

rigorous analysis, parsing the responses in numerous ways—and the problems submitted by the public scored well. “I thought it was fascinating to see the disconnect between what the academics thought were important problems and what the non-academics thought,” says Stephen M. Kosslyn, one of the organizers. (Formerly Lindsley professor of psychology and dean of social science within the Faculty of Arts and Sciences [FAS], he now directs the Center for Advanced Study in the Behavioral Sciences at Stanford.)

Once the poll had closed, John Muresianu '74, Ph.D. '82, then a fellow at the Berkman Center for Internet and Society, analyzed the results using both traditional measures (such as overall high score and how many voters gave a high score for each problem) and the less-orthodox “Zec score,” an algorithm he designed based on the assertion by symposium presenter Richard Zeckhauser, Ramsey professor of political economy, that in deciding which problems social scientists should address first, extreme difficulty should actually count *against* a problem. (Problems whose solutions seem very unlikely “might be fun to talk about” hypothetically, Zeckhauser says, but it would be foolish to funnel resources into work on them.) Thus, even though the public ranked world peace the most important problem, and the second most difficult, it dropped to fourth place in importance when Muresianu calculated the “Zec score” because of its difficulty. Sustainable development, ranked second in importance by the public, fell all the way out of the top 10 for the same reason. (See harvardmag.com/hard-problems to see how 10 problems ranked on different scales.)

Kosslyn thinks the disconnect between scholars and the public may be partly a matter of phrasing: the public sees the forest (world peace), while scholars examine individual trees, breaking the problem down into constituent parts (e.g., the distinct roles of religion, politics, or the availability of food and water in contributing to violence). One way “to bridge the gap” and foster a better understanding of what social scientists do, says Jennifer Shephard of the FAS social science dean's office, who helped coordinate the original event, “is to have more conversations where the public is involved and scientists explain their research in a way that's accessible.”

THE IDEA for the “hard problems” symposium and follow-up originally came from Nick Nash '00. As an undergraduate chemistry and physics concentrator, he was inspired by “Hilbert's problems”: a list of 23 hard problems in mathematics assembled by mathematician David Hilbert in 1900. Eleven decades later, 10 of those problems had been solved; four had been classified as unsolvable; and all but two of the rest had been partially solved. Nash—now a vice-president at General Atlantic, an investment firm based in Greenwich,

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Connecticut, began to wonder whether a similar list of problems could be assembled for the social sciences, for possible solution during the coming century.

Nash secured funding for the project through the Indira Foundation; he, Kosslyn, and Shephard coordinated the April 2010 symposium and the online poll and discussion that followed. They drew attention to the discussion through press releases and

Facebook ads, targeting users in countries and regions that were underrepresented among poll respondents. The response, says Nash, was thrilling: “We'd post a problem and ask,

‘What do you think?’ We'd have a woman in India opine, followed by a man in Nigeria, and then a teenager in Brazil would respond. What a fascinating way to get the whole world humming and buzzing about ideas.”

A parallel but independent effort by the National Science Foundation may indicate that the time is indeed ripe for aligning academic efforts (and public funding for them) with public priorities. The foundation's general call last August for “decadal-scale ideas” on directions for research in the social, behavioral, and economic sciences drew 252 white papers from scholars (the abstracts are now viewable online). The NSF sometimes finds itself “stuck in this year-by-year budget cycle,” explains assistant director Myron Gutmann. “I wanted to ask, ‘What are the big ideas we can be working on 10 years from now?’ so we really make a good investment in planning for them.” The agency will review the submissions and announce priorities in the summer.



Visit harvardmag.com/hard-problems to read about the original “Hard Problems” symposium and find links to websites to learn more.

Beyond Ramen Noodles

ON A MONDAY NIGHT in late March, dozens of graduate students stand around a brightly lit lounge where tables are covered with many different kinds of pies. The conversation is warm and animated; professor of public policy and management Jennifer Lerner, of the Harvard Kennedy School, chats with students from the Divinity School, Law School, and Graduate School of Arts and Sciences (GSAS). They avidly sample blueberry and chocolate-pudding pies, along with several types of quiches. No one seems stressed out. In fact, everyone looks...happy.

Lerner, faculty director of one of two apartment complexes in the Graduate Commons Program (GCP), observes, “The stereotype of the Harvard grad student is someone working until all hours, sitting alone in his or her apartment or lab, eating ramen noodles. This allows little op-

portunity for interdisciplinary or social exchange.” But the Grad Commons students—surrounded by lively company from around the University—are both well fed and social. “Student success is partly driven by well-being, balance, and social connection,” she adds, “and so we want to build and broaden well-being as an end in itself.” Eight decades after the College was transformed by the creation of residential Houses, with faculty and academic advisers as residents, something similar is taking root for Harvard's large population of graduate and professional-school students.

In 2001, then-president Neil Rudenstine, the Harvard Corporation, and the deans of the graduate and professional schools formally acknowledged the need to expand the available graduate housing on Harvard's campus. Allan Brandt, now dean of GSAS, recalls, “Some of our peer institutions had moved more aggressively in developing graduate housing, so we had

a real sense of urgency.” At the same time, both students and administrators wanted to develop not just residential spaces, but sustained communities of advanced students. “Most graduate students today are looking for what I’ve been calling a ‘socio-intellectual’ experience,” Brandt explains. “Their interests go beyond what they will learn and discover in their particular graduate programs—they want to learn from one another and become members of a dynamic and diverse community.”

The development of the Graduate Commons Program brought together research on graduate housing initiatives at MIT, Princeton, and Stanford with Harvard’s experience running both the undergraduate House system and the non-residential Dudley House for graduate students. At the same time, the GCP was seen as an opportunity to foster connections among students and faculty members from parts of the University that might not otherwise interact—drawing together students from the schools of law and medicine, divinity, design, business, and government, as well as public health and education. “Graduate students, perhaps more than other students, can become isolated in their specific academic program—in their laboratories or in their departments,” says Brandt. “But graduate students today want to learn from one another across a wide range of fields and disciplines.”

The president’s office provided funding for a three-year pilot program. Harvard Real Estate Services commissioned two Boston architecture firms to design buildings specifically for the GCP on Harvard-owned sites at 5 Cowperthwaite Street and 10 Akron Street. Rickie Golden, a first-year student in the Graduate School of Design, likes “all the sustainable aspects. There’s great light, plenty of windows; my apartment is spacious and beautiful. It is new and immaculate, and I like that there are a lot of common-room options and places to study and socialize—I love it.” The buildings opened sequentially, in the summers of 2007 and 2008, and the GCP began in the fall. It now houses 429 residents across both locations—mostly grad students, but also their family members, as well as some University staff members and researchers, including two faculty directors at each site. Lerner and her husband, Brian Gill, senior fellow at Mathematica Policy Research, di-

rect 5 Cowperthwaite; David Carrasco, Rudenstine professor for the study of Latin America in the faculties of divinity and arts and sciences, and senior Romance languages preceptor Maria Luisa Parra direct 10 Akron. The faculty members’ role is similar to that of the masters of the undergraduate Houses, hosting events like wine tastings in their apartments and inviting scholars to speak at lectures and dinners: recent guests have included Nicholas Christakis, a medical sociologist with appointments at both the Medical School and the Faculty of Arts and Sciences (see “Networked,” May-June 2010, page 44), and William Graham, dean of the Divinity School. “Students are more used to going to the classroom or office of their teachers,” notes Carrasco. “Here, the process is reversed in a relaxed, social environment.”

Golden recalls, “You hear about programs like this, and you wonder how many of the people around you actually are going to meet and connect with on a deeper than neighborly basis. But I really did make a few good friends....It just adds another dimension of warmth to being in graduate school.” Dustin Smith, a third-year divinity student, first heard about the GCP at an orientation session for admitted students, and entered at its debut in the fall of 2008. “The first friends

I made in the building I met at a free pizza event, and they’re still my friends today,” he reports. He is now a community adviser for the GCP, helping to plan programming and community-building events ranging from a series of Korean film nights to iftar meals during Ramadan. “It’s an avenue for connecting with people that you wouldn’t otherwise have, and I feel like it keeps a lot of people afloat... I’m very fortunate to have plugged into it because I think my experience would have been rough without it.”

GSAS administrative dean Margot Gill emphasizes the importance of such opinions in drawing the best possible graduate students: “Here are students not only telling us, but also saying student-to-student, that one of the reasons they accepted the offer at Harvard was because we have really taken the time to value and support a graduate community.” The GCP was originally funded for three years, but its budget has been stretched to cover four. Gill hopes that the pilot program’s success will not only extend the GCP itself into the future, but provide a model for future graduate housing sites: “This,” she says, “is a success architecturally, it is a success for the neighborhood”—and obviously for the resident students and faculty directors.

~SPENCER LENFIELD

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