigorous inquiry, robust debate, and independent thought, the essentials of liberal education must yield.

Several left-liberal Harvard Law School professors have testified to the gravity of Harvard's most recent betrayal of traditional liberal principles. Likening the firing of Sullivan and Robinson to the dismissal of lawyers who, in his student days, represented communists and civil rights activists, Professor Emeritus Alan Dershowitz [wrote](#) that “[f]eeling ‘unsafe’ is the new mantra for the new McCarthyism.” According to Dershowitz, “[i]t is a totally phony argument not deserving of any serious consideration. Any student who feels unsafe in the presence of two distinguished lawyers doesn't belong at a university.” In any event, the claim is not credible, he maintains, “since the students apparently did not feel ‘unsafe’ when Sullivan was representing a convicted double murderer.”

In a New York Times [op-ed](#), law professor Randall Kennedy asserted that in his 34 years at Harvard the university “has never so thoroughly embarrassed itself as it did” in dismissing Sullivan and Robinson from Winthrop House. To Kennedy's dismay, “Harvard College appears to have ratified the proposition that it is inappropriate for a faculty dean to defend a person reviled by a substantial number of students — a position that would disqualify a long list of stalwart defenders of civil liberties and civil rights, including Charles Hamilton Houston and Thurgood Marshall.” This, according to Kennedy, was not a mere misunderstanding. “Some high-ranking administrators have clearly been guided by an affinity for the belief that Mr. Sullivan's representation of Mr. Weinstein constituted a betrayal of enlightened judgment,” Kennedy writes. “Others have simply been willing to be mau-maued.”

Harvard's renowned constitutional scholar Laurence Tribe [tweeted](#), “I agree fully with my colleague Randall Kennedy's denunciation of Harvard University's mistreatment of my colleagues Ronald

Sullivan and Stephanie Robinson. Of the many blunders Harvard has made in my 50 years as a professor here, I recall none worse.”

Tribe also joined a [letter](#) to the Boston Globe signed by 52 members of the Harvard Law School faculty stating, “We call upon our university’s administration to recognize that such legal advocacy in service of constitutional principles is not only fully consistent with Sullivan’s roles of law professor and dean of an undergraduate house, but also one of the many possible models that resident deans can provide in teaching, mentoring, and advising students.”

Alas, Harvard’s steady descent over many years into authoritarian progressivism and illiberal identity politics casts doubt on the ability of Harvard’s administration to recognize the force of such a traditionally liberal stance and on the willingness of Harvard professors to back it.

In 2005, then-Harvard University President Lawrence Summers scandalized the faculty by uttering a forbidden proposition. At a [closed-door brainstorming session](#) devoted to increasing the representation of women in the natural sciences and engineering, he considered “three broad hypotheses” about why, despite great strides in the humanities, social sciences, and professional schools, significant disparities remained in the natural sciences and engineering. One was that biologically based differences between men and women could influence differences in choice of profession and professional achievement. MIT biologist Nancy Hopkins promptly [leaked](#) Summers’s remarks to the press. Despite his apologies for having dared to broach the subject, within months a groundswell of faculty wrath forced him to resign.

In 2010, Harvard Law School students [distributed a classmate’s email](#) in which she had written that before taking a position on possible connections between IQ and race, she would have to consult the scientific research. For wishing to examine the evidence before reaching a judgment, the student was

shamed by fellow students. Then-Dean of Harvard Law School Martha Minow piled on, siding with those who sought to censor speech and regulate thought through campaigns of public humiliation.

In 2011, the Obama administration, with scant legal authority, directed colleges and universities that received federal funding — that is, virtually all — to eliminate basic due process protections for students accused of sexual misconduct. This government-dictated evisceration of the cornerstone of justice in communities based on individual freedom and human equality provoked barely a peep of protest from the Harvard College faculty.

In 2014, 28 Harvard Law School professors did publish a compelling [letter](#) in the Boston Globe insisting that Harvard must rededicate itself to both protecting victims of sexual misconduct and vindicating the rights of the accused. Yet one aspect of the letter was also distressing: What were the approximately two-thirds of the Harvard Law School faculty who declined to sign it thinking?

The recent history of Harvard's erosion of the preconditions of liberal education also includes the university's determination to punish students' exercise of the right of association to join private, off-campus, same-sex social organizations, as well as the substantial evidence that has emerged in *Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard College* that the university has systematically discriminated against Asian American applicants. Plenty of other lamentable episodes could be added.

Harvard's decision to discharge Ronald Sullivan and Stephanie Robinson from their positions as faculty deans was neither an aberration nor an accident. It was an all but ineluctable step in Harvard's transformation of liberal education into a doctrine that enslaves students to intellectual fads and fashions, encourages the searching out and destruction of those with differing perspectives and thoughts, and equates grasping after power and imposing one's will — provided one possesses a high rank in the approved victim hierarchy — with justice.

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<https://college.harvard.edu/about/deans-messages/announcing-winthrop-house-climate-review>

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