As a new presidential administration moves into Massachusetts Hall, the Harvard Alumni Association (HAA) is also taking on challenges under its new president, Jonathan L.S. Byrnes, D.B.A. ’80. “The theme of this coming year will be ‘Creating a New Era,’” he says. The University itself has new deans coming on board, is busy building the Allston campus, and is increasing coordination among its many “tubs,” he notes. In addition, he points to Harvard’s changing student demographics and says the HAA must analyze both its current and its future alumni base and develop better ways to engage an increasingly diverse group of people living throughout the world. “As with any organization, there are an infinite number of worthy things to do, but you can only do so many things and you have to find the sweet spots,” he explains. “We’re trying to enrich our offerings, so we can offer more things to attract more people to Harvard.”

It is the perfect task for Byrnes, who enjoys a career that “combines teaching, research, and direct involvement in business innovations.” The senior lecturer at MIT teaches courses such as “Case Studies in Logistics and Supply Chain Management” and has guided major companies through large-scale organizational changes and strategic repositioning. He also runs a consulting firm, Jonathan Byrnes & Company, in Lexington, Massachusetts, where he lives with his wife of more than 30 years, Marsha (their two sons are grown). “My specialty is…helping [businesses] understand what customers want and how to fulfill [those needs],” he explains. “And that ties into what we’re trying to accomplish this year at the HAA.”

To better position itself for the future, the HAA has already ramped up traditional alumni access points, such as Harvard clubs, class and reunion activities, and its continuing education and travel programs. It will also continue to develop more sharply targeted alumni activities, in line with the rapidly growing number of shared interest groups (known as SIGs); the newest groups include Harvard Student Agencies Alumni, Women’s Leadership Project Alumni Network, Native American Alumni of Harvard University, Harvard South Asian Alumni Alliance, and Harvard Veterans Alumni Organization (see “Radcliffe and Other Shared Interest Groups,” January-February, page 82, or visit http://post.harvard.edu/harvard/clubs/html/SIGdir.html for details).

Two other initiatives are also underway, according to Byrnes. First, the HAA will develop more systematic information about what kinds of programming and activities appeal to which segments of the alumni population. This has entailed some organizational changes. One of the HAA’s three vice presidents will now be in charge of “engagement and marketing,” and two committees have been redefined to report to that person: the Graduate Schools Committee, which Byrnes has chaired, will become the University-wide Alumni Outreach Committee, and the Communications Committee will become the Engagement and Marketing Committee.

Also on tap are efforts to bring Harvard’s history and “shared alumni experience more directly to the student body on campus,” he explains. “As Harvard draws increasingly from new demographic segments to enrich and diversify the student body, it is increasingly necessary to communicate to students earlier the lifelong benefits of being an engaged, active alumna or alumnus.”

He began this process with his younger son, Steven ’07, whom he addressed, with his classmates, as imminent alumni during a speech on Class Day in June. “For the rest of your life you will not just be from Harvard, you will be a part of Harvard;” he told members of the senior class. “And there is something very deeply meaningful about being part of something larger than yourself that will endure beyond your years.”

He spoke from personal experience. In addition to his work for the HAA, he has served more than 15 years as a Harvard Business School (HBS) class secretary, for five years on the HBS Alumni Association’s board of directors, as vice president of the Harvard Club of Boston, and as a member of Harvard’s Advisory Committee on Shareholder Responsibility. Harvard, he says, helped him develop a deep knowledge base and offered up a circle of “friends for life….What could be better?”

—N.P.B.