thinking about Harvard’s future coming from her new boss, President Lawrence H. Summers, and from Provost Steven E. Hyman and FAS dean William C. Kirby; and by the engagement of alumni and friends (whose annual support has held steady at about a half-billion dollars since the end of the University Campaign, despite the weak economy—double the level of gifts in the early 1990s). Of her own transition from school CFO to University chief development officer, she says, “It’s a tremendous opportunity to serve this institution, which I love, and to do something that will have an enormous impact.”

“People Who Look like You”

Sitting on a radiator in a Science Center corridor, Deborah A. Batts ’69, J.D. ’72, who is U.S. district judge for the Southern District of New York, described coming to Cambridge to find herself one of eight African-American undergraduates in her Radcliffe class of 282 students. “In 1965, I was pleased that there were eight people,” she remembered, her eyes wandering to a row of linen-draped tables around which clusters of silver-haired alumni and well-dressed undergraduates juggled program booklets, styrofoam cups, and breakfast pastries. “Looking back and seeing what Harvard is today, it’s extremely surprising to me that I thought eight was all right.” Batts, who had just shared her experience of finding an African-American community in the overwhelmingly white Harvard of the 1960s, was one of several panelists at the third Black Alumni Weekend, a three-day program (October 3-5) sponsored by the Harvard Alumni Association, the Black Alumni Society, and the Black Students Association that drew nearly 600 former students back to Cambridge.

Batts described the black community she knew at Harvard and Radcliffe—growing slowly out of interaction in the classroom—as a major opportunity for her personal development. Its intimacy and unentrenched scholastic culture supported individuation, Batts said. “There was no pressure and concept of conformity,” she explained. “People were free to decide who they wanted to be and how they wanted to be.”

The weekend’s events let several generations of alumni, the eldest hailing from the class of 1947, learn precisely what their predecessors and successors had become—and how to get there. After a Saturday lunchtime report about the Black Alumni Society’s current projects, alumni featured in a series of career panels discussed their professional lives after Harvard and proffered advice for success in their fields. At a black-tie dinner at the Cambridge Marriott that evening, president and CEO of CNBC Pamela Thomas-Graham ’85, J.D.-M.B.A. ’89, urged young graduates to follow her lead and enter the business world. Influence in business today, she told the sea of dinner guests, offers work at the “next front” of the civil-rights movement.

But for other weekend guests, the vanguard of opportunity remained in academe, where Harvard African American’s struggle for recognition in the classroom began. Batts’s classmate and fellow panelist Charles J. Hamilton Jr. ’69, J.D. ’74, now a partner in an international law firm, recalled the first student-motivated steps to establish a program of African-American study in a time when the College’s black community was small and close-knit. “On a cold fall or winter morning, if you saw someone [African-American] coming through the north gate [of the Yard], you probably knew who they were,” he said. “Little did we know that a group of us would sit in front of [former dean of the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS)] Henry Rosovsky and debate the beginning of the African-American studies program.”

Harvard, according to Hamilton, meant an assiduous effort to escape a Greyhound ride home to the life that otherwise would have awaited him. “We only knew one thing: We couldn’t go back unsuccessfully,” he mused. “We were here because of opportunity, not because of privilege.”

According to Du Bois professor of the humanities Henry Louis Gates Jr. (visiting Cambridge for the weekend from a sabbatical in Princeton), the distinction between opportunity and privilege remains a vital one. After praising the work of Hamilton and his student contemporaries and leading a standing ovation for Ethiopian scholar Ephraim Isaac, B.D. ’69, Ph.D. ’69, of Princeton—whose tenure denial in Harvard’s young Afro-American studies department more than 20 years ago became a topic of national controversy—Gates kicked off a faculty panel on affirmative action by energetically condemning suggestions that the existing admissions system gives minority applications an unfair advantage. “There’s nothing worse than a self-loathing black person who feels guilty because of his own ac-

From the weekend’s panel on “Being Black at Radcliffe: A Multigenerational Discussion,” celebrating the sixtieth anniversary of the Schlesinger Library on the History of Women in America

Photograph by Martha Stewart
Aiming at Alcohol

When the Committee to Address Sexual Assault at Harvard reported to the Faculty of Arts and Sciences last spring, it pointedly observed, “Alcohol has been identified as a significant factor in a large majority of campus sexual assaults” (see “On Preventing Sexual Violence,” July-August 2003, page 68).

The problem is not new. In studies of binge drinking among college students, for instance, School of Public Health lecturer on social psychology Henry Wechsler has documented bingers’ involvement in insulting behavior, pushing or hitting, property damage, unwanted advances, and sexual assault (see “The Booze News,” March-April 1995, page 20). Former dean of the College Harry R. Lewis repeatedly reminded students about the legal consequences of under-age drinking, their right not to be imposed upon by roommates’ alcohol-fueled antisocial behavior; and the problems of unregulated access to alcohol at final-club parties and tailgating events (see, for example, “Aftermath of a Drug Bust,” September-October 1996, page 72, and “An Accident Waiting to Happen?” March-April 1999, page 69).

So it comes as no surprise that the present dean of the College, Benedict H. Gross—whose appointment was announced in April as the sexual-assault report circulated—has made a point of focusing on alcohol abuse. On October 16, Gross and Provost Steven E. Hyman followed up by appointing a Committee to Address Alcohol and Health at Harvard. It is charged with making recommendations by the end of the academic year on “prevention, education, outreach, and treatment services to reduce the negative health consequences associated with excessive alcohol consumption and alcohol abuse.” Currier House master and Shad professor of business ethics Joseph L. Badaracco Jr. chairs the committee, which is composed of another faculty representative; three students; two administrators; three medical professionals; and ex-officio representatives from the Office of Sexual Assault Prevention and Response (created to implement the sexual-assault report) and the Bureau of Study Counsel.

The timing seems more than ripe. In reporting the news, the Crimson noted that University Health Services (UHS) treated 24 undergraduates for alcohol poisoning in September, up from 15 in the year earlier, and 123 during the academic year ended June 30, 2003—nearly a sevenfold rise from five years ago. Although the increase may reflect students’ willingness to seek help (Harvard has made it clear that medical care will not trigger disciplinary consequences), fears have intensified that more students may be drinking dangerously. Following scares associated with beer kegs and students’ close encounters with North Harvard Street traffic at the 2000 Yale game, Dean Lewis imposed restrictions on drinking in the vicinity of the Stadium (see “Unsavory Record,” January-February 2001, page 83, and “Drying Out ‘The Game,’” November-December 2001, page 85).

Suggesting the scope of the committee’s work—and of the problems it must address—its charge extends to “health-related and educational issues” such as “training of residential House staff, student orientation and outreach programs, impediments to healthy student social life, and available UHS treatment services.” UHS reports to Hyman; as a neuroscientist and past director of the National Institute of Mental Health, he has focused on addiction. Accordingly, the committee will examine both the scientific literature on anti-drinking measures and the programs of other universities. And underlying these research efforts is a sense of urgency about what administrators characterize as a real public-health issue for the community.
verse beyond the “checking of boxes,” she contended.

Guinier was not alone in suggesting that Harvard had progress left to make in its commitment to its African-American community: trenchant criticism came from Massachusetts Hall itself as alumni heard from a series of key administrators on Saturday morning. University president Lawrence H. Summers told his audience that even though the number of African-American tenure-track faculty in FAS (18 as of this year) has doubled since 1994, progress must continue beyond this “milestone” because the current situation is “not what we would all, as a society, like it to be.” A chorus of affirmative murmurs answered, as had happened at a cocktail party the previous evening when FAS dean William C. Kirby told alumni that, in spite of its progress in improving the African-American experience so far, the University needed reason “to be able to feel a hell of a lot better.” Summers, who was introduced by African and African-American studies donor Alphonse Fletcher Jr. ’87, received one standing ovation after his extemporaneous talk and another during a question-and-answer session he held: a warm response after tension over his role in the departure of Fletcher University Professor Cornel West in 2002.

Alumni and a sprinkling of current students alike beat their hands together at a Sunday-morning brunch in the Lowell House dining hall as the undergraduate Kuumba Singers performed a series of traditional and gospel tunes, finally weaving musically inclined alumni into the chorus for a rendition of “May the Lord Bless and Keep You” that brought the weekend to a close. A few minutes earlier, gazing over the expanse of Harvard men and women from the raised platform at one end of the dining hall, Plummer professor of Christian morals and Pusey minister in the Memorial Church Peter J. Gomes had honored Harvard’s deceased African-American alumni, all of whose names fit on double-sided sheets dispersed among the tables. “Never in my 33 years [in the Memorial Church],” he told the assembled alumni and undergraduates, “did I expect to look out from High Table at Lowell House and see a roomful of people who look like you.”

—NATHAN HELLER

THE UNDERGRADUATE

Extracurricular Communities

by REBECCA O’BRIEN ’06

I THINK IT CAME TO ME on a bleak November day, in the middle of an equally bleak economics lecture, as I perched high in the lofty wood bleachers of Sanders Theatre. If this were all I had, I thought—if this were the only community I belonged to—I would be miserable. It was there in Ec 10, miles away from the podium, surrounded by a collection of anonymous fellow students, that I understood why, for most Harvard undergraduates, being a member of an audience or a face in the crowd isn’t enough.

At the time, only a few months into my freshman year, I was already finding ways to fill my non-academic time. I was halfway through my “comp” process at the Crimson, I was tutoring third-graders in Boston’s Mission Hill, and I had tentatively committed to the Harvard AIDS Coalition, a fledgling advocacy group. We began our college careers with a blank slate, with just a few hours of scheduled classes a week. And regardless of passion for one’s studies, most students found quickly that the purely academic life can be lonely.

When I looked at my peers, I saw a tapestry of diverse activities and interests. Among the eight students who would later become my blocking group, we had a ballerina, a concert violinist, a varsity squash-playing poet, two Crimson writers, a filmmaker, and two public-service groupies. It seemed that everyone I knew was involved in some sort of extracurricular activity.

Obviously, Harvard students are not chained to their desks. We find—we must—ways to fill the time between classes and work, meals and sleep. And so we find communities and identities through extra-academic activities, which sometimes demand more time than our courses. From social clubs to political movements, our afternoons and résumés are filled with the groups and causes that define our non-academic lives.

“From what I have experienced, Harvard is not social the way high school was,” says Jordan Thomas ’04. “You interact with your roommates and maybe talk briefly to people in class, but...your class interactions with fellow students are nowhere near as involved as they were in high school. The intermediate degree of closeness is not there. So without extracurriculars, the social dynamic just is not there, except for a few close people and a lot of ‘hellos.’” Or, as associate dean of Harvard College Judith H. Kidd says: “It’s part of adult life to be lonely. It’s a natural thing to reach out and find people to alleviate that.”

Whatever their motivation—a sense of social responsibility, a desire to hone writing or editing skills, or a love of little kids—Harvard students flock to extracurriculars, usually from early in freshman year. Many juggle several activities and groups in the course of their time here, because we are in search of a cause.