

# MITFaculty Newsletter

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## From The Faculty Chair Improving Our System of Faculty Governance

Rafael L. Bras

**"Our system [of governance]** 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 . . ." So begins Jake Jacoby's article "On Our Faculty Governance" in the May/June 1991 *Faculty Newsletter* . Jake acknowledges difficulties with the unconventional system of government but extols its benefits: blurring the boundary between faculty and administration; according great influence to minority opinions since poor attendance in meetings make any block of individuals significant; demanding "shoe leather cost" from those managing important issues since consensus is highly desirable before a poorly attended faculty meeting; forcing a conservative bias on decisions.

Jake felt that "most faculty are satisfied with the current arrangement" and since no "alternative is evidently better in our context, then we need to devote some real effort to search for ways that we can keep our own unique system vital, and responsive to evolving circumstances."

Other opinions have also appeared in the *Newsletter*. In March 1993, facing financial difficulties similar to the present one, the *Newsletter* Editorial Board wrote "Faculty Malaise: A Case of Learned Helplessness?"

The comments were motivated by the feeling that "Time and time again we see ourselves and our MIT colleagues failing to react constructively and proactively to conditions under which we - as members of any community worthy of the name – would quite readily evince a sincere sense of shared concern and come together as responsible individuals to engage in socially responsible action."

The article described "learned helplessness" in the following way: "When painful experience teaches us that it is beyond our power to bring about changes in the prevailing conditions, we learn to stop trying . . . . Once learned, the expectation that responsiveness to aversive conditions in a given environment generally proves futile, tends to inhibit present and future responsiveness in that situation by undermining both (1) the motivation to respond, and (2) the cognitive capacity to perceive the existence of opportunities to respond effectively if and when they become available." The piece ends with a call to change ". . . and it might as well begin with us . . . . Are we ready, willing, and able to join with the MIT administration in the process of shaping the future of this unique place? Are they ready, willing, and able to accept us as full partners in this task? And what is the Corporation's view of these issues?"

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On August 25, 1997 (Vol. 117, No. 34), Anders Hove, opinion editor of *The Tech* , wrote "Excessive Committees Devalue Governance." The thesis is that the fragmentation of

decisions into so many committees results in confusion and responsibility falling between the cracks and a situation where few people can tell what is going on.

All the quoted opinions have elements of truth. As I have written before, I summarize the reasons for poor attendance to faculty meetings as: all decisions are already made (helplessness); issues discussed are trivial (consensus of important issues is generally achieved by key players in committees), and there is an overall lack of knowledge of issues; we are too busy with more pressing issues, with the implication that we trust that good decisions are being made most of the time.

**Before giving more opinions or suggesting actions, it is worth noting that there is at least one forum where faculty (not in committee) come together and engage in lively discussion of important issues. These are the monthly "random faculty dinners," hosted by Jay Keyser.**

Last September's dinner was representative, occurring the day after the budget and the educational commons discussion in the faculty meeting. The dinner was what the faculty meeting was not: an open, frank, generally fair, debate of the present financial difficulties and the planned review of the educational commons. It was great. The problem is lack of follow-up since, by design, those capable of answering the questions as ultimate decision makers are not present at those dinners.

Although I do not think that the system of governance is broken, I do think that changes are needed, as Jake Jacoby wrote, to keep the system of governance vital within the context of MIT's present reality. This feeling, I believe, is shared in some degree by Chuck Vest and Bob Brown, who very much want faculty input and spend innumerable hours trying to get that input, with varied success. Currently, I do not have a clear vision of all that needs to change or of how it needs to change. What follows are thoughts on sub-topics related to governance.

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Let me begin with faculty meetings. Some state that the trust of the faculty on the decisions of our colleagues in committees and the administration makes attendance at faculty meetings unnecessary. As evidence, they point out that the faculty does attend meetings when the occasion warrants it, particularly when an imminent or past decision is perceived as wrong. I would argue, though, that such reactive occasions are not healthy and for the most part serve for venting concerns, but rarely change or create policy. Let me then make the assumption that better-attended meetings and more open debate would lead to more information transfer and more informed decisions. Albeit not perfect, I like to compare faculty meetings to the venerable New England town meetings. After reaching a certain size, particularly in this day and age, many towns have found that the traditional town meeting meant the theoretical right of all to vote, but the responsibility of none. Representative town meetings are now common. What most of us do not want is a politicized representative faculty meeting that would become the realm of a few willing players.

**Maybe all senior faculty should share a rotating responsibility as attendees of meetings and reporters to their particular units. At the very least, this will guarantee a reasonable attendance and a more informed faculty.**

All faculty meetings are currently opened to the MIT community. In practice, that means that they are opened to anybody. Many feel that this hampers the ability of the faculty to have honest and broad debate on sensitive issues. The bottom line is that most of us are not interested in having potentially embarrassing public discussions with colleagues and

leaders. Maybe not all faculty meetings should be opened to the public; closed and open meetings could be scheduled ahead of time and the agendas appropriately determined. The reason the "random dinners" discussions are so wonderful, is because the social setting, the confidentiality, and the meeting of equals create a sense of security and trust.

In this age of electronic communications, it should be possible to conduct most of the routine business and votes outside of a formal meeting. The meetings, which after all are not held very often, could be reserved for the more hefty issues, open debate, and to promote information transfer and communication. Some have argued that some meetings could also serve as forums for faculty lectures. The suggestion has been made that the Killian lecture should be part of a formal gathering of the faculty, open to the public.

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There is no doubt that the committee structure serves MIT well. Nevertheless, it leads to a system where a few, generally quite wise individuals, are fully informed of the issues and effectively make the ultimate decisions, because the broader debate does not occur in the faculty meetings. Most of the time this is fine. Many times it leads to surprises when faculty learn of policy of which they were unaware. You could argue that it's the fault of individuals for not keeping up with the issues. I would agree if this scenario were rare and isolated. When it is widespread and the norm, then I think it is the system that needs improvement.

The fact is that there are reasonably few standing committees of the faculty. Some work very effectively and have hefty responsibilities. Others are lacking in significant agendas and do far less. In many ways the structures lack symmetry. For example, three major faculty committees, populated by elected faculty, lead undergraduate education. One committee deals with policy, another overviews curricula, yet another deals with admissions and financial aid. Graduate education has one committee, headed by the Dean and populated by departmental representatives. The result is two very different systems that place different emphases on commonly similar issues.

MIT is increasingly involved in international programs. These programs bring up questions about resources, administration, and adherence to MIT principles of openness and non-discrimination. Yet we have no standing faculty governance structure to provide the guidelines for MIT participation.

The Faculty Policy Committee (FPC), the over-arching committee in the existing structure, has the charge to "maintain a broad overview of the Institute's academic programs, deal with a wide range of policy issues of concern to the faculty, and coordinate the work of the faculty committees." Very quickly the FPC finds itself playing the role of gatekeeper to the faculty meetings, giving final approval to recommendations by other committees, or serving as a sounding board for ideas arising largely from the administration. Indeed, that is a necessary function – but what is lacking is the strategizing role, the faculty body who can think of issues and define positions to be taken by the faculty which in turn can help and guide the administration.

A related question is the relationship of the standing committees to presidential committees, task forces, councils, and the many other committees that the Institute appoints. The ability to appoint these "transient" committees is important. It provides flexibility; it provides opportunity for involvement of many faculty members, tapping the large majority of the faculty at some point or another. On the other hand, proliferation of committees can result in duplication, busy work, and at worst a "disconnect" from the activities of the permanent structures of governance. There is a need to reconcile and define this system of committees.

**The presidential search process has provided an opportunity for the Institute to explore alternative ways of decision-making through input from the larger community of faculty. The presidential search**

committees have engaged a process that has tapped grass roots participation, by visiting each academic unit and soliciting viewpoints about the presidency, potential candidates, and future directions of MIT.

Each visit was moderated by one of the officers of the faculty or the chair of the Faculty Advisory Committee on the Presidency. The various academic units emerged from this process of discussion – and sometimes debate – with a sense of involvement, even empowerment, as they reflected not only on the larger requirements for the presidency, but also on their relationship to the Institute and the outside world. The discussions were usually frank and uninhibited, many times trenchant and probing, always informative and helpful. The challenge to the search committees is to find a strategy to use that grass roots input to reflect the sentiment of the faculty and to promote the best interests of the Institute. Faculty meetings, as presently constructed, could never elicit these kinds of invaluable suggestions and viewpoints. While this process was time-consuming and cumbersome in minor ways, similar, more streamlined ones could be created for certain major institutional decisions that would benefit from such faculty input.

MIT operates much better than most other academic institutions I know. Its system of governance allows for fairly fast decisions, it is not caught in too many political intrigues, and most importantly has always avoided the "them and us" syndrome between administration and faculty. After all, the academic administration is faculty. All of the above are characteristics that we must preserve. Nevertheless, the system must evolve and adjust to the times. If the faculty is to retain the responsibility of the academic well-being of the Institute, then it must become more involved and the system of governance should facilitate that involvement.

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