Two points merit consideration. First, this does not appear to be an effort to downsize certain graduate programs where demand for academic hiring has diminished (notably, the humanities, languages, history, and related fields)—a subject of understandable anxiety within the affected fields.

Second, exactly how GSAS sets its admissions targets is as much an art as a science. Some tiny doctoral programs admit one or two candidates annually; others welcome scores. The yearly allocation varies by program, prior enrollment yields among those admitted, new faculty appointments (and leaves and retirements), funding vicissitudes, and so on. For whatever reason, GSAS is providing only the percentage reduction in admission targets for those admitted, new faculty appointments (and leaves and retirements), funding vicissitudes, and so on. For whatever reason, GSAS is providing only the percentage reduction in admission targets for those admitted, new faculty appointments (and leaves and retirements), funding vicissitudes, and so on.

A final observation: this outcome illustrates the overwhelming importance of the endowment in funding the University and FAS (which derived 51 percent of its operating income from endowment distributions in fiscal year 2016). Even in a period when The Harvard Campaign has raised well more than $7 billion in new gifts and pledges, core academic operations remain vulnerable to persistently weak endowment earnings.

Allston Ambitions

Harvard business school (HBS) dean Nitin Nohria’s annual letter to his faculty is especially interesting this year. The headline item—that HBS exceeded its $1-billion capital campaign goal in 2016, and formally raised it by $500 million—matters less than the intended aims: more associate professorships and practitioner-teachers; more fellowships; further flexible funding for innovation; and “realizing the vision of One Harvard by supporting work across the University and…in Allston.” The latter may point to deepening engagement with the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences (see “Academic Allston, At Last,” July-August 2016, page 22), and perhaps HBS support for the proposed Gateway research building and data sciences, of import to both faculties (see page 27).

Nohria also addressed the migration of the school’s experience-based FIELD curriculum into the fall and spring M.B.A. courses of study; rapid change in executive education; and a goal of making the online HBX operation “cash-flow positive by 2019.” (Given that HBX collects tuition for its courses—$1,950 for the three-unit basic business-skills sequence—this hints at the costs of such offerings, and perhaps the continued reliance on philanthropy to support the University’s HarvardX online courses; see next item.)

Nohria also observed that the academic gaps between men and women in the M.B.A. program, and their different levels of satisfaction, had been closed. He identified the need for additional support for students who receive financial aid, and highlighted a fiftieth-anniversary celebration of the African-American Student Union, in 2018.

Online Updates

The online version of “Super-Earths and Life,” by Phillips professor of astronomy Dimitar Sasselov, director of Harvard’s Origins of Life Initiative (see “Life’s Beginnings,” September-October 2013, page 29), is the first HarvardX course to incorporate adaptive-learning technology that tailors content and exercises to student mastery of material. Early assessments demonstrate clear gains in learning and students’ speed through the course.

Turning to revenue-producing online programs: Georgia Tech has introduced a second, lower-cost master’s degree, in analytics, complementing its popular computer-science degree launched in 2014. Meanwhile, edX members including Boston University and Penn rolled out 16 more blended online and in-person “micromasters”—in career-oriented fields like data science, business analytics, and cybersecurity—brining the roster of such revenue-generating courses to several dozen.

Inside Higher Ed reported that Simmons College, in Boston, has increased online revenue from $5.4 million in the year ended June 30, 2014, to $15 million in the most recent fiscal year—nearly equal to its classroom-based graduate tuition revenue, and closing in on undergraduate income. Master’s programs in nursing and social work account for the
growth; they enroll more than 2,500 students.

And in late February, Caroline M. Hoxby, Bommer professor in economics at Stanford, analyzed online learning in a working paper, “The Returns to Online Postsecondary Education.” As summarized in the abstract, the research found “little support for optimistic prognostications about online education.”

Drawing on the cohort of students enrolled full time, or very substantially, in online programs (thus heavily at for-profit institutions, many of which have been discredited in recent years), she concluded that their online work was “not substantially less expensive than comparable in-person education,” as measured by tuition or the schools’ costs. Moreover, “Online enrollment usually does raise a person’s earnings, but almost never by enough to cover the social cost of the education. There is scant evidence that online enrollment moves people toward jobs associated with higher labor productivity”—meaning that taxpayers are unlikely to recoup public costs through higher tax revenues, and, indeed, that many of the students would struggle to repay their loans. Many educators criticized Hoxby’s student and institutional sample, and her aggregation of results among different kinds of learning situations, but most agreed her metrics are relevant for assessing online programs’ costs and potential.

One interesting cost (which HarvardX has also encountered) involves making online content accessible to people with disabilities—usually by captioning. In March, the University of California, Berkeley, announced that it was ending public access to more than 20,000 legacy audio and video files, in response to a federal order that they be made accessible. YouTube, the iTunes U, and Berkeley websites will remove the items. Its edX courses continue to be made accessible, and future contents will accommodate users with constraints.

Developing Data Science

Harvard plans to build a data-science institute in Allston to support research, education, and entrepreneurship in what University leaders call “a new discipline.” Data science is central to research in public health, the physical, social, and biological sciences, and medicine; it has become increasingly important in all fields that involve empirical research, such as law, government, and even the study of culture. The institute would provide a commons for collaboration among almost every school—especially the Harvard Paulson School of Engineering and Applied Sciences (SEAS, which will have a new home on Western Avenue by 2020), Harvard Business School, the i-lab incubator and its affiliates—and research-intensive businesses that the University expects to attract to its Allston “enterprise research campus.” (For an overview, see “Why ‘Big Data’ Is a Big Deal,” March-April 2014, page 30.)

Harvard has the ingredients needed to do “world-leading data science,” said Colony professor of computer science David C. Parkes, area dean for computer science in SEAS, and co-director of the data-science initiative defining the path to an institute, together with professor of biostatistics Francesca Dominici, senior associate dean for research at the Harvard Chan School of Public Health (HSPH). Harvard has “methodologists; compelling applications questions; and...the context of society. That is the magic triangle,” Parkes said. With leading professional schools and affiliated hospitals, each with its own data-science expertise, the University has many resources already in hand. “We need to somehow bring them together,” he said, “and go from this distributed excellence” to creating a place where the people and their skills “sing together.”

The initiative plans several early steps: creating an interdisciplinary postdoctoral fellows program in which each fellow works with multiple faculty members; outfitting new programmatic spaces—one in Cambridge and one in Boston (“to help us bootstrap what we want to be,” Parkes said, “until we get to a permanent space”); and hiring professional data scientists to work with students and faculty members.

These moves complement the launch of three data-science master’s programs, one each at HSPH and Harvard Medical School, launching this fall; and one in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences beginning in fall 2018.

Dominici and Parkes declined to compare Harvard’s data-science plans to those elsewhere, or to put a timeline on the physical data-science institute in Allston. But Dominici said, “I think we are going to end at an unprecedented scale and a most important impact.” Read a complete report at harvard-mag.com/datascience-17.

---JONATHAN SHAW

The Undergraduate

Exclusivity, from the Inside

by Lily Scherlis ’18

I was the kind of kid who would actually respond to the mass email freshly appointed Dean Rakesh Khurana sent to the incoming freshman class. I didn’t realize he was the kind of dean who would reply, asking to meet me.

At the time, I was deep in the throes of competing with other prospective undergraduate literati to join the staff of The Harvard Advocate, the College’s long-lived literary magazine. I was very angry at having to prove myself to win a spot in an extracurricular. Here we all were, already at Harvard, still chasing after prestige. The social scene felt like a forest of ladders all stretching up toward the sunny warmth of feeling included, wanted, comfortable.

“I hate all these social hierarchies and power structures,” I told him. “I just want to work on a magazine and make friends.