

MIT Faculty Newsletter

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contents

- ▶ **Editorial**
[Financing Undergraduate Education](#)

- ▶ [MIT Faculty Survey: It's About Time](#)

- ▶ [Berwick, Lee, and Orlin Elected to FNL Editorial Board](#)

- ▶ **From The Faculty Chair**
[Reconsidering the Value of Service to MIT](#)

- ▶ [Confidentiality in Recruitment, Promotion, and Tenure Reviews](#)

- ▶ [Provost Announces Faculty Renewal Program](#)

- ▶ [Endowment Spending Policy at MIT](#)

- ▶ [A New Approach to MIT's Financial Planning](#)

- ▶ [A Primer on Indirect Costs](#)

- ▶ [Changes in Engineering Education](#)

- ▶ [Anthropologists Express Concern Over Government Plan to Support Military-Related Research in Universities](#)

- ▶ [Reflections on Nominations and Elections for Faculty Officers and Committees at MIT](#)

- ▶ [Initiative on Faculty Race and Diversity: Research Team and Effort Launched](#)

- ▶ **MIT Poetry**
[The Man I Killed; Lise](#)

- ▶ [Creating a Culture of Communication: Assessing the Implementation of the Undergraduate Communication Requirement](#)

- ▶ [The Vision Thing](#)

- ▶ [Lerman Now Dean for Graduate Education](#)

- ▶ **Letters**
[The Spellings Commission Backs Off](#)

- ▶ **Letters**
[Who Should Be Allowed to Speak at Faculty Meetings?](#)

- ▶ **M.I.T. Numbers**
[from the 2008 Faculty Survey: Reasonableness of Workload](#)

- ▶ **M.I.T. Numbers**
[from the 2008 Faculty Survey: Satisfaction with . . .](#)

- ▶ **M.I.T. Numbers**
[from the 2008 Faculty Survey: Sources of Stress](#)

 [Printable Version](#)

Reflections on Nominations and Elections for Faculty Officers and Committees at MIT

Michel DeGraff

The Officers of the Faculty and the Standing Faculty Committees constitute the core of faculty governance at MIT. These positions and structures are the main venue for faculty to conduct Institute business, to promulgate the rules, policies, and procedures that govern MIT and shape its future. The Committee on Nominations, which I've been serving on for the past two years, is central to governance at MIT. Every year, at the April faculty meeting, it nominates a slate a candidates for Officers of the Faculty, and for the membership of all Standing Faculty Committees, to be considered for a vote by the faculty at its May meeting. Any flaw in the structure and operations of the Nominations Committee can ripple through MIT's entire governance.

The Committee on Nominations: History, Structure, Mandate, Rules, and "Standard Practices"

The candidates on the Nominations Committee's slate usually run for election totally unopposed. In no sense can these candidates be seen as having been elected. In effect, the Committee on Nominations *appoints* the Officers of the Faculty and the elected membership of all the other Standing Faculty Committees. As far as I can tell, only once was the process for alternative nominations, as outlined in *Rules and Regulations of the Faculty*, ever invoked. In 2005, a group of underrepresented minority faculty contested the slate submitted by the Committee on Nominations at the April faculty meeting. That challenge was motivated by the perception that the Nominations Committee's slate lacked diversity, and all three alternate nominees were from the minority faculty ranks. This challenge resulted in the election of two underrepresented minority faculty to the membership of Standing Faculty Committees – one on the Faculty Policy Committee, the other on the Committee for Academic Performance.

The Committee on Nominations is the only Standing Committee whose members are determined exclusively by the President, a practice going back to 1907.

There have been a few proposals over the years to change the way the Committee on Nominations is organized, giving to the Chair of the Faculty or to the faculty-at-large, rather than to the President, the responsibility for selecting potential members. According to some of these proposals, the faculty-at-large would play a more significant role in choosing the Officers of the Faculty and in deciding the membership of its Standing Faculty Committees, including the Nominations Committee. In one such proposal, which was attached to the April 1951 slate, the Nominations Committee explained the benefits of "competitive election" for committee membership. The fact that the *Faculty Newsletter* has now successfully run an Institute-wide election where the number of nominees exceeded the number of slots to be filled shows that such competitive elections can be seamlessly accomplished, using technology developed right here at MIT. As it turns out, the number of voters for the *Faculty Newsletter* Editorial Board exceeded by more than four times the

number of those usually present at the May faculty meeting where Officers of the Faculty and Standing Committee members are elected.

In a 2004 article in the *Faculty Newsletter* (**Vol. XVII No. 1, September/October 2004**), Professor Rafael Bras, who was then Chair of the Faculty, described a proposal by the Faculty Policy Committee whereby the outgoing Chair of the Faculty would select the members of the Committee on Nominations. In response, Professors Lotte Bailyn, Stephen Graves, and Kim Vandiver, three former Chairs of the Faculty, chose to diffuse the power of appointment by proposing that “the president and outgoing chair work together to select the nominating committee” (*MIT Faculty Newsletter, Vol. XVII No. 2, November/December 2004*). But another former Chair of the Faculty, Professor Steve Lerman, endorsed Professor Bras’ proposal to move the appointment of the Nominations Committee away from the administration:

“If nothing else, having the Nominations Committee formally independent of the administration would enhance the perception that the leaders of the governance system are representatives of the faculty.” (*MIT Faculty Newsletter, Vol. XVII, No. 3, January/February 2005.*)

Yet, the President still appoints the Committee on Nominations and its chair. Therefore, the Committee must work carefully to ensure that the nomination process proceeds without undue influence from the Office of the President or from others from the administration. Any faculty member who has served on Institute-level committees can readily appreciate how extremely dedicated and helpful the support staff of these committees usually is. But the staff support for the Nominations Committee comes directly from the Office of the President. The line between providing support and exerting undue influence is often blurred – for example, through comments and suggestions that the support staff makes about the nomination process (including comments about particular nominees and suggestions regarding procedural details), and through meeting records that they take and distribute selectively.

[▢ Back to top](#)

This year, the Nominations Committee was subjected to notions of “standard practices” and “committee rules” from the administration, many of which the Committee had not been apprised of before or during its deliberations. Not one of these practices and rules could be found in *Rules and Regulations of the Faculty*. Much of this lore about “practices” and “rules” had the effect of curtailing the Committee’s efforts to make the nomination process more transparent and inclusive.

The *only* rules for the nomination process, as stated in *Rules and Regulations of the Faculty*, are:

“a. The Committee shall nominate the following in the appropriate years: a Chair-elect, an Associate Chair, and a Secretary of the Faculty; and shall also nominate candidates for the elected membership of the Standing Committees.

b. The Committee shall circulate the list of nominees to all members of the Faculty not later than the April meeting of the Faculty.

c. The Committee shall have power to fill any vacancies that may occur during the year in the offices of Chair, Chair-elect, Associate Chair, and Secretary, and in the elected membership of the Standing Committees.”

Rules and Regulations of the Faculty does not specify *how* the Nominations Committee is to arrive at the names of nominees, nor how many names should be put forth for consideration for any given slot. The Committee itself must come up with the most appropriate mode of nominee selection in order to create a list of candidates who can best serve the Institute's interests and goals as Officers of the Faculty and members of the Standing Faculty Committees.

There needs to be a more systematic way to develop a slate of potential candidates and to go beyond the Nominations Committee's natural but limited sources of names from networks of friends and colleagues.

The Committee does rely on a database of answers to a faculty-wide committee-preference questionnaire that is circulated and maintained by the Office of the President. But this questionnaire needs to be revised by the Nominations Committee, with options for individual faculty to suggest others, besides themselves, for membership on Standing Faculty Committees and for positions as Officers of the Faculty. Such options would make the nomination process more inclusive.

The Committee on Nominations should not rely on information labeled as "off the record," especially when "off the record" comments may effectively exclude potential nominees by means of hearsay or confidential faculty-personnel issues. Such comments should not go beyond that nominee's personnel review committee, especially since the potential nominee may not even be privy to many of these comments.

Is the aforementioned alternative nomination process, as outlined in *Rules and Regulations of the Faculty*, a reasonable way to bring about a representative list of nominees for Officers of the Faculty and for Standing Committee members? Indeed, the alternative nomination process, when invoked, entails an electoral contest between nominees for particular slots, as it did in 2005 with the election of two underrepresented minority faculty to the Standing Faculty Committees. Yet, the structure and timeline of this alternative process are stacked against the alternative nominees and their nominators. Witness the following clauses:

"Nominations alternative to those circulated by the Committee on Nominations may be made *either at the April meeting of the Faculty or in writing to the Secretary of the Faculty by the Wednesday following the April Faculty meeting*, provided in all cases that the consent of the nominee has been obtained. For each candidate for any *contested* committee, information on the departmental affiliation and prior Institute service should be made available to the faculty *at least two weeks prior to the May Faculty meeting*. Candidates for *contested* committees may optionally submit a short statement to be circulated to the Faculty at the same time." (emphases added).

In other words, in cases when there is dissatisfaction with the Nominations Committee's slate when it's put forward at the April meeting, alternate nominees and their nominators have at most one week after that April meeting to decide and prepare to run for elections in May, and at most two weeks before the May meeting to provide additional information regarding Institute service (the latter requirement was added after the April 2005 alternative nominations).

In contrast, the Nominations Committee has about seven months to look for nominees and prepare its slate for the April meeting, and it need not provide any additional information about any of its nominees that are not contested.

It seems to me important that the faculty be informed of the qualifications (e.g., prior Institute service) of each faculty on the nominations slate, whether or not the Nominations Committee's slate is contested. Yet, it is only when the alternative nomination process is invoked that the Nominations Committee *must* provide additional information about its nominees – information that in any case may help the faculty cast their votes in a responsible manner.

The above asymmetries do not encourage the use of the alternative nomination process.

If the Nominations Committee were to solicit nominations – for both Standing Faculty Committees and Officers of the Faculty – from the faculty-at-large early in the nomination cycle and include those nominations in their April slate alongside the Committee's own nominations, the entire faculty would have much more significant input into the regular nomination process. Such a procedure would incorporate into the mainstream of faculty governance the major objective of the alternative nomination process, while removing the latter's structural handicaps. This would also make both the regular and alternative nomination processes more legitimate and representative, thus decreasing the risk of making alternate nominees – actually, any nominee – look controversial as they are voted upon and as they fulfill their appointments if elected.

The idea of having the faculty-at-large suggest nominees early in the nomination cycle so that all duly nominated candidates (from both the Nominations Committee and the faculty) be put on the same slate goes back to a suggestion made by Professor Bras as Chair of the Faculty at the November 2005 faculty meeting. This proposal has never been implemented.

At any rate, MIT is still far from any fair and transparent process that would allow the Officers of the Faculty and the elected members of Standing Committees to broadly represent the faculty-at-large.

[Back to top](#)

Nomination of Officers of the Faculty

The Chair of the Faculty serves, *ex officio*, as chair of the Faculty Policy Committee, determines the leadership of each Standing Committee (except for the Committee on Nominations), plans faculty meetings with the administration and other faculty officers, and sits on Academic Council and on various Standing and Special Committees. The Chair of the Faculty, the Associate Chair of the Faculty, and the Secretary of the Faculty all must be able to represent and advocate for the Faculty as a whole, in all its diversity and complexity, and to remain relatively independent of the administration, while being able to work with it. Therefore, the nomination of the Officers of the Faculty is perhaps the most important task of the Committee on Nominations.

The ad hoc procedures used to nominate members of the Standing Faculty Committees are inadequate for that purpose, but they are even more inadequate for the task of selecting the Officers of the Faculty. As a member of the Committee on Nominations, I have come to a similar view to that of the Editorial Board of the *Faculty Newsletter*, namely:

“Officers of the Faculty should be openly nominated and elected by the faculty, in a process that allows candidates with differing views and priorities to run for the office on a public platform.” (*MIT Faculty Newsletter*, Vol. XX No. 4, March/April 2008.)

This proposal is similar in spirit to the Faculty Policy Committee's opinion, as reported in the aforementioned *Faculty Newsletter* article by Professor Bras in 2004, that it is the faculty as a whole who should provide nominations for Standing Committees and for the Chair of the Faculty position.

Pending the implementation of such proposals, the Nominations Committee already has the license to find and nominate candidates for Officers of the Faculty based on their qualifications, prior service, preferences, and so on. The Committee must be careful not to fill the Officers of the Faculty positions as stepping-stones to positions into the upper administration.

In one recent case, the Chair of the Faculty resigned in the middle of her term to become Associate Provost, leaving the small group of three faculty officers gutted. The Committee on Nominations appointed her replacement as Chair of the Faculty, following the *Rules and Regulations of the Faculty*, without going through any semblance of an election. This appointment, in turn, gave the selected faculty member two simultaneous and conflicting roles over several critical months: Chair of the Faculty and chair of a major tenure grievance committee. The grievance in question implicated the academic unit of the then-chair of the Nominations Committee. An open election of the Chair of the Faculty at that time may have uncovered these issues, which affected both faculty governance and the handling of the drawn-out grievance case.

So, for many reasons, there is an extra need for the nomination of the Chair of the Faculty to be protected as much as possible from direct or indirect influence from the administration.

Here is yet another instance of undue influence by the administration on the Committee on Nominations. The Office of the President has pushed the view, as established practice, that the nominees for Associate Chair and Secretary of the Faculty, though submitted by the Committee on Nominations, are to be handpicked by the Chair of the Faculty, rather than independently chosen by the Nominations Committee. This view is not supported by the procedure and authority outlined in *Rules and Regulations of the Faculty*.

There's more, still related to this year's nomination cycle: In January, the Nominations Committee moved to make our selection procedures more sensitive to the interests of a diverse and complex faculty, and to give the nomination process more legitimacy – through more transparency and more fairness. We stopped this effort, however, after the chair of the Nominations Committee consulted with the Office of the President, with other members of the administration, and with past chairs of the Committee on Nominations. We were planning to solicit input from the faculty-at-large about candidates for the Chair of the Faculty, but were told that such a “change of procedure” did not conform with “established practice” and would require prior discussion at an Institute-wide faculty meeting. In my opinion, such input from these and other undisclosed sources undermined the independence and the integrity of the nomination process. Besides, such a directive finds no basis in *Rules and Regulations of the Faculty*.

As far as I can tell, when the first faculty committee-preference questionnaire was introduced in the late 1950s, it was not previously discussed at any faculty meeting. After the Committee on Nominations discussed the advantages and disadvantages of such a questionnaire, it enthusiastically approved the procedure as one way to ensure wider faculty participation in governance. It was within the mandate of the Committee on Nominations, in accordance with *Rules and Regulations of the Faculty*, to mold the nomination process to achieve its goal of maximizing faculty input into the choice of nominees.

Half a century later, our main source of input from the faculty regarding the nomination process still comes from a preference questionnaire that is basically an outdated form seeking self-nominations for the Standing Faculty Committees. This questionnaire only provides loose guidance to the nomination process. There regularly are cases of faculty

who are not offered the nominations they prefer, as well as cases of faculty who are offered nominations for which they didn't state any preference. As for the Officers of the Faculty, there currently is no established mechanism whatsoever for broader and systematic faculty input with respect to determining candidates for these positions. Yet these positions are of utmost importance for representing the faculty in issues that are central to Institute business.

One piece of good news is that the Committee on Nominations now seems committed to seriously examining the issues raised in this article, to learning more about the history of governance at MIT, and to improving the nomination and election process, including the mechanisms whereby the Nominations Committee is appointed and structured within MIT's overall governance system. In a related vein, the proposal of a Faculty Senate **in the [previous Faculty Newsletter](#)** deserves ample consideration as one way to help increase the transparency and integrity of our entire system of governance.

[▲ Back to top](#)

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