

Lawrence S. Bacow
Remarks at Feb. 11, 2018 press conference

Thank you, Bill. And thanks to all of you for being here.

I am truly honored and humbled by this opportunity to succeed my good friend and colleague and somebody who I admire greatly, Drew Faust, and also to have a chance to follow in the footsteps of some wonderful leaders that Harvard has enjoyed. Neil [Rudenstine], it's an honor to have you here today. This is truly a remarkable institution.

I must confess that when I arrived at the Kennedy School in 1972 as a 20-year-old graduate student, I never could have imagined that I would be standing here today. Like generations of students who have come to this campus, I was in awe of this place. And I have to admit that I wondered if the admissions committee had made a mistake, if I was meant to be here, if I was worthy, if I would fit in. It's sort of what Harvard does to everybody.

But as it's done for so many of us, 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. Now, I am grateful for the opportunity to give back to an institution that helped to make me the person that I am today.

I know of no place on Earth with greater potential to help change people's lives for the better. And I can think of no more exciting time than doing all I can and indeed I would say – all we can – to help Harvard achieve that potential, not just for the good of our students, but for the good of the world that we aim to serve.

I grew up in Pontiac, Michigan. Both of my parents were immigrants, refugees from Europe. My father was born in Minsk. His family brought him here to this country as a child to escape the pogroms of Eastern Europe. My mother arrived on the second Liberty ship that brought refugees from Europe after the war. She survived Auschwitz, the only member of her family to do so and in fact the only Jew from her town who survived the war as well. When she arrived on our shores, she was all of 19.

When I reflect upon my parents' journey to this country, I realize how lucky I am. Where else can one go, in one generation, from off the boat, with literally nothing, to enjoy the kind of life and opportunity that I and my family have been fortunate to enjoy. It was higher education that made this all possible. I look forward to working every day as president of Harvard to ensure that future generations benefit from the same opportunity my family had – and so many of us that I suspect sit in this room today also had. And that is the opportunity to experience the American dream.

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. 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, through our scholarship, but also to our commitment to a search for truth, a commitment to excellence, as well as a commitment to opportunity for all. And we should always recognize that all of our progress toward realizing these ideals over decades, even centuries, at a place like Harvard that there is still much we can do, much we can learn, and more that we can contribute to make the world better, together. As Bill noted, these are challenging times for higher education in America. I often say that one of the things that makes being a university president

tough (I'm looking at Drew and Neil as I say this) is that everybody who went to college thinks they can run one. These days, higher education has plenty of critics. And candidly, I think some of the criticism is fair. We need to do a better job of controlling our costs. We need to do a better job of operating more efficiently. We need to collaborate with others, with our peer institutions, with industry, and the broader world. And we 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.

While the challenges confronting us are great, I think the opportunities are even greater, and I am excited by them. We are blessed with extraordinary students, faculty, and staff. In fact, every time I walk into the Yard and I see flocks of tourists there taking pictures of the statue of John Harvard, of Mass Hall, of University Hall, I always want to stop them and say “No, no, no! That’s not Harvard. Harvard is its people.” That’s what makes this place special. Extraordinary faculty who are doing work in every possible intellectual domain. Students who inspire us, all the time. And staff who really enable all of us to do our work. It’s an amazing collection of people that I now feel privileged to lead.

I am particularly excited by the extension of our campus that’s taking shape in Allston. Allston gives us the opportunity to forge new partnerships across Harvard’s many parts, both intellectually and otherwise: between Harvard and our neighbors, between Harvard and our sister institutions, between Harvard and the rest of the world. And it also gives us the opportunity – not just in Allston but across all of Harvard – to envision the university of the future, and to bring that future to life. Very exciting indeed.

One of the things that has always drawn so many of us to Harvard is how it aspires to excel across such a wide range of academic domains. You only have to name our Schools to get the idea: Arts and Sciences; Business; Design; Divinity; Education; Engineering; Government; Law; Medicine and Dental Medicine; Public Health; and of course, thanks to Drew, the Radcliffe Institute, which now spans the entire endeavor. 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.

When our faculty and students and staff think of Harvard, I want them to think, "This is the place where I can do my best work. This is the place where I can pursue opportunities beyond those that might be available to me anywhere else. This is the place that whatever my background, wherever I came from, whatever I look like, whatever my academic focus, whatever my point of view, that I can have the greatest chance not only to succeed personally, but, even more importantly, to make a difference in the lives of others.

I am enormously excited to be part of such an adventure. And for these next several months, I also look forward to being a Harvard student again. I still have much to learn, and I know from my prior life here that there is no better place to learn than at Harvard.

Those of us privileged to lead this University are invested with a precious trust. Working together, faculty, staff, students, and the governing boards, I promise to do everything within my power to prove worthy of that trust.

Thank you.