# MITFaculty Newsletter

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## From The Faculty Chair
## Reconsidering the Value of Service to MIT

**Bish Sanyal**

**Have you seen the 2008 MIT Faculty Quality of Life Survey?** Or perhaps you are still somewhat unhappy that the survey was so long, and you don't trust the findings of such surveys, anyway. When the spring semester ends, and before you get into your summer writing schedule, glance through the survey once before you toss it out with the paperwork accumulated on your desk over the past nine months. You may notice what I noticed; or, you may read the survey totally differently.

For example, I read that 80.6% of MIT faculty are either satisfied or very satisfied with being a faculty member at MIT; but then, I was reminded by a colleague that 16% of the faculty are either dissatisfied or very dissatisfied (**see chart**). And, 3.5% of faculty have not made up their mind as yet: They are in the column of "neither satisfied, nor dissatisfied"! "Who are these faculty and why they are still sitting on the fence?" I ask myself. The survey does not provide any clue regarding the complexity of such undecided minds, but their presence is visible on most tables, barring a few where the faculty seems to have a very clear opinion one way or the other.

One such table is on page 29 of the survey, which documents what the MIT faculty think their peers value in the tenure process (**see chart**). According to that table, 95% of the faculty think research/scholarly work is highly valued; 91.4% think that assessment by our peers outside of MIT is highly valued; and 85.3% think professional reputation is highly valued.

In contrast, only 9.1% think collegiality is highly valued, and, more importantly – at least for me, the Chair of the Faculty who is expected to manage MIT's faculty governance system – only 1.5% of the faculty think service to MIT is highly valued; and 52.5% – that is more than half of the faculty – think service to MIT is either valued slightly or not at all!

How do such perceptions of what is valued by the faculty affect MIT's faculty governance system? For one, this might explain why the faculty does not participate more widely in the various standing committees, and why it is so difficult to recruit even senior faculty to chair such committees. The Nominations Committee has raised this concern many times before, pleading for more volunteers to staff the various committees, but the rate of faculty participation has remained low, reinforcing the results of the Survey that faculty perceive that it is their professional reputation which really matters. Consequently, many faculty are unwilling to volunteer their time and energy for MIT's faculty governance system.

Which raises one intriguing question: Why do a small number of faculty continue to participate in the faculty governance system, volunteering their time and energy for tasks which are not regarded highly by their colleagues? One predictable response would be that the faculty who participate must be serving their self-interest in some way. A crude version of this hypothesis is that faculty who are unable to enhance their professional reputation

through research/scholarly work, may consider service to MIT as the only way to feel as if they are contributing to academia. A more instrumental version of the same logic would be that faculty volunteering is a strategy to ultimately secure a position in the academic administration, as if those faculty members have nothing else to offer through their research or teaching for which they had received tenure earlier.

Could there be an alternative explanation as to why a small number of MIT faculty volunteer their time and energy for the faculty governance system? Is it plausible that there could be some faculty members whose concerns are not limited to how they can further their self-interest? Is it plausible that some faculty members want to belong to a learning community by participating in its governance? Whoever designed MIT's faculty governance system must have assumed that MIT faculty could be both first-rate scholars and scientists and also contribute to MIT's learning community, not only through publishing which enhanced MIT's reputation as a leading research university, but by also contributing to its governance system. These two ways of contributing to the MIT community – research/scholarly work and participating in MIT's faculty governance system – need not be seen as an either/or proposition: After all, for our professional reputation to flourish, we need a well governed institutional setting to conduct research and teach the brilliant students who assist in that research. In that sense, the small group of faculty who continue to volunteer for faculty governance-related work, even though such work is not respected by their peers, actually contributes to knowledge generation in a significant way: They help to create the institutional settings whose stability and resilience we take for granted, to the extent that we barely notice its significance – as is evident from the 2008 Faculty Survey.

How should we acknowledge the contributions of the faculty who contribute to MIT's faculty governance system? Each academic year, at the end of the spring term, the President and the Chair of the Faculty host a reception at Gray House to thank the faculty, students, and staff who participate in the faculty governance system. Since this reception is held in mid-May, the garden at Gray House provides a beautiful setting for faculty to mingle and exchange thoughts about yet another academic year coming to an end. Although this event does provide a sense of respect to the faculty who contribute to the faculty governance system, it has very little impact on the perception of the faculty-at-large regarding the value of governance-related work. Which has led me to think that such work must be provided more visibility. The faculty need to notice and appreciate the contributions of those colleagues who help maintain the institutional infrastructure upon which professional reputations are ultimately built.

### There are at least three ways to make the contribution of those who participate in the faculty governance system more visible.

First, we could have the standing committees periodically present summaries of their deliberations at the monthly Institute faculty meetings. The current practice is to have only the Committee on Discipline present an annual report at a faculty meeting in the spring semester. We could build on that practice by requiring other committee chairs to present summaries of their committee activities. This will not increase the workload of the committee chairs, as they prepare such reports in written form already – reports which are currently compiled by the Faculty Chair for the President and other senior members of the administration.

A second way to provide more visibility to the work of the faculty governance committees is to publish their annual reports – perhaps one or two at a time – in the *Faculty Newsletter* (FNL). To make it interesting to the readers of the FNL, the committee chairs could be interviewed by *Newsletter* Editorial Board members who could ask questions regarding the significance of the various committees' work for research, teaching, and community building. Such interviews could focus on controversial issues, which always draw the

faculty's attention.

A third way to change the perception of low respectability of committee-related work is to provide financial incentives for such work. True, the voluntary quality of the committee work should be respected and cherished, but it can be combined with some financial rewards for at least the chairs of the various committees. After all, let's face facts: Incentive structures do shape organizational cultures. If our goal is to change the perception of the faculty regarding the worth of governance-related committee work, why not demonstrate that the Institute values such contributions by financially rewarding the faculty who shoulder the burden of such work? It's my hunch that if the Institute were to implement such a policy, the percentage of faculty who consider themselves "either satisfied or very satisfied" would increase; and I wonder if such a policy would also have an effect on those faculty who are still undecided?! If publicized well, a policy that acknowledges the contribution of those who make MIT a vibrant learning community will certainly have some impact even on those faculty (30.3%) who are currently "neither satisfied nor dissatisfied" by committee and administrative responsibilities.

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