

HARVARD PORTRAIT

Perhaps because of the racially fraught legacy of law in the United States, tensions at the school appear to run especially high. Michele Hall, a second-year student, said that students of color are routinely exposed to racism in the classroom. "It's hostile every day to go into class and talk about laws that affect populations of color....Every time issues of profiling come up, black students say, yes, they've been profiled on campus, and white students are shocked," she continued. "Our daily experience is colored by these types of incidents, big and small."

Other members of the community describe what they view as a climate of intolerance toward dissenting views. Third-year student William Barthow, who created Responsible Speech at HLS, a website where students have expressed disagreement with the protesters, believes many students who oppose activist demands are intimidated into silence. "There's a contingent that disagrees with the protesters but is afraid to voice that view publicly because of the social backlash of doing so," he said. Barthow and 36 other students signed a letter in December urging Reclaim Harvard Law School to remove from its demands certain items that the signers believe threaten academic freedom—such as the proposed first-year course on racial inequality in the law, which, they write, "would be taught in a highly partisan manner."

Animating a diverse community. This tension has played out most visibly at Yale, where disputes about social-justice issues escalated into a discussion about whether college students and administrators were acting more as censors than facilitators of free inquiry. In Cambridge, the College's responses have been more muted. Khurana rejects the dichotomy drawn between free speech and student calls for racial justice: "Those are sort of false binaries...one can engage in free-spirited exchange and also do that in a way that is respectful," he said. "It requires skill and capacity-building and a genuine desire to hear from somebody else's perspective." Others suggest that the challenges of embracing Harvard's increasingly diverse student body demand more expansive University strategies. "From the 1960s on, it was about quantitative diversity. Now it's about qualitative diversity, as Tomiko Brown-Nagin has written. So the question



James Mickens

James Mickens is explaining how comedians Hannibal Buress and Louis C.K. get their laughs: Buress's high "joke density" versus Louis C.K.'s slow-build storytelling. For Mickens, an associate professor of computer science known for his snappy, engaging, and laugh-out-loud funny PowerPoint presentations on computer security (many viewable online), YouTube comedy clips are research. "A lot of people don't realize that even the sciences are a social field," he says. "When you can explain your work well and create a narrative, you are building a universe for people to inhabit with you." He approaches teaching the same way. Mickens joined Harvard's faculty last fall, after six years with Microsoft Research and a one-year visiting professorship at MIT. He tries to give his students a "deeper sense of the work," he says, beyond money and prestige and Silicon Valley. Growing up in Atlanta as a physicist's son (and a serious heavy metal fan; he owns a formidable record collection and plays in two one-man bands), he was drawn to computer science and the potential to "build things with your mind, without needing a backhoe. There's a lot of architectural thought, and yet at a certain level you're in a different reality." After Georgia Tech, and a Ph.D. from the University of Michigan, he now studies security—or the lack of it—in distributed systems (multiple computers connected to a network). A lot of his research, he says, "is thinking about failure scenarios." It also addresses the fundamental tension between privacy and profit in Web services like Facebook and Gmail. He's working on a data-storage system that would allow users to retain control of their online content—and a whole new ecosystem of Web services to go with it. Building without a backhoe.

—LYDIALYLE GIBSON