Harvard names Lawrence S. Bacow as 29th president

Widely admired higher education leader, who previously served as Tufts president and MIT chancellor, to become next president starting in July

Lawrence S. Bacow, one of the most experienced and respected leaders in American higher education, will become the 29th president of Harvard University on July 1.

Currently the Hauser Leader-in-Residence at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government’s Center for Public Leadership, Bacow served with distinction for 10 years as president of Tufts University, where he was known for his dedication to expanding student opportunity, fostering innovation in education and research, enhancing collaboration across schools and disciplines, and spurring consideration of how universities can best serve society.

Bacow’s decade of leadership at Tufts followed 24 years on the faculty of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where he served as chancellor, chair of the faculty, and the Lee and Geraldine Martin Professor of Environmental Studies.

A native of Pontiac, Mich., and the son of immigrants, he attended college at MIT and went on to earn three degrees from Harvard – a J.D. and M.P.P. in 1976, and a Ph.D. in public policy in 1978. With scholarly interests that range across environmental policy, bargaining and negotiation, economics, law, and public policy, he is a recognized expert on the resolution of environmental disputes, and more recently has turned his academic focus to issues facing higher education.

“Larry Bacow is one of the most accomplished, admired, insightful, and effective leaders in American higher education,” said William F. Lee, A.B. ’72, senior fellow of the Harvard Corporation and chair of Harvard’s presidential search committee. “This is a pivotal moment for higher education – one full of extraordinary possibilities to pursue new knowledge, enhance education, and serve society, but also a time when the singular value of higher education and university research has too often been challenged and called into doubt. Such a time calls for skillful leadership, strategic thinking, and disciplined execution. Larry will provide just that.

“He will bring to the task not only wide experience, deep expertise, and an intimate familiarity with Harvard’s opportunities and challenges, but also a passionate commitment to helping universities, and everyone within them, serve the larger world,” continued Lee. “He is ideally positioned to hit the ground running and keep Harvard moving ambitiously forward.”

Speaking after his election, Bacow said, “I am humbled and honored by the opportunity to lead this remarkable institution – and to succeed Drew Faust, whom I have been privileged to count as a friend and an inspiration since we met over a decade ago.

“The Harvard I have known has always stood for at least three things: the pursuit of truth, an unwavering commitment to excellence, and opportunity,” Bacow added. “In a nation divided, these guiding ideals have never been more important. We should never shy away from nor be apologetic about affirming our
commitment to making the world a better place through our teaching and scholarship and our commitment to truth, excellence, and opportunity for all. And we should always recognize that, for all of our progress toward realizing these ideals over decades and centuries, there is much more we can learn, more we can contribute, more we can do better.

“We are blessed with extraordinary students, faculty, and staff,” he said. “Whenever I see tourists taking pictures in Harvard Yard, I want to stop them and say, ‘No! Harvard is not its buildings. It is its people and they are inspiring, from faculty pushing the boundaries of knowledge in virtually every field imaginable, to students who excel in every possible dimension, to our staff who are dedicated to enabling everything we do.’

“Those of us privileged to lead this university are invested with a precious trust,” Bacow said. “I promise to do everything within my power to prove worthy of it.”

In accordance with Harvard’s charter, Bacow was elected to the Harvard presidency today (Feb. 11) by the Harvard Corporation with the consent of the university’s Board of Overseers.

The appointment concludes a search launched in the summer of 2017 following Drew Faust’s announcement that she would step down after 11 years as Harvard’s president. The search involved far-reaching consultation with faculty, students, staff, alumni, and others having valuable perspectives on Harvard and higher education.

“From the very first day of my presidency, when he invited me to his house for dinner, Larry Bacow has been a source of wisdom, experience, and insight, as a friend, as a fellow president, and in recent years as a member of the Harvard Corporation,” said Faust. “He understands the power of higher education to expand knowledge, strengthen society, and improve human lives. But he will also bring a clear-eyed perspective to the challenges higher education faces at this moment, and a deep devotion to addressing them in the effort to broaden opportunity for all. I could not be happier contemplating Harvard in his hands, and I look forward to his many successes as president.”

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Bacow served as the 12th president of Tufts from September 2001 through July 2011. Throughout his tenure, he worked vigorously to advance excellence and catalyze innovation in teaching, research, and public service. A prominent advocate of student access and opportunity, he presided over a doubling of the university’s annual budget for financial aid, the replacement of loans with grants for undergraduates from low-income families, and the introduction of a loan repayment assistance program helping graduates from across Tufts pursue careers in public service and the nonprofit domain.

Bacow’s time at Tufts was marked by efforts to strengthen the undergraduate experience, to expand the institution’s international reach, to invest in research and graduate education, and to create new interdisciplinary connections within and across Tufts’ eight schools, with an emphasis on addressing societal challenges. He embraced diversity and inclusion as foundations of excellence, launching the university’s Office of Institutional Diversity and working to increase the presence of women and minorities on the faculty and in positions of leadership.

Reflecting his focus on how universities can benefit society, Bacow convened an international conference of higher education leaders in 2005 to initiate the Talloires Network, a global association of universities committed to strengthening the civic roles and social responsibilities of higher education. The network has grown to over 360 member institutions in 77 countries and maintains its secretariat at Tufts.
Bacow was widely known at Tufts for his open, engaged, and accessible leadership style, as well as for strengthening the university’s ties with its alumni and its host communities. An avid runner, he founded the President’s Marathon Challenge in 2003, which brought together Tufts community members to run and volunteer in the Boston Marathon and to raise funds to support nutrition and medical research. His early-morning training runs with students, faculty, and staff became a hallmark, as did the dinners he hosted for members of the senior class.

While at Tufts, Bacow also took on broader higher education leadership roles as chair of the Association of Governing Boards’ council of presidents, chair of the executive committee of the Association of Independent Colleges and Universities in Massachusetts, and a member of the executive committee of the American Council of Education’s board of directors.

“Larry Bacow set Tufts on a trajectory to a different level, and his record at the university speaks for itself,” said James A. Stern, M.B.A. ’74, chair of the Tufts University board of trustees during Bacow’s presidency. “Larry is an extraordinary leader who, in the pursuit of excellence, thinks about where things need to be, not simply where they are now. He is the ultimate team player, someone who makes everyone around him better. He was deeply respected, even loved, by all the constituencies at Tufts – students, faculty, staff, and alumni.”

Following his decade at Tufts, Bacow came to Harvard in 2011 as President-in-Residence at the Graduate School of Education, while also becoming a member of the Harvard Corporation, the university’s principal governing board. In 2014, he moved from the GSE to the Harvard Kennedy School of Government, where he remains the Hauser Leader-in-Residence in the Center for Public Leadership. He has devoted his time to advising new and aspiring college and university leaders, mentoring students interested in careers in education, teaching in executive education programs, and writing and speaking about major issues in higher education.

“Larry Bacow brings an extraordinary combination of broad experience in academia, deep knowledge of Harvard, and that intangible quality, wisdom,” said Shirley Tilghman, who served as president of Princeton University from 2001 to 2013, remains a professor of molecular biology at Princeton, and serves on the Harvard Corporation. “I have been struck during the years I have served with him on the Corporation by his generosity to many leaders, both inside and outside Harvard, who regularly turn to him for thoughtful counsel.”

Bacow is a senior advisor to Ithaka S+R, a leading research organization that helps academic communities serve the public good and navigate change. In addition, he has served as a member of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences’ Lincoln Project on preserving and strengthening the nation’s public research universities (2014-16), as well as an advisory board member for the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities (2010-15).

“Since meeting and befriending Larry Bacow over 25 years ago at MIT, I have had the privilege of working with one of the most effective leaders in all aspects of the living and learning environment of university life,” said John Silvanus Wilson, Jr., M.T.S. ’81, Ed.M. ’82, Ed.D. ’85, former president of Morehouse College, a Harvard Overseer, and former past executive director of the White House Initiative on Historically Black Colleges and Universities. “I encouraged President Obama’s interest in appointing Larry to the advisory board of the White House Initiative on HBCUs because of the transformational impact he had at Tufts, including boosting financial aid, expanding research, enriching student life, and advancing diversity and inclusion.

“Larry combines wisdom with a human touch, acumen with compassion,” Wilson added. “Harvard is fortunate to have him as its leader for the road ahead.”
As a member of the Harvard Corporation since 2011, Bacow has been increasingly involved in a range of strategic issues facing the university, from planning for future developments in Allston to bolstering support for research, from enhancing collaboration across schools to envisioning the future of online learning. He withdrew from the presidential search committee in mid-December 2017, after numerous people consulted about the search urged that he be considered as a possible candidate.

“A trusted and proven leader, known for his listening and communication skills, Larry Bacow has the intelligence, integrity, demeanor, and management expertise to guide Harvard in the years to come,” said Scott A. Abell, A.B. ’72, president of Harvard’s Board of Overseers and a member of the presidential search committee. “He knows Harvard, knows and respects our faculty, is trusted by our staff, and thoroughly enjoys his interactions with our students. His sense of humor and warm personality are admirable and genuine.

“Larry Bacow is the right person, for all the right reasons, to become the 29th president of Harvard,” said Abell.

Bacow spent the first phase of his academic career at MIT, where he joined the faculty in 1977. Emerging as a leading member of the Department of Urban Studies and Planning, with expertise in economics, law, and public policy, he rose to become the Lee and Geraldine Martin Professor of Environmental Studies. He played key roles in founding and guiding both the MIT Consortium on Global Environmental Challenges and the MIT Center for Real Estate. Early in his career, he held visiting professorships at universities in Israel, Italy, Chile, and the Netherlands.

His first university-wide leadership role came as Chair of the MIT Faculty (1995-97). In 1998, he was appointed MIT’s chancellor, one of the institute’s most senior academic officers, a role in which he guided efforts in undergraduate education, graduate education, research initiatives, international and industrial partnerships, and strategic planning.

“It was clear from the moment Larry Bacow became Chair of the Faculty at MIT that he is someone with a deep commitment to academic excellence, for whom students matter a great deal, and with a very broad perspective across disciplines,” said Robert J. Birgeneau, an eminent physicist who served alongside Bacow at MIT before becoming president of the University of Toronto and then chancellor of the University of California, Berkeley. “Successful university leaders are clear about what their values are, and those values are reflected in how they lead their institutions. Larry has a very well defined moral compass, which will serve him and Harvard well in the years to come.”

The son of immigrant parents – his father a refugee from the pogroms of Eastern Europe, his mother a survivor of Auschwitz – Bacow has long been devoted to education’s vital role in enabling pursuit of the American dream. Growing up in Michigan, he took an avid interest in science and mathematics, and won acceptance to MIT. He received his S.B. in economics there in 1972, graduating Phi Beta Kappa. He went on to earn three degrees from Harvard, including a J.D. and M.P.P in 1976, and a Ph.D. in public policy in 1978.

Bacow is the author or co-author of four books and numerous articles on topics related to environmental policy, economics, law, land use, and occupational health and safety. More recently, his writings and lectures have focused on a wide array of issues in higher education, including online learning, innovations in teaching, the political economy of universities, and higher education leadership and governance. A fellow of the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, he was named Clark Kerr Lecturer by the University of California, Berkeley, in 2017, and he has been awarded six honorary degrees.
Bacow is married to Adele Fleet Bacow, an urban planner and graduate of Wellesley College and MIT. He met Adele on his first day of orientation as a 1L at Harvard Law School. She was awarded the Hosea Ballou Medal by the Tufts board of trustees in 2012. The medal, awarded only 17 times since its inception in 1939, was created to “recognize members of the Tufts community who have rendered exceptional service for the institution.” The Bacows have two sons.

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In a community-wide message announcing Bacow’s appointment, Lee expressed the search committee’s gratitude to all who offered thoughts on the search.

“With my colleagues on the search committee, I thank all of you who offered your thoughtful advice,” he said. “Our gratitude goes especially to the members of the three advisory committees – of faculty, students, and staff – who worked so hard and contributed so much to informing the search committee’s deliberations, both by sharing their own views and by eliciting robust input from many others.”

Said Robin Kelsey, A.M. ’87, Ph.D. ’00, chair of the faculty advisory committee, who serves as the Shirley Carter Burden Professor of Photography and Dean of the Arts and Humanities in the Faculty of Arts and Sciences: “During the course of our conversations on the faculty advisory committee, it became clear that the extraordinary challenges and opportunities that Harvard faces today call for a president with vision, experience, organizational savvy, and consensus-building skills. Larry Bacow has these leadership qualities in abundance. The search committee could not have been more solicitous and respectful of the views of the faculty advisory committee. It was a wonderful process, and I look forward to great years ahead under the leadership of Larry Bacow.”

The student advisory committee reached out to students across the university throughout the fall semester to seek input on overarching challenges and opportunities facing Harvard, as well as the qualities they would value in its next president. “From the beginning, I found the search committee to be sincerely invested in student perspectives and feedback, and we met with members of the committee multiple times over the past few months to share observations and recommendations,” said Jyoti Jasrasaria, A.B. ’12, a third-year Harvard Law School student who chaired the student advisory committee. “We engaged almost 4,000 students through our various outreach efforts, and we’re grateful that we were able to bring those students’ voices to the committee and ensure that they were heard throughout the presidential selection process.”

“The presidential search committee’s recognition of the importance of staff input into the search process was deeply appreciated by the community,” said Katie Lapp, executive vice president, who chaired the staff advisory committee. “The robust attendance of staff at sessions across campus demonstrated the deep commitment they have to the university and to the success of our next president.

“Throughout his career,” she added, “Larry Bacow has demonstrated an ability to build and inspire teams, and to engage openly and authentically with staff members, and I know the staff community will work tirelessly to support his efforts on behalf of the university.”

Founded in 1636, Harvard University is devoted to excellence in teaching, learning, and research, and to educating leaders and pursuing scholarship in many disciplines to make a positive difference in communities around the world. The university, which is based in Cambridge and Boston, Massachusetts, has an enrollment of more than 20,000 degree candidates, including undergraduate and graduate students. Harvard has more than 360,000 alumni around the world. The president serves as the chief academic and administrative officer of the university.
Lee closed his message to the Harvard community by thanking Drew Faust and welcoming Bacow.

“I want again to salute Drew Faust for her outstanding leadership and service, which will leave her successor with so strong a platform to build on. With her, we will do our best to make her final spring in Mass Hall both memorable and productive,” said Lee. “For today, please join me in congratulating and welcoming Larry Bacow as Harvard’s next president. He is someone who leads by giving credit rather than taking it. And he knows that what Harvard can accomplish for its students and for the world in the years ahead will depend foremost on all of you.”