

The Pragmatist

Lawrence S. Bacow,
a seasoned educator,
is schooled in
making decisions.

by JOHN S. ROSENBERG



AT TUFTS UNIVERSITY, Lawrence S. Bacow famously invited members of the community to join him on early-morning runs: a chance to get a word with the president while training for the Boston Marathon. And so this past April 16—a very wet and miserable Marathon Monday morning—enterprising *Crimson* reporter Luke W. Xu '20 found himself splashing along Memorial Drive with Harvard's president-elect. Between breaths, an inescapable Bacow metaphor emerged ("A presidency is marathon, not a sprint"), but also this:

You don't have to solve every problem in the university on day one, or even in the first year. You need to understand the culture, understand the organization, understand the students, the faculty, the staff, the alumni. Figure out what needs to be done, and then do it.

In the context, that last bit might seem a riff on Nike's slogan. But Bacow's seemingly simple formula assumes broad significance given his lifelong immersion in higher education: from MIT undergraduate ('72, economics) to three Harvard degrees (M.P.P.-J.D. '76, Ph.D. '78); 24 years on MIT's faculty and leadership positions there; the Tufts presidency; and (penultimately, it turned out), beginning in 2011, higher-education advising and consulting, and Harvard Corporation service. A scholar of decision- and policymaking in complex settings, Bacow combines deep understanding of how diverse interests are expressed and aligned and more than two decades of experience in *applying* those insights to set agendas, mobilize support, and effect decisions in the unwieldy, multicentric, hothouse setting of elite universities.

In other words, as he explained in a recent conversation, he brought to his new role as Harvard's twenty-ninth president, on July 1, a clearly expressed, readily understood *theory of action*. As abstract as that might seem, the man himself speaks in a comfortably conversational style. Although he uses engineering and social-science terms fluidly, and resorts to sports metaphors (from running and sailing, a lifelong passion), his voice is distinctively personal, drawing examples from boyhood experiences; formative teachers and mentors; and deep and apparent religious faith. The effect is clarity about leaderly matters ranging from articulating strategy to defending free speech within the academy.

At work, Bacow is a practiced pragmatist, seasoned and steeped in the values that underlie universities as *communities* and attuned to their cultures, quirks and all. Most visibly at Tufts, he acted to advance the institutional purpose—attained through "great students, great faculty, and great staff"—for the benefit of individuals and society. Now, at Harvard, which like the rest of higher education faces large internal questions, and perhaps larger ones in a frosty external environment, he seems urgently ready to "Figure out what needs to be done, and then do it."

From Pontiac to the Red Line

By his own, self-deprecating, account, Larry Bacow grew up in Pontiac, Michigan, as a "nerd"—a ham-radio operator, enthralled by building his gear from Heathkits, entering science fairs, and reading *Popular Science*, *Scientific American*, and obscure amateur-radio magazines. As he did on February 11 after being named Harvard's president, he has spoken about the fundamental fact of being the son of refugees: his father from pogroms in eastern Europe, his mother a survivor of Auschwitz. During his Tufts inaugural address, he named them both: Mitchell Bacow, "who taught me the importance of honesty, integrity, and always speaking one's mind. Dad, I hope the latter will not get

me into too much trouble in my new job. My late mother, Ruth, who recognized that I was born to be a teacher long before I ever did."

He was certainly born to be a student and a learner. Among others he welcomed to the Tufts inauguration were "Mrs. Chandler" (Shirley Chandler Bitterman), from fourth grade at Webster Elementary School in Pontiac, who "taught me, very gently, how important it was to listen...because other people had really interesting things to say." He also welcomed Robert Solow, his undergraduate mentor—the first of four Nobel laureates-to-be among his teachers—and dissertation advisers Mark Moore and Richard Zeckhauser, both still professors at the Harvard Kennedy School 40 years later. (Another mentor, mentioned in a different context, was high-school librarian Pearl Jacobstein, who cleverly guided the young nerd on a broadening course from a biography of Isaac Newton to history and on to literature.)

The best account of the path from Michigan to a higher-education career along the MBTA's Red Line comes from Bacow's dedication, in his 1978 public-policy dissertation, to his parents, "Who encouraged my curiosity years ago by answering all those questions that began with 'Why?' and then demonstrated extraordinary patience as I tested the sufficiency of their answers with the inevitable follow-up question, 'But suppose...?'" That foreshadows one of his favorite sayings about his chosen life in the academy: "Faculty members are people who think otherwise."

As he related in a 2008 MIT sesquicentennial oral-history interview with Karen Arenson, M.P.P. '72 (who had covered higher education for *The New York Times*), Bacow headed off to the institute intending to major in math before proceeding to law, his father's profession. (Arriving amid a campus protest—it was 1969—his father said, "If you get arrested, don't call home.")

Instead, he found an absorbing home in economics: "I realized there was a difference between being good at math and being a mathematician. I was good at math." Graduating in three years, he disappointed Solow's hope that he would stay for a Ph.D. in economics; Solow then called Thomas Schelling (another of the future Nobelists) at the Kennedy School, and Bacow went upriver for master's and doctoral degrees in public policy, a law degree, and a life partnership with Adele Fleet, a Floridian and Wellesley graduate; they were fixed up on a date in 1973 and married in 1975. (She then continued her higher education, enrolling in MIT for a degree in city planning.)

After the intensity of MIT, Bacow described the learning culture in his new environs with some bemusement. In that 2008 interview, he said: "I had an interesting experience as a first-year graduate student at Harvard. I sat through a class, and I remember leaving... and my classmates were just in a tizzy. One of them said, 'I didn't understand half of what was going on in there.' I said, 'Well, that's pretty good. You understood half. I just spent three years in college, in which my goal was to stay no more than three blackboards behind the professor.'"

"I didn't expect to understand things at the end of a class. You took your notes and...your book and...your problem sets, and you went back to your room and you sat there with your classmates. And that's when you really learned the course."

Withal, much as he adored MIT, he found things to like about his graduate work, too. In his February 11 remarks, Bacow said, "Harvard made me better. It was here I learned that I was a teacher at heart. It was here that I discovered that I wanted to devote my life to scholarship. It was here that I nurtured my passion for higher education. And it was here that I discovered who I really was."

Few students passing through the Law School en route to a doctorate, all within six years, likely found Harvard a step *down* in demands, but Bacow seems to have lapped up his increasingly interdisciplinary education and research. His dissertation acknowledges adviser Mark Moore, who “helped me frame the researchable questions, tactfully pointed out my errors of logic, and generally offered much-needed encouragement,” shaping “the way I look at policy problems.” (The tact might be questioned, but not the overall effect: Moore recalls sending his student “a rather stinging critique of a paper he submitted. There was something in there about how painful it was to see him ‘working with rusty saws and bent screwdrivers.’ He told me later that he had kept a copy of that memo to refer to throughout his career when he feared he was getting too full of himself.”)

In the event, Bacow emerged properly equipped. His dissertation, “Regulating Occupational Hazards through Collective Bargaining,” assessed the Occupational Safety and Health Act (OSHA, legislated

together research, professional training, and residential undergraduate education—and with tenure for certain employees, to boot.)

Having proposed another way of proceeding, Bacow tested his theories in real-world settings ranging from United Auto Workers’ health and safety stewards in General Motors factories to training for the workers at dozens of diverse construction job sites covered by United Association of Plumbers and Pipefitters’ agreements. He did not claim that bargaining could *substitute* for regulation; rather, it could usefully boost enforcement of safety standards, training, and other effects that would make work less dangerous—all by actively engaging “the parties most directly affected.”

In this light, his dissertation’s academic, anodyne title—mashing up “regulating” and its command-and-control connotations with the very distinct processes of “collective bargaining”—could also be read as a statement of how to think differently. Aiming toward safer workplaces, it cut through problems of cost, insufficient and unequal expertise, and even the philosophical divides that separate advocates of risk-based, free-market solutions from those who see a rights-based role for government intervention.

Degree in hand, Bacow headed back down the Charles for a two-year faculty appointment in MIT’s department of urban studies and planning—a trajectory that pointed decisively back into academia, in a field where he could draw on those disciplines to engage with interesting policy problems.

The book he completed in 1980, *Bargaining for Job Safety and Health*, drew heavily on the dissertation. Some of the obligatory academic prose carried over (“The collective-bargaining-based regulatory strategy described...represents an attempt to enhance the capacity of the implementation process to reflect efficiency considerations”). But the subtle changes seem revealing now. The title conveys the essence of the work far more simply and vividly. Bacow emphasizes *applying* research, even when doing so falls short of perfect theory (negotiation “will not be as efficient as the decentralized intervention strategies urged by many economists, but it will be more efficient than what we have now”). And in a reworked summing-up, he calls out academic navel-gazing, particularly as it might be perceived by policymakers who

hope to deploy scholarship productively:

Academics have a general tendency to look for global solutions to interesting policy problems. In fact, much of the academic debate over regulatory reform centers on the choice between standards and economic incentives. Although the participants in this debate have produced much interesting literature, the debate itself has been over the wrong question. Economic incentives can no more be preferred to standards than a wrench can be preferred to a pair of pliers—there is a time and a place for each, and what is important is knowing when to use which. To do a good job, the regulator needs to know how to match regulatory tools to regulatory problems.

The stylistic nod to Mark Moore’s bracing criticism may have been subconscious, but Bacow was finding his true voice. Like any good writer, he saved his best lines for last. Making the case for a pragmatic path forward, he concluded on a most unacademic note: “In general, regulatory policy would be both more efficient and more effective if we identified and exploited modest but significant opportunities to do



in 1970) from the perspectives of policy (finding no statistically significant evidence that accidents had been reduced); law (revealing an often adversarial standard-setting process, ill-suited to the distinctions among myriad workplaces and unlikely to yield either a commitment to implement the standards or a search for more practical options); and economics (the inefficiencies and excess costs baked into the system).

He found that although OSHA’s rulemaking “provides a convenient forum for the presentation of alternative viewpoints, it is not well structured to resolve the differences”—a very unlawyerly notion. The parties faced no pressure to reach agreement, nor any cost for failing to do so: a formula for future litigation—but not for improving actual workplaces cost-effectively. He also enumerated the imperfections in a wholly market-based approach to job safety and health, given limited knowledge and other constraints.

More broadly, Bacow observed, “Institutions tend to be organized to perform the tasks they are currently performing. Their capacity to perform new tasks is limited. Moreover, they learn slowly and can only pay attention to a few things at a time.” Those insights, proceeding from knowledge of organizational behavior, rather than from law or economics, point to different modes of action. (They obviously also apply to operating long-established enterprises that meld to-

Michigan roots: the young scholar as a fifth-grader and high-school senior (in 1969), pre-MIT

better. And in many cases the only way we will succeed in identifying these opportunities is by asking the simple question ‘What works?’”

An Education in Leadership

TWO YEARS turned into two dozen. “I sort of found myself as a faculty member,” he said in the 2008 interview. “I liked it, and I enjoyed the teaching.” A tenure-track position was created after his term appointment, he entered the search, *et voilà*. He taught in his department, and in economics and political science, and served on committees when asked. When his chair tapped him to see what MIT ought to do in the field of real estate, Bacow led the creation of a new master’s degree program in development, drawing from his department, economics, civil engineering, architecture, and the Sloan School (MIT’s business school). Doing so, as he put it in the 2008 conversation, was not only an exposure to other parts of the institute but also “how I came to encounter faculty governance”: learning how initiatives are birthed, the curriculum is shaped, and resources are allocated. That done, he returned happily to his faculty role: “One of the wonderful things about being a faculty member is, you can pick and choose what problems you work on...because they are of interest to you. And I loved that. And I really worked pretty hard to avoid academic administration.”

As a scholar-teacher, Bacow embedded himself more deeply in policy thickets even more complex than negotiating workplace safety: resolving environmental disputes (siting, permitting, rulemaking, and enforcement). Here, disparate actors expressed differing values, assessments of risk, and guesstimates of probable outcomes—all in the context of overlapping laws and regulations at multiple layers of government. From an MIT research project, Bacow and Michael Wheeler, then of the New England School of Law and MIT, created a graduate-level casebook, *Environmental Dispute Resolution* (1984).

Certain general findings again stand out. Environmental conflicts would surely persist, but the costs of conflict “likely can be reduced. Even if perfection will always be out of reach, the quality of decisions in environmental cases surely can be enhanced”—especially relative to protracted litigation. Negotiation “relies on the principals to create the terms of the final outcome,” guided by their “much deeper understanding” of the issues than a judge may have and their superior capacity to “explore different solutions and their consequences”—with which the negotiator/principals “usually will have to live.” In sum, “negotiation is more likely to produce results that accurately reflect the preferences of the parties.”

“He’s intrigued by the moving parts and, like an engineer, is interested in making them work more productively,” Wheeler recalled in a recent conversation about their research. Bacow, he said, is a “systems thinker” with a critical approach honed by his legal training. Reflecting on his academic collaborations during the past three decades, Wheeler (who retired as MBA Class of 1952 professor of

management practice at the Business School in 2013), said, “None was as engaging or instructive for me as that one was.”

Their friendship since the early 1980s has led Wheeler to put the conclusions they drew then into broader context. He and Bacow, he said, share the view that conflict “can be very *costly* in lots of ways, but it can also be *generative*—can be the basis for more solutions” than those surfaced otherwise. Bacow’s higher-education leadership roles, he continued, have been informed by “the same view of accepting the reality of conflict, of understanding that it must be charged and dealt with, that if it were stifled, we might be the worse for it.” Conflict, in other words, can advance a mission—so long as it *evolves* and does not *devolve*. Hence the importance, for leaders, of understanding all the parties to an issue and analyzing their perspectives: the take-away Bacow summarized for his *Crimson* running partner in April.



At Harvard, then: the young couple in 1976, when Larry Bacow became a newly minted M.P.P.-J.D.

Concluding their book, Bacow and Wheeler wrote, “Instead of creating the illusion of truth, bargaining embraces the accommodation of competing interests,” which in turn “forces each side to acknowledge the legitimacy of the claims of the opposition.” Transpose that to leading a community like a university—where differences often arise precisely because the principals are, as scholars, single-mindedly committed to discovering “right answers.” As Bacow was to say in a later context, a university president, responsible for the safety and flourishing of human beings, their surrounding physical plant, and the community’s finances, in many ways fills the role of a city mayor—the ultimate pragmatist and negotiator among “competing interests.”

(It helps to lubricate that approach to problem-solving with humor. During a visit to Gloucester, Bacow took command of Wheeler’s sailboat—and promptly ran it onto a sandbar: “He turned to me and said, ‘It could be worse,’” Wheeler recounted. “I asked, ‘How?’ and Larry said, ‘It could be my boat!’”)

For all his affection for the life professorial, it seems retrospectively inevitable that a scholar of negotiation and decisionmaking, whose cast of mind went “deeper than curiosity about how systems work” (Wheeler’s description), would end up with his hand on

the tiller. During a sabbatical in Amsterdam—one of several stints abroad—Bacow said in the 2008 interview, he received a call asking him to chair the MIT faculty. Given his youth and the peripheral status of his department within the engineering firmament, he said, it was unexpected. But “Candidly, I knew I was going to say yes”: the position was a singular honor and “I thought there were a set of issues that were before the faculty that I thought I might be able to be helpful with.”

In the doing, “I loved being faculty chair. I thought it was a wonderful job.” Faculty members, he realized, “tend to keep our noses down. We know the people who live in our neighborhoods...intellectually and geographically.” But as chair, “you have the world’s biggest hunting license,” addressing everything from the way MIT brought junior faculty members aboard to concerns about student life and learning. Interestingly, MIT had *seriatim* committees on the latter; this time, Bacow and colleagues “[took] a look at why those

other committees had failed” so their new task force could actually get things done.

As chair, for a transition year and then a two-year term, Bacow attended MIT Corporation meetings—and had the idea of inviting members to come a few hours early to meet with groups of professors to learn in depth how they spent their time: an education in academic life for the governing board. He also joined weekly two-hour Academic Council sessions, convened by the

Deciding on the life academic: from an initial two-year position to two decades of rising responsibility at MIT

president and including deans, the provost, the head of the libraries, and others: a personal education in the institution as a whole, including access to all tenure and promotion cases. The professor of planning was quickly exposed to all the disciplines, to admissions and financial aid, and to federal education policy—at a time when MIT was cutting its costs to adapt to more stringent reimbursement for the overhead on research grants.

From this lapse into administration, Bacow returned to his faculty duties for a year, setting up a center to coordinate MIT’s environmental initiatives. But the hook had been set: in 1998, MIT president Charles Vest appointed a new provost, Robert A. Brown, who had been engineering dean when Bacow was faculty chair. Vest also created a new post, the chancellorship, and appointed Bacow. He and Brown sorted out their respective responsibilities—in Bacow’s telling, over bagels at the S & S Deli in Inman

Square. MIT’s deans reported to Brown, who ran the budget; Bacow oversaw everything that cut across the schools, from undergraduate and graduate education to strategic planning, allocation of space, and institute-wide partnerships with other institutions. He also engaged with audiences ranging from alumni to visiting world leaders.

Those formal responsibilities completed the leaderly preparation of two presidents-to-be (Brown now leads Boston University). In Bacow’s case, other lessons accrued, too. In the wake of the 1997 death from alcohol poisoning of MIT freshman Scott Krueger while pledging a fraternity, the chancellor took on the challenge of moving toward on-campus housing for all freshmen, upending a cherished tradition. Effecting that change was not easy (“I was hung in effigy,” he said in the 2008 interview). “It was a very stable system, and one which people clung to”—an example of the organizational culture he had observed at OSHA.

The Krueger death seems to have shaped the way he later talked to Tufts students and parents about drinking. Those cumulative experiences likely entered into his thinking about Harvard’s decision to sanction undergraduate membership in final clubs, fraternities, and sororities: a policy he and fellow Corporation members affirmed in a vote late last year, during the presidential search.

Aligning with his scholarly predilections, Bacow said in 2008, his engagement with MIT as a whole was an immersion in “an engineering-driven culture. I came to really embrace that....Engineers see problems and they say, ‘Great, there’s a problem, let’s go solve it’...Engineers are not ideological; they are data-driven.”

And then Tufts came calling. “I was 49 years old, and I’d been at MIT as faculty for 24 years,” he said. “One more year and it was going to be half my life, and there are times when you need to take risks and get repped.” So he said yes, “but it was excruciating leaving.”

Presiding from the Heart

IN A CONVERSATION at Loeb House two weeks before he assumed Harvard’s presidency, Bacow said, “When I’ve advised new university presidents...one of the things I’ve said to every single one of them...is that the biggest challenges they will face probably could not have been anticipated on the day that they were appointed.” His learning curve entering Tufts was already steep: in a 2006 essay on university leaders, he observed that during that search, his name didn’t surface until the day his appointment was unveiled: secrecy was preserved, but “I could not have the kinds of conversations with faculty and students and staff that one really wants to have to understand the new environment.” He paid attention when an adviser urged him to look for opportunities to tell his new community “what makes you tick, what you care about, what your values are.”

That opportunity came unwanted, 10 days after he became president, via the ultimate unforeseen challenge: the terrorist attack of 9/11. In a message to the community that day, Bacow urged, above all, “This is a time when we must come together to support each other,” while conveying his own sense of vulnerability: “Like you, I am finding it difficult to concentrate on anything other than the suffering of so many innocent people and their families.” Three days later, he wrote again, to the student body, underscoring the importance of coming together even as he acknowledged turbulence: “I wish that every member of our community felt equally embraced, but I fear this is not the case. I have heard reports that some of our Muslim, Arab, and international students have been subject



to unkind remarks or worse. We cannot tolerate this behavior.” He concluded on a simple, humane note: “I think we are all glad to see this week draw to a close.”

Those spontaneous messages set a tone for Bacow’s presidency: a sympathetic, personal voice; recurrent emphasis on community; and sharp clarity about values—and the reciprocal obligation to uphold them (“We cannot tolerate...”). One aim of his communications, he noted in that 2006 reflection, “was to be as explicit as possible about...some of the challenges and opportunities that we confronted. I tried to say quite clearly to the faculty that any academic institution that had to rely on its president for all its good ideas was a university in trouble. I expected them to be part of this process.”

His beginning-of-year letters shared news of appointments, praise for colleagues who had received honors, and updates on capital improvements and academic programs. Other emails were straightforward about personal matters of institutional import, such as the infection of the heart lining that left him “a guest” of the Tufts-affiliated hospital in the spring of 2004.

Tufts is small—like an urban Dartmouth—with faculties of arts and sciences, and of engineering; dental, medical, nutrition, and veterinary schools (in Boston and Grafton, respectively); and the Fletcher School (international affairs). The compact central campus, in Medford and Somerville, invites that kind of personal outreach—augmented by the president’s morning runs, and such innovations as the Bacows’ dinners at their home for all members of each senior class. The scale also enabled him to talk to people throughout the institution, and to aggregate and process what he heard and saw. In the assessment of Sol Gittleman, the provost for 21 years, who stepped down shortly after Bacow arrived, Tufts in 2001 was a school that had from inception been a superb undergraduate teaching institution, onto which a research culture had begun to be grafted in recent decades.

“The faculty just fell for him,” Gittleman, now retired, said in a recent conversation, embracing their new leader as a fellow scholar and appointing him to their ranks in five separate departments in three separate schools—recognition not bestowed on his two immediate predecessors. By the end of October, Bacow was ready to suggest where Tufts needed to progress, appointing a task force to examine the undergraduate experience, and a university council on graduate education (through which research priorities and cross-school opportunities would be identified). He also eliminated a vice presidency (for arts, sciences, and engineering) and the associated budget, and applied the savings to faculty salaries: a modest but tangible signal about the research mission. As Gittleman announced his plan to return to teaching, Bacow hailed him as a “wonderful mentor” and “a true mensch”—apt for a professor of Yiddish literature.

• *Setting the strategy.* Bacow’s inaugural address, in April 2002, timed for the Tufts sesquicentennial, outlined the outcomes of liberal-arts education, aimed at “helping our students become active, engaged, effective citizens” who are

“People comfortable dealing with ambiguity.

“People willing to take a risk to make a difference.

“People more interested in solving problems than in taking credit.

“People who—Mrs. Chandler will be glad to hear—can appreci-

ate what *others* have to say. Who are both effective advocates—and aggressive listeners.

“People who are eager to imagine and implement large, daring, multifaceted solutions—together.”

On another occasion, he emphasized the central role of preparing students to become “active citizens in our democracy” (he regularly charged new matriculants with registering and voting). He maintained that liberal education exists “not just to convey knowledge, but to convey values also.” And when he spoke about engaging in communities, he looked beyond political or civic life to “our professional, religious, and social communities, indeed the entire social fabric that makes a democracy work and makes a society possible.”

Bacow elaborated his program—in essence, a prospectus for Tufts and the capital campaign to effect it, and the roadmap for his presidency—in “Tufts: A University Poised,” a presentation first shared with trustees in February 2003. It proceeds from four principles, beginning with “We need great students, great faculty, and great staff” in order to be a great university. (The others: a



Team Tufts: the President’s Marathon Challenge, joining the university’s leader and students afoot

“diverse learning environment,” the “capacity to work across traditional disciplinary boundaries,” and “integrating teaching and research”—plus, of course, the resources to sustain the vision.)

He then proceeded, bracingly, to assess strengths and weaknesses, in a way rare on contemporary campuses. Thus, Tufts provides “a nurturing environment for our students”—but some “graduate programs are anything but nurturing.” As the “smallest of the major research universities,” Tufts had undersold its life-sciences prowess. Its professional schools charged among the highest tuitions in the country (a problem that required more resources).

The quality of Tufts undergraduates, he noted precisely, had improved “unambiguously by any measure, at the same time that we also greatly increased the diversity of this student body” during the past two decades, an impressive feat. But that meant it was now recruiting against a new cohort of schools, virtually all with need-blind admissions—a “different competitive space” for which Tufts was not fully equipped. At the same time, bluntly, “Our scholarly reputation as an institution has lagged behind the improvement in the qual-

ity of our students....We compete for students with a set of schools that we do not necessarily compete with for faculty.” (Tufts was not need-blind at the time. Its endowment reached about \$1.3 billion in its 2010 fiscal year, after the 2008 financial crisis: up about 80 percent from 2002, reflecting strong prior returns and the proceeds from Bacow’s \$1.2-billion Beyond Boundaries campaign, launched in 2006.)

Speaking in the wake of the dot.com bust that weakened other schools’ balance sheets, he continued, “Although we are under-endowed as an institution, we have a short-term competitive advantage over endowment-driven” schools. Or more memorably, “Every dog has its day, and this day is ours.” Reverting to running metaphors, “races are won on the uphill,” and this was the time for Tufts to hire faculty members—“to make a move, and gain on our competitors.” He summarized the plan as “great students and great faculty”—an “easy message to communicate to donors.”

The resulting strategy was not sugarcoated. There were appealing goals: the faculty embraced better salaries and hiring packag-



es, and the related investment in laboratories and research facilities. Turning from the teachers to their students, Bacow said Tufts *had* to commit to need-blind undergraduate admissions—for which it would have to raise nearly four times as much scholarship endowment as it had realized in the campaign that concluded the year before.

But Bacow also emphasized accommodations that had to be made. Given scarce money, space, and faculty slots, their use would be driven strictly by academic priorities, enforced by a budget run from the provost’s office (a departure for Tufts, meant to send “important messages about how we are changing the way we do business”). Even closer to home, “true excellence will test Tufts’ egalitarian culture.” In a tight market for faculty talent, “we are going to have to match employment offers from other very competitive institutions”—hiring a young colleague as a full professor lest she or he spurn an offer at a lower rank, or promoting colleagues more rapidly than usual to retain them. And ahead of the coming campaign, Bacow even settled on “slowing growth in the deferred maintenance budget” to free resources to invest in the people priorities.

A consequential decade: boosting financial aid and faculty prowess, in a presidency Tufts “needed”

His peroration hit the standard notes—“We must raise our sights for the faculty we hire, for the students we recruit, for the donors we solicit, and for ourselves as a board”—but it was built on a distinctive foundation of candor and tough love. Such discussions may have taken place at Harvard in recent decades, but not for public consumption.

In the event, Tufts met his goals. Despite severe headwinds from the financial crisis, the campaign exceeded its \$1.2-billion target in the final week of Bacow’s presidency, in June 2011, raising \$434 million for financial aid and \$386 million for new faculty positions and research support. The rallying to the cause no doubt reflected enthusiasm for his strategy.

- *Weathering the storm.* It probably also reflected confidence in how he had navigated that crisis. (From 9/11 to 2008, Gittleman said, Bacow was “never lucky” as president.) A series of community memos, beginning October 6, 2008, openly acknowledged conditions “unlike any I have ever witnessed in the financial markets,” but asserted, “Tufts has never been in a stronger financial position,” with a growing endowment, modest debt, and an improved credit rating. From the outset, Bacow stressed, “We have a moral obligation to continue to meet the full need of all undergraduates currently enrolled at Tufts, and we will do so.” He even indulged in humor (“Economists are fond of giving forecasts without time horizons. I can guarantee you that this market will turn, but I cannot tell you when”), reinforcing readers’ sense of their leader’s assurance.

Given that Tufts derived just 8 percent of operating income from endowment distributions—less than one-quarter wealthy Harvard’s exposure—he was able by mid November to outline a prospective \$36-million deficit (about 6 percent of non-research funds) and to reinforce the guarantee of financial aid. While not promising to avoid layoffs, he suggested “some sacrifice for each of us”—a call to community, to be met by those earning more than \$50,000 doing without salary increases, “so that we can avoid sending colleagues into an uncertain job market in these difficult times.” And he committed to preserving critical initiatives: “I don’t believe in across-the-board freezes or budget cuts. They are an abdication of management responsibility.” By the following March, he was able to project balanced budgets for that fiscal year and 2010—and with that, the adjustment to more limited means was crisply completed. He was especially delighted to end that missive by noting that “the students on our Medford campus are organizing

a concert...to say thank you to our faculty and staff who...are sacrificing so we can protect our students. All of these actions make me proud to be president of Tufts.”

- *Giving voice to values.* Support for Bacow as a strategic and fiduciary leader was surely buttressed by his comparable addressing of academic values—and community members’ obligations—on divisive issues such as free speech, norms of appropriate behavior, and, more generally, how to conduct one’s life.

- *Speech.* When issues of offensive, hateful speech arose on campus, Bacow responded with an unwavering, three-part response: an absolute affirmation of freedom of expression; application of that freedom to condemn what he saw as false or abhorrent speech; and an appeal to individual reflection and common values.

Thus, in February 2002, when student publications published personal attacks, a community memo stated the bedrock principle:

“Individuals and the press enjoy extraordinary freedom of expression in this country and on this campus.” But,

Our embrace of freedom of expression sometimes...means we must live with gross distortions of fact, caustic commentary, boorishness, sophomoric behavior, and even personal attacks. To say that we must live with this behavior does not mean, however, that we have to condone it....I condemn the personal attacks that have become commonplace....

He similarly condemned attempts to muzzle publications by stealing copies of the print run, behavior that “runs counter to everything we stand for as a university.”

Finally, turning from community to individual responsibility, he drew a line between “legitimate criticism” of ideas to “personal invective designed to hurt,” and having found the line crossed, declared, “I hope that those who edit some of our student publications would aspire to higher standards.”

This layered response, applied whenever such conflicts rent campus, looks far easier to accomplish than it is under pressure. (A favorite quip: “I often say that one of the things that makes being a university president tough is that everybody who went to college thinks they can run one.”) Bacow has demonstrated a “remarkable ability to articulate sensitive, delicate issues with full frankness and no edge,” said Harvard’s Richard P. Chait, professor of education emeritus, whose scholarship and advisory practice have focused on higher-education governance and leadership. (He advised the University during the reforms that remade the Corporation at the end of 2010.) A close acquaintance for a couple of decades who worked with the Tufts board during Bacow’s presidency, Chait said of his friend’s ability to articulate such concerns, “I envy it!” He added that Bacow addresses the most sensitive concerns with “a refreshing forthrightness that has no edge to it—it’s not provocative, and it doesn’t instigate hostile reactions.”

– **Campus behavior.** Bacow has held students accountable to high standards in other, unusual ways.

Deans of students, and their higher-ups, routinely fret about adolescent indiscretions, but they aren’t always forthright about their charges’ misdeeds. Bacow, seared by what can go wrong, made space in each year’s matriculation address, in front of parents, for a passage like this one from 2010:

If you look hard enough, you will find many temptations on a college campus....We admitted you because we thought you had good judgment. Please do not prove us wrong....

Let me give you some blunt advice about drinking. Nothing good ever happened to anyone while they were drunk. You are likely to embarrass yourself or worse, put yourself or others at risk....Please be advised that Tufts is not a consequence-free zone. Your Tufts ID does not entitle you to flout the law.... We expect you to be the type of person you described in your application....[N]one of you claimed to be loud, obnoxious, drunk, or offensive to your neighbors. We don’t expect you to behave that way here either.

Neither the *Crimson* nor anyone else has pinned him down on the Harvard Yard “Primal Scream” preceding exams each semester, but Bacow did not hold back after his first experience of the similar “Naked Quad Run” at Tufts, in December 2002. “I was sorely disappointed by what I saw and heard,” he wrote. The littered campus

was “an embarrassment”—a state of affairs that “cannot continue.” Some students were reportedly groped, amid other disrespectful behaviors. “Tufts is better than this,” and though “not everyone is responsible for what occurred...it reflects on all of us.” Again, “I have higher expectations for you, and candidly, hope that you have higher expectations for yourself.” He concluded with a call for collective action: “Let’s work together to make changes so that what happened last night is not repeated....”

– **Knowing when not to speak.** Asked during that mid-June conversation whether Harvard could expect similar community memos, Bacow said his Tufts missives “were prompted by events” (see page 16 on a welcome message on July 2, the first business day of his new presidency). “I was pressed regularly to do more,” he continued, “and my response was if I communicate too frequently to people, there’s a signal-to-noise problem, they tune it out.”

A revealing example of knowing when *not* to weigh in dates from 2004, when Bacow spoke at the Hebrew College commencement address, “a great honor” for someone who “was not the best or most attentive student of Jewish learning as a young adult.” He used the occasion to explore how to “understand or explain what some in our community believe to be a rise in anti-Semitism on college campuses,” despite the ascent of Jewish leaders in higher education. As an example of what he said was the “gross distortion” of characterizing campuses as “hotbeds of anti-Semitism,” he took on the politically charged issue of petitions calling for divestiture from Israel. Beginning from a first principle (“On its face, this petition is outrageous” in comparing Israel

“One of the things that makes being a university president tough is that everybody who went to college thinks they can run one.”

to the South African apartheid regime), he moved to the practical crux of the matter: that the petition, for all the publicity given it, “has gone virtually nowhere,” with fewer than 30 Tufts faculty members, out of 700, signing: “It is literally much ado about nothing.”

How better to proceed? By “trying to find the teachable moment,” teasing out divestment from South Africa (which Tufts supported) from comparable sanctions on Israel. His basic conclusions were that proponents of divestiture are not anti-Semites and that “the conversation comes to an immediate and crushing end if you label them as anti-Semites. This language is not helpful”—foreclosing reasoned efforts to change opinions.

– **Lives well lived.** The tendency of elders to bestow wisdom on their young charges is particularly pronounced on ritual college occasions. Doing so originally is a test of oratorical skill, which in turn reveals the emotional intelligence, at least, of the person commanding the lectern.

Feeling the weight of parental expectations? Bacow told the seniors in 2005, “My dad was not happy when I told him I was going to become an academic instead of returning home to practice law with him. He has since gotten over it.”

An even more personal message appeared later in that baccalaureate address. Pivoting from the hoary advice that wealth is not the true measure of success, Bacow said:

There are lots of ways to earn a living. What is truly important is to lead a meaningful life, to acquire a good name, or as the Talmud would say, a *shem tov*.

What is a good name? It is the crown that sits atop all your

other accomplishments. It comes from the love and respect one earns from parents and children, from friends and colleagues. It comes from being honest and trustworthy with yourself and with others. It means making good on your commitments. People who enjoy a good name always strive to do the right thing, not that which is easy or convenient. They think about others before thinking about themselves. They are helpful because it is the right thing to do....People who enjoy a good name do not yield to temptation, but rather, always embrace decency, honesty, integrity, and humility....

We have every confidence that you will make your mark in the world, and that you will create for yourself a *shem tov*, a good name.

At the conclusion of his presidency—a decade in which he had made decisions that necessarily disappointed some people, and routinely called out those who he felt had fallen short of community standards (and their own)—Bacow departed, Sol Gittleman said, as someone who had begun with a “pretty good product and made it much better, in every respect.” He was “clear, transparent, and honest, but he made decisions.” Tufts “needed that presidency,” he continued, and Bacow is remembered as someone who “just *had* it.” He departed with his *shem tov* intact.

A Productive Post-Presidency

AFTER TUFTS, the Bacows appeared headed for a more relaxed pace—but not retirement. Adele Fleet Bacow continued her planning, cultural and economic development, and urban design prac-

Bacow left Tufts as someone who had begun with “a pretty good product and made it much better, in every respect.”

tice as president of Community Partners Consultants, the firm she founded in 1996. Larry Bacow was president-in-residence and then leader-in-residence, respectively, at the Graduate School of Education and the Harvard Kennedy School—and, from its expansion in 2011, a fellow of the Harvard Corporation. The couple spent time with their two sons’ growing families in New York, and acquired a second home on Florida’s Gulf Coast, a better base from which to indulge in sailing during New England winters.

With the gift of less structured time, Bacow pursued several issues in higher education that could become pertinent, in ways then unforeseen, given the decision he made this past winter to move across campus to Mass Hall.

- *Learning online.* His departure from Tufts coincided with rising interest in online learning: Harvard and MIT announced their edX venture on May 2, 2012—one day after Bacow, William G. Bowen (Princeton president emeritus), and coauthors published a study on the barriers to adopting online learning in U.S. higher education. Lowering them, they hoped, would make it possible to “greatly expand the reach of the nation’s colleges and universities to populations currently not served, while at the same time helping to bend the cost curve” of ever-escalating expenditures and tuition charges. But they worried that the obstacles were at least as much “conceptual, organizational, and administrative” as technical: difficult to overcome because they went to “the heart of the traditional model of higher education and its highly decentralized mode of decision-making.” As for the potential to save costs (the subject of Bowen’s foundational scholarship on

the constraints on productivity in higher education), they cautioned, “Absent strong leadership...we fear that any productivity gains from online education will only be used to gild the educational lily.”

In a 2015 academic paper, “Online Higher Education: Beyond the Hype Cycle,” Michael S. McPherson, president of the Spencer Foundation (which funds education research) and past president of Macalester College, and Bacow warned that the adoption of online education could *worsen* inequalities in higher education. That “dystopian” outcome might result if state legislators used online learning as an excuse to cut appropriations to public institutions, while elite private ones “flipped” more courses and invested even more heavily in smaller, faculty-led classes.

- *Bolstering public universities.* Bacow served as an adviser to the American Academy of Arts & Sciences’ Lincoln Project: Excellence and Access in Public Higher Education. Its report, published in 2016, observed that following the Great Recession, hard-pressed states cut support for public universities severely. Many institutions were forced to curtail programs and to increase tuition sharply. Because they educate nearly four million students and disproportionately enroll those with the greatest financial needs, their very character as “public” institutions has come under threat, and their expansive research is in jeopardy. The Lincoln Project pragmatically observed that the budget cuts were “not necessarily the result of changes in political philosophy” but rather reflected “long-term structural changes in state finances.”

In response, it recommended renewed state support, coupled with internal cost efficiencies and new revenues; public-private partnerships to sustain research and teaching; and further efforts to help students through simplified financial aid and clearer transfer processes. The presence of private representatives (Bacow; former Columbia provost Jonathan R. Cole; and Shirley M. Tilghman, president emerita of Princeton, and from January 2016 a fellow member of the Harvard Corporation) strengthened the case for their public peers.

- *Networking in higher education.* Bacow is deeply embedded in the higher-education community along Boston’s Red Line subway (from MIT to Harvard to MIT to Tufts to Harvard). At Tufts, he broadened that circle, serving as chair of the council of presidents of the Association of Governing Boards of Universities and Colleges and a member of the executive committee of the American Council on Education’s board of directors.

But the online-learning studies and Lincoln Project expanded these ties. The 2012 online-learning research spanned the spectrum from Bryn Mawr, MIT, and the University of Texas to Austin Community College, Fayetteville Technical Community College, and Morgan State University—including schools with negligible resources that are intimately involved in educating students who must overcome huge socioeconomic challenges. Similarly, former Berkeley chancellor Robert J. Birgeneau (whom Bacow knew from MIT) and Mary Sue Coleman, then president of the University of Michigan (now president of the Association of American Universities), led the Lincoln Project. Other advisers came from across the country, from the University of Arizona to West Virginia University. If he wants to build a higher-education coalition, Bacow can engage with a refreshed contact list extending to every kind of school—and to congressional districts not routinely on the Harvard fundraising circuit.

- *Attacking costs.* Concern about costs has long figured in Bacow’s message about higher education. Beyond productivity issues, he has

advanced an analysis of organizational behavior—as in his 2006 testimony before the U.S. secretary of education’s Commission on the Future of Higher Education:

[C]ompetition...in most other industries has the effect of driving costs down....In higher education, in some instances, competition has the effect of driving costs up. Students and their parents are looking for smaller class sizes, not larger classes. They are looking for more student/faculty contact, not less. They are interested in more hands-on learning, not in rote lessons delivered in a lecture hall....I think these trends produce an educational output that is unique and outstanding, but it is an educational output that is also expensive.

In other words, the negotiation scholar sees that lower costs are feasible—but lack a constituency. And the competitive dynamics suggest that online pedagogy—the first good opportunity to raise teaching productivity in a century—might be deployed in the richest institutions, in McPherson and Bacow’s analysis, only when they “can demonstrate that it is actually *more* expensive than existing methods.” Most bluntly, “selective institutions...actually compete to be among the least cost-effective providers of educational services.” The problem extends to what they call “curricular entropy”: offering endless specialized courses and concentrations “even when demand...dwindles.” The result is a sector of elite colleges that “already spend more than can be justified on educational grounds” (even as public schools’ strained finances jeopardize the quality of and access to education at the very places where most American are actually enrolled).

Bacow explained the problem further in a 2016 essay and in April 2017, as Clark Kerr lecturer at Berkeley, where he addressed “The Political Economy of Cost Control on a University Campus.” Drawing on his leadership experiences, he detailed an ecosystem of interests aligned to drive education costs ever higher—at the risk, he fears, of derailing the entire sector. When costs *are* controlled, that is “almost always due to exogenous constraints on revenue.” He went so far as to say that access is no longer the most pressing issue for higher education—because escalating costs threaten to undercut public support generally, choking off government research and financial-aid funds.

Faculty members value the artisanal, craftlike way their scholarship has developed, and resist administrative efficiencies that might yield benefits in the aggregate, but disrupt “locally optimized” systems of support that have reproduced all over campus. Even trustees, the financial fiduciaries, have countervailing incentives, Bacow said. Much as they care for their institutions, they are loath to see the schools’ reputations diminish on their watch. Hence, they are always inclined to favor new revenues—even when fundraising “can actually be quite expensive” if incremental resources do not fully cover an initiative’s costs. The path of least resistance is for tuition to increase.

What, then, is to be done? Bacow nodded to the promise, if not yet the reality, of online technology. He also suggested lessening the competition that fuels rising costs—through shared scientific facilities, libraries, purchasing, graduate-student housing, and even the curriculum (a Lincoln Project recommendation): “We need not replicate” every degree program or research facility on every campus, he argued. Absent mandatory retirement, he even suggested experimenting with capping new tenured appointments at, say, 35 years, with the possibility of term extensions thereafter.

Ultimately, he came back to the roles of leaders and their campus communities. Leaders need to do a better job of finding opportuni-

ties to lay out the real choices the institutions face: at some point, crises over costs that exceed the public’s threshold, and the collapse of government support. Again sounding the Tufts theme of collective responsibility for the community’s well-being, his takeaway was that acting to bend the cost curve is in the interest of *every* constituency within any college or university. At Tufts, he said, once financial aid became the highest undergraduate priority, he could have conversations about other wants: if students sought funds for three new club sports, he could frame that request in terms of the number of students who would have to be deprived of aid.

The academic leader’s work is to frame the institution’s challenges and articulate needed change—and then to make those *leaderly* problems *student* and *faculty* problems, too. “We need to be candid, we need to be up front, we can’t hide from the very real challenges that we face,” he said. “But in articulating those challenges, we need to give each constituency a stake in the outcome. We have to explain to students and their parents, if we control costs, what we will do



The external agenda: during an initial trip to Washington, D.C., as Harvard’s president, on July 19

for tuition. We need to explain to faculty, if we moderate administrative costs or enhance faculty productivity, how we are going to share those with them.”

In other words, having identified an overarching, intractable, even existential problem for higher education, Bacow concluded with his theory of action.

On Broadway

BACOW ARRIVED at Tufts as a distinguished scholar with recent administrative posts at MIT—but with limited knowledge about his new academic home. He assumed his Harvard presidency, by his own account, a couple of decades removed from professorial practice, but a veteran university leader and immersed in this one’s workings from his perspective on the Corporation.

Even as he looked forward to “being a Harvard student again,” as he described his transition on February 11, Bacow knew that already being prepared (he was an Eagle Scout) would stand him in good stead. As one observer of his career put it, from Off Broadway (near the Tufts campus, on the Somerville-Medford line), he has now moved to Broadway (given the bright light shined so often on Harvard). Harvard’s sheer scale makes it more demanding to conduct the kind of personal presidency that he and Adele Fleet Bacow effected at Tufts.

And the threatening external environment for higher education—a focal point for senior fellow William F. Lee’s remarks on February 11, and Bacow’s, too—suggests exceptional challenges for elite universities.

• *Beyond Harvard.* In an April conversation, Lee fleshed out how the latter concerns helped shape the presidential search. Present circumstances call for leading institutions like Harvard to reaffirm fact-based inquiry, evidence-based discussion, and the free exchange of ideas, he said. Despite some surveys that report broad disaffection from higher education, he noted, other research shows overwhelming support for having one’s children attend college (even as parents worry about the costs). A new president should, as Drew Faust did, articulate the values and benefits of higher education and help bridge the gap dividing communities—addressing other educators, legislators and policymakers, and the public at large. Interestingly, Lee said the Corporation has been discussing such

“I’m constantly looking for ways to frame issues so that it broadens people’s perspective,” but “you don’t need everybody on board.”

matters regularly—for example, being briefed on Thomas professor of government and sociology Theda Skocpol’s field research. (Her work shows that keeping campuses open to diverse viewpoints, making factual arguments about the value of education and the institutions that provide it, and partnering with public colleges and universities are winning strategies with the electorate at large—no matter the partisan combat among political elites.)

Corporation member Shirley Tilghman said in a May conversation that it is “very important, to the greatest extent possible, to talk to individuals on all sides of the political system,” especially as the “perception of universities as bastions of liberal political correctness” has spread. (Bacow’s absolute commitment to free speech, and the clarity of his remarks on speech controversies, seem valuable assets here.) She was at pains to say, further, that the president must “speak in the broadest general terms about the value of education, *period*,” and “in the case of Harvard and Princeton, the value of a *liberal-arts* education.”

Discussing his presidency two weeks before it began, Bacow championed that role, perhaps the feature of his nascent administration most interesting to outside observers: “I’m anticipating that I’m going to spend a fair amount of my time engaging with legislators and policymakers in Washington about issues that bear on higher education,” he said. But he broadened the mission, saying, “Typically, when policymakers think of institutions like this, they tend to look at them almost exclusively through the lens of undergraduate education. They fail to...appreciate the degree to which graduate and undergraduate education are joint products....So part of my job is to be a teacher, and to try to educate people on how institutions like this actually work, on how we are in competition for faculty talent and student talent globally.”

It will be interesting to watch how Bacow allocates his energies between Washington, where Harvard has direct interests in the federal budget and regulation, and places the University touches only slightly now: metaphorically (and perhaps literally), Pontiac.

“[A] lot of what I’ll do is engage with people who actually need to understand us better,” Bacow said. “In one of my early books, I wrote that one of the mistakes people make in public disputes, sit-

ing disputes, is they spend too much time talking to their friends and not enough talking to their enemies. I’m not trying to characterize people who disagree with us as our enemies. But...if you want to make progress, you do so not by talking only to those who think like you. You need to engage with those who think differently, and that’s going to be a big part of my job.”

The aim, he said most expansively, is “being a voice for *all* of higher education, not just Harvard—for what I’ve started calling the enduring values of the nation’s colleges and universities as the enablers of the American dream.” (Bacow’s own family history is a story of how higher education enabled a refugees’ son to experience that dream.)

• *At Harvard.* There is *plenty* to do on campus and along the Red Line, too—internally, and in support of the public agenda. Most of the other priorities Lee and Tilghman highlighted appeared in Bacow’s lean February 11 remarks, which merit rereading in light of his record and past communications. He stressed then:

– **Connecting teaching and research to the wider world:** “This is the place [where anyone] can have the greatest chance not only to succeed personally, but, even more importantly, to make a difference in the lives of others.”

– **Maintaining truth, high standards, and access:** “The Harvard I have known has always stood for at least three things: the pursuit of truth, or as we say, *Veritas*; an unwavering commitment to excellence; but also to opportunity....[W]e need to be vigilant to ensure that our campuses are always open to new ideas—that they are places where all our members feel free to express themselves, and also where every member of this community feels that he or she belongs.”

– **Developing the frontier:** “I am particularly excited by the extension of our campus that’s taking shape in Allston” (see page 5).

– **Pursuing interdisciplinary work:** “Our breadth has long been our great strength. And our great opportunity now is the chance to combine our strengths in new ways that help address some of the world’s most pressing problems.”

Then, and in the June conversation at Loeb House, he was clear about some of the ways he would address his agenda. Asked whether his message about costs pertains to Harvard (with, as the public knows, the world’s largest endowment), Bacow quickly said, “It applies,” and pointed to the Kerr lecture. “I think that if people in positions like I’m about to be in don’t push back against the natural inclination of the various constituencies to always demand *more*, there’s going to be ever-present, ever-rising pressure on costs.... While it may appear in the short run that they would be better off if we did more, in fact longer term, we are all paying the price in potentially diminished public support for the enterprise.”

Did he envision *academic* partnerships involving Boston’s flagship university (another subject he alluded to in February)? “Absolutely. Last week, [MIT president] Rafael Reif invited me to speak to the MIT Corporation—a bit like going home.” Already, Bacow said, he and Reif have charged their provosts with examining “existing collaborations, and there are many” (like edX, the Broad Institute for genomics research, an HIV/AIDS institute, and the graduate-level Harvard-MIT program in Health Sciences and Technology) to determine how they are working and how they could be improved, and “then to look in a systematic way at opportunities for us to collaborate in various scholarly initiatives.” Similarly with former MIT colleague Robert Brown, now presiding at BU: the two have

“talked about ways in which we could collaborate, especially in Allston, which is closer to his campus than it is to ours.” And so on.

• *How to proceed.* After a decade of expansionary University hopes reined in by financial crisis, little if any growth in the professoriate, governance reform, and the extensive Harvard Campaign to repair the balance sheet, Bacow arrives, as he did at Tufts, championing the faculty and the mission.

He said in mid June, “I start from the proposition that the function of an administration is to enable the faculty to do their best work—their best teaching, their best scholarship—and that all of us who work in a university, we all are in service of the academic mission.” He stressed the latter point, underscoring his vision of a community enterprise: “It’s important for *everybody* in the institution to feel that. It’s not just the job of the faculty. It’s the job of literally everybody who works in a place like this—to understand that...what we are all doing, is trying to produce great teaching and great scholarship.”

Universities’ work takes place, he noted, in “fundamentally collegial organizations,” where “there are strong expectations that people will be engaged in discussion, debate about the future of the institution, that the *passion* that people have for the institution, whether they are faculty or staff or students or alumni, can sometimes make this a noisy process. But you need to recognize and understand that what *motivates* it is in fact passion, and that that’s good.” Passionate scholars will be further encouraged by the advice Bacow said he always gives new presidents and deans, to the effect that “in a university, any time you have to assert your authority to get something done, you’ve lost. You lead by the power of your argument, by being able to reason from first principles...”

All this will be manna to professors. But, as at Tufts, Bacow made clear that community and institutional interests are paramount, and collegiality is not a formula for endless debate. The outcome of that argument and persuasion, he continued, is “your willingness to engage and explain to people why you are doing what you are doing, and why that’s in the best interest of the institution as a whole.” The leader’s challenge is *channeling* the community’s passion, figuring out “how does one do so productively that allows you to move forward on important decisions and in addressing difficult issues?”

Richard Chait said of leading in an academic context that “shared governance is consulting and explaining.” Of his friend, he said, “Larry doesn’t hide. He listens and explains his decision.” The ultimate emphasis is on reaching decisions and moving forward. As Bacow put it in mid June:

There’s a frequent conversation one winds up having in jobs like this: it was true when I was chancellor of MIT, it was true when I was president of Tufts, and I am certain it will be true when I assume this office two weeks from today. That is, somebody will come in—it could be a dean, it could be a faculty member, it could be a vice president—and they will be either unhappy with a decision I have made or they will be asking me to do something that I cannot do. And what I have found very effective...is to listen and listen carefully....

But often, people, because of their passion, are representing what are reasonably parochial points of view. So I’ve found myself saying at times to people...“You’ve made a really good argument. We know if I were sitting where you are sitting, I don’t think I could make a better one—but I’m not. So let me explain to you why I did what I did, or why I can’t do what you want me to do, and if you can look me in the eye and

tell me that if you’re sitting where I’m sitting you would do something different, we have something to talk about.” But if all you’re saying is, “Do this because it locally optimizes my preferences,” I’m sorry, I can’t do that right now....

My job is to make you a better dean, a better faculty member, to enhance your capacity to do your work, but in this case I can’t do what you’re asking me, because my responsibility is to the institution writ large. In my experience, when you explain things to people who truly care about the institution in those terms, they understand.

♦ ♦ ♦

HOW HE DEFINES those responsibilities will become clearer soon: Bacow’s installation is October 5. People keeping score should be able to tick off a clear focus on common purposes—and higher purposes (from February 11: “I can think of no more exciting time than [now for] doing all I can and indeed I would say—all we can—to help Harvard achieve [its] potential, not just for the good of our students, but for the good of the world that we aim to serve”). At least with their *inner* ear, they should detect a leader with a vigorous appetite for action, honed by scholarship and practice for nearly five decades.



At Harvard, now: at work in Loeb House on July 2, the first business day of his presidency—Harvard’s twenty-ninth

As he put it in June, “I’m constantly looking for ways to frame issues so that it broadens people’s perspective,” to hear their questions, and to explain a course of action—but not to fret about satisfying *every* interest. “I think it’s important to recognize you’re never going to make everybody happy—but you don’t have to. I was a student of Tom Schelling when I was...here. I learned about the importance of ‘unblocked coalitions’ from Tom. In order to move forward, that’s what you need, an unblocked coalition—you don’t need everybody on board.”

In the past half-century, Harvard has seen leaders with a spiritual bent or steeped in professional disciplines and in the humanities, periods of full-sails expansion and of sails reefed to reboot the University’s operating system. Now, amid challenges to *Veritas* and a polarized polity, it welcomes its twenty-ninth president, Lawrence S. Bacow, whose scholarship and leaderly seasoning have made him higher education’s preeminent pragmatic visionary. Harvard is about to find out, at this moment, what he thinks “needs to be done”—and “What works?”

▽

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