

MIT Faculty Newsletter

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Editorial

Difficult Times Ahead Require a Higher Level of Faculty Participation in Setting Policies

The recent report on declining biomedical R&D investment, "A Broken Pipeline?" (brokenpipeline.org/brokenpipeline.pdf) carried poignant profiles of young scientists whose biomedical research programs are blocked by the decline in NIH research funding. Their situations reflect the plight of junior faculty and postdoctoral fellows in all disciplines at MIT and across the country. The consequences of failure to invest in our young scientists is not limited to personal tragedies; it undermines the overall economy, the ability to alleviate the suffering of disease and mitigate degradation of the environment, and our long-term efforts to raise the standard of living.

The restrictions on the growth of the NIH, NSF, NASA, DOE, NOAA, and EPA R&D budgets do not appear to reflect a conscious Congressional policy to disinvest in science and technology. Rather, they reflect the constraint of the enormous federal expenditures to prosecute the war on Iraq, the significant decrease in income tax revenue due to the Bush tax cuts for the wealthiest Americans, and now the multiple impacts of the recession on the federal budget. This economic reality will take some years and major policy changes to correct.

In the meantime we will have many difficult choices to make. Research universities like MIT will be hit particularly hard by the federal R&D downturn. The impact will be felt not just by junior faculty, but all faculty carrying out federally-funded research, together with the postdoctoral fellows and graduate students supported by these programs. We expect that the MIT administration will respond vigorously to this challenge. However, dealing with the multiple campus impacts will also require the full wisdom and full participation of the faculty.

MIT is one of the only major research universities in the U.S. that lacks a faculty senate or council, with elected representatives both responsible and accountable for university-wide decision-making.

The only institutions in the U.S. that still have governing bodies whose decisions depend on who shows up at the meeting, are the remaining towns with "Town Meetings." In fact, as with even small cities, MIT is too large and complex for that mode of governance. Compared to past periods of economic downturn, we also currently have many more members of the administration who come from outside MIT and sometimes from outside academia, so the indigenous knowledge of the faculty becomes even more valuable.

Our key Institute committees have hard working members and generally do an excellent job (see, for example, [Prof. Widnall's article on the Committee on Discipline in this issue](#)). The problem arises at the next stage in the process, where committee reports, recommendations, or deliberations are brought to the broader faculty. With faculty meetings poorly and randomly attended – since no faculty are actually responsible for attending any

given meeting – the critical broader input, debate, and deliberation are often inadequate. Some recent articles and exchanges in the *Newsletter* indicate that current mechanisms for efficient and inclusive faculty policy formation and input into overall MIT policy are not functioning well.

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To be sure, we have witnessed some recent examples of effective faculty participation in policy formation, most notably the discussions and debate over curriculum revisions. However, these discussions had little direct economic impact on students or faculty. The answer is not to get rid of faculty meetings, but to make them into serious deliberative and decision-making bodies that are transparent and accountable.

Our proposal in this editorial is to move toward a “Faculty Senate” with representatives elected by the faculty and with the following attributes:

1. For the decisions we face, MIT faculty now needs representative governance, with faculty meetings attended by faculty representatives elected or selected, possibly by department or unit. During a two- or three-year term appointment, Faculty Senate representatives would be responsible and accountable for oversight of policy decisions made by the administration and the faculty.
2. One reasonable path to a definition of Faculty Senate responsibilities and authority that would balance legitimate faculty and administration interests, is for the newly- elected Senate leaders to directly negotiate them with the President and Provost. The objective here is not to override or displace policies and actions set by the administration, but to arrive at a clear and explicit articulation of faculty views and interests and to assure that they are taken seriously when the administration proposes actions that intersect with these interests.
3. Faculty meetings should be chaired by the Chair of the Faculty, so that when faculty views and concerns differ from administration views and concerns, both the faculty and the administration ’s representatives have ample opportunity to develop and present their case without being summarily overruled. This encourages communication and consensus as opposed to confrontation, which is surely a net gain for all Institute personnel.
4. Officers of the Faculty should be openly nominated and elected by the faculty, in a process that allows candidates with differing views and priorities to run for the office on a public platform.
5. The joint administration/faculty policy committee currently acts as a gatekeeper who decides which issues reach the faculty agenda. This committee should instead be given responsibility for implementing decisions made at the faculty meeting. The Faculty Senate, in consultation with representatives of the administration, should be solely responsible for structuring faculty-meeting agendas. The Chair of the Faculty Senate would be given authority for control of the flow of discussion at faculty meetings.
6. The Faculty Chair needs and should be assigned a budget and staff, as proposed by former chair Rafael Bras (see “Preliminary Position of the Faculty Policy Committee on Faculty Governance,” *MIT Faculty Newsletter*, September/October 2004).

Here are three examples of policy decisions that need more adequate faculty input: a) **As noted in the letter from Prof. McKinley**, the new \$500M Campaign for Students allocates \$400M for undergraduates, and \$100M for graduate students. We are not aware of any serious input to this important initiative from the faculty at large or at a faculty meeting prior

to the announcement of it by the administration; b) Many faculty members feel that the fashion in which MIT 's total budget is allocated among administrative, instructional, and research functions will need much closer analysis in the future; c) The issue of return to the faculty from internal Institute resources (endowment, tuition) of some fraction of the overhead brought into MIT by faculty, needs serious consideration.

While decisions made with Faculty Senate input might not be or would have been necessarily different, the lack of faculty consultation is worrisome and becomes even more so as the budgetary pressures that we alluded to earlier become stronger.

In keeping with these views, the *Faculty Newsletter* itself is moving toward an Editorial Board that is elected by vote of the faculty ("[Newsletter Elections to be Held This Spring](#)").

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