

MIT Faculty Newsletter

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contents

-  [Editorial
Improving Faculty Governance
For Changing Times](#)
-  [Is This Really Who We Are?](#)
-  [Constraints on Civilian R&D Budgets
From Excessive Pentagon Spending](#)
-  [From The Faculty Chair
The Roles of the Standing Committees of the
Faculty in the Governance of MIT](#)
-  [Introducing Sandbox](#)
-  [A Critical Look at the Plan
for MIT's East Campus](#)
-  [Our Faculty Agenda](#)
-  [M.I.T. Numbers
MIT Campus Research Expenditures](#)
-  [Printable Version](#)

From The Faculty Chair

The Roles of the Standing Committees of the Faculty in the Governance of MIT

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In the *May/June 2011 issue of the Faculty Newsletter*, then Chair of the Faculty Prof. Thomas Kochan wrote a wonderful column entitled “**Faculty Governance @ MIT: Strengths and Future Challenges.**” I remember the column well from when it appeared, reread it when I was asked to stand for election to my current position, and just reread it again. Prof. Kochan’s article remains as good a description of faculty governance at MIT as any I have read.

In this column I would like to pick one aspect from Prof. Kochan’s column, namely the role of the Standing Committees of the Faculty, expand upon his description and provide some recent illustrative examples of the role these committees play in the governance of MIT. As Prof. Kochan wrote, the 11 Standing Committees of the Faculty are the heart of faculty governance. Approximately 100 faculty members (10 percent) participate in any given year on one or more of these committees or on two focused awards committees. The faculty are joined on the committees by undergraduate and graduate students who bring key perspectives and by administration representatives and professional staff, who provide both perspective and institutional memory for the faculty and students who rotate on and off committees. The Standing Committees of the Faculty oversee a broad spectrum of what MIT does, and is. It is within these committees that the governance referred to in the phrase “faculty governance” happens.

The complete charges to each of the committees are to be found [here](#). My aim is to illustrate their roles in the governance of MIT in sum; I will not come close to providing a full description of the work of any one of them.

Perhaps the committees whose responsibilities are easiest to understand are the two that make dozens of executive decisions each year: the Committee on Discipline (CoD) and the Committee on Academic Performance (CAP).

Every year, the CoD considers cases of alleged misconduct by students or student organizations, and takes appropriate action in the name of the Faculty. In so doing, it plays a key role in implementing the values of the MIT community and defining its standards of conduct. Every year, the CAP reviews the academic performance of all of our undergraduates and takes appropriate actions in the name of the Faculty, including sometimes requiring students to spend time away from MIT. These decisions provide an operational definition of MIT’s minimum academic standards, a responsibility of the CAP. Every year, the CAP also reviews and approves applications for readmission to MIT from students who have spent time away. Because the CAP hears regularly from them, it also plays an important informal stewardship role for the many professionals who are deeply committed to supporting our students in so many ways.

Both the CoD and the CAP also play key policy-making roles. This year, the CoD is

implementing new processes for how complaints of student sexual misconduct are handled, processes that it developed following the recommendations made last year by an Institute Task Force chaired by Prof. Munther Dahleh, the former chair of the CoD. Also this year, the CAP, together with the Dean for Undergraduate Education, is in the midst of a soup-to-nuts review of the processes via which medical withdrawals occur and readmission decisions are made. By making the difficult decisions that the Faculty has delegated to them, as well as through their varied policy and stewardship functions, the CoD and the CAP play key roles in the fabric of academic and nonacademic life at MIT.

Every year, the faculty and students on the Committee on Undergraduate Admissions and Financial Aid (CUAFA) serve as the eyes and the voice of the Faculty as MIT formulates policies related to undergraduate admissions, enrollment, tuition and fees, and financial aid. This fall, CUAFA made a **public statement** that it developed over the past year on the "Role of Diversity in MIT's Educational Mission." Quoting its last sentence, "It is through [the] experience of the richness and diversity of interests, strengths, viewpoints and concerns of their fellow students that our students become open-minded intellectuals and innovators, primed to pursue the MIT mission of the betterment of humankind." This public statement of MIT's goals in forming our student body and its commitment to our students is particularly important given the current state of the national conversation on this topic.

There are three committees that, among them, provide broad oversight on how we educate our students: the Committee on Graduate Programs (CGP), the Committee on the Undergraduate Program (CUP), and the Committee on Curricula (CoC). These committees help faculty members and departments to innovate in what we offer our students via reviewing, improving, and approving new curricula, including new subjects, new or revamped minors, majors and graduate degrees, and related educational policies.

Just in the present academic year, the relevant committees have approved new majors in Business Analytics, Finance, and Management and a new Master's degree in Business Analytics from MIT Sloan, a new pathway via which a professional student may attain our Supply Chain Management (SCM) Master's degree, as well as two flagship educational initiatives from our new Institute for Data, Systems and Society: a doctoral program in Social and Engineering Systems and an undergraduate minor in Statistics and Data Science that includes a new and innovative interdisciplinary capstone subject, the vision for which evolved to some degree in response to committee feedback.

In fact, in the case of each of these degree programs, the processes of consultation and discussion with the relevant committee or committees resulted in substantive improvements to the final product, which is to say improvements in how we will be educating future students. This comes about because of the breadth of experience and perspective that the committees provide. A committee that includes faculty from all five Schools, several students with differing perspectives, and professional staff who have seen the successful launch of many previous innovations will inevitably add value, finding ways in which a proposed new program can best be aligned with respect to existing curricula and can be strengthened, no matter how carefully and thoughtfully it has been conceived and developed by those with the relevant disciplinary expertise and experience. Through the work of these committees, lessons learned from the experience of individual departments and Schools over time inform and improve subsequent innovations across MIT. Authors of new educational activities and initiatives regularly comment on the value of discussion with, and review by, the CGP, CUP and CoC.

In the case of new majors or new graduate programs, after committee approval, the final proposals are reviewed by the Faculty Policy Committee (FPC) and voted on at an Institute Faculty Meeting on the third Wednesday of some month. In other cases also, for example as new minors or substantial revisions to programs or policies are under consideration, the

committees often seek advice from each other, from the FPC, or from the faculty officers (all of whom serve on the FPC). The chairs of all the Standing Committees meet twice annually, the professional staff of the committees meet monthly, the chair of the CUP meets weekly with the faculty officers during the semester, and the chairs of the CoC, the CGP, and other Standing Committees consult regularly with each other and with me. There are often instances where the experience or perspective of one committee can help another.

To give a recent example, when the CGP received the proposal for the new configuration of the SCM professional Master's degree, in which a cohort of students will be admitted only after taking a suite of online subjects and an Advanced Standing Exam, the CGP chair and I decided together that, although as always the approval of a substantial modification to an existing graduate program rests with the CGP, it would be of considerable value to hear as many faculty perspectives as possible. This proposal to modify the SCM program was therefore reviewed by the FPC as well as by the CGP and was presented for discussion at an Institute Faculty Meeting, the minutes of which can be found [here](#).

The FPC was warmly supportive of trying this approach to blending online and residential education in the particular context of a professional Master's degree, and saw the proposal as moving MIT to the forefront at a time when professional Master's programs and the needs of their students are changing. Furthermore, both the CGP and the FPC saw it as particularly important that this pilot program, still in the early stage of its development, be evaluated so that all of us can learn from the experience of developing, launching, and running it. The CGP will review the modified SCM program again before it is launched, likely in fall 2016, in order to provide further feedback. And, upon the request of the CGP, after the first two cohorts of students admitted via the new pathway have graduated, the CGP, the FPC, and the Dean of Engineering will review key elements: the effectiveness of the new program; how well its new admissions criteria serve to bring to MIT the best students – including students who would not have been admitted previously; the quality of the teaching; and the initial success of its graduates. MIT is well positioned to learn a lot from this pilot program via the reviews envisioned. Through the future work of the Standing Committees of the Faculty, the lessons learned will inform MIT's future educational innovations – and, in so doing, will improve the education that we offer to our future professional Master's students.

[⏪ Back to top](#)

Sometimes, although the evidence indicates that this is quite infrequent, a Standing Committee of the Faculty can outlive its role. Earlier this year, the Faculty decided to disband the Committee on Outside Professional Activities (COPA) while charging the Faculty Policy Committee with the key component of its former responsibilities. When COPA was formed many years ago, a large part of its *raison d'être* was that it was the forum where a faculty member could go for advice when she or he was concerned about whether some outside professional activity would constitute a conflict of interest. However, it has been more than 15 years since COPA last received any request to consider a question like this. Policies and practices have evolved in recent decades, in part in response to external changes. Individual faculty members now discuss such questions with the heads of their department, lab or center, or with the Office of Sponsored Programs (OSP). For years, then, faculty members have had no need to discuss potential conflicts with COPA.

Consequently, in recent years COPA met infrequently, on average less than once per year over the most recent six years. And yet, one component of COPA's charge remains at least as important a goal of the Faculty today as ever: speaking loosely, COPA was charged with being the eyes and voice of the Faculty as new kinds of potential conflicts of interest arise and as MIT's policies evolve. However, as COPA no longer had individual cases to consider and met so infrequently, it has for more than a decade been questioning whether its charge justifies the existence of a standing committee. The recent incarnation of this discussion

was initiated last year by Prof. Steve Hall, then Chair of the Faculty, and Prof. Sheila Widnall, then chair of COPA, and reached its conclusion this fall with a decision by the Faculty to charge the FPC with being its eyes and voice on questions related to conflict of interest and to disband COPA. The FPC can exercise its new responsibilities via its biannual meetings with the Provost and via adding regular meetings with the Director of OSP and the Assistant Provost, as well as by forming a targeted ad hoc subcommittee if and when a need arises. Once COPA itself, then the FPC, and then the Faculty reached the conclusion that adding to the role of the FPC in this way would be a more effective way of meeting the needs of the Faculty than a separate standing committee, the decision to disband COPA was unanimous.

This brings us to the FPC, which I chair in my capacity as the Chair of the Faculty. Prof. Kochan described its role in his column and I have already given some examples of its work from the present academic year. The FPC coordinates the work of the other committees as needed, reviews any resolutions and proposed changes to the *Rules and Regulations of the Faculty* before they are brought to an Institute Faculty Meeting for a vote, and meets regularly with the President, the Provost, other members of the administration as topics of interest arise, and the Chair of the Corporation.

The FPC can take up any agenda item of concern or interest that is not better handled by one of the other Standing Committees and, in so doing, serves as a strategic committee, as Prof. Kochan described. When an issue arises that the FPC wants to delve into more deeply than it can as a whole, it forms an ad hoc subcommittee. For example, this year the FPC has formed a subcommittee (chaired by Prof. John Fernandez, with membership drawn from the CAP, CoC, CUP, and CGP, as well as from the FPC itself) that is currently looking at sub-term-length subjects. Over the past few years, many professors, instructors, and departments have been exploring the educational flexibility and pedagogical value of subjects whose duration is less than a whole semester. Individual faculty and students, as well as the CAP, CoC, CUP, and CGP, have posed various intersecting questions about best practices and policies. The subcommittee is collecting data, including from students via surveys and focus groups and from faculty via interviews, with the goal of understanding the scope and motivations of sub-term subjects as well as their intended and potential growth, and their impacts on students, faculty, and the curriculum. The subcommittee is aiming to report by late this spring.

There are three Standing Committees of the Faculty that I will defer discussing to a future occasion. The Committee on Campus Planning is our newest standing committee, having been created only last year; it will report on its activities for the first time later this spring. The best time for a discussion of the Committee on Student Life will be after it has begun working with our future Vice President for Student Life. And, the best time for a discussion of the Committee on the Library System will be after the Task Force on the Future of Libraries has completed its work.

Last but not least, the Committee on Nominations (CoN) nominates faculty members for election as members of the Standing Committees, or as officers of the Faculty.

The examples that I have given constitute only a fraction of the myriad ways in which our committees have served MIT, its faculty and its students, just during the current academic year. The committees make key executive decisions; in varied ways and in different domains they are the eyes and the voice of the Faculty; and, by synthesizing experience and perspectives across Schools and over time, they improve the ways in which we all innovate as we develop new educational opportunities for our students. I hope that next year when you get the email from your School Dean asking you which of these committees you would be interested in serving on, you volunteer. Rotating onto one of these

committees is one of the best ways to play a part in the governance of MIT. It requires a commitment of time and effort, but you will see your service play a part in shaping our Institute. If you have further questions about the roles of each of our standing committees and, in particular, about how your own interests and passions might best be deployed in the service of our collective governance through joining one of them, please don't hesitate to be in touch. I also welcome hearing from you regarding issues or opportunities that you feel should be addressed by one of these standing committees.

[▲ Back to top](#)

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