Scanning the Social Sciences

Letters have gone out inviting senior faculty members from across the University, nominated by the deans of their respective schools, to participate in planning for a broad review of the way Harvard handles the social sciences. The list of participants is not yet final, but a recent conversation with University provost Steven E. Hyman offers a preview of the committee’s purpose and the work that lies ahead.

The review will proceed along lines similar to those followed in the natural sciences, where a review that began in 2006 is now moving from goal-setting to implementation (see “For Science and Engineering, New Life,” March-April 2007, page 65). But Hyman, a neurobiologist, warns that this isn’t as easy as mapping the previous process onto the social sciences. “Frankly,” he says, “the natural sciences are simpler. It’s really four schools—arts and sciences, engineering, medicine, and public health. The social sciences are far more complex. Every school at Harvard, arguably, is engaged in the social sciences.”

In the natural sciences, Hyman adds, independent developments such as the biotech boom and stem-cell research have driven collaboration across disciplines. The social sciences, absent such forces, have not gone so far down that path. It also hasn’t helped, he says, that social-science methodologies “differ enormously from the qualitative and ethnographic to highly quantitative.”

But crossing these boundaries is both inevitable and necessary, says Eckstein professor of applied economics David M. Cutler; dean for the social sciences in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS), who has already signed on to the nascent working group. For most social scientists, says Cutler, a deep understanding of a single field no longer suffices. In his own case, he has had to learn about aspects of medicine and public policy in order to study the economics of healthcare. In his course on health policy, he uses readings from the New England Journal of Medicine or, he says, “from whatever discipline happens to have someone who wrote a nice paper.”

Yet Cutler suspects that if he showed his research to economists trained 40 years ago, “they would look at it and say, ‘I have no idea what this person is doing.’” The configuration of academic departments—in some cases, set up more than 100 years ago—does not reflect the new reality, he explains. The departments are still important, but a structure for coordinating between them is also necessary.

Harvard’s historic decentralization can hold back interdisciplinary connection, says Cutler. For instance, it would make sense for him to teach at Harvard Medical School (HMS), and for HMS health-policy scholars to teach or co-teach courses offered through FAS, the Harvard School of Public Health (HSPH), or the Harvard Kennedy School (HKS). But because each professor’s paycheck comes from his or her specific faculty, he says, “we’re not very well set up to deal with that at the moment.”

Facilitating boundary crossing is a high priority for President Drew Faust. In a letter to the Harvard community at the start of the academic year, she wrote of her wish for Harvard to become “a university known more for bridges and less for walls.” In this vein, the provost’s office has become the nerve center for University-wide initiatives in the natural sciences, the arts, and now, the social sciences.

As a model of successful coordination, Hyman cites the interfaculty initiative in health policy. That initiative encompasses a Ph.D. program within FAS, with joint programs through HMS and Harvard Law School (HLS); a secondary concentration for undergraduates; a postdoctoral program; and a program that aims to use Harvard scholars’ knowledge to improve the quality of healthcare in eastern Massachusetts. The initiative gets funding from six faculties; its director, Joseph P. Newhouse, holds appointments at HMS, HKS, and HSPH.

And as an example of what should not happen under the new approach, Hyman points to the field of human rights, where HSPH has the François-Xavier Bagnoud Center for Health and Human Rights; HKS has the Carr Center for Human Rights Policy; and HLS has its own Human Rights Program. As executive director of the University Committee on Human Rights Studies—“an awkward overlying planning committee,” in Hyman’s words—Jacqueline Bhabha “has done a brilliant job,” he says, “but it’s exhausting.”

With a University capital campaign on the horizon, creating a wish list for fundraising will be a primary goal for the review. But the eventual recommendations may not all require money. Cutler, for one, believes Harvard already possesses many of the resources needed to increase effectiveness in the social sciences. “If you’ve got butter and sugar and flour and eggs,” he says, “I think you ought to bake a cake.”