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Section: Education

**GAY ACTIVISTS LOBBY HARVARD TO INCREASE AID
FUNDS SOUGHT FOR THOSE ESTRANGED FROM PARENTS**

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Chanda Prescod-Weinstein, a junior at Harvard University, was upset when she learned that the parents of a gay classmate stopped paying tuition after she came out to them. But Prescod-Weinstein was even more disturbed when she found out that Harvard was unwilling to offer more financial aid.

"For all they knew, when they threw her out of the dorm, they were throwing her out on the street," Prescod-Weinstein said.

Prescod-Weinstein and other gay activists are lobbying Harvard to change its policy and offer more financial aid to students who suddenly find themselves without parental support. Students facing such circumstances find little comfort from their school's financial aid offices - most colleges are reluctant to make up for parents unwilling to pay.

"We believe that it is first the responsibility of a student's parents to finance their education to the extent that they are able before it is ours," said Sally Donahue, director of the Harvard Undergraduate Financial Aid Office.

Virginia Hazen, director of financial aid at Dartmouth College, agreed. "We must be sure that it is an inability rather than an unwillingness to pay," she said.

Instances in which parents estrange themselves from their children - and tuition payments - are unusual, Donahue said. "It's probably just a handful of students out of an undergraduate population of 6,600," she said.

Other schools report similarly low figures, but at least one college - Bridgewater State - has deemed students' financial estrangement from their parents a serious problem, especially in the case of gay students.

Last April, the school's outreach education coordinator, Bob Haynor, began raising money for a fund geared toward gay students cut off by their parents.

In his eight years with the college, Haynor said, a number of gay students had approached him with concerns about financing their college educations after being estranged from their parents. Those students who tried to obtain assistance from Bridgewater's financial aid office often had little success, he said.

"Because of the way the financial aid system is set up, they found dead ends," Haynor said.

Most US colleges, including Harvard and Bridgewater, follow government guidelines in dispersing federal financial aid. They stipulate that the amount of financial aid should be, in part, determined by parent income.

Students wishing to be evaluated for federal aid without the consideration of their parents' income must be granted "independent" status by the federal government.

To qualify for that status, a student must meet one of several conditions: He or she must be at least 24; married; pursuing a graduate degree; be an armed services veteran; have dependents other than a spouse; or be an orphan or a ward of the state.

Students who meet none of these conditions have one last hope: a dependency override. Financial aid officers have the discretion to declare a student independent - and eligible for more federal funds - irrespective of government guidelines. But dependency overrides are reserved for the most extreme cases, such as documented child abuse on the part of the parents, and are rarely granted. Annual government audits of college financial aid offices are conducted to ensure that the dependency override option is not overused.

Still, schools have other resources besides the federal government, said Jeff Cook, the executive director of Oyaron Advancement, a nonprofit counseling organization for gay students.

"Nothing's holding the institution back from providing institutional grant money, money not bound by any type of regulation," he said.

Every year, Cook said, he hears from one or two gay college students seeking to continue their education without the financial backing of their parents. There are scholarships and grants geared toward such students, but they are far from numerous, Cook said.

At Bridgewater, the school's financial aid office has worked with Haynor and Bridgewater's Safe Colleges Task Force, a gay advocacy group, in setting up the new fund.

Donahue says that Harvard's financial aid office does not single out specific segments of the student population - including gay youth - in awarding money.

"It would really run against the grain of how we assist students in general to categorize them in groups," she said.

But Prescod-Weinstein argues that well-heeled institutions should do more to help students who suddenly find themselves without their parents' support.

"At a university where our endowment is just so large," she said, "I think you can afford to be giving those people access to their education here."