

Union College president David Harris credits his teachers, academic aid for his opportunities

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Donna Abbott-Vlahos

David Harris, Union College's new president, challenged students and faculty to try something new this year.



David Harris could not have gone to college at Northwestern University without a substantial financial aid package.

Growing up outside of Philadelphia, Harris said his teachers pushed him to pursue college. His goal is to create that same opportunity for the next generation as the new president of Union College in Schenectady.

Harris came to Union from Tufts University. He taught sociology at Cornell University and spent a year under President Barack Obama working for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

In his first initiative at Union College, Harris is challenging students to do something different. He took on the challenge too, listening and writing about right-of-center podcasts and practicing yoga.

You had trouble deciding what you wanted to study in undergrad. I was curious about everything and wanted to explore and ask questions. I started out as a journalism major at Northwestern University. My favorite class was honors calculus, so I said I must be an engineer. I left college during the third term of sophomore year and that summer went to Los Angeles and worked for Enterprise Rent-A-Car. I came back to study social policy. I tell students, you don't really know your choice set of majors and careers and you don't know yourself fully. I didn't know how to map what I wanted to do.

How did you get into academia? It comes down to the power of a faculty member. Junior year, I was in childhood development and the professor called me at home, which was scary. I thought I missed an assignment. She asked if I was interested in a summer research opportunity program with Big Ten schools to get minority students to pursue Ph.D.s. I didn't

have a summer job yet, and I said, "Yeah, that's great." If she hadn't reached out, I would be doing something different.

What was your first job? I delivered newspapers when I was a kid. Then I was a bill collector at 15. It was bizarre. There was a company, that I don't think highly of, but I was 15. They went to sororities and got them to buy things with monthly payments that they couldn't afford. I would collect. There was an office of 15 people, some high school students. We would get a card saying how far behind they are on their payments, and I had to get them to pay. That was my introduction to the real world.

Tell me about something you are proud of from your time at Tufts and Cornell. I'm proud of the things I stopped from happening. A school I used to work at was going to do something that would have helped with revenue but it was not going to help the mission and it would have hurt the mission. When you think about generating revenue, three-fourths of the revenue comes from students' tuition and room and board. Your most important generation of revenue is your retention of revenue. If you do something that adversely affects your core mission, you put that 75 percent at risk. You might end up advancing 2 percent and losing 10 or 15 percent.

How have your experiences shaped how you approach your job today. My passion is increasing opportunity for people. I'm trying to help out the 4th grade me. My dad lost his job, and we weren't doing great financially. There were teachers who helped me along the way. At Cornell, I was one of the major players of two financial aid initiatives. One family wrote me a letter where they said when their daughter was admitted to Cornell, it was the best and worst day of their lives. It was the best day because she got in and it was the worst day because they couldn't afford to send her, until they saw the financial aid package. That was a result of the work we did changing financial aid. She was obviously qualified for Cornell, but wasn't lucky enough to be born wealthy.

What were your first impressions of relations between the city of Schenectady and Union College? I had never been to Schenectady. I read about it. What I read gave me pause. I was in the area, and was being recruited by the search firm. So I came to downtown wearing jeans and a hoodie and met officer Nick. I walked over and said, "Tell me about Schenectady." He was a fantastic ambassador. Downtown didn't look like what I thought downtown would look like. The more we talked, the more I got excited. As someone interested in social poverty, opportunity and urban poverty, I thought it was an interesting opportunity. Schenectady is rebuilding. It provides an opportunity as a college leader to help bring back the place and figure out how students can get involved.

What challenges are you facing at Union? One of my goals at Union is to expand our footprint. We draw too high a percentage of our students from New York, Massachusetts, Connecticut. I'm looking at if there's more students in the south or out west that could be interested in Union College. I'm working with admissions to compare Williams College, Siena College, Skidmore College, Hamilton College and even Amherst College, Smith College and others. Where do these schools recruit from? It's the culture of this place that we don't brag about ourselves, but we could tell the story better.

This interview has been edited and condensed.

David Harris

Title: President of Union College

Age: 49

Grew up: Philadelphia

Resides: Between the Union College President's house and Niskayuna

Education: Bachelor's degree in human development and social policy, Northwestern University, 1991; Ph.D. in sociology, Northwestern University, 1997

On the resume: Chief academic officer at Tufts University; professor of sociology and later founding director of Cornell University's Institute for the Social Sciences; served as deputy assistant secretary for human services policy at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services from 2010 to 2011.

Family: Wife, Anne; three daughters, ages 21, 19 and 8