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

1935 The Summer School hosts multiple discussions of national educational policy, the editors report, noting “signs that academic freedom may become a central issue in a modern struggle as momentous as the earlier struggles in this country for the principle of liberty.” They encourage “bring[ing] into schools and colleges a closer contact with the realities of life. Quacks and nostrums still succeed...despite advances in the social sciences, there is no safeguard in the general mind against the demagogue, the jingo, or the maker of false economic promises. Nor have the natural sciences routed superstition. Those who still believe that the truth has a least some part in making human beings free have much to do in seeing to it that the truth is widely known.”

1940 Harvard sets up a summer aviation camp at Plymouth, offering students a chance to earn private pilots’ certificates from the Civil Aeronautics Authority.

1955 Helen Keller ’04 becomes the first woman to receive an honorary degree from Harvard. Her fellow honorands include Andrew Wyeth, Archibald MacLeish, West Germany’s chancellor, Konrad Adenauer, and Harvard’s president emeritus, James Bryant Conant.

1960 The Faculty of Arts and Sciences establishes a new degree, A.B. in Extension Studies, to replace the Adj.A. (adjunct in arts) previously awarded.

1970 The Faculty of Arts and Sciences resoundingly votes down the so-called Princeton Plan already adopted by 15 other universities: a proposal for a two-week recess during the fall so students may participate in political campaigns.

1990 Widener Library will require stack users to sign in “after an unidentified vandal mutilated more than a hundred books and a phone message threatened physical harm to anyone who interfered.”

2010 The Medical School updates its conflict-of-interest policies, prohibiting faculty participation in industry-sponsored speakers’ bureaus and limiting industry funding for continuing medical-education course content.

Addressing Climate Change

Even as the University operated remotely during the second half of spring term, it announced new measures to address the other great global challenge, climate change. In an April 21 announcement tied to the fiftieth anniversary of Earth Day, Harvard unveiled an initiative to make the endowment’s assets “net-zero”—meaning the holdings would contribute no overall release of greenhouse gases—by 2050. The plan depends on significant advances in research and portfolio management (and, of course, in the operations of the companies and technologies in which the endowment might invest).

The announcement was framed as a broader response to the Faculty of Arts and Sciences’ (FAS) February vote calling for divestment from investments in enterprises that produce fossil fuels (for background, see harvardmag/fas-divest-
Jeffrey Epstein’s Extensive Reach

The Harvard General Counsel’s office, charged last September by President Lawrence S. Bacow to investigate Jeffrey Epstein’s gifts to and relationship with the University, found that his financial support did not extend past his conviction on sex charges involving a minor in 2008—but that his earlier access to the institution was deeper than had been known, and remained extensive, in troubling ways, through 2018. Epstein died in jail last August, reportedly by suicide, while facing numerous new charges of sex trafficking of minors. The report, conveyed to Bacow and released with his comments on May 1, revealed:

 Epstein made gifts totaling $9.1 million between 1998 and 2008—in line with the figure released last autumn, with the largest sum directed to the Program for Evolutionary Dynamics (PED; $6.5 million), run by professor of mathematics and of biology Martin Nowak.

 President Drew Gilpin Faust, in 2008, and Faculty of Arts and Sciences (FAS) dean Michael D. Smith, in 2013, decided, independently, not to accept further gifts from Epstein—the latter when faculty members advocated accepting further funding for the PED and the mathematics department.

 In 2005, however, Epstein had received an appointment as a visiting fellow (subsequently renewed) with support from then-psychology department chair Stephen Kosslyn (who had received $200,000 of research support from Epstein; he left Harvard’s faculty in 2011). The general counsel’s report concluded that he lacked the academic qualifications visiting fellows typically possess and his application proposed a course of study Epstein was unqualified to pursue.

 Furthermore, Epstein visited the PED offices more than 40 times between 2010 and 2018—well after his conviction. Although he apparently did not engage with undergraduates, he did use the visits to network with faculty members. “While inviting Epstein to campus did not violate any Harvard policies,” the report continues, “aspects of his relationship to the PED, such as his access to the program’s offices, treatment on the PED’s website” (at Epstein’s request, and “part of a larger effort to rehabilitate his image”), and interactions concerning a grant application, “do implicate Harvard policies and our findings and recommendations address these issues.” (The website page remained until “In October 2014, sexual assault survivor advocates contacted both PED and President Faust’s office about Epstein’s page….In response, PED took the page down.”) In response to the documentation of these visits, among other matters, FAS dean Claudine Gay announced that Nowak has been placed on paid administrative leave pending a review of possible violations of FAS policies and standards of professional conduct.

 In the report, vice president and general counsel Diane Lopez made recommendations pertaining to school-based and central fundraising offices and the communications among them; criteria for evaluating gifts and donors, and their dissemination; FAS criteria for appointing visiting fellows; and the need for the further investigation Gay has now initiated. Bacow directed that the recommendations be implemented “as soon as possible,” and noted further that the $201,000 in gifts from Epstein that remained unspent have been split between two organizations that support victims of human trafficking and sexual assault. Correcting University shortcomings, he said, both benefits the institution and serves to recognize “the courageous individuals who sought to bring Epstein to justice.”

 For a complete report, with the messages from Bacow, Lopez, and Gay, and a link to the general counsel’s full findings, see harvardmag.com/epstein-report-20.

~J.S.R.

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reports at five-year intervals.

Harvard’s plan is billed as the first of its kind among endowments. Announcing the “multiyear” undertaking, in collaboration with faculty members and outside experts, President Lawrence S. Bacow said: “With this commitment, our focus is on reducing the demand for fossil fuels, an action that is consistent with the University’s overall commitment to reduce our operational carbon footprint [on campus]...If we are successful, we will reduce the carbon footprint of our entire investment portfolio....”

Beyond its substantive aims, the new policy is the University response to that FAS advisory vote of February 4. Bacow had promised to report back to the faculty once the Corporation had reviewed its vote. Given the pandemic-driven cancellation of the April FAS meeting, he wrote a separate letter explaining the April 21 HMC announcement. Noting “our shared goal” of confronting the threat of climate change via “research, education, and institutional efforts to reduce our own use of fossil fuels,” he turned to “the role that investment policy might play”—and thus, the net-zero target as the pathway toward “decarbonizing [the] overall endowment portfolio.” He contrasted that with a narrower approach of “simply targeting the suppliers and producers of fossil fuels,” while acknowledging that this decision may fail to satisfy proponents of divestment. (Read more at harvardmag.com/hmc-ggh-neutralpledge-20.)

- Divestment advocates’ response. In one sense, faculty members, alumni, and students who have campaigned for divestment could declare victory. The Corporation has in effect agreed to the principle that at least one overarching nonfinancial objective (reducing GHG emissions) ought to shape endowment investment policy and its implementation—an overlay beyond earning targeted returns within acceptable levels of risk.

But the devil is in the details. In a response to Bacow, core members of the faculty divestment group declared that, “while the path is the right one, the pace is too slow. The goal of a carbon-neutral portfolio by 2050 is simply not ambitious enough”—and included some specific, interim goals for each decade in a separate document. They also continued to criticize the stance on divestment: “It is incongruous, if not counterproductive, to pursue a decarbonized portfolio while continuing to invest in the very companies that supply the carbon and...do far more to perpetuate that supply—and the demand for it—than...to reduce it.” That said, they were “greatly encouraged” by this rethinking of investment policy: “It augurs well for constructive action across the University to address the climate crisis.”

Student activists wrote that “Harvard has finally acknowledged that its investment strategy must play a role in mitigating the climate crisis,” but called the net-zero commitment “insufficient” for permitting continued investments in fossil-fuel enterprises; allowing the University “a wide margin to calculate portfolio emissions however it chooses”;

and setting a “far too protracted” timeline. “As the world burns,” they concluded, “Harvard continues to defend the arsonists.” A subsequent letter, signed by student and alumni divestment advocates, the Harvard Forward candidates for Overseer, and others, endorsed by the faculty divestment group, called the University plan “radically insufficient.”

- The Overseers’ election. Alumni can weigh in on these issues directly as they vote for Overseers this summer. The pandemic has, for now, shut down Harvard Forward’s global gatherings to gather votes for its petition nominees (who advocate divestment and an array of Harvard governance reforms—read details at harvardmag.com/overseer-slates-20). In the meantime, it is posting statements of support on its website, headlined by former U.S. vice president Al Gore ’69, L.L.D. ’94, and author Bill McKibben ’82, co-founder of 350.org, which has spurred much of the campus divestment movement (and other climate-change activism) nationwide.

Not coincidentally, Harvard Forward’s organizers chose Earth Day to unveil a clone, Yale Forward, backing the candidacy of Maggie Thomas, a 2015 graduate of the Yale School of Forestry & Environmental Studies, for election to that university’s corporation. (She was a climate adviser to Governor Jay Inslee and Senator Elizabeth Warren during their campaigns for the Democratic presidential nomination.) Significantly, the Yale Corporation, unlike its Harvard counterpart, has some trustees elected by alumni—and is the fiduciary, decisionmaking governing board in New Haven. In that regard, of course, it plays the same role as Harvard Corporation, not the advisory and oversight responsibilities that are the province of the Board of Overseers.

Thomas and Yale Forward must gather 4,394 nominating signatures by October 1 to qualify her for the spring 2021 vote. If they succeed, both institutions’ alumni will have some say on how they wish their alma maters to address global warming.

~MARINA N. BOLOTNIKOVA
and JOHN S. ROSENBERG

THE UNDERGRADUATE

Point of No Return

by JULIE CHUNG ’20

Soon after the Harvard community was upended and scattered around the world by the COVID-19 evacuation, I called my two roommates. Pre-move-out, whenever I felt like my world was falling apart, I could always depend on returning to our room in Adams. The worn wooden floors, beautiful crown molding, and fireplace made the space look reliably ancient, like an antique heirloom passed down for generations. My roommates, Sunday and Catic, and I would sip from mugs of herbal teas on those cold Cambridge nights and snuggle together on our beloved, faded floral futon. I could always count on Sunday’s perspective to ground me, or at least tame my overzealous drive to work. Catic and I often had long, philosophical discussions about the meaning of work, school, and service that left me satiated with introspection.

Even without the physical comforts of our dorm room, I was happy I could still call them from my home in California. I couldn’t wait until all of this was over so that we could all... So that we could all what? As graduating seniors, we weren’t returning to campus. We weren’t really returning to anything, since we’d been thrust peremptorily into the uncertainty of postgrad life.

In some sense, college is structured as