Yesterday’s News
From the pages of the Harvard Alumni Bulletin and Harvard Magazine

1930 The Harvard Engineering Society enjoys an illustrated address on the building and running of the first vehicular tunnel under the Hudson River from Manhattan to New Jersey: the two-year-old Holland Tunnel, named for its first chief engineer, Clifford M. Holland ’05, S.B. ’06.

1940 The editors encourage readers to help the University Archives by clipping news of Harvard men, particularly from papers outside the Boston and New York areas: “the more obscure the man and the paper, the more useful the clipping.”

1945 Among the 189 degrees awarded at the close of winter term is the first posthumous A.B. for a student killed in action during the current war: Pfc. William Sco-ville Moore Jr., who died on a battlefield in France on Armistice Day 1944.

1955 Signs of spring: the Cambridge police begin a crackdown on the latest undergraduate vehicular craze—second-hand hearses. Local citizens, reports a spokesman, find them “depressing.”

1970 Despite limited publicity, note the editors, some 150 people turned up for the first meeting of the Harvard University Ecology Coalition in February. The loose union of campus groups “worrying about the decline of our environment” made plans for teach-ins and other activities scheduled for April 21 and 22.

1995 Inaugurating its new business section, The New York Times reports publishers’ fevered efforts to find a new college-level introductory economics textbook, noting that Harvard’s N. Gregory Mankiw has received a $1.4-million advance for his nearly finished volume.

2005 The Corporation announces the divestment of stock holdings in Petro-China (which sought drilling rights in Sudan during the brutal war in Darfur) on the recommendation of its Committee on Shareholder Responsibility. Seniors Matthew Mahan and Brandon Terry had launched a campaign urging classmates to put their senior gift into an escrow account unless divestment occurred.

News Briefs

University Professor Arrested

Friedman University Professor Charles M. Lieber—a much-honored leader in nanoscale science and bio-compatible electronics, and chair of the department of chemistry and chemical biology—was arrested on January 28, charged with misleading investigators from the Department of Defense about his work for a Chinese government-sponsored program designed to identify and support leading researchers in China and abroad. The U.S. government, which is investigating China’s efforts to gain access to technical and scientific expertise by legal and extralegal means, has characterized the program as a threat to national security. An affidavit accompanying the criminal complaint also accused Lieber of making false statements to the National Institutes of Health (a major funder of his research)—and to Harvard—about his connections to the Thousand Talents program and the Wuhan University of Technology.

A brief statement by the University noted: “The charges brought by the U.S. government…are extremely serious. Harvard is cooperating with federal authorities, including the National Institutes of Health, and is conducting its own review of the alleged misconduct. Professor Lieber has been placed on indefinite administrative leave.” Those on such leaves typically are denied access to campus and separated from Harvard teaching and research.

During last November’s Faculty of Arts and Sciences meeting, dean of science Christopher Stubbs addressed colleagues on the subjects of federal concerns about “academic espionage” involving the transfer of unclassified information overseas, and of increased scrutiny by sponsoring federal agencies regarding faculty members’ commitments and conflicts of interest. He focused particularly
on government concerns about scientists affiliated with China who might be involved in stealing biomedical research. Stubbs then reviewed Harvard research policies, changes in procedures to accommodate full internal reviews of funding proposals, faculty training, and better monitoring of compliance.

A report on the arrest, with the affidavit, is at harvardmag.com/lieber-20

~JOHN S. ROSENBERG

Giving Guidelines

Amid public and campus dismay over gifts to many universities—including Harvard—by the late sexual predator Jeffrey Epstein (News Briefs, November-December 2019, page 25), and the abuses at other institutions revealed during the “Varsity Blues” admissions and bribery scandal, the University is conducting a broad review of its gifts policy. Outlining the issues during a December conversation, President Lawrence S. Bacow highlighted several matters the initiative aims to address, including:

- Admissions. The institution is trying “to be very thoughtful” about “the relationship between admissions and philanthropy,” he said—a more nuanced issue than at first appears. Does a university tell a 20-year donor to its annual alumni fund not to give if her child then seeks admission—or freeze fulfillment of a prior, long-term pledge under the same circumstances? If a child enrolls in the College or graduate school, should Harvard then direct the parent not to make donations for a set period of years? Drawing on his own family experience, Bacow continued, parents often have no idea until very late in the process where a child may decide to apply. And he noted, nodding to the news coverage of the admission dean’s interest list during the recent lawsuit over Harvard’s application policies, one reason for having such a thing is to keep track of donor-parents whose Harvard-oriented hopes for their progeny will be disappointed, as many are.
- Core values. Bacow also observed that it is easy to propound the notion that any institution should avoid taking gifts that conflict with its core values. But as a practical matter, “[T]hose values are often contested in a university,” so devising workable general rules is not simple—and those Harvard may devise are unlikely to satisfy everyone. Moreover, he cautioned against interpreting accepted gifts as University endorsements of their donors’ views on controversial issues, or of the donors themselves. Quite the contrary: in making a gift, “They’re endorsing Harvard, Harvard is not endorsing them.”
- Codifying common practices. Finally, Bacow said, there are several generally understood rules of thumb and clear principles that have not been made concrete. Thus, Harvard does not accept anonymously any gift that it would be embarrassed to accept publicly—and he expects that to be spelled out. As a core value, the University explicitly limits donors’ influence on Harvard academic operations once a gift is made: a donor may underwrite a professor, chair, for instance, but does not have a say in who holds it. The same principles apply to corporate support for research, or similar gifts.

Comparable concerns have arisen at peer institutions, where such conversations are also under way, so Brian Lee, vice president for alumni affairs and development, is consulting with his counterparts elsewhere. There will be plenty to talk about in the wake of outside counsel investigations of the long-term gift relationship between members of the Sackler family—and their company, Purdue Pharma (implicated heavily in the opioids crisis)—and Tufts; and on the handling of gifts from Epstein, after his conviction as a sex offender, principally to MIT’s Media Lab. The Tufts report, dated December, found possible ways for Purdue to have influenced medical-education programs, and insufficient conflict-of-interest policies. The MIT report, released in January, documented policy loopholes, errors to conceal the source of gifts, and errors of execution in accepting the monies.

The result of Harvard’s review, Bacow indicated, is intended by the end of the academic year to be a written policy for the entire community, made public—as the current gift policy is not, but as Brown University’s recently developed statement is (see Brevia, January-February, page 28), and other institutions’ are likely to become.

~J.S.R.

Graduate-Student Strike Update

After a nearly monthlong strike, the Harvard Graduate Student Union-United Auto Workers (HGSU-UAW) went back to work on New Year’s Day. In mid-December, about two weeks into the strike, the University proposed working through federal mediation, a public service available to help resolve particularly difficult labor disputes.

“Over the course of our strike, we’ve shown the university administration that Harvard works because we do,” HGSU-UAW wrote in a statement announcing the end of the strike. “Instead of working to reach a fair agreement, over the course of our strike, the administration showed their true priorities. They decided to threaten student workers instead of agreeing to protections against workplace abuse....Nevertheless, in response to our strike, the administration—for the first time ever—announced that they intend to reach a contract by the end of January. We now expect the administration to put all their energy into reaching a fair agreement.”

The parties had not reached an agreement as of early February. During federal mediation, it’s customary for the negotiators not to offer public updates about their progress. Some union organizing has continued: on February 3, HGSU-UAW and graduate students in the government department co-hosted a panel condemning Harvard’s process for investigating sexual-harassment cases.

Although it’s not clear why the union decided to end its strike, Harvard has been criticized for an internal email, leaked to The Harvard Crimson, suggesting that departments should ask graduate students whether they planned to work in the new semester even if the strike were continuing. Critics, including Winthrop professor of history Walter Johnson, have argued that this is tantamount to making employment contingent on a pledge not to strike. The University has maintained it was meant only to plan for appropriate levels of teaching personnel: “The University is committed to ensuring that all of Harvard’s students can pursue and complete their academic work,” said Harvard spokesman Jonathan Swain in a December statement. “Ensuring appropriate staffing levels for academic activities is a part of that.”

~MARINA N. BOLOTNIKOVA