

Preface

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President Drew Gilpin Faust © Stephanie Mitchell, Harvard University

Historians are more accustomed to looking into the past than forecasting the future. But as I read through the challenges facing the world highlighted in the pages that follow, I recognised a pattern that has been a focus of my work in recent years as president of a research university.

We live in an era when knowledge is of critical importance in addressing the world's most pressing problems, when technology promises both wondrous possibilities and profound dislocations, when global forces increasingly shape our lives and work. At Harvard and other research universities around the world, academic enterprise has become increasingly collaborative, because the best answers to complex questions often involve the combined perspectives of experts from different but complementary disciplines.

What struck me about the subjects highlighted in this journal was the degree to which many of these challenges are connected in complex ways that may not be apparent at first glance. For example, few would dispute the idea that climate change (**page 18**) will be a major concern in 2014, as will the rising socio-political tensions across the Middle East and North Africa (**page 10**). But relatively few may have noted that one of the factors exacerbating the situation in Syria is a drought that resulted from shifting weather patterns in the region. Similarly, the expansion of megacities (**page 26**) is influenced by rising sea levels and other climate challenges. And then there's the issue of energy independence and the impact that tapping natural gas in the US (**page 50**) could have on political policy in the Middle East.

The increasingly interconnected nature of the world's most pressing problems demands new approaches to the development of solutions. Traditional intellectual fields are shifting and converging in order to answer the complex questions facing our globalised society, just as organisations such as the World Economic Forum and its Global Agenda Councils are bringing together thought leaders from across a wide range of disciplines to provide new perspectives on our greatest opportunities.

As we look ahead, we have to be optimistic that this growing spirit of collaboration across disciplines and across borders will enable us to meet the challenges of 2014 ■