Back to the Lab Bench

Steven E. Hyman, M.D. ’80, a neurobiologist who has served as University provost since 2001, announced in December that he would relinquish the post at the end of the academic year. The office was created in its modern Harvard form under President Neil L. Rudenstine in 1992; Hyman’s decade of service makes him the longevity champion, and gave him the opportunity to define the position, now at the center of the University’s efforts to facilitate collaborative, interdisciplinary research and teaching. Hyman plans to take a sabbatical year at the Broad Institute, the Harvard-MIT genomics center—he is a member of the Harvard Medical School (HMS) faculty—to explore returning to active science, and to create a course for undergraduates on neuroscience, ethics, policy, and law. The search for a new provost began in January (see page 40).

“I have deeply valued my partnership with Steve,” said President Drew Faust in a statement as part of the news release.
about Hyman’s decision. “He has spurred fresh thinking and important initiatives in areas ranging from the sciences to the humanities, from the museums to the libraries. In all of these areas and more, he has approached his role with intelligence, passion, and wit, and with a devotion to the highest academic standards.”

Early in his career, Hyman was a professor of psychiatry at HMS and served as the first faculty director of the University’s Mind, Brain, and Behavior Initiative. He was subsequently appointed director of the National Institute of Mental Health (1996-2001); during that initial period of administrative service, he maintained a laboratory and continued to publish scientific papers (activities he has had to put aside during his decade as provost). The interfaculty initiative served as a useful introduction to Harvard’s interdisciplinary, multischool programs and projects—a principal focus for his work as provost. Of late, he has been associated with such University-wide initiatives as the effort to rethink the libraries’ operations and administrative organization (for budgetary reasons and to adapt to digital technologies); in early December, he was named to chair the new board of directors for the Harvard library system. (For more on the libraries, see “Harvard Library’s First Director,” page 41.)

In a conversation in his Massachusetts Hall office on December 14, Hyman described his decision to step down as he entered “the tenth year of a five-year commitment” in personal terms. He indicated to Faust last July, he said, that he thought this should be his last year as provost. During his service, he said, “I have mostly stayed out of searches for other positions outside of Harvard,” and had arrived at the decision that he did not want another administrative position, at least for the near term. “I fell down the administrative well rather early, in mid career” as a scientist, he said. During his sabbatical year at the Broad, he said, he hoped to “see what I can do effectively in the sciences” after a long layoff from the laboratory bench; he conceded, smiling, “I may not be rehabilitatable.”

The time also seemed suitable, he continued, because “You shouldn't walk away from something in bad times,” and the University has emerged from its recent financial challenges with “a very effective president who is in command and a very strong staff—including the vice presidents and certainly with the addition of [executive vice president] Katie Lapp. And we have a remarkably strong cadre of deans.” Later he noted that with a large University capital campaign in the offing, “President Faust deserves in whoever will be provost someone who will serve for the duration, in mint condition.”

When he became provost, Hyman recalled, the office was new at Harvard and consisted of a “collection of projects,” not yet resembling the post of chief academic officer that the title signals at other research universities. Today, he said, it is “well on its way to becoming a modern research university provost’s office, but with a Harvard flavor.” That Crimson coloring strongly reflects the traditional decentralization of the University’s schools. They retain their autonomy, and the provost’s office has strong, direct interactions with each, Hyman said, but “the most important thing we do is to work tirelessly across schools and across disciplines.”

There is a “lot of life left in the disciplines, and lots of rigor,” he added—but it would be curious if inquiry today aligned entirely with departmental and professional-school boundaries established a century ago. Thus the provost’s office supports the departments and schools (for instance, through University-wide efforts to encourage faculty diversity, to support international research and learning, and to oversee research—all of these now directed by vice provosts), but seeks “not to allow them to become limiting intellectual silos. It falls to the provost’s office to facilitate bottom-up efforts at boundary crossing.” Some 30 interdisciplinary efforts now receive funding.

In his letter to the community announcing his decision, Hyman wrote, “The world well recognizes Harvard’s overall academic strength, but less well understood is the collaborative spirit of our faculty members and students and their desire to pursue important intellectual and practical problems wherever they lead—often across the boundaries of disciplines or of individual schools.”

As examples, he cited the first inter-school department (Stem Cell and Regen-

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**Wanted: Corporation Members, Provost**

In the wake of the Harvard Corporation’s early December decision to increase its membership from seven—the President, Treasurer, and five Fellows—to 13 (see “The Corporation’s 360-Year Tune-Up,” January-February, page 43), nominations for candidates to serve on the senior governing board are now being sought. An early-January announcement from President Drew Faust and Senior Fellow Robert D. Reischauer solicited ideas and names from the Harvard community at large; they may be submitted to corporationsearch@harvard.edu or by mail to Corporation Search Committee, Harvard University, Loeb House, 17 Quincy Street, Cambridge 02138; all communications will be held in confidence.

Consistent with the Corporation’s earlier steps to include members of the Board of Overseers in its review of its governance structure and procedures, the search for new Corporation members will include three Overseers: Joshua Boger, Ph.D. ’79, founder and former CEO of Vertex Pharmaceuticals and chair of the Harvard Medical School Board of Fellows; Diana Nelson ’84, director of the Carlson Companies and former co-chair of the Harvard College Fund; and Robert Shapiro ’72, J.D. ’78, a partner at Ropes & Gray, past president of both the Harvard Alumni Association and the Harvard Law School Association. (Shapiro also served on the governance-review committee.)

Faust and Reischauer reiterated their earlier expectation that the Corporation’s expanded membership would be put in place within the next two to three years.

A week later, Faust announced the appointment of a faculty advisory committee to help her search for a successor to Provost Steven E. Hyman. Comments from the wider Harvard community on the provost’s role and nominations of candidates may be sent in confidence to provostsearch@harvard.edu or by letter addressed to her at Massachusetts Hall, Harvard University, Cambridge 02138.
Harvard Library’s First Director

Helen Shenton, an experienced innovator from the British Library who was deputy director of the Harvard University Library this past year, became executive director of the new, consolidated Harvard Library in mid January. “What we will be doing,” she said in an interview at Wadsworth House, “is creating something new…the concept of one Harvard library.” Recalling visits to Harvard’s 73 libraries when she first arrived at the University a year ago, she said she noted “a lot of enthusiasm” for the idea among library staff, who “want to work together in better ways” but have struggled to do so across “false boundaries.” Patrons, she added, also seek simple ways to access all of the collections once they are in a library or logged in to the system.

Under a management structure more than a year in the making (as part of a provost-initiated review of Harvard’s libraries), Shenton will report to and work with a new library board that has been given “strategic and decision-making authority for the whole of the Harvard Library. That’s very radical,” she said, when compared to the coordinated decentralization of the past. But during a “revolutionary time” in which people are changing how they access and use information, she explained, “We have got to not only respond, but be ahead of it, for the good of pedagogy and learning and research.”

Shenton credited a yearlong effort by the Library Implementation Workgroup (chaired by Divinity School professor of philosophy and theology David Lamberth) for gathering tremendously useful information about the entire library system, “which had never been looked at as a whole.” In order to effect necessary changes, she has identified several “strands of work” that, as of late January, were being pulled into a transition plan—including issues of governance, funding, information technology, organization, and use of space—under the supervision of provost Steven E. Hyman and executive vice president Katie Lapp. Shenton, who focused on collection care at the British Library during an analogous period of consolidation, reiterated that “We must do this for the benefit of our patrons. It is for now, but it is also very much for the future.”

She emphasized that even as the planning continues, local decisions will remain important. “We need to balance shared services with the best of the local,” she said, “because the libraries have incredibly knowledgeable, specialized staff who work extremely closely with academic programs and with faculty, and know their subjects well. We must keep that whilst moving to some element of harmonization.”

Shenton has wasted no time in taking action, announcing in late January that Harvard would be joining Borrow Direct, an interlibrary loan program among the Ivy League universities that gives users access to a catalog of 50 million items for delivery in just four to five business days. “Borrow Direct,” she explained, “strongly reflects the aspirations that guide the new Harvard Library.”

tenure ultimately rest with the president, the provost now runs “somewhat more than half” of the review committees, he said—in the heady days before the recent economic difficulties, one per week, across all the faculties. He marveled at “what you can learn” as provost from engaging with the faculty members through those reviews.

Looking ahead, Hyman said his most important piece of unfinished business is ensuring that the restructuring of the library system proceeds and gains momentum. The new University library board has been appointed, an executive direc-
Tackling Teaching and Learning

For the third time in a decade, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) is addressing its educational mission. During the December 7 faculty meeting, dean Michael D. Smith talked at length about “teaching and learning,” initiating both a web site dedicated to the subject (www.fas.harvard.edu/home/content/teaching-and-learning) and what he hopes will be discussions intended to “identify how best to support pedagogical and curricular excellence today and for the future.”

Smith drew on the work of the Task Force on Teaching and Career Development, a 2006-2007 effort during the interim presidency of Derek C. Bok and deanship of Jeremy R. Knowles, the result of which was the faculty’s “compact on teaching and learning” (see “Toward Top-Tier Teaching,” March-April 2007, page 63). The task force succeeded the earlier review of the undergraduate curriculum. That extended review had led to change in course content, as the Core curriculum was succeeded by the new General Education offerings and course requirements for students. But it focused little on pedagogy per se, beyond advocating smaller section sizes and alternative classroom layouts to accommodate new teaching styles.

Smith’s decision to highlight teaching and learning anew illustrates both the importance of the subject and the difficulty of defining what that means, measuring performance, and effecting improvements. His starting point—“Harvard is an institution of truly great teachers”—set a high standard for what he described as the progress the faculty had made since the compact was promulgated, and for its aspirations. He placed those aims in two larger contexts. The first is as an FAS academic priority in the forthcoming University capital campaign (alongside House renewal, see page 44, and goals such as financial aid and scholarly initiatives). The second is the national debate over the effectiveness of higher education—as for-profit schools expand, public universities’ budgets shrink, and parents and students examine the costs and benefits of a wide range of private institutions. “Overall,” Smith told colleagues, “my goal is to establish in the public consciousness our position as an undisputed leader in pedagogical and curricular excellence in America today.”

In a recent conversation, Theda Skocpol, who chaired the 2006-2007 task force, said that the compact aimed to recast the prevailing view of teaching as an essentially private, individual activity: an art for which one had or lacked the knack. Instead, said the Thomas professor of government and sociology, the compact’s premise is that teaching, like scholarship, can advance through peer review, inquiry into effective instruction and learning, and incentives—all aimed at promoting evaluation and continuous improvement. Skocpol was then dean of the Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (GSAS), a post affording perspective on graduate education, the training of teaching fellows for their significant role in undergraduate classes, and her own College courses.

During a late-January interview, Smith reviewed progress in implementing the compact. Faculty members’ annual self-reports on their activities now request much more detailed accounts not only of their research, but also of their teaching, mentoring and advising, and pedagogical innovation. Deans and department chairs use those data in setting salaries, he said. In making faculty appointments and promotions, Smith said, “We ask a lot more” about teaching, drawing on the Q Guide (student course critiques) and depart-