

FROM THE FACULTY CHAIR**On Our Faculty Governance**

Henry D. Jacoby

"Is this really the way we ought to be doing this?" This question has come up more than once in my period helping manage the faculty's involvement in Institute governance. Our system is a peculiar MIT concoction: a unitary faculty meeting with real power and influence, but which draws more than 15% of the faculty only when a hot item is on the agenda; a meeting designed to do the faculty's business, but which is chaired by the President on most occasions, and which includes top members of the administration under Rule 1 and welcomes input from other senior administrative staff (see box). No senate, but a Faculty Policy Committee which serves *de facto* as a sort of executive committee of the faculty - keeping an eye on issues of faculty concern, hearing the flak, and shaping issues on their way to the faculty meeting. No elections, but three faculty officers and members of standing committees chosen by a nominations committee with faculty-meeting ratification.

Early in my term as chair, I tried to explain this system to colleagues at a meeting of presidents of faculty senates, to their widespread mystification.

The system has its good points and bad. It is of a piece with a broader MIT culture which blurs the boundary between faculty and administration. One factor contributing to this style is the revolving-door nature of administration here. Outside the specialized business functions most top officials are faculty members, many continuing to teach, and spread through the faculty ranks are former department heads, deans, and provosts.

Involvement of the president in the conduct of the faculty meeting tends to reinforce this close relationship. Not only is the president in regular face-to-face contact with the faculty, but this style of meeting draws the participation of the provost, deans, and VPs. We avoid the gulf that has opened up in many of our fellow institutions. The faculty meeting is not "question time" in the British parliamentary sense, but it is a regular occasion where issues of importance to the faculty can be addressed, and concerns can be raised by individual members.

Some feel it would be better if the faculty's position within the Institute

were more sharply defined, with clearer mechanisms for confronting the administration with faculty views. I have the impression, on the other hand, that most faculty are satisfied with the current arrangement. They trust that reasonable decisions will be worked out in collaboration, and they are willing to participate in the process for reasonably confined periods of time. They know they have a forum, with direct access to the president, provost, and faculty officers, when they believe something has been badly handled. Meanwhile they are happy to get on with their work.

Another characteristic of this system is the great influence it accords to minority opinion, strongly felt. Essentially, faculty votes on controversial issues are weighted by passion level, because of who shows up. In an otherwise poorly attended meeting, people concerned with a particular agenda item can have great influence. The effect on faculty and institute-wide decisionmaking is profound. The faculty-meeting gauntlet puts pressure on the committee process, by which most issues come to the floor, to work out a consensus ahead of time. It increases the shoe leather cost of those managing difficult issues, but probably leads to better thought-out proposals in the end.

On the other hand, months and even years of hard work can be overturned in a few moments of thrashing on the faculty floor, in a process of debate and decision by members who are not always well-informed about the issue and the background work that has been done. Overall, the result is a strong conservative bias.

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In the May faculty meeting, the officers again did not add any new names to the list of the members of the academic staff appointed to the faculty on an annual basis, *ex officio*. After a review this past year, the officers and the FPC concluded that this appointment is not achieving the goal of bringing the expertise of key members of the administrative staff into faculty-meeting deliberations. The process tends to exclude rather than include. The list has been allowed to decrease by attrition for some years, but now the officers have declared the list closed as a matter of policy. Other measures are planned to insure that senior members of the administrative staff are welcomed, and their input sought on topics of their special expertise. Because the historical list contains people who have served for many years in *ex officio* status, and who make a substantial contribution to the meeting, it is being left as is during a period of transition.

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Would some other system be better? And exactly what does "better" mean? The common alternative is an elected faculty senate, with balanced representation by school, rank, or some other category, and usually with officers selected from within the senate. It is hard to know what the effect of such a system would be at MIT.

I suspect that faculty-wide participation in its own affairs and the Institute's governance would decrease, as the task was given over to people willing to stand for the elected positions. Efficiency would go up as decisions were addressed in a more orderly deliberative body, and likely the boundary between faculty and administration would be sharpened as the administration was presented with a more clearly defined set of people to deal with. The influence of minority views surely would decrease, and I fear that the role of faculty opinion in the running of the Institute would be channelled and more orderly but ultimately reduced. In short, the result would be sharper distinctions but less impact on day-to-day decisions and on proposals for major change.

All these views can be debated, and should be. Our environment is changing, producing new pressures on us as a faculty and on those responsible for managing the show. We ought to think about whether we have the right system for the next decade or two. If we conclude, as I have in two years of working the system, that no alternative is evidently better in our context, then we need to devote some real effort to the search for ways that we can keep our own unique system vital, and responsive to evolving circumstances.
