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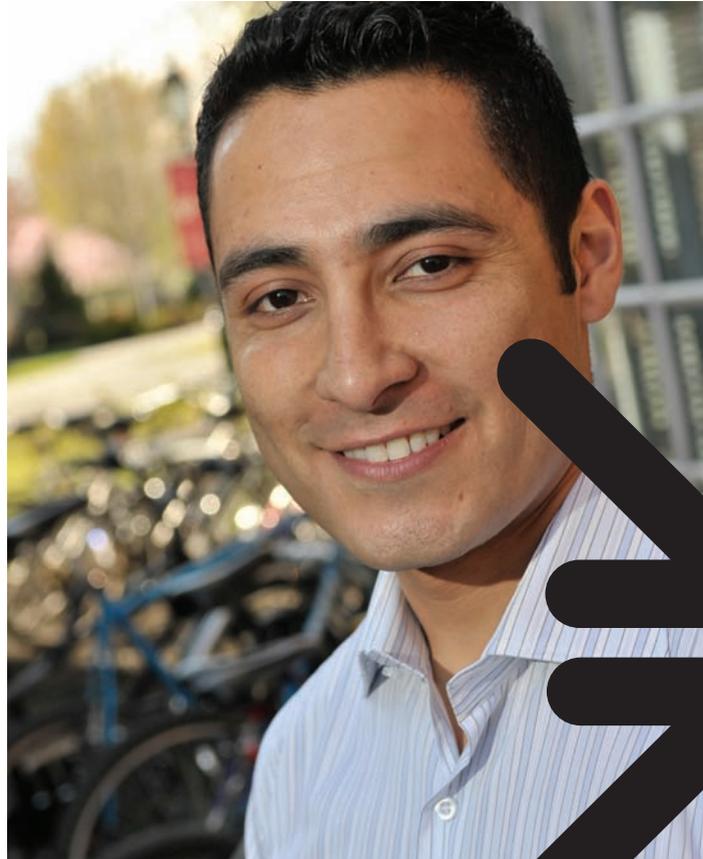
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PERSPECTIVES

LGBT AND BUSINESS:

ARE WE THE INVISIBLE MINORITY?



JAIME MENDEZ, HBS STUDENT (MBA '09)

Pico Rivera, California

Jaime Mendez serves as Co-President of the Latino Student Organization (LASO), is a member of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, and Transgender Student Association (LGBTSA), Musical Director of Heard on the Street, and Admissions Representative for Section E.

“Perspectives” is a Harvard Business School series that pairs current students with alumni to talk about social business issues. In this edition, Jaime Mendez and Jens Audenaert discuss “coming out” in corporate culture, how companies can become LGBT-friendlier, and the importance of having a gay voice in the classroom.

Jaime Mendez: Being gay, which is often referred to as an invisible identity, it’s easy for me to see how often people assume things about other people — that they may be straight, or that gay issues are no longer relevant in today’s era of pro-gay rights.

Jens Audenaert: I think the main worry of any gay professional is probably the continuous outing of one’s sexual orientation and the anxiety about how people (including clients) would react to that.

JM: Right, and the fear in school is that you might not be as close to your classmates if they don’t approve of your sexuality. Which is something my straight peers don’t have to face.

JA: So these issues are more or less the same as the worries LGBT people have being who they are in society at large.

JM: Yes. And if you have a partner, the topic comes up quite often in an environment such as HBS. We obviously come here to get an education, but we also come to build a network. So the question of whether to correct someone and say, “No, I have a boyfriend” is always interesting.

JA: I worked for an American consulting firm in India, where the corporate culture and policies are the same as in the US, yet the personal attitude of people is very different. In a country where being gay is still illegal, people were less comfortable working with openly out colleagues, and I could definitely sense that.

JM: Both of the firms I worked for had policies in place to protect against discrimination and to promote a “gay-friendly” work environment, yet many of the gay men and women I knew were not out.

JA: If I think back about business school and look around me in the workplace, the one thing I regret is that so many LGBT people still believe they can climb the corporate ladder faster being closeted, and one day when they’re in charge they will change things. They rarely do.

“It has been great to raise my hand and question our assumptions about diversity.”

– JAIME MENDEZ

JM: The Old Boys Club mentality also kept LGBT men and women from progressing. We’ve made a lot of progress in some industries, but there are lots of industries and segments of the world where people don’t view gay rights as an issue worth worrying about.

JA: Well, becoming gay-friendlier would require a significant shift in culture in those places.

JM: True, and we’re beginning to see a large portion of professional service firms being gay-friendlier than years past.

JA: That’s definitely something where executives need to establish norms and set an example. People who know gay people are so much more likely to be gay-friendly.

JM: I have learned that for me—and every person is different—I was able to build stronger relationships in both my professional and academic lives when I felt comfortable and open enough to share that I have a partner.

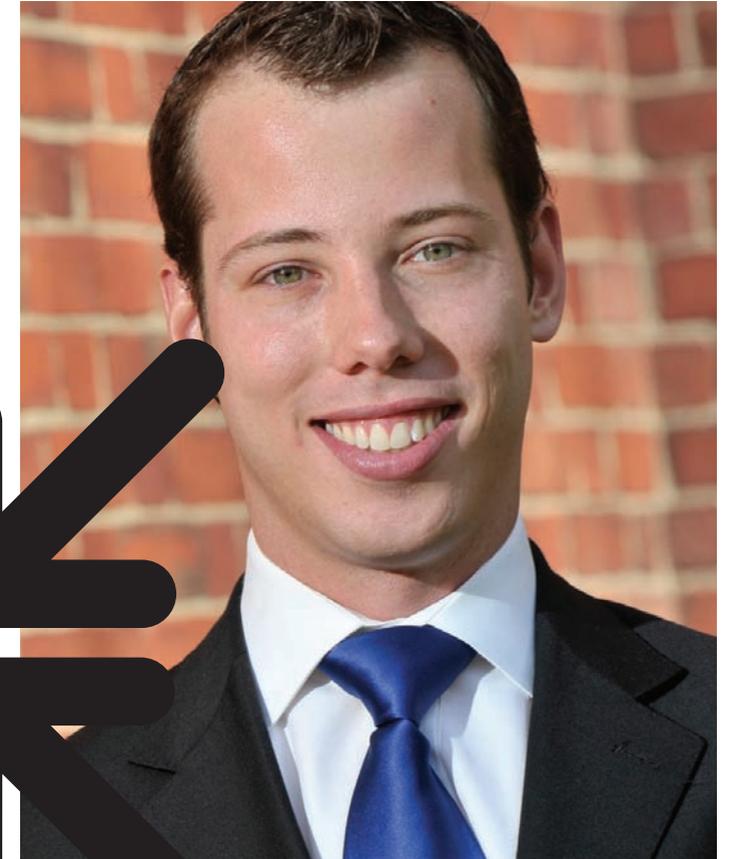
JA: It makes it all the more important to bring LGBT people into the HBS classroom and raise LGBT issues, so future generations of business people will be more educated and aware of those concerns.

JM: It’s been very beneficial for me to bring my own experiences to class. Of course, being a gay man is only slightly related to certain academic topics, but it has been great to raise my hand and question our assumptions about diversity in general.

JA: Absolutely. Just like it is important to have women in the classroom to discuss women’s issues in the workplace, I believe it is important to have LGBT people in the classroom, to challenge other people’s misconceptions or oversight.

JM: My section does have some great debates about everything from the ethics of reverse engineering HIV drugs to how to manage a diverse workforce.

JA: Since this summer, my company actually mentions diversity (including sexual orientation) in our recruiting presentations on campuses in India, something very uncommon over there. Being able to make a difference in that way is huge.



JENS AUDENAERT, STRATEGY CONSULTANT (MBA '08)

Brussels, Belgium

Jens Audenaert is a case competition judge for the Reaching Out MBA conference (the LGBT MBA recruiting conference), oversees his firm’s LGBT recruiting outreach in North America, and is the honorary president of the London School of Economics Alumni Association in Belgium.

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PERSPECTIVES

UNDERREPRESENTED
MINORITIES AND BUSINESS:

DO DIVERSITY ISSUES STILL EXIST?



ROCIO PARRA, HBS STUDENT (MBA '10)

El Paso, Texas

Rocio Parra is the Co-President of the Latino Student Organization and the Luxury Goods & Design Club, as well as a member of the Catholic Student Association and the Retail & Apparel Club.

“Perspectives” is a Harvard Business School series that pairs current students with alumni to talk about social business issues. In this edition, Rocio Parra and Deborah Wright discuss the challenges for minorities in business, the impact of cultural upbringing on career paths, and the importance of understanding a different worldview in today’s economy.

Rocio Parra: To be honest, I’m not sure that I’ve faced many issues as a minority in business as of yet. What do you think prohibits minorities from achieving scale and capital in today’s business world?

Deborah Wright: I think history is the biggest factor. Race precluded participation for decades. Only recently have minorities had opportunities to participate in mainstream business.

RP: In school, I think it’s more about affirmative action, with non-minority students making comments suggesting they are being passed up for less deserving minority candidates. These comments have not been directed at me personally...

DW: Very true. When I attended HBS in the early 80s, the number of minorities was small. The African American Student Union was a critical factor for most of us, but the limited exposure of most students to minorities was evident. I guess back in the day, the worldview of the majority was “It’s all about us.” Has that at least changed?

RP: I believe so. We’ve had numerous classes and cases on issues of diversity at HBS and I have been very pleased by people’s appetite to talk about these issues in a very open, constructive manner.

DW: Glad to hear there’s been that level of progress. I don’t always see it in the business world, but hopefully in time.

RP: Well, one caveat might be a sense that “diversity issues” no longer exist and racism in society is gone, at least in our social/business circles. But the class conversations and discussions really help people, especially non-minority students, understand that we still have a ways to go. And that it still should be a top-of-mind issue.

“I feel like I’m
in a position to be
a role model.”

– ROCIO PARRA

DW: That is so important. It seems like people running most businesses today don’t “get it” where it counts. It’s not about checking the boxes or percentages of this and that, it’s more a question of understanding a different worldview. What does it mean to be a black man in this world? What does it mean for your native language to be Spanish? What does the world look like to you when you grew up in an Asian slum?

RP: Absolutely.

DW: I grew up in a very small town in the South, so it was a huge transition to HBS. My parents earned masters degrees in fields traditionally open to blacks: education, the ministry. Not business. That’s a big difference in this country.

RP: A huge difference. My parents are from Mexico and moved to the US so my dad could pursue his studies. My mother did not know English when they moved here, so I was born speaking Spanish and learned English in school. The fact that they had the courage to leave their families and the comfort of the culture and the language to pursue a better life has always been very inspiring for me.

DW: Personally, I feel that through my experiences I need to keep reaching out. In my conversations with interns, I try to debunk the fear about graduate school generally and the power of business to change lives.

RP: For me, I’ve tried to be courageous in my own way, going to college out of state, moving to New York City and pursuing a career and a graduate degree in business, which no one in my family had done.

DW: That’s definitely the result of a generational shift. My daughter is 5 and a third of her class is multicultural. Those kids will have a very different view of the world than when I was in school, a view that understands race and cultural differences versus ignoring them.

RP: I think a lot of young people from my background have an inherent desire to be leaders or be different and make a difference in their community. They just don’t know how, or don’t have anyone to guide them. I’ve pushed myself even harder in order to prove that I was where I should be, so I feel like I am in a position to be a role model.



**DEBORAH WRIGHT,
CHAIRMAN & CEO, CARVER FEDERAL SAVINGS BANK (MBA '83)**

New York, New York

Deborah Wright serves on the boards of Kraft Foods Inc., Time Warner, The Partnership for New York City, The Children’s Defense Fund, and Sesame Workshop. She is a member of the Board of Managers of the Memorial Sloan-Kettering Cancer Center and served as a member of the Board of Overseers of Harvard University.

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PERSPECTIVES

WOMEN AND BUSINESS:

CAN WE REALLY HAVE IT ALL?



ERIN TEAGUE, HBS STUDENT (MBA '10)

Southfield, Michigan

Erin Teague is an HBS Board Fellow, member of the Women's Student Association and Social Enterprise Club, the Co-President of the African-American Student Union (AASU), and served as the Education Representative for Section J.

"Perspectives" is a Harvard Business School series that pairs current students with alumni to talk about social business issues. In this edition, Erin Teague and Ellen Rubin discuss work/life balance, industry opportunities for women, and the importance of diverse thinking.

Erin Teague: I think one of the biggest challenges facing women in business today is balance. Determining how to balance home, having a family, and career progression is something that is on the top of my mind and the minds of most of my friends.

ER: I agree. Since B-school, the thing that my women friends and I talk about the most is the need to find a balance between our careers and family life. It's definitely possible to balance the two, but it takes a great deal of organization... not to mention an extremely supportive family!

ET: Ellen, I would be curious to hear how you thought about the family planning process.

ER: Sure, I have two great daughters, Talia and Maya (12 and 9). My husband, Michael, and I decided early on that we would be partners in all the home and child-raising responsibilities. Given how much we both travel and the crazy hours, it's been important to be very flexible about home life. It often comes down to whose 8 a.m. meeting is the most important!

ET: It's definitely inspiring to hear when an alum has been able to achieve the balance that we all strive for. Did this become more difficult as you left the corporate world and became an entrepreneur?

ER: It's funny, when you start a company you're on 24/7 and you're thinking about the business constantly. But in other ways, things are more flexible now, in terms of making my own schedule and doing things around the kids' needs.

ET: Generally, it seems like there's fewer women entering fields where there are women leaders who could serve as mentors and coaches.

ER: I have a particular view of things in the high-tech world, where there are still very few women engineers or women founders and leaders. Do you find

that there are many women at HBS who have technology backgrounds and career interests?

ET: There are very few women engineers, and even fewer women who are interested in technology as careers. However, there is a critical mass of people with such interests, which is one of the perks of HBS having a large class size.

ER: It would be great to have more women in the technology sector in general, and I believe the HBS experience was very valuable for me in pursuing this.

ET: I think having a woman's perspective in the classroom is particularly important. At HBS, given the case method of instruction, most of the learning is peer-to-peer and facilitated by the professor. In these situations, having diversity of thought and experience only enhances the richness of the learning. I can remember several situations this past year where a case would highlight something that would seem obvious to some, but one or two comments completely changed the course of the conversation.

ER: Definitely. In the business world, the more creative and diverse thinking, the better the insights and great ideas. It's exciting to work with a team of people who bring very different perspectives to problem solving.

ET: And the more a team of diverse backgrounds and experiences have the opportunity to work together, the more likely the solution will be creative and innovative!

ER: Absolutely. The MBA experience has been valuable throughout my career and I would (and do) definitely encourage young women to pursue it. Besides the specific content and take-aways from the academics, I value the social and personal relationships. I find that I value what I learned at HBS more and more over time, particularly in managing people and working with teams.

ET: In the classroom, I have been challenged to think about issues that business leaders face and difficult situations that they must make critical decisions to overcome. These are the types of lessons that will stay with me throughout my career.

"I find that I value what I learned at HBS more and more over time."

— ELLEN RUBIN



ELLEN RUBIN, FOUNDER, CLOUDSWITCH (MBA '95)

Boston, Massachusetts

While at HBS, Ellen Rubin was a member of the Women's Student Association and the Arts and Media Club, and participated in a second-year field study program in educational software. Today, she is an active member of the Finance Committee at her children's school, JCDS, in Newton, Massachusetts.