

FROM THE FACULTY CHAIR

The Faculty Chair: A Job Description (2.0)

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Over the last year, several people have asked me what the chair of the faculty does. In this column – which resumes a tradition of columns from the faculty chair in the FNL – I want to begin with a brief outline of the role of faculty governance at MIT. I'll focus on the big picture rather than trying to be exhaustive; my hope is that readers will come away with a realistic sense of the structure and capacities of this role and of faculty governance more broadly.

A 1997 column in the FNL by an outgoing chair of the faculty described the general contours of the role in a way that I (and I expect many of my predecessors) would continue to endorse.^[1] That column is worth reading, and I'll begin by citing it.

The first job of the chair is to “represent the views of the faculty to the administration”: candidly reporting their sentiments, participating vigorously in discussions at Academic Council, and creating opportunities for the senior officers to interact with the faculty and hear their concerns firsthand.^[2]

It's a convention of writing (and perhaps of thinking), in some circumstances, to treat a collective activity as if it were the actions of a single person. While some aspects of the chair's role are indeed individual, the work and thinking behind the role is in important ways a joint effort.

Before taking on the role, each chair has served a year as chair-elect, working closely with an earlier group of officers – and indeed, whoever currently serves as chair has a wealth of distinguished predecessors whose knowledge and experience provides an ongoing resource. He or she will also work closely with two other officers – for my term, Elly Nedivi (BCS/Bio) and Peko Hosoi (MechE/Math/IDSS) – and the faculty governance administrator, Tami Kaplan.^[3] The team aspect of faculty governance provides a broader base of understanding, ensures more diverse networks, and strengthens our institutional memory and knowledge of policies.

The two associate chairs each sit either on the Committee on the Undergraduate Program or the Committee on Graduate Programs, and we meet weekly as a group that usually includes the chairs of those committees, currently Bill Minicozzi (Math) and Duane Boning (EECS). All three faculty officers are members of the Faculty Policy Committee (FPC); the chair of the faculty is *ex officio* chair of FPC. That committee's members provide yet another source of high-level perspectives, experiences and opinions; its membership represents the five Schools and includes representatives of the Undergraduate Association and the Graduate Student Council. In short, anyone serving as chair of the faculty can draw in practice on a reservoir of expertise and critical thinking, and a roster of relationships, that exceeds what any of us could muster on our own.

Faculty governance has several formal channels for the candid reporting of views that the 1997 column identifies as the first of our responsibilities. The chair of the faculty meets privately with each of the senior officers (the president, provost, and chancellor) at regular intervals. As a group, the faculty officers meet monthly with the senior officers to set the agenda for the next faculty meeting and discuss other matters of concern. (In turn, the president, provost, and chair of the corporation visit the FPC at regular but less frequent intervals.) These are the minimal settings for interactions that will typically be far more extensive, both in person and over email.

The chair of the faculty also sits on **Academic Council**, which currently meets every other week with additional meetings twice a year to review promotion and tenure cases. Although the current chair is listed on the Academic Council roster, you will *not* see the chair on the org-chart or reporting list for MIT's senior leadership; the faculty officers are not members of the administration, and do not have reporting relationships other than (as we understand it) to the faculty itself.[4] Chairs of the faculty typically view that organizational independence as accompanied by the responsibility to think independently and speak freely to our colleagues who serve in the administration.

Structurally, this independence is not simply oppositional. Another aspect of the chair's responsibilities is to seek "congruence between the agenda of the administration and the interests of the faculty." [5] That is, the faculty have a voice, individually and through governance, that should be clearly expressed. However – with the exception of the academic program, on which the faculty acts with power – the capacity and resources to execute and enable most of what we might want to speak about reside within the administration. When the faculty and the administration can find alignment, the Institute moves.

As governance, we also have a significant ability to shape policy by other means. The chair of the faculty appoints chairs to the standing committees of the faculty and, to some extent, can direct their work. [6] When topics of concern arise, the chair of the faculty will frequently join with one of the senior officers in charging an ad hoc committee, working group, or task force on a particular topic, charging it to study and report or make recommendations on particular topics. To give two recent examples, the Ad Hoc Working Group on Freedom of Expression issued **a report** last year whose recommendations we are now working through, while the Research Administration Faculty Advisory Committee is currently finalizing a report on their work. The chair of the faculty is also frequently invited to participate *ex officio* or by appointing a delegate on a variety of policymaking or study committees, or (again) to make recommendations on their membership.

Committee work may sound rather dull, and in fact the volume of meetings and email can be daunting even as the pace of action is perennially slowed by the need to consult broadly and by the bottlenecks of individual calendars and capacities. From another perspective, though, these committees represent an effort to channel and organize the insight and expertise of MIT's faculty towards problems that we think are worth our collective and individual time.

Choosing the problems for governance to tackle involves a balancing act between business that comes to us, and priorities we set. Some of what comes to us will be routine, or at least anticipated; some business will arrive as a surprise or an emergency. While we can't look around the corner for such surprises, we can look to the record of the past for successful and unsuccessful cases of meeting the moment, and indeed for analysis of those cases. At the same time, the way we operate in normal circumstances and on routine matters, ideally, builds a set of shared understandings and resilient relationships that give us greater capacity to meet the demands of the extraordinary.

Meetings can matter, in other words, as process as well as for their content; whenever we come together as colleagues, from stairwells and coffee rooms to the stately settings of conference rooms or the Institute faculty meeting, the structure and manner of how we speak and think together in a daily way

function as a kind of deposit against future needs. In particular, I believe we should aim, in the way we tackle the dailiness of institutional life, to create environments where trust and the articulation of disagreement are mutually enabling.

As this two-year term of faculty governance begins, there are responsibilities the officers expect to take on, others we can't yet anticipate, and priorities each of us has identified as a focus. The responsibilities of AY '23-'24 are substantial, although at the time of writing they are not accompanied by the extraordinary circumstances and demands of the last four years.

With the concurrence of senior leadership and the academic deans, we will be setting in motion a comprehensive review of the undergraduate program; this particular effort to think about the education of the future will need to build in lessons learned from previous such efforts. Faculty governance will also participate, along with many partners, in a complex effort to adapt aspects of how we manage graduate education. As I write, the membership of the Graduate Student Union is voting on a Collective Bargaining Agreement, reached after roughly a year of negotiations. Yet even as MIT and the Union were deep in discussion on some topics, on others we had already begun to move towards changes that we agree should happen, and are within the purview of governance to move forward. These will take work.

Even as we prepare for the expected and unexpected work of the next two years, my colleagues Elly Nedivi and Peko Hosoi are beginning to dig into two additional topics that powerfully shape our capacities as an academic community: the current landscape of efforts on diversity, equity, and inclusion, and of efforts on freedom of expression, respectively. My own core interest is communication, which overlaps with both these focus areas.

Questions about communication go to the heart of our governance model. How do we learn what faculty think, so that we can represent and incorporate their views – the content and diversity of opinions as well as the degree of intensity with which they are held? How do we ensure faculty are well informed on emerging issues and topics, and create opportunities for all of us to discuss, reflect, and provide input in a timely way? Even more broadly, almost every problem or question that has come to me as chair so far involves some aspect of information flow, as well as (frequently) some aspect of how topics and conversations are framed, the manner in which we talk together about the things we need to talk about, even the ways we understand what our words mean.

Talking well requires having both information and opportunity. Yet while the modes of communication available to each of us in daily life have multiplied and diversified, the infrastructure of communication within MIT has become quite attenuated.[7] The sheer volume of emails we receive puts any individual message at high risk of being overlooked or, if opened, forgotten. The faculty meeting is a more complicated and interesting topic, but I'll simply say that even with the move to a hybrid format, you can't count on reaching everyone you need to through that means. Neither Institute faculty meetings nor all-faculty emails provide a reliable way of keeping all faculty informed, much less encouraging exchange. We can work on better emails and more engaging meetings but the larger problem of ensuring a reliable flow of ideas and information remains.

There are two particular areas where we might begin to get a purchase on how communication happens within our community. First, there is the very old and still rewarding effect of frequenting shared spaces. Whenever something brings us together in the same place, information moves, and the capacity for that dyad of trust/disagreement can be fostered. Second, faculty research and creativity have generated some intriguing tools and practices in this domain, and we are exploring what they might do for us on campus. In the shorter term, we are trying to create more events like the monthly drop-in breakfasts for faculty at the MIT Museum, inaugurated by Lily Tsai and supplementing the existing program of Random Faculty dinners and lunches. We also expect to pilot a pulse survey tool this year as a way to sample opinion and signal topics that may call for engagement. Both the ideas of shared space and of tools for

internal communication also have longer-term aspects that may be ripe for discussion in future columns. Yet though real progress will take work and time, we hope that some smaller initial efforts will take concrete form quite soon.

The chair of the faculty exercises significant power in the sense of voice and representation, through the means I've described. These means differ from those available to colleagues in administrative positions, who can deploy resources of budget and staff as well as knowledge and expertise, but they are real. Another distinctive feature of roles in governance is their regular rotation, with each group of officers serving a two-year term. My successor as chair of the faculty will be nominated and elected this spring, and you are invited to consider nominating others (or yourself).^[8] Like every group of officers, we hope to leave the Institute a little better for whoever comes next.

[1] Lawrence S. Bacow, "**The Faculty Chair: A Job Description**," *MIT Faculty Newsletter*, IX.4, 8-9. The archives of the *Faculty Newsletter* are deeply informative not only on past events, but on some enduring concerns and structures.

[2] Bacow, "Faculty Chair."

[3] *Rules and Regulations of the Faculty*, **Section 1.21**, includes the President of the Institute as, *ex officio*, an officer of the faculty, a role preserved largely in the practice that the President chairs the Institute faculty meetings (<https://facultygovernance.mit.edu/faculty-rules-page#1-22>).

[4] <https://orgchart.mit.edu/senior-leadership>; <https://orgchart.mit.edu/academic-council>.

[5] Bacow, "Faculty Chair."

[6] A full list of standing committees of the faculty (and others) can be found at <https://facultygovernance.mit.edu/committees-and-councils>.

[7] For instance, *The Tech* long provided coverage of Institute faculty meetings in a widely distributed weekly newspaper.

[8] The Nominations Committee will send out a survey this fall requesting committee preferences and inviting nominations for the role of chair (<https://facultygovernance.mit.edu/committee/committee-nominations>); the chair of the committee is Rodrigo Verdi (Sloan), and it is staffed by Tami Kaplan. The election process is described in *Rules and Regulations of the Faculty*, Section 1.51: <https://facultygovernance.mit.edu/faculty-rules-page#1-51>.