

# Open Letter

to the Harvard Community

November 2002

## HUCTW in 2002: After 14 Years of Steady Progress, A New Agenda and A Continuing Commitment

May 17, 2002, marked 14 years since Harvard support staff voted to form a union. The Harvard Union of Clerical and Technical Workers is now solidly into its teenage years – not really a young union anymore, but still growing and learning at a rapid rate.

HUCTW members and leaders have experienced much in 14 years as a union (and through more than a decade of union-building before the 1988 election). We have matured as an organization, with many hundreds of union members gaining skills in leadership, negotiation and community involvement. In addition,

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our union-management relations have ripened over 14 years of intense interaction. Over those years, HUCTW and the University's administrative leaders have repeatedly experienced the power of collaboration and have discovered large areas of overlapping interest. In other

respects, our 14 years of experience in labor-management affairs have brought into focus significant tensions between competing ideas about how to make Harvard a great and productive workplace. While fertile ground has been broken, real philosophical differences and challenges remain.

This letter represents a report on the state of our union and the University workplace in 2002; it is organized in two segments. The first section contains a brief discussion of HUCTW accomplishments and introduces a new agenda for current and future efforts. The second part offers analysis of the Harvard working environment, what it lacks, and how it might become stronger and truer to the University's ideals.

### **The Proud, Early History of Our Union: Economic Progress and Community-Building**

HUCTW has been most loudly acclaimed, over its first 1½ decades, for accomplishments which improve the economic standing of Harvard staff. Indeed, five major rounds of negotiation have brought a steady series of improvements and additions in economic benefits. Although those gains are threatened currently by a crisis in Boston-area housing costs, we have created a University salary and benefits package which is without peer among service sector employers in the region.

At Harvard today, more than 80% of the office, laboratory, library and health care staff in HUCTW earn over \$30,000 per year. In all job families and types of work, staff members have the opportunity to see their salaries progress beyond \$40,000 per year. The longest-serving and highest-skilled workers are making more than \$50,000 per year and growing steadily toward \$60,000. Our members, who started out 15 years ago with the depressed wages typical for women's work in the service sector, have achieved a kind of middle-class standing, complete with vacations, savings, and realistic hopes of home-ownership, considered so elusive in the modern American economy.

In negotiations since 1988, benefits programs have been added or expanded in health care, pensions, disability coverage, educational assistance, vacation and other time off, paid parental leave, financial assistance for child care, adoption assistance, and numerous other areas. Harvard's part-time staff have full access to the same

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benefits as full-timers. The current array of benefits addresses nearly every area of human concern that HUCTW and Harvard negotiators have been able to identify.

There is one storm cloud which darkens the otherwise sunny economic landscape for Harvard staff: the increasingly-dire problem of housing cost. In the past six years, steep increases in rental housing prices have forced many of our members into painful choices about where and how to live. Home ownership has again slipped out of immediate reach for many of our co-workers.

In terms of non-economic issues and the quality of the working environment, members and leaders of our union can also be proud that they have participated in developing a negotiating style which is powerful and effective, and at the same time peaceful, creative and community-building. Although there have been moments of disagreement, sometimes intense or even angry discord, HUCTW members have never acted in a way meant to damage Harvard or disrupt its activities. We have resolved our disputes and pursued our goals by persistent listening and determined relationship-building, with good humor and energy.

More than 70 percent of HUCTW members are women, and most of our union's leaders — women and men — have taken inspiration from ideals of the women's movement. We have maintained a strong commitment to peaceful progress, to hearing and valuing all voices, and to kindness in all human interactions within the Harvard community.

When we have seen episodes of serious disagreement (over salary growth and employment security in 1992-93, over health benefits in 1994-97), we have worked through them by engaging intensively, explaining our concerns broadly, encouraging the involvement of concerned faculty and students, listening carefully, and trusting skilled, neutral mediators. We have also applied these beliefs and strategies in individual workplace disputes, through an innovative and powerful "problem-solving" mechanism. Each year, that individual problem-solving process brings about the resolution of as many as 1,000 cases involving disagreement or confusion between union members and supervisors.

HUCTW has never given up on a vision of union-management partnership and community engagement. As a result of this commitment to collaboration, Harvard and our union have taken some impressive steps in recent years. We have moved forward constructively and reached agreement on a number of thorny issues:

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strengthening policies which limit the use of "casual" or contingent labor, and which include new job categories in the union. These are policy questions which would have sunk into rancorous legal battles in a different kind of union-management relationship.

## **A New Agenda: Participation, Learning, Community**

In the past two years, HUCTW members and leaders have begun to articulate a new agenda. This new set of aspirations is really a refinement and a renewed commitment to a set of hopes and concerns, held by Harvard staff members over many years: for participation, learning, and community.

**Participation:** Put simply, HUCTW members want more involvement in planning and problem-solving to improve our jobs and our departments' effectiveness.

Many Harvard functions rely on outmoded structures of “command and control” supervision. A steady stream of economics and management scholarship, over the past 30 years, calls for investing in workers’ skills for coordination and analysis, giving more control and self-direction to

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front-line employees, and flattening hierarchies. A number of American industries have been saved from collapse by employing engagement and participation strategies. Compelling research shows that increased investment in training, participatory management, and structures which allow for self-direction have measurable, positive impacts on both organizational performance and employee satisfaction. Yet, in the Harvard workplace, these enormously important ideas have, for the most part, been disregarded. Just in the past year-and-a-half, University and HUCTW leaders have entered into a few experimental efforts in staff engagement and redesigning work systems. These efforts, including a program called New Work Systems at Harvard (NWSH), have shown strongly encouraging results. We are determined to continue and expand these efforts, in order to make Harvard work better, and to make Harvard a better place to work.

**Learning:** Harvard’s fundamental promise as an institution is that of learning; the gaining of new knowledge and skills is Harvard’s most sacred exercise. However, that activity is not fully accessible to all members of our University community. At Harvard in 2002, many of the University’s staff have not been able to participate in the rich resources for learning which surround us.

Our union’s members are, overall, not encouraged to think of skill-building, education, or professional development as part of our jobs. The University’s in-house training courses charge substantial fees, which sometimes act as an impediment. Even more commonly, Harvard staff

are denied in requests to take time away from regular work duties for training and education. The main school offering affordable, college-level education for University staff, the Harvard Extension School, offers courses only in the evening hours. This makes participation infeasible for many staff members with family obligations, second jobs, or health care problems. On the whole, attitudes and offerings supporting learning for Harvard workers have been confused and inconsistent.

There are some recent, positive developments in the area of workplace learning. In the spring of 2001, HUCTW and the University agreed to create the Harvard Academy of Workforce Education. The primary purpose of the Academy is “making Harvard a workplace where all staff members have rich, plentiful opportunities for learning and skill development, whether for enhancement of a current job, for career growth or advancement, or for general professional and intellectual betterment.” It is a critical goal for our union in the next few years to make the Academy real and, through its work, to bring about a great increase in the time and energy our members spend learning on the job. The University’s promise of learning should be for all of Harvard’s people.

**Community:** Harvard should be a healthy community, in which all of the University’s citizens act with kindness toward each other. It should be an environment where all voices can be heard, and no group is arbitrarily subjected to treatment as second-class. At present, in our members’ experience, it is not entirely so.

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Breaches of civility are all too common in the daily interworkings of faculty, students and staff on the Harvard campus. HUCTW members’ observations about their working lives are frequently peppered with stories about being yelled at or insulted. Sometimes, sadly, our members do their share of the yelling.

Perhaps some moments of incivility are inevitable in an environment where many thousands of human beings are interacting with great energy and purpose. Even more troubling than those scattered incidents of disrespect, however, is the persistence of a set of official policies which represent an ongoing, institutionalized offense to a whole category of Harvard staff comprising more than 5,000 people.

- The Faculty Club extends automatic membership to thousands of staff, those classified as “officers,” at the beginning of their employment. Thousands of others, including our members, are excluded.
- Many of Harvard’s libraries maintain two separate policies on borrowing privileges for staff. One group, again the thousands of “officers,” can borrow materials on the same terms as faculty members. Union members’ privileges are significantly limited, allowing us to borrow materials only for shorter periods of time.
- The University’s primary resource for information on official titles and addresses of Harvard people, an annually-published directory of faculty and staff, includes no listings for thousands of members of HUCTW and the other Harvard unions.

There are some small chinks in the armor of this caste system. For example, the Harvard Gazette, with leadership from the Office of Human Resources, has recently changed a policy on printing job postings. Where previously only “officer” job postings appeared in the Gazette, now the newspaper prints postings for all Harvard job categories.

Still, more attention is needed to these policies. They do not represent an inevitable social dynamic. They are an ugly symbol with an unhealthy effect, and they should be corrected. In pursuit of a stronger Harvard community,

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HUCTW will continue to advocate for those changes.

Another important aspect of “community” at Harvard concerns the University’s interaction with the neighborhoods surrounding our campus in Cambridge and Boston. Harvard could and should be more generous, thoughtful and conciliatory in dealings with community organizations and local elected officials. HUCTW members are deeply interested in being part of that outreach, engaging with our neighbors and building connections. Harvard’s vast human resources should not be walled off from the University’s neighbors. Our “community relations” should not be structured primarily around the University’s needs for construction permits. Our University will be richer and healthier, the more deeply we are involved in the lives of people and neighborhoods which are formally outside of Harvard, but nearby.

### **What is Lacking?**

There is a hole in our University’s workplace fabric in 2002. Harvard has no core philosophy for managing people and creating a productive working environment.

HUCTW members can feel that lack every day. Far too many of our co-workers come daily into a workplace where they are not challenged, not listened to, not engaged in setting priorities and solving problems, not encouraged to build new skills.

To be fair to Harvard’s managers and supervisors, it is important to note that the University’s administrative leadership has made little investment in developing professional management skills in that group. Although thousands of people work in managerial roles, at a cost of hundreds of millions of dollars per year, Harvard has no comprehensive programs for management training. The central administration has started a new leadership training program for managers in the last few years, but it has trained barely a few hundred managers to date. In the separate

Harvard schools, with few exceptions, there are no management training programs in place. Thousands of people in managerial roles go year after year without any organized exposure to new thinking and challenging ideas about leadership, organizational behavior, productivity, or union-management relations. We hear often, out of our members' interactions with their supervisors, that Harvard managers are hungry for those new ideas.

Even if the University did increase its commitment to management training, in the current state it is hard to know what Harvard would teach the supervisors. The University's administrative and academic leaders have not articulated a coherent set of goals and values upon which to build a great workplace. President Summers took a good step when he asserted, in his Installation Address, that "Harvard's distinction, and its promise, flow from all who are here. From this entire community, from all those who read books, who write books, and who shelve books. From all who do their part in the constant quest to make a great university a greater one." Those are noble sentiments, and they resonate powerfully for our members.

However, that vision of inclusion and workplace democracy which President Summers voiced proves difficult to achieve in the Harvard environment. The most recent "Annual Report of the Office of Human Resources," issued in December, 2001, framed the quandary eloquently: "...the traditional divide between faculty and staff is pronounced at Harvard, where meetings or committees that include both faculty and staff are the exception, and there is no orientation program for new faculty members, as there is for staff. The idea of community, of valuing all of the various ways in which individuals contribute to Harvard's mission, is difficult to promote as long as within the staff ranks long-standing class distinctions persist that grant exempt staff higher status than those who are overtime-eligible."

In the current Harvard workplace, a craving for community and democracy clashes mightily with traditions of elitism and distinction. The reconciliation of those competing ideals depends more than anything on a strongly-defined and vigorously-pursued set of values. We believe that the "Values Statement" advanced by the

University's administration in recent months falls short of what is needed. The Harvard community needs bold leadership toward a clear goal of institutional greatness based on the value of every Harvard citizen's contribution.

*HUCTW will strive to humanize and democratize the Harvard workplace.*

## Conclusion

As we approach the 15<sup>th</sup> anniversary of our union's creation, in the spring of 2003, HUCTW members and leaders hope to continue in a strong tradition of engagement, hard work, and collaboration with University leaders, but with a new and clear focus on very current challenges:

- We need to begin in earnest addressing the problem of housing cost, through research, education and collaborative work with Harvard as well as elected officials and community groups;
- We intend to pursue greater employee involvement and improved organizational performance for all of Harvard's workplaces, through redesigning work systems and increased managerial training;
- The Academy for Workforce Education must become a living Harvard institution, transforming the University workplace into one where every staff member has real learning and skill-building opportunities every day; and
- We will actively oppose policies which separate Harvard staff into upper and lower classes, or which treat whole categories of employees as less important.

In the broadest sense, HUCTW will strive to humanize and democratize the Harvard workplace. We will hold to high standards for respectful collaboration with the University's administrators, faculty and students. Our commitment to participation, learning and community is unyielding, and our work is far from finished.





This letter was prepared by leaders and staff of the

Harvard Union of Clerical & Technical Workers (HUCTW)  
1306 Massachusetts Avenue, #203  
Cambridge MA 02138

With comments or questions, or to request additional copies, please call the  
HUCTW office at (617) 661-8289



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1306 Massachusetts Avenue, #203  
Cambridge MA 02138

*University Mail*