At the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) meeting on September 27, its dean, William C. Kirby, said, “We begin this academic year having just gone through a most difficult one,” punctuated by sharp conflicts over the views and leadership of President Lawrence H. Summers. Given that “There is no one in this room…who does not have the interest of this College, this Faculty, and this University at heart,” he expressed hope that this year would be a time of “collaborative accomplishment.”

Summers echoed those hopes, and shortly thereafter ceded direction of the meeting to Kirby. The second agenda item, discussion of Conrad K. Harper’s resignation from the Corporation, began with a statement by professor of anthropology and of African and African American studies J. Lorand Matory (author of the no-confidence resolution the faculty adopted last March). He was followed by Christie McDonald, chair of Romance languages and literatures, and Andrew Biewener, chair of organismic and evolutionary biology. In a joint statement, they said they were “saddened and deeply troubled” by Harper’s departure, and hoped his successor would be “someone who brings an independent mind, and a broad and deep understanding of the academic mission of our University.” Summers endorsed their remarks.

Their statement derived from a broader letter addressed to the committee searching for Harper’s successor. Because it reflects issues being debated by the faculty, and the unusual institutional responses induced by recent events, it is reproduced below with permission of the signers.

We are saddened and deeply troubled by the resignation of Conrad Harper from the Corporation. We write to you as you search for his replacement with the hope that you will be able to find someone with the humanistic breadth and culture that Conrad Harper brought to Harvard.

Let us introduce ourselves (to some of you, again) as we begin the academic year: we are part of an ad hoc group of FAS department chairs that began convening weekly in late February after the faculty meetings where criticism of President Summers erupted. As far as we know, never before had FAS chairs held ongoing meetings with one another without the presence of deans or administrators. Although our numbers have included about 30 chairs—many but not all—out of a total of 43 departments, we do not claim to represent all of the faculty’s opinions on these topics. Yet our meetings have been very informative and helpful to us. In particular, we have discussed the crisis of presidential leadership and the issues we as chairs have faced. The themes that have emerged from sharing our own individual experiences are remarkably consistent across the sciences, humanities, and social sciences.

However, the crisis that was triggered by the President’s remarks at the NBER [National Bureau of Economic Research] conference on women in academic science and engineering] was long in coming and remains one of governance within the Faculty of Arts and Sciences and the University. As the academic year ended, we applauded the hard work of our colleagues on the two faculty task forces that have brought excellent suggestions for the recruitment of women and minorities and improvement of the climate for women in science on campus. Yet many matters continue to concern the faculty seriously: from the curriculum, to the change in policy just announced from growth to “steady state” in hiring, to plans for Allston.

From an organizational point of view, everything works less well in the atmosphere of mistrust and suspicion that has been created over the past four years. A cycle has developed in which the faculty has reacted to the president’s distrust by becoming distrustful in turn of the administration, or by withdrawing from the kind of intellectual give and take that leads to informed and reasoned decisions. The result has been that important business of the University, including progress on the shared goals mentioned above, has been interrupted or in some cases ground to a halt. We do not merely regret that this situation has been created; we as chairs want the business of the University to get back on track and we are working to that end. But this will not happen by a return to the same management style that created the problems in the first place. We hope very much that as work resumes in the fall, we will find far greater transparency in both the University and the Faculty, so that all of us can begin to repair the damaged fabric of trust.

As you move through the process of choosing a successor to Conrad Harper, we would like to stress the importance to us, at this troubled time, of choosing a distinguished educator, of independent mind, someone who can help bring clarity and good judgment to the current situation at Harvard. It is crucial that the new member of the Corporation have deep knowledge of and a close affiliation with the academic world.

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The letter was signed by 22 current and former department and committee chairs: Biewener; Allan Brandt (history of science); Tomas Ó Cathasaigh (Celtic languages and literatures); James Engell (English and American literature and language); Marjorie Garber (visual and environmental studies); Andrew Gordon (history); Jay Jasanoff (linguistics); Arthur Kleinman (anthropology); James T. Klapokpenberg (American civilization); Philip Kuhn (East Asian languages and civilizations); McDonald; Ingrid Monson (music); Richard Moran (philosophy); Ansah Najmabadi (studies of women, gender and sexuality); Stephen Owen (comparative literature); Eric Rentschler (German); Judith Ryan (German and comparative literature); Stephanie Sandler (Slavic languages and literatures); Kay Kaufman Shelemay (music); Richard Thomas (classics); Mary Waters (sociology); and Jan Ziolkowski (comparative literature, medieval studies, classics, and folklore and mythology).

The letter was later endorsed by Thomas Cummins (history of art and architecture); Cynthia Friend (chemistry and chemical biology); and James McCarthy (environmental science and public policy).