MIT Faculty Newsletter

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From The Faculty Chair
"A Peculiar MIT Concoction": Our System of Faculty Governance – Part I

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How to improve our system of faculty governance has been a topic of discussion at MIT for many years, and nearly every one of my predecessors as Faculty Chair has devoted at least one of their columns in the *Faculty Newsletter* to the subject. The description of our system as "a peculiar MIT concoction" comes from the column **"On Our Faculty Governance"** by Jake Jacoby in the May/June 1991 issue of the FNL, one of several articles that I reference here and which I recommend for further reading.

What currently is the role of faculty governance vis-á-vis that of the Administration and the MIT Corporation? What *should* be the role of faculty governance? How can our current system of governance be improved? Are there alternative systems of governance that would better serve the Institute? This year the Faculty Officers and the Faculty Policy Committee (FPC) have undertaken a discussion of these and related questions. Our overarching goal is to make our system of faculty governance more democratic, ensuring that a full range and diversity of views are represented in the discussion of issues and in decision-making. Our discussions thus far have benefited from input from faculty colleagues received via email and also from several frank and very useful conversations at Random Faculty Dinners and our first Random Faculty Lunch. We encourage colleagues to continue to provide us with suggestions on all of the issues discussed here and we anticipate that one or more faculty meetings during the coming year will include consideration of aspects of faculty governance.

MIT operates with a system of "shared governance" involving the Corporation, the Administration, and the Faculty. Eleven "Standing Committees of the Faculty" serve as the core of faculty governance, with the Faculty Policy Committee functioning as an executive committee whose charge includes coordinating and "providing guidance and direction" to the other committees as well as "establishing Ad Hoc Committees as appropriate."

The FPC has the responsibility "to formulate policy on matters of concern to the Faculty, for approval by the Faculty" and to "interpret and implement policy as approved by the Faculty." These and other duties and responsibilities of the FPC are outlined in *Rules and Regulations of the Faculty*, Section 1.72.

The FPC is led by the three Officers of the Faculty: the Chair, Associate Chair, and the Secretary. The Faculty Officers meet regularly with the Senior Administration and with each of the five School Councils "to enhance the interchange between the Faculty and Administration on matters of concern to the Faculty." The Chair represents faculty interests as a member of the Academic Council and Deans Group, attends meetings of the MIT Corporation, and meets individually with each member of the Senior Administration, as well as the Chair of the Corporation, on a regular basis. The Chair and other Faculty Officers serve ex officio on several other Institute committees, and collaborate with the members of

the Senior Administration in setting the agendas for the monthly Institute Faculty Meetings.

Several aspects of faculty governance are on the agenda for discussion at meetings of the FPC this year; some have already received attention at our meetings this fall.

- *The Application of Electronic Technology*. It has been suggested that the election of the Faculty Officers and perhaps even the election of faculty committees could be carried out more democratically through online voting rather than by a show of hands at the usually sparsely attended May Institute Faculty Meeting. A related proposal calls for voting on motions to be carried out online rather than at faculty meetings. These changes would certainly enable wider participation of the faculty in elections and decision-making. Online voting was in fact suggested as far back as 2004 by former Faculty Chair Rafael Bras (**"Improving Our System of Faculty Governance,"** *MIT Faculty Newsletter*, Vol. XVI No. 4, February/March 2004) and was also discussed by former chair Steve Hall in a column in 2013 (**"Initial Thoughts,"** *MIT Faculty Newsletter*, Vol. XXVI No. 1, September/October 2013). The creation of an online discussion forum to debate important topics has also been proposed. There are pros and cons to all of these ideas and their variants, and the Faculty Policy Committee will be considering these and related proposals in the coming year. We welcome your input!

- *The Committee on Nominations*. As discussed further below, there are 11 Standing Committees of the Faculty. The members of 10 of these committees are elected by the faculty from a slate of candidates chosen by the Committee on Nominations based on the responses to the annual Preference Survey which is sent to all faculty. In developing the slate of candidates, the Committee on Nominations carefully considers matters of diversity and ensures that there is balanced representation across the five Schools. Additional candidates can be nominated from the floor, although the last time that option was exercised was in 2005. Since the election of committee members is rarely contested, the Committee on Nominations obviously plays a key role in determining who represents the faculty on the standing committees. It is therefore noteworthy that in contrast to the manner in which candidates for the other 10 committees are chosen, *Rules and Regulations of the Faculty* calls for the members of the Committee on Nominations to be appointed by the President, who also selects the Chair of the committee. If nothing else, this encourages a perception that the administration exercises significant influence over the membership of the committees of faculty governance. Proposals to change this system have been discussed as far back as 1951, and several former Faculty Chairs have suggested alternatives. Professor Michel DeGraff (then a member of the Committee on Nominations) published an excellent discussion of this issue in the *Faculty Newsletter* in 2008 (**"Reflections on Nominations and Elections for Faculty Officers and Committees,"** *MIT Faculty Newsletter*, Vol. XX No. 5, May/June 2008). This question of the procedure for the appointment of the membership of the Committee on Nominations has been debated in several meetings of the Faculty Policy Committee this fall, and we will be continuing this discussion with the possibility that we will bring a motion for change to the full Faculty for consideration this spring.

- *Alternative Systems of Governance*. Is our "peculiar concoction" the best system of governance for MIT? Over the years there have been a number of calls for the creation of alternative systems such as a faculty senate. See the 2008 editorial **"Difficult Times Ahead Require a Higher Level of Faculty Participation in Setting Policies,"** *MIT Faculty Newsletter*, Vol. XX No. 4, March/April 2008 for one such proposal. Would the creation of a faculty senate be a panacea for any deficiencies associated with our current system? This is not clear. Last May, Faculty Chair Susan Silbey co-organized a one-day meeting of faculty chairs and faculty senate presidents that was held at Yale. Invited were representatives from the eight Ivy League universities as well as MIT, Stanford, Chicago, and Berkeley. The discussions at this meeting focused on the advantages and

disadvantages of the governance systems in place at each school. Among these universities, seven have faculty senates, and five do not. This discussion and comparison of governance systems will continue at a second meeting of faculty leaders which is planned for this coming May and which will be held here at MIT.

Along with consideration of the above, the Faculty Officers and the Faculty Policy Committee have been trying to understand the underlying reasons for the relative lack of interest in faculty governance at MIT and have been working on short-term measures to improve our current system by increasing attendance at faculty meetings and by encouraging greater participation on the committees of faculty governance.

Faculty Meetings

Informed debate and the representation of a diversity of views is not possible at meetings when only 5% or fewer of the 1,056 MIT faculty are in attendance. The Faculty Officers have introduced several measures aimed at encouraging greater attendance at Faculty Meetings.

● Over the years several Chairs of the Faculty have suggested a system in which departments would assign a faculty member to attend each Institute Faculty Meeting. Susan Silbey proposed such a scheme at the monthly Department Heads Lunch in May, and there was general enthusiasm for trying out the idea. At the beginning of September, the Provost and I contacted the Deans of each of the five Schools asking them to have each of their Department Heads designate one or more of their colleagues to attend the monthly Institute Faculty Meetings. This plan should ensure that there is at least some representation from each department at all meetings of the Faculty.

● To foster more interest in Faculty Meetings, it is of course important to make attendance at the meetings appear more worthwhile. Last year a number of modifications in *Rules and Regulations of the Faculty* were approved that eliminate the need for some of the routine time-consuming "housekeeping" discussions and votes that had filled the agenda of some meetings in the past.

● One past complaint is that reports at Faculty Meetings are often purely informational and are only scheduled after the reports of working groups and committees are completed and key decisions are already made. Beginning last year, interim reports have been scheduled where working groups and committee chairs update the faculty on the status of their deliberations and invite comment and discussion while their work is still in progress.

● In conjunction with the above, the agendas of meetings have been arranged so as to allow more time for discussion and debate. The agendas for the Institute Faculty Meetings are set at a monthly meeting of the Faculty Officers and members of the Senior Administration. This year, at the suggestion of the Faculty Officers, the entire September meeting and most of the October meeting were devoted to discussion of the Epstein donations and the new committees that have been created to develop guidelines and processes for evaluating outside engagements.

● Although normally the President chairs the meetings of the faculty, the September meeting was chaired by the Chair of the Faculty, as was a major part of the October meeting.

Hopefully these short-term measures will serve to foster greater interest in attending Faculty Meetings, but ultimately more innovative and radical steps may be necessary to increase participation in the discussion of issues, in voting, and in elections.

Service on Faculty Committees

Much of the business of faculty governance takes place at meetings of the Standing Committees of the Faculty. This is particularly true with regard to academic matters – it will be recalled that *Policies and Procedures* assigns responsibility for the undergraduate and graduate programs to the faculty ("Educational policy for the Institute is determined by the Faculty," *Policies and Procedures*, Section 1.5). It is therefore disturbing that each year the Committee on Nominations struggles to identify sufficient faculty to staff the committees based on the tepid response to the annual Preference Survey. Typically, only 50% of the faculty respond to the survey and 60% of those responding indicate no interest in serving on a committee.

Addressing faculty apathy toward service on committees is clearly essential. What are the reasons for the lack of interest? This is a question that has been discussed in prior columns by the Chairs of the Faculty (see, for example, Bish Sanyal's 2008 column **"Reconsidering the Value of Service to MIT,"** *MIT Faculty Newsletter*, Vol. XX No. 5, May/June 2008) and which the current officers have probed in discussions at Random Faculty Dinners and a Random Faculty Lunch this semester. To summarize, several factors have been identified as playing a role.

● Time is precious and many colleagues simply do not feel they can spare the time for service on committees. For the great majority of faculty the top priority is research (including fund raising) and scholarly activities that contribute to professional advancement. Teaching responsibilities also are a high priority for most of the faculty, leaving little time for Institute service.

● Some faculty do not volunteer for Standing Committees because they are already committing significant time to service within their department such as serving on curriculum, graduate admissions, and faculty search committees. Many faculty are also involved as members on one of the numerous Institute ad hoc working groups and committees, as well as on one or more of the 36 "Standing Institute Committees Appointed by the President." Women and members of underrepresented minorities are in particular demand for these service assignments.

● There is a sense that service on faculty committees is not recognized and appreciated by colleagues and that such service is not rewarded by Department Heads and administrators. In the Quality of Life surveys conducted every four years, a significant number of faculty report that they feel that service to MIT is "valued slightly or not at all."

● Finally, and perhaps most importantly, there is a sense among many faculty that these committees lack the authority to significantly influence important decisions and that the role of faculty on the committees is diluted by the presence of members of the Administration. In that connection it should be noted, however, that on many of the committees the members representing the Administration (and their designees) are ex officio, *non-voting* members. It is also true that the Standing Committees of the Faculty have had a major impact on many key decisions and developments at MIT over the years. I intend to devote a future column to further discussion of the roles and impact of the faculty committees, but for now I refer readers interested in more information to the excellent column by former Faculty Chair Krishna Rajagopal on **"The Roles of the Standing Committees of the Faculty in the Governance of MIT,"** *MIT Faculty Newsletter*, Vol. XXVIII No. 3, January/February 2016.

The Faculty Officers welcome input and proposals relating to all aspects of faculty governance. Please send your thoughts and suggestions to **facultychair-reply@mit.edu**.

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