Topping Off

THE FINAL BEAM of the Science and Engineering Complex in Allston was lowered into place on an unseasonably warm day this November. For years, I have watched the building come into focus in artist renderings and architectural blueprints. Standing at its base surrounded by students and faculty who will work within it, alumni and friends who have supported it, and community partners and elected officials who have enabled its creation was a powerful reminder to me of the remarkable progress we have made toward realizing the promise and possibility of campus expansion in Allston.

When it opens in 2020, the SEC will do more than become home to the majority of the Harvard John A. Paulson School of Engineering and Applied Sciences. It will create more opportunities for collaboration and launch Harvard’s next century of achievement. Standardized class start times, approved last spring by the Faculty of Arts and Sciences, will give undergraduates an hour to make their way from Cambridge to Allston, and expanded transit options will make day-to-day travel more convenient for all members of the community. Faculty from SEAS and the Harvard Business School have already begun exploring the ways in which their activities and research intersect, and new academic offerings such as the MS/MBA joint degree are designed for individuals who want to pursue the business of technology and engineering.

Former United States Office of Management and Budget Director Shaun Donovan ’87, M.Arch.-M.P.A. ’95, who has for the last six months served as senior strategist for Allston, likes to say that Harvard has in Allston “the most extraordinary opportunity of any university anywhere,” and we have already begun to see remarkable changes unfold. Western Avenue has become a destination for artists, educators, innovators, and entrepreneurs—from the craftspeople perfecting their work at the Harvard Ceramics Studio; to the community members participating in educational, arts, wellness, and workforce and economic development programs at the Harvard EdPortal; to the undergraduate, graduate, and professional students building businesses at the i-lab, where more than 80 companies have been incubated since 2011. Nearby, the Launch Lab supports alumni-backed ventures, and the Pagliuca Life Lab provides laboratory space for high-potential life sciences and biotech startups. New housing and retail offerings, including Continuum apartments, Trader Joe’s, and Our Father’s Deli, have brought 24-hour activity to the area. Art installations and murals, one of them the result of an open-call competition organized by the Graduate School of Design, have added new dimensions to familiar areas, and a 9,000-square-foot ArtLab will become home to student and faculty artists in search of studio and performance spaces when it opens early next year.

These achievements are important first steps toward realizing our once-in-a-generation opportunity to reimagine Harvard’s campus in ways that are as bold as they are thoughtful. In December, the University filed regulatory plans for an Enterprise Research Campus that will bolster the remarkable strengths that exist at Harvard and throughout higher education institutions, hospitals, and research-driven industries in Greater Boston. Partnerships with corporations, organizations, and institutions will speed our efforts and extend our reach, bringing new ideas and talent to our community and multiplying the potential for serendipitous interactions. How can we take greatest advantage of undeveloped space at the center of one of the most research dense areas in the world—an area that can inspire and support some of the future’s most extraordinary ideas, careers, and companies?

The Allston neighborhood owes its name to Washington Allston, a member of the Harvard College Class of 1800, who set out from Cambridge to travel the world and returned to the United States to become one of the most celebrated artists of his time, creating the very first painting to enter the vast collection of the Museum of Fine Arts. More than two hundred years after his graduation, we gathered on land named in his honor to celebrate an endeavor that has brought extraordinary minds together and given all of us a chance to look up—and look ahead.

Sincerely,

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