An Asia Expert for Arts and Sciences

The brief, intense search for a new dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) concluded May 20, when President Lawrence H. Summers announced the appointment of William C. Kirby, Ph.D. ’81, Geisinger professor of history, to the position. He succeeds Jeremy R. Knowles, who made public in February his plan to conclude an 11-year tenure as dean on June 30 (see "A Dean for All Weathers," May-June, page 48). The new Dean K. is a scholar of modern China; his predecessor, a chemist, analyzed enzymes.

Kirby figured in speculation about likely decanal candidates from the outset. Since arriving as professor of history in 1992, he had chaired his department (1995-2000) and directed the fledgling Asia Center (beginning in 1999)—important administrative, programmatic, and development credentials. He has also chaired the search for a new Harvard College librarian; served on the Resources Committee (through which FAS monitors its fisc, negotiates with the University administration, and advises the dean on internal policies, such as faculty leaves, and their costs); and has been a member of the Board of Syndics of Harvard University Press.

Summers praised Kirby’s “exceptional effectiveness and energy” in discharging those extraprofessorial roles. But other factors may have been decisive in his selection as dean. For one thing, his studies and scholarship embody the international scope Summers has championed. Kirby, a 1972 summa cum laude history alumnus of Dartmouth College, also studied in Germany and at Wellesley College as an undergraduate; as a graduate student, he spent a year in Berlin. At Washington University in St. Louis (1980-1991), he directed an international-affairs program and Asian studies (and was also dean of the unit serving part-time, evening, and summer-school students: a useful experience for an FAS dean, who oversees Harvard’s Extension School). More recently, Kirby was a visiting professor in Heidelberg and Berlin during the 1995-1996 academic year; his scholarly writings frequently cross borders, comparing historical developments in Germany and China. A current project, involving colleagues in Berlin and Beijing, explores the internationalization of China.

For all his technical rigor, Kirby is low-key in his public demeanor and communicates easily. His brief foreword to Iris Chang’s 1997 book, The Rape of Nanking, is a model of moral clarity; it ends with lines from “In Time of War,” by W.H. Auden:

And maps can really point to places Where life is evil now: Nanking; Dachau.

Kirby outlined the University’s widening demands substantial financial sacrifice from many students who then can expect lifelong low salaries. “It’s a pretty deadly package” for graduates, Singer says, and obviously a severe hindrance in raising funds from their alumni, the schools’ likeliest allies.

So the weaker “tubs” find themselves needing assistance from other parts of the Harvard community. During her introduction to the school, incoming education dean Ellen Condliffe Lagemann (see page 77) made explicit her understanding that President Summers would secure more funds, and he acknowledged that commitment. Beyond whatever additional funds the central administration might commit, the new dean and Summers will have to make GSE’s case to foundations and other Harvard alumni, such as business school graduates who during the University Campaign were important supporters of financial aid at other graduate and professional schools.

These are the issues Huidekoper and others must address as they devise plans to fulfill Summers’s vision of University-wide need-blind admissions and aid. At stake are the competitiveness of Harvard’s schools in attracting students, Harvard’s accessibility to the international community, the disparities among schools’ resources and differences in the total costs of degree programs, variances in student and family demographics, the quality of students’ experience while in residence, and—at least a little—leveling the financial playing field when career choices are made.

Nor are the stakes confined to Boston and Cambridge. As SPH dean Barry Bloom tells it, a faculty member has brought him a request from a former student who now works for a United Nations agency in Afghanistan, “than which few countries have greater needs.” He has identified a couple of qualified physicians who could come to the United States for desperately needed public-health training. But, says Bloom, “I don’t have the resources to make that happen.”

Photograph by Justin Ide/Harvard News Office
global agenda in an appreciation of Neil L. Rudenstine’s administration written for this magazine (“The International President,” July-August 2001, page 40). Drawing upon his own past, he was a passionate, funny, and effective advocate for FAS’s new policy easing study abroad (see “Changing the College Curriculum,” May-June, page 50, and this issue, page 78).

Complementing his graduate-school experiences as student and teacher, Kirby has also been in the thick of undergraduate academics at Harvard. During his tenure as chairman the history department overhauled its tutorial program for concentrators, increasing faculty involvement. He has taught a Core course on contemporary China, and co-taught another, on China in historical context (with colleague Peter K. Bol)—gaining direct familiarity with a part of the College curriculum that will figure centrally in a much-anticipated review of undergraduate learning as a whole.

And finally, there are certain intangibles. In his studies of China’s foreign economic and cultural relations, Chinese business history, and the role of science and technology in China’s interactions with the world, Kirby’s interests appear a comfortable fit with those of Summers, with the world, Kirby’s interests appear a comfortable fit with those of Summers, and notably succeeds in getting senior faculty members to teach undergraduates from across the College. But it is also in danger of choking on its own success. Kirby said he was startled to learn from five students in his recent Core course that its enrollment—170 undergraduates—was the smallest of any Core class they were taking. “I don’t think that’s right,” he said.

More broadly, the “structure and size of concentration requirements,” while organized to help undergraduates “become specialists, more than at peer colleges,” perversely afford “rather less flexibility in the curriculum.” Thus, while students crowd Core lectures, they are unable to take the many smaller departmental classes—25 of them in history alone, each with 10 students or fewer.

Accordingly, “Students need to have room in their schedule” to find such courses and to take advantage of the newly liberalized opportunity to study abroad—an essential enhancement of a Harvard education for the twenty-first century. Ultimately, he said, the curriculum must be supple enough to accommodate new areas of study and to enable students to change their minds about their concentrations. Effecting all that requires not another round of evaluations of each part of the curriculum, but an examination of the whole—taking into account what it means to be educated today, and satisfying urgent needs such as “a serious immersion in the sciences” for all students.

As for the faculty, Kirby hopes to “improve our linkages with all of Harvard’s schools”—something the Asia Center and its regional kin have begun to do. If Arts and Sciences is Harvard’s intellectual heart, as he believes, it is very much “part of an intellectual circulatory system,” with individual faculty members and departments finding peers elsewhere around the University in academically fruitful ways. The opportunity now, he believes, is to encourage those scholarly connections faculty to faculty.

When summers introduced Kirby as dean-designate at the faculty’s May 21 meeting, he cited comments from the search, among them that “He has both charm and backbone.”

Joined by his family—historian Yvette Sheahan Kirby, Ph.D. ’80, and their children Ted, 15, and Elizabeth, 13—Kirby acknowledged thunderous applause and declared, “This is a good time to be dean at Harvard.” He ticked off some reasons why: the College’s student body; a graduate school that had become “leaner but not meaner”; engineering and applied sciences and the extension school; and the faculty itself, which he noted had grown in size and diversity, drawing increasingly from its own junior ranks,

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**Rethinking 90 Mount Auburn**

Harvard has tapped Leers Weinzapfel Associates, Architects, of Boston, to design a building at 90 Mount Auburn Street after the original, stylistically avant-garde plan for the site by Pritzker Prize-winning Austrian architect Hans Hollein was rejected by the Cambridge Historical Commission. Associate president for planning and real estate Kathy Spiegelman says the new architects “have a very interesting track record of doing contemporary design but with real sensitivity to historic areas and contexts. We don’t want a red brick box, so we are hoping that they can keep alive our intent to introduce innovation and modern design ideas while respecting the historic context of this small site.” Harvard and its architects will be working closely with the Cambridge Historical Commission, Spiegelman adds, as they proceed with the design process.

Harvard plans to erect a new building on Mount Auburn Street beside the Fox Club (foreground).
without compromising its standards.

Then he thanked Jeremy Knowles for the “intellectual and institutional and physical rejuvenation” of FAS. Knowles, for his part, exhumed a story from the faculty’s annals. As Henry Rosovsky narrated in The University: An Owner’s Manual, when President Derek Bok asked him in 1973 to be FAS dean, Rosovsky inquired, “If I say no, whom will you choose?”—and when told the answer, promptly accepted the position. Had he known that Kirby would be his successor, Knowles said, he would have relinquished the post years earlier.

After the faculty completed its business for the afternoon, Knowles offered a final literary assessment of his deanship, containing strategic advice for the new Dean K. Ignoring the straits in which Catholicism currently finds itself, particularly in Boston, Knowles said he had been guided by Pope John XXIII, who once said, “See everything, overlook a great deal, improve a little.”

In from the Margins

The first radiant spring day formed an auspicious backdrop for President Lawrence H. Summers’s first decanal appointment, on April 9. Ellen Condliffe Lagemann, historian of education and president of the Spencer Foundation, will direct the Graduate School of Education (GSE), beginning July 1. She succeeds Jerome T. Murphy, who stepped down exactly a year earlier, and faculty members Judith D. Singer and John B. Willett, who have jointly served as acting dean in the interim.

Before a standing-room-only crowd of GSE faculty members and students in Askwith Lecture Hall, Summers said that Lagemann knows about education and schools of education, and brings to the deanship a “deep commitment to the ideal of education, with a hard-headed, practical sense of what’s needed to bring it off.” In their conversations while Harvard sought to recruit her, Summers said, Lagemann persuaded him that “it was essential for a university like Harvard to be deeply committed to the one school in its midst whose mission is what we do,” and that she had insisted upon the University’s moral and tangible support for the GSE. Summers concluded by “pled[ging] to her all of our support.”

Lagemann, calling herself “energized by the prospect of becoming dean,” said Summers “bowed [me] over with his ideas for the School and his unprecedented promises to help.” She then sketched some of her agenda. Citing “an auspicious moment” for education generally, Lagemann said, “To a degree that has not been true before, we are now committed to educating all children in this country to high levels. Realizing that commitment is going to require that we rethink how we recruit, educate, and structure the careers of teachers and school administrators.” It will, further, demand “research that is both scientifically rigorous and generative of knowledge that can be translated into the kinds of tools teachers really need and policymakers must have to make education policies that are intelligent.” Finally, in order to encourage interest and needed investments in education, she said “people like all of us in this room, who understand how tough, complex, and important teaching and learning are, [must] find more effective ways to educate the public about education.”

In outline, those priorities align well with a list Summers offered the GSE in a speech last fall (see “Virtual Mass. Hall,” March-April, page 71): identifying and disseminating educational “best practices”; applying knowledge about cognition and neuroscience to learning; helping to make education a widely honored profession; and designing systems of incentives, management, and accountability for effective education.

Lagemann (pronounced LAG-e-mun) has refined these interests during more than three decades of involvement in education. A 1967 graduate of Smith College, she taught social studies and history in Long Island and New York City schools for two years while acquiring a master’s in social studies at Columbia’s Teachers College. In 1973, she began a professional association with Teachers College that extended through 1994, rising from instructor and research assistant through junior faculty member to a professorship of history and education, with a joint appointment in Columbia’s history department. (She earned a Ph.D. in history and education from Columbia in 1978.) Her early books include A Generation of Women: Education in the Lives of Progressive Reformers, published by Harvard University Press, and volumes on the Carnegie Foundation and the Carnegie Corporation.

Since 1994, Lagemann has been at New York University’s school of education, where her recent interest has focused on...