Agenda-Setting

With a new administration comes a new agenda. The election of Lawrence S. Bacow as Harvard's twenty-ninth president on February 11 (see page 14) inaugurated that transition. He does not assume office until July 1, of course, and may choose to begin outlining his priorities when the academic year commences, or at his formal installation on October 5. But the community will be eager to hear more about how he will articulate the case for higher education to the larger society at a fraught moment—and how that complements his to-do list on campus.

Herewith, thoughts about the home front, combining close scrutiny of what the president-elect has said and written with observations from strolling around the place.

They arise in the context of continuing financial constraint (despite Harvard’s gigantic capital campaign)—a concern for any new president. For instance, the Faculty of Arts and Sciences' (FAS) endowment was smaller at the end of fiscal 2017 than in 2008, but must support undergraduate financial-aid spending that has risen by $100 million yearly during the past dozen years. The number of professors has been held essentially level, even as new fields blossom. House renewal has been slowed, and FAS is incurring additional debt to sustain the program. Even a high priority like FAS’s “Inequality in America” initiative (which would seem timely and of broad social import) is on a tight leash; the same holds for other initiatives. FAS as a whole may even operate at a deficit this year; both its engineering and applied sciences school and Harvard Medical School—each with expensive research operations—have persistently done so.

Costs vs. Harvard's culture. During the past couple of years, Bacow has highlighted higher education's expenses. He did so again on February 11. In a University culture that has pointed to the desirability of more revenue (even as income has been growing more than 5 percent per year), he talks about controlling costs and operating efficiently. Indeed, while underscoring his deep commitment to securing students' access to college regardless of their means, he premised a recent major address on this question: "Why do I believe that bending the cost curve is the biggest challenge that we face?" Because, he explained, rising costs jeopardize access, public support, and ultimately universities' financial foundations: in a word, everything.

More tubs vs. more partners. In a place historically eager to have its own top-quality everything (witness the current enormous investment to augment Harvard's modest footprint in engineering and applied sciences), the new leader emphasized partnerships and collaborations. He has, separately, remarked upon a relationship between scale and academic excellence, such as that found in MIT’s large departments. Might he want to powwow with former colleagues down Mass. Ave. about joint ventures?

People vs. places. Speaking optimistically about Harvard's opportunities and intellectual capital on February 11, Bacow said: "We are blessed with extraordinary students, faculty, and staff. In fact, every time I walk into the Yard and I see flocks of tourists there taking pictures of the statue of John Harvard, of Mass Hall, of University Hall, I always want to stop them and say, ‘No, no, no! That’s not Harvard. Harvard is its people.’ That’s what makes this place special." Might he want to examine the University’s current, epochal love affair with construction? If so, his timing may be good. House renewal continues, but a lot of deferred maintenance has been remedied, and many new projects on the wish list have been built. Redoing the Divinity School’s Andover Hall and augmenting the Graduate School of Design’s campus loom large locally, but less so from a University perspective. Possibly, a Bacow administration will bend the curve from cranes and contractors toward the faculties and academic programs that benefit society.

Allston. The Corporation has identified life sciences as a current strength—and a field with huge potential for Harvard, its affiliated hospitals, other area schools, and Greater Boston’s biotech and pharmaceutical businesses. It is also of rising interest to Stanford and its neighbors. Investing here could sop up huge sums: “wet” bench research is as expensive as it comes. The requisite facilities would logically seem to fit well in Allston, linking Longwood researchers to those in FAS—and to other universities, Kendall Square, and companies that might gravitate to the “enterprise research campus” at Allston Landing. Notwithstanding a general disposition to attend to expenses, might a snap campaign focused on life sciences, promising new cures and jobs in new companies, be in the offing?

Other ambitions? How to weigh that research investment against, say, expanding the College’s teaching mission—a powerful signal of serving promising students from the lowest-income households and under-resourced K-12 schools? (Yale and Princeton are pursuing such efforts.) For Harvard, the requisite expansion of the faculty, House space, and financial aid associated with a maximum effort to educate more undergraduates would probably entail a further few billion dollars in endowment and building funds. That might be feasible in time, but longer term and far more expensive than, perhaps, disseminating Harvard online learning in new, more effective ways—or deemphasizing the legacy admissions preference to make room for additional first-generation applicants.

Making choices. Bacow’s scholarship focused on negotiating and resolving complex disputes with contending interests: ideas he has since applied in higher education. The matrix of interests here is internal: good things Harvard would like to do. So perhaps this will be an interesting moment for trading off dreams and means, resulting in a new set of University priorities.

In light of worries about the political environment, fueled by public skepticism about the worth of higher education, it will not be easy for the institution with the largest endowment (and an elite education and research mission) to lead efforts to persuade the broad public about the value of what Harvard and peers do. Even if donors were willing, the appearance of doubling down on Harvard Campaign-scale fundraising anytime soon might be toxic. Maybe the president-elect will revisit programs, restructuring some and ending others, to redeploy the millions they now consume. Coming from Tufts, where resources were far scarcer, may prove helpful in examining what Harvard has chosen to do, and may aspire to pursue.

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Given his service on the Corporation, Lawrence S. Bacow comes to his new role with current, broad knowledge of Harvard. He has also led a university before; reflecting on his assumption of the Tufts presidency, he wrote: “I am a sailor. One of the most dangerous portions of any passage is leaving the harbor. It is actually safer once you get off shore. There are fewer things to run into. Beginnings are really, really important. How we plan them, how we transition, how we reveal our deeper moral convictions, is key.” Faculty and staff members, students, alumni who care about Harvard, even politicians who may care less, might want to tune into this one. ~John S. Rosenberg, Editor