

# “COMMUNITY”



## A White Paper

by

*The Committee on Student Life*

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There is remarkable consensus that informal, outside-the-classroom contact between faculty and students enriches the education of our students. In his 1998-1999 Report [1], President Vest indicated that: “By engaging with students beyond the formal classroom and laboratory we can help to develop wisdom and understanding as well as knowledge and skill.” In its 1998 report, the Task Force on Student Life and Learning [2] noted that: “The ultimate goal is to bring students, faculty and staff together in the pursuit of the common educational enterprise, and doing so entails recognizing the relationship between what happens within the classroom or laboratory and the informal learning that takes place outside.” Many of our colleagues throughout the community share stories of such interactions and the positive effects they have experienced.

Forty years of research, as summarized by Kuh et al [3] in 1994, share similar consensus in that faculty-student interaction outside the classroom has a number of significant and positive effects on student life and learning. These findings, which have been consistent over dozens of studies, corroborate the anecdotal experience of MIT students, faculty and staff. Specifically, faculty-student interactions outside the classroom:

- lead to greater satisfaction on the part of students with their total college experience which in turn positively affects their grades;
- positively influence educational aspirations and degree completion;
- are associated with gains in humanitarianism;

- positively influence values associated with concern for others, helping others in difficulty, and promoting racial understanding;
- correlate positively with personal growth, including leadership, and self-esteem;
- impact positively student sense of self-concept; and
- have been shown to influence career interest and career choice.

These findings are consistent with a theme that continues to be raised in writings and conversations across campus -- the *need for community*.

The benefits of community are clear, and this is manifest in the multiple small and strong communities within M.I.T. However, there is an identified weakness in our *campus-wide community*. The Task Force on Student Life and Learning not only talked of this but also described this weakness as an obstacle to the integration of formal and informal learning. Thus, there is work to be done at the Institute to understand why this weakness exists and to rectify this so that we might fully achieve the benefits that community can bring.

Our goal is, therefore, to consider the dimensions of the current situation and to propose some steps in a process towards addressing that situation. It would be foolhardy for this committee, or any small group, to prescribe a solution for the Institute at large -- MIT is too varied and diverse to allow that. What is needed is an inclusive process that can focus and support the energy and imagination that fills MIT. The Institute is full of creativity and "problem-solving skills." What would be most useful now is a harnessing of those talents in an effort to build community.

## **Focus**

The issue of community is indeed a broad one. It is so broad that it often overwhelms those who are asked to consider ways of building community. In its report, the Task Force on Student Life and Learning identified the challenge facing MIT to be twofold: "First, how can we do more within the community we have? Second, how can we unite the learning that takes place in the community with the learning available elsewhere?" [2]. Our committee set forth as its initial objective to address this broad challenge.

As this posed challenge was discussed amongst committee members and with leaders of various parts of the Institute community, it became clear that we needed to focus our efforts so that they might not be diffused by the scope of the problem, and that we might make a discernible contribution. Noting that this Committee on Student Life is an entity of the formal faculty governance structure, we agreed to focus on faculty contributions to the Institute community via participation in issues related to student life. In making this commitment, we took particular note of the findings of the Task Force that: "Of the many difficult design problems MIT faces, promoting student and faculty participation in community activities is probably the most difficult." [2]. We furthermore strongly feel that student-faculty interaction is a key building block in the process of building community.

### **Key Findings**

The Committee on Student Life undertook this focus as its major effort for over a year. This work included considerable internal dialogue, meeting with leaders from the undergraduate and graduate student communities and other parts of the Institute, and consideration of current student life activities at the Institute, particularly as affiliated with the Office of the Dean for Student Life. Further consideration of this information resulted in our attempts to identify "community-building" activities in which faculty could and do participate. A compilation of suggestions from committee members led to a rich dialogue around the thoughts and issues embedded within these suggestions. This overall process led to the identification of four key findings with regard to the issue of community at the Institute.

## 1. The Meaning of "Community"

In its report, the Task Force defined community as referring to "...students, faculty, staff, and alumni who have come together on campus for the common purpose of developing the qualities that define the educated individual" [2]. In an article in the Faculty Newsletter, then Undergraduate Association President, Jaime Deveraux, indicated that "MIT is already a community, though maybe not the one everyone wants" [4]. She went on to note that many people feel that there needs to be a sense of broader community. In its internal dialogue and meetings with various leaders within the Institute, the Committee heard expressions of different models of community. This leads to **Finding 1**:

*There is a lack of shared understanding of the meaning of "community" across the Institute.*

## 2. Actions to build community

People act and interact based on their own mental models. In our dialogues, we heard, concomitant with their expressions of community, ways in which individuals act and interact in regard to issues of community. This is particularly true when one thinks about community-building. If we are to work together to build community, it is important that we are building towards the same shared understanding of community. This leads to **Finding 2**:

*Differences in the models that individuals have of "community" lead to very different and potentially counterconstructive actions in acting as and in building our community.*

## 3. Faculty involvement in community building

The Task Force identified faculty commitment/involvement, or lack thereof, as one of the weaknesses of Institute community particularly observing that: "There is a tendency for most faculty to treat community activity as the residual left over when everything else has been done." [2]. Yet, President Vest declared in his 1998-99 report that he feels "...that faculty do have certain collective responsibilities to our students beyond their core duties in the formal classroom and laboratory" [1]. Amongst these he specifically noted the need to work toward better integration of life and learning

with the campus community. Similar differences in opinions were heard as the Committee met with various parts of the community. This leads to **Finding 3:**

*There is wide disagreement as to whether contributing to the Institute community via participation in issues related to student life is an inherent part of being an M.I.T. faculty member.*

#### **4. Faculty reward for contributions to community**

We again go to the rich discussion of the Report of the Task Force on Student Life and Learning where they note that: "Time pressures have negative implications for interaction among faculty members, and there is little recognition of faculty who participate in community activities." [2]. We heard this time and again in our discussions with various members of the Institute community with particular concern expressed about and by junior faculty in terms of the potential negative connotations such time spent on community-building can have on their career process with specific implications in regard to promotion. This leads to **Finding 4:**

*There continues to be a distinct lack of career rewards for faculty contributions to the Institute community via participation in issues related to student life.*

### **Recommendations**

As stated earlier, we seek to develop a process whereby all members of the Institute community can be included in working to reach consensus on answers to questions posed by these findings. Given that the diversity of the Institute is a strength that needs to be harnessed in order to reach solutions to the issues before us, we recommend that:

1. A forum be created by which all members of the Institute can engage in open dialogue to work towards a common understanding of the definition of community and the associated attributes of our community at M.I.T.
2. We build off the energy of the engagement of individuals in this Institute-wide dialogue and work to identify the qualities of activities in which we engage as a community.

3. Students and faculty engage in a dialogue to define expectations of each other in working towards and as community.
4. The faculty and administration engage in a dialogue to define expectations as to faculty contributions to the Institute community via participation in issues related to student life and the associated appropriate rewards, including career rewards, for such.

### Some Initial Thoughts

Initiating this dialogue across the Institute is a prelude to working towards a broad consensus and shared ownership of that consensus and its implementation. With that in mind, we offer these thoughts as starting points for our dialogue.

#### 1. Meaning of Community

The meaning that the Task Force gave to "community" in their report must be and is a starting point in defining our community as:

"...students, faculty, staff, and alumni who have come together on campus for the common purpose of developing the qualities that define the educated individual."

Yet just four years after this report, one sees that our community has already grown beyond this definition. We have virtual pieces of our community with students who work in Cambridge, England, who are parts of distance education programs, and who go off in internships. These students are and must still very much be members of the extended Institute community. This leads to the notions of the *nuclear* Institute community and the *extended* Institute community. Although there are further aspects which differentiate between these two notions of community, a key aspect here is the physical presence on campus.

Whether we consider our extended or nuclear Institute community, it is important to identify the issues that give us the *sense of community*. The common purpose identified by the Task Force gives us a shared foundation upon which to build. Yet, a house is not a home. Thus, we suggest the **sense of belonging** and being part of a home are key parts of a community. This includes a **feeling of safety** associated with

this home. Our home is also a place of constant change and building and our community shares that characteristic. We therefore identify the **ladder of community** as a central process that the members of the community endorse and embrace in building community. This represents the work of members of the community to climb the stages of *understanding, empathy, respect, and acceptance* of other members of the community for who and what they are.

Beyond these three key parts of sense of belonging, a feeling of safety, and the ladder of community, a community has a shared goal amongst its members that helps to establish a **strong identity and spirit as a community**. Therefore there are attributes of a particular community that contribute to this identity. We list the following attributes of our Institute community as a starter to our dialogue:

- Shares a purpose of developing the educated individual.
- Cares for the *whole* person and values individual growth of the whole person.
- Shares responsibility for each individual's success.
- Seeks personal contact.
- Builds on common intellectual curiosity.
- Is willing to explore, accept, and change.
- Encourages risk and supports failure.
- Encourages involvement and a devotion to minimization and elimination of barriers for such.
- Encourages and values outreach, building connections, and contributions to community.
- Is devoted to quality, excellence, and pride (in and of MIT).

We can add to and build upon these initial thoughts in our dialogue.

## 2. Building Community

The Task Force pointed to a strength of the Institute community being the many sub-communities and all the activities that take place within such. This does not, however, address the issue of building the "Institute community". In so doing, we see

a need to identify those things that we do as an overall community. This will enable us to extract the key attributes of those ongoings to identify "Institute community-building" activities. We list the following as qualities of such activities:

- Brings people into recurring personal contact beyond academic environment with the strong possibility of integrating academic issues.
- Contributes to the growth of the overall community.
- Contributes to the individual growth of the whole person.
- Reaches out and builds connections.
- Helps to establish and articulate MIT's identity including . . . .
  - . . . . our shared purpose
  - . . . . our shared history and traditions
  - . . . . our shared vision for our community and Institute
- Establishes a feeling of ownership of *our* Institute and *our* community in each individual.
- Is intimately involved to better our Institute and our community.

Such a list of qualities of activities can serve as a set of metrics, even criteria, as various activities are considered for their value as community-building activities within our Institute.

### 3. Faculty and Students

In the November 20, 2001 edition of The Tech, guest columnist Jeffrey Roberts, former president of the Dormitory Council, wrote about student life and community noting that: "It is time for more interaction across the campus and among students, faculty, staff, and alumni" [5]. He went on to indicate that such interaction will only be successful if students desire such and decide to invest their time and energy in such interaction. We heard in our interactions that the faculty and administration cannot mandate the "how and what" of interactions between faculty and students. Similarly, students cannot simply expect the "how and what" of interactions without considering the limitations and demands on faculty. In her column in the faculty newsletter, then Undergraduate Association President Jaime Deveraux pointedly noted that with regard



to faculty, "... [students] often find it difficult to see where your opinions and ideas stem from. We are not fully aware of the pressures of research, writing, teaching, and tenure. We may not know about the other obligations you have to industry, your families, or other organizations." [4]. As she goes on to indicate, learning more about each other is a first step. This can lead to working together on issues of "how and what". This, as in any items within a community, must be shared and agreed upon. This requires an engagement and open dialogue working towards consensus.

#### 4. Faculty Expectations and Rewards

The increased demand on time from a variety of sources has made it even more difficult for faculty to balance personal life, research, teaching (in the traditional sense), and involvement in community and specifically student life. It would not be tolerable to place another demand on faculty time without recognition that this time will come from another area (**not** personal life) where the Institute already has specific expectations. This additional demand can be better handled by having it distributed across the faculty. As President Vest noted in his report: "If we devote ourselves to building campus community, the incremental time involved can be modest, but the consequent enhancement of our already vital and exciting student experience will be great." [1]. Furthermore, time and energy spent must be recognized and rewarded. When the Task Force noted that "...the responsibilities of the faculty include participation in community, balanced properly with research and teaching", they also specifically called for recognition of student and faculty participation in community activities just as achievements in academics and research are recognized.

Much as in other areas of faculty responsibility, the specific expectations for involvement in community-building activities need to be explicitly identified and communicated to all faculty -- current and future. These include aspects of time, achievement, and quality. In regards to community-building, we choose to focus initially on issues of time and type of activity.

We suggest three specific aspects of time and type of activity around which dialogue needs to take place:

- The nominal number of hours spent per term by each faculty member on community-building activities.
- The minimum number of contacts with students per term by each faculty member in community-building activities.
- The contacts must be of the type that . . . .
  - . . . . go beyond business as usual.
  - . . . . are informal.
  - . . . . can involve more than one faculty member at a time.
  - . . . . can partake of a variety of "entry points" (e.g. student residences, based in academic departments, cultural events).

It is important to emphasize that we are in a build-up mode. Thus, we begin with identification of these initial aspects and expect a continued dialogue and effort to work towards identifying our common expectations on the issues surrounding community and community-building.

### **Next Steps**

The thoughts conveyed herein are not meant to be definitive answers to the issues related to community-building and student life within our Institute. Rather, these findings and initial thoughts are the result of the dialogue and discussion amongst a small group of faculty, students, and administrators over a finite period of time. While this group of people sought advice and input from various parts of the Institute, it is not possible for the group of people to truly represent the diversity of individuals and opinions throughout our Institute. These thoughts, then, are provided as stimuli to heighten awareness and to form the foundation for a rejuvenated dialogue across the entire Institute around these issues.

The first steps in building our Institute-wide community lie in understanding the issues, perceptions, and needs of the diverse assemblage of individuals and sub-communities that make up our entire Institute. This dialogue needs to seek the participation of the diversity of people and opinions that make up the Institute; be open to and respect any and all people and thoughts; concentrate primarily on listening

and sharing; and work towards a goal but not at the expense of true dialogue. Opening that dialogue will help us to build our understanding on our way up the community-building ladder of “understanding, empathy, respect, and acceptance”. Furthermore, any commitment of effort in this regard must be a commitment from our entire community, not simply imposed by administrative or committee action. Such actions often fail because they do not involve the entire community in the consensus-building process.

The Committee therefore suggests that the first community-building activities be focused around a campus-wide dialogue to define the vision and attributes of our Institute community. This process would have the specific objective of reaching consensus within our Institute community on the following four items as brought forward by the Committee herein:

1. A more specific definition of this community
2. A definition of actions in which we partake as a community
3. Expectations of how students and faculty interact
4. Expectations of the level of faculty involvement in community-building activities and associated rewards

The thoughts contained herein can serve as a starting point for this dialogue. We further suggest that the first community-building activities possess the following characteristics:

1. Create a friendly, relaxed, and sociable atmosphere for students and faculty to discuss/exchange ideas on any topic/issue of mutual interest and/or concern.
2. Give students the opportunity to get to know faculty as a person and vice versa.
3. Give students a sense they are cared about, and that MIT is truly another home.
4. Give the community a common sense of purpose, and therefore unite the community.
5. Be based on deep respect for all members of the community, recognizing that while understanding that there are areas where people may disagree, fundamental ethical values should be common to all.
6. Be recurrent or continuous, so that there are multiple opportunities to enable familiarity, respect, and frankness.

7. Be based outside curricula and if possible product-focused, so that the power dynamic that is often present in the classroom is avoided.
8. Enable free mingling - i.e. relaxed atmosphere to speak about interests other than academics.
9. Be organized by the participants themselves and not by separate Institute committees.
10. Be fun activities that both parties share, which can bring them together.

These characteristics were developed as benchmark characteristics for community-building activities in general. Thus, using them in the consensus-building process will give the wider community the opportunity to evaluate their appropriateness within the specifics of the Institute and also provide a seed of ideas from which a more complete listing of attributes might grow.

As this process progresses, different perspectives within our community will result in conflict. It is important for us to accept and even applaud this. As Boyer notes: "As we explore the essentials of campus community, this may be a moment to revisit the idea that the presence of community does not imply or require the absence of conflict. Conflict in any organization can have constructive and destructive valence. The conventional wisdom is that conflict signals individual or organizational pathology, and its presence is an alarm call to seize the nearest hose and douse the fire. This narrow view, however, misses the personal and organizational growth possibilities, the clearing-away and renewal promise that may be found in conflict." He further emphasizes: "Not the absence of conflict but its thoughtful orchestration is what marks the presence of campus community" [6]. We must keep this in mind as we move forward and work towards the delicate balance of consensus.

To further enhance the discussions, we have developed a list of possible activities that can be both pilot activities (i.e. for evaluation) and topics of discussion (i.e. seeds from which other ideas might grow) during the consensus-building process. These follow:

1. Subjects (graduate as well as undergraduate) have a social component consisting of three (3) dinners hosted by the faculty member for all (or a subset of) the students enrolled in the subject. In subjects with less than 30 students, 3 dinners with 10 students per dinner would give everybody a chance to meet sociably. In larger

- subjects, TA's in recitation groups replace faculty, and a lottery system could be used to select the 'lucky 10' for each of the three dinners hosted by the faculty member in charge of the subject.
2. Advisors meet with student advisees more than once or twice a term to touch base and have interesting or meaningful discussions. This would help redress woefully inadequate faculty advising.
  3. Faculty work to incorporate students more into the family life of faculty, e.g. inviting each advisee (or pairs) for dinner once per semester. This gives a chance to know the advisee, and vice versa, and may encourage students to seek out faculty if the need for help arises.
  4. Advisors set up small (5 to 8 students at most) discussion groups with advisees, probably over lunch or dinner, to discuss issues chosen by the groups -- careers, MIT campus issues, world affairs (could invite an expert faculty member).
  5. Students and faculty participate together in community-outreach activities, to help parts of the city and world in need of better education. There are already several mechanisms in place for such outreach activities and these may provide more meaning beyond encouraging social interaction.
  6. Faculty have students within a class book a residence kitchen and gather, three or four times, to prepare food together.
  7. Faculty with a group of students obtain a decent map of Cambridge/Boston, plot a "tourist trail", and then walk the route over several sessions.
  8. Departments hold monthly departmental social events such as Make-your-own-pizza-for-lunch/dinner where faculty and students could take turns hosting, and could mingle outside the academic setting (possible times are Friday afternoons and Thursday nights).
  9. Research groups hold retreats: one/two-day retreats (doesn't have to cost too much - roughing it out can also bring about bonding).
  10. Departments participate in interdepartmental competitions, such as baseball matches, where faculty and students compete against other departments.
  11. Each department form a student advisory committee to meet on a regular basis and act in an advisory capacity to the department head on matters that students feel impact their educational experience. This would be a student-run committee with guidance from the department head. Besides academic issues, this committee could help the faculty begin to bridge the community gap by suggesting activities that are

not only relevant from the student perspective but are connected closely to the specific character of each department.

In closing, we voice a strong consensus that the Chancellor and Provost need to work with the governance of the Faculty to commit the resources of the Institute to make this happen. Of all the resources available at the Institute, the most precious to all of us is time -- the time of students, the time of faculty, and the time of staff. Yet, without this commitment of time, we will never be able to achieve that for which we seek -- a true community. Part of our dialogue must be around what we are willing to sacrifice in order to devote more time to building community. This is very much a dialogue around our values, as individuals and as an Institute, a dialogue that is long overdue and one that will lead us to build, enrich, and sustain our Institute-wide community.

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Names indicate all members  
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