Educating “Citizens and Citizen Leaders”
The new College dean aims to “discuss what I think is undiscussable.”

In his book-lined office in University Hall, Rakesh Khurana keeps handy a well-worn copy of Samuel Atkins Eliot’s 1848 A Sketch of the History of Harvard College and of Its Present State. The slender, red volume arrived in the mail last summer, an anonymous gift for the newly minted dean, who took the helm of the College in July 2014.

Pulling it off the shelf this spring, Khurana, the first Danoff Dean of Harvard College, opens to a yellow Post-It flag, and reads aloud the description of the seventeenth-century gift that funds the Detur Book Prize, the College’s oldest honor. The gift, he quotes, was for the purpose of “breeding up hopeful youth in the way of learning...for the public service of the country in future times.” That, Khurana reflects, remains the mission of Harvard College: “It was to educate—and it is to educate—the citizens and citizen leaders for our society.”

A year into his new role, the Bowser professor of leadership development says he sees himself as a “steward” of that mission—to remind students, faculty members, and the College community of Harvard’s nearly 400-year-old liberal-arts core. For Khurana, a Harvard education should expose students to new ideas and new ways of thinking—a contrast to pre-professional training that “might prepare you for a job, but I’m not sure necessarily prepares you for a career, or necessarily prepares you for life.”

A graduate of the University’s Ph.D. program in organizational behavior, Khurana has spent the past decade and a half across the river at Harvard Business School (HBS). His years in a professional school, in fact, helped convince him of the power of a liberal-arts education. As an example, he describes how students from preprofessional and liberal-arts backgrounds tackled case-study discussions, which often dealt with tricky questions of leadership and management. Over the years, he saw a “vast difference” in students’ abilities “to think about problems creatively, to locate a situation in a cultural context—to see the economics of that situation, but also the anthropology and the sociology,” he explains. Even when based at HBS, therefore, Khurana kept the undergraduate experience close at hand: he served as a nonresident tutor in Eliot House while in graduate school, and he and his wife, Stephanie, became master and co-master of Cabot House in 2010.

But the new dean's focus comes at a time of relative tumult for that liberal-arts philosophy, both across the landscape of higher education and closer to home. National discussions of education quality have increasingly focused on “return on investment”—weighing tuition paid and time spent against potential future earnings. By necessity, this has increased attention to skills-based learning, which has not always fit easily into the Harvard curriculum. At the other extreme, critics have questioned whether schools like Harvard live up to their purported “liberal-arts” goals. The month after Khurana moved into his decanal office, a cover story in The New Republic—illustrated with a bright red Harvard flag, going up in flames—implored: “Don’t Send Your Kid to the Ivy League.” Writer William Deresiewicz argued that places like Harvard and Yale, where he taught English for 10 years, attracted and produced students who, though smart and driven, were afraid of the potential failure that comes with true intellectual engagement.

Khurana's vision for the deanship—as a locus of conversations revisiting the very core values of a Harvard education—marks the start of a new chapter in University Hall. In the spring of 2013, then-dean Evelynn M. Hammonds, Rosenkrantz professor of the history of science and of African and African American studies, stepped down from her position, amid concerns over her involvement in searches of College staff members’ e-mail accounts. After Faculty of Arts and Sciences dean Michael D. Smith named him to the position in January 2014, Khurana embarked on a six-month study of his new role, meeting with faculty, students, and staff to hear their visions for a Harvard education. In these conversations, he says, “People were sometimes too worried about seeing the College as a stepping stone to something else, rather than a place itself.”

In his first year as dean, Khurana has emphasized making a strong, proactive case for the value-added of a College edu-
As a public defender, Andrew Manuel Crespo '05, J.D. '08, met his first client on Christmas Eve 2011. Handcuffed and shackled, the client had just celebrated, in juvenile lockup, his eighth birthday. Seated, his feet didn't touch the floor. "I remember walking in and just being stunned," recalls the newly appointed assistant law professor. "Like, this is my job now: I represent eight-year-olds who are in handcuffs." A two-time Supreme Court clerk and the first Latino president of the Harvard Law Review, Crespo aims to interrogate the gap between the criminal-justice system's ideals and its reality. That gap "crystallized" for him during first-year "Criminal Law"; his own students now probe the same disparity in Crespo's popular course "Popular Criminalism." Before turning to law, Crespo was a social-studies concentrator who examined how Boston community organizations knit connections among ethnic groups. His thesis adviser, Kennedy School senior lecturer Marshall Ganz, recalls a student who could "dive into the nitty-gritty" and still master the "broader context"—like a great composer, able to originate a theme, but also "get every note right." The musical analogy is apt, given Crespo's guiltiest secret: a cappella. He performed with the Veritones throughout college, and a Veritones friend introduced him to his future wife—Abby Shafroth '04, J.D. '08, now a civil-rights attorney—on the Dudley Co-op dance floor. Well aware that the justice system is flawed, Crespo nevertheless connects it to his favorite college memories of "long discussions and debates" among his best friends. "The law," he says, "continues that same conversation about our social fabric—the values we care about, and how we make them real, in lived, daily experience."

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the faculty are feeling a sense of responsibility and agency and, I think, a sense of urgency to get this right.”

And as the world has changed, so too, he says, have the obstacles that stand in the way of getting it right: “The challenges of our society don't stop at the gates of Harvard.” The College is more racially, ethnically, and socioeconomically diverse than ever. Long gone, for good reason, are the days when the liberal arts meant teaching a curriculum of white, male prep-school graduates a curriculum of white, male writers. Khurana sees himself as someone who likes to “discuss what I think is undiscussable”—including how issues of class, access, and success manifest themselves on Harvard’s campus. One growing problem, he says, is that students often arrive with a K-12 education that, because of high-stakes testing, has focused on teaching skills—not necessarily how to think.

For Khurana, a key part of fostering personal and intellectual transformations, therefore, is opening spaces for students to stop, take a step back, and think about the changes happening around and within them. He has joined with other College administrators in strengthening and expanding programs to encourage reflection among undergraduates. In an experiment last fall, he helped develop a curriculum of readings and conversations for freshman orientation that centered on the value of a liberal arts and sciences education. “Sometimes students are—obviously, in a good way—so taken by the name Harvard, they may not know as much as we would like about the undergraduate program itself, and what its purpose and its construction are,” he explains. “We have to do a better job on communicating that.”

This year, he and dean of freshmen Thomas A. Dingman helped initiate a mid-year gathering that brought together the entire freshman class. Following a comedy show, a spoken-word performance, and other entertainment, Khurana took the stage last at January’s “ReFRESH-MEnT” event. He began, he explained to the crowd in Sanders Theatre, “where I start every discussion, which is the mission of the College.” He spoke of “citizens and citizen leaders,” as well as the liberal arts’ “transformative power”—reiterating the mission he’d first shared with the Class of 2018 at September’s Convocation. But Khurana also added new advice, the kind that anxious college freshmen most need to allow transformation to take hold. “There’s no one best way to do Harvard,” he reminded them. Ending the evening, the dean—halfway through his own freshman year—dismissed the class with “Thank you. See you guys in the dining hall.”

~STEPHANIE GARLOCK

Surgery for All

“GLOBAL health” typically brings to mind issues such as vaccination, maternal care, sanitation, and malaria control. It’s not usually associated with surgery. But consider the woman who dies in childbirth because she can’t reach a clinic that performs cesarean sections, or the man out of work because he can’t afford cataract surgery to restore his vision, or the child whose life is cut short by an injury that local healthcare workers don’t have the training to repair.

A landmark report published by the Lancet Commission on Global Surgery argues that a lack of access to safe surgical care has a major impact on the health and well-being of people around the world. A public conference at Harvard Medical School (HMS) on May 6 marked the report’s launch, following a similar meeting in London. “We want surgery to be part of the discourse on global health, and we want surgery integrated into the discussions about how you build health systems,” says John Meara, Kletjian professor of global surgery at HMS, one of three commission co-chairs.

The problem is vast. “Five billion people cannot access safe, affordable surgery,” Meara said during his opening address in Boston. That number includes people who can’t afford expensive procedures as well as those who live far from an operating room. Closing the gap would require 143 million additional procedures each year. But the commission laid out an ambitious plan to achieve 80 percent coverage of essential surgical and anesthesia service per country by 2030, and outlined specific recommendations, goals, and indicators of progress that can be used to realize it.

The Lancet, a preeminent medical journal based in London, formed the commission in 2013 when a small group of surgeons joined with Justine Davies, editor-in-chief of Lancet Diabetes & Endocrinology, to champion an in-depth look at surgery around the world. The commissioners worked with collaborators from more than 110 countries to produce the report, focus-