interrupted shortly after noon the next day. A new message from Bacow brought the pandemic home: he and his wife, Adele Fleet Bacow, had tested positive for COVID-19, and were isolating at home. (They recovered.)

Affirming how much had changed for the community, on March 27, FAS dean Claudine Gay notified her colleagues that grading for this term will be on an “Emergency Satisfactory/Emergency Unsatisfactory” or “SEM/UEM” basis. She cited the often demanding circumstances in which students found themselves: “Some have seen parent job losses, or have had to take over childcare and other household responsibilities, as healthcare and other essential workers in their families continue to provide critical support or have become ill themselves. Those who relied on the public library for Internet access are struggling to find other ways to join their classmates online, as public buildings are ordered closed. Students in a time zone 12 hours away from us are feeling remote and closed off...by closed borders.”

While these emergency measures were being taken, University leaders also had to begin contending with the inevitable financial fallout from the stunningly swift change from a growing, full-employment economy to a prospectively severe recession. In their messages accompanying Harvard’s fiscal year 2019 annual financial report, released last October, President Bacow and vice president for finance Thomas J. Hollister pointed to the likely imminent end of the record U.S. economic expansion: the recovery dating from the financial crisis and Great Recession more than a decade ago (see harvardmag.com/financial-endowment-reports-19). Bacow has experience with lean times (he led Tufts University through that tumultuous period; see “The Pragmatist,” September-October 2018, page 32), and accordingly directed Crimson administrators and deans to plan warily. Hollister’s organization disseminated a leaned-down “financial resilience” guide, subtitled “A Recession Playbook,” summarizing detailed internal advice on how to incorporate this cautious perspective in plans and operations (https://ofsp.finance.harvard.edu/blog/financial-resilience-harvard)—and increased cash holdings. In a harbinger of things to come, on March 18, Moody’s Investors Service downgraded the entire higher-education sector’s credit outlook to negative, citing higher expenses and constrained revenues.

For Susan Murphy, mathematics was always the place “where everything made sense.” The first woman tenured in Harvard’s statistics department, she fell in love with numbers as a grade-schooler in southern Louisiana, surrounded by chemical plants and antebellum homes. She followed her interest to Louisiana State (“Because, you know, everybody goes to LSU if you’re from Louisiana”) and took every math course offered. In graduate school, she dove into probability and read a paper on martingale theory—“an area that studies how data evolve over time”—that changed her life. “I realized I wanted to solve real problems but use beautiful math to do it,” she says. In 2013 she won a MacArthur Fellowship for work on methodologies for finding therapies to treat chronic or relapsing diseases: depression, schizophrenia, addiction, cancer. “Much of the way we’ve collected data evidence in medicine is via randomized trials that were developed long ago, for settings in which the patient either was cured or died,” Murphy says. “So, you really only got one chance to help.” Today, as diseases wax and wane, clinicians must make a sequence of decisions about care. So, too, must patients, and Murphy’s recent work aims at them: mobile applications that use artificial intelligence to support struggles with alcoholism, smoking, overeating, and other challenges. “The contingencies of the moment conspire against you,” she says. “But a wearable device—a phone, a tracker—can help manage those contingencies with suggestions, advice, support. They can help get you to the next moment.” To clear her mind of professional puzzles (and help with her own contingencies), Murphy plays ice hockey, seriously, five times a week—another unlikely outcome for a Louisiana girl who fell, hard, for mathematics.

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Susan Murphy

Photograph by Jim Harrison

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