

MIT Faculty Newsletter

Vol. XXI No. 1
September / October 2008

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From The Faculty Chair Agenda Items: Old and New

[Bish Sanyal](#)

It is intriguing how the beginning of a new academic year still evokes in me a sense of excitement mixed with apprehension. Every fall I look forward to meeting new students and faculty, hoping that the freshness of their ideas will blow away the staleness of old ways of thinking accumulated over the years.

As I write this in mid-August, cherishing the remains of the summer even as I get ready for the academic year 2008-2009, it seems worthwhile to refocus our attention on agenda items that would enhance the learning environment we call MIT. I have two such initiatives in mind.

The first pertains to an old but central issue in academia: promotion and tenure. The second addresses a relatively new trend, influenced by the spread of information technology: how to ensure that the knowledge we produce is disseminated widely and on time for scholarly deliberations. Both initiatives will be faculty-led, and hence will require your active involvement.

First, the old challenge: Can we improve the transparency of the promotion and tenure process at MIT?

Some may argue that MIT's promotion and tenure processes have worked quite well. After all, nearly 88 percent of the faculty responding to the 2008 Faculty Quality of Life Survey were satisfied with the process. So, why bother to fix a system that seems to work well? Although a reasonable position, one also needs to consider that the survey also demonstrated that: 35 percent of MIT faculty do not think that the criteria for tenure are clearly communicated; 30 percent do not know how different aspects of faculty performance are weighted in their evaluation; 40 percent do not know how committee members are selected for the review committee; 58.6 percent received no mentoring, and of those mentored only 54 percent found it useful; 35 percent are not aware of MIT's policies and procedures for promotions; and 62.7 percent do not know about MIT's grievance procedure regarding promotion and tenure decisions.

Put another way, even though "the system" is not broken, there may be room for some improvements that would make MIT more transparent. Moreover, if a review of the promotion and tenure process is conducted properly, with genuine curiosity and frank consultation with both junior and senior faculty, that process itself can have a positive impact on faculty morale, even if the review concludes that the current system works reasonably well.

Who should conduct such a review and what should be its scope? The Faculty Policy Committee (FPC), drawing on extended deliberations over the last academic year, came to the conclusion that a special task force should be created with equal representation from all five Schools and from both senior and junior faculty. As for the Committee's terms of reference, three issues emerged from their yearlong discussion. First: What are the best

practices that the five Schools can learn from one another regarding how tenure and promotion cases are put together to ensure fairness, confidentiality, and efficient use of faculty time? FPC initiated a conversation on this question last fall, and invited the deans of all five Schools to share their understanding of established procedures. It was a good beginning, confirming that there is enough accumulated experiences among the five Schools to be shared for mutual learning even if there may be some procedural variations due to disciplinary differences.

Second: What form of mentoring, by whom, and at what stage can make the tenure process more transparent to junior faculty members? This question may appear to be straightforward at first glance but, as I learned from my conversations with faculty last year, there are many elements to this question.

For example, relatively new junior faculty members pointed out that what they needed most when they arrived at MIT was not advice about how to get tenure, but information on how to set up their labs quickly.

Hence, at that stage, the person they need advice from is not a senior colleague, but rather an administrative officer who can help them procure the instruments necessary for experimentation – at a reasonable price and, most importantly, quickly.

The advising needs of the faculty evolve over time, and their knowledge of how the promotion and tenure process actually works can differ depending on who advises them. For example, by the time a promotion case is discussed at Academic Council, the faculty member whose case is being discussed should have had the opportunity to explain his or her academic plan and intellectual trajectory not only to his or her department head but also to the dean of the School, as it's the dean who ultimately presents the tenure case to Academic Council. Some deans have already acknowledged the need for this change in the process; others need to be convinced that such procedural changes will not create additional time-consuming steps complicating the existing line of hierarchy by which information on candidates currently filters up.

The third question regarding promotion and tenure which emerged repeatedly in discussions with faculty last year: Is there a need to improve the process by which grievances related to promotion and tenure are currently addressed at MIT? As most faculty are not conversant with the intricacies of current process but are generally satisfied with the way the tenure system works, how important is it to scrutinize the grievance procedure? The FPC discussed this question last year and concluded that the issue is so important that it could be the sole agenda item for any review initiative. For the moment, I have included this issue in the terms of reference of the committee I have set up, but it will be up to that committee to decide whether it is so vital that it should be dealt with separately. I am sure that this will not be the only question the committee will need to decide at the outset, and the committee will have to decide what it can really accomplish by the end of this academic year.

Fortunately, I have been able to convince two outstanding faculty members to co-chair the committee and channel the deliberations: Professor Robert Silbey from the School of Science and Professor Thomas Kochan from the Sloan School have agreed to serve as co-chairs. Since Tom will be the next chair of the faculty (2009-2011), he will provide continuity to the deliberations as they move from discussions of issues to the implementation of the recommendations.

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The New Challenge

The second initiative I propose for 2008-2009 is a relatively new challenge. The central

question underlying this initiative is the following: How can scholarly publications of MIT faculty best be disseminated at a time of major changes in communication technologies, while still maintaining the structure and practices of the scholarly publishing industry? Many faculty members have drawn my attention to these changes and their possible consequences. They urge that the MIT faculty should deliberate whether a new approach to dissemination of research is necessary, particularly in light of recent directives from the National Institutes of Health and foundations such as the Howard Hughes Medical Institute, both of which are concerned that such changes may impede rather than promote the rapid diffusion of scholarly research. You may remember that similar concerns led the Faculty of Arts and Sciences at Harvard in February 2008 to adopt a resolution stipulating that faculty authors grant copyright permission to the University to archive and distribute their articles openly, online, on their behalf.

Needless to say, MIT's response must be crafted with full awareness of our institutional particularities; also our response must emerge from campus-wide discussions involving all five Schools. The aim should not be to recommend a set of coercive guidelines, but rather to articulate the faculty's preferences and to utilize the deliberations to enhance their awareness of how their research can be best disseminated under the changing circumstances.

With that objective in mind, I have convened an ad-hoc faculty committee, co-chaired by Professor Hal Abelson from the School of Engineering and Ann Wolpert, director of Libraries. This committee will address the following question: Is there a need for MIT faculty to be proactive in influencing the trajectory of current trends? Answering this question will require a review of various positions and practices on open access publishing currently held by publishers, key funding agencies, and MIT's peer institutions. Related questions are: Assuming that the shared sentiment of the MIT faculty is to influence the current trajectory, what form of response is likely to have the most impact to ensure large-scale research dissemination? Should MIT faculty consider adopting a resolution for an Institute-wide response to open access publishing? How should such a resolution be worded to signify the faculty's collective commitment to open access publishing as well as to the intellectual autonomy of individual faculty members?

I am aware that to answer such questions, collectively and collegially, will take time and serious intellectual engagement, adding to the workload of the faculty who will serve as chairs and members of the two committees. On behalf of the faculty officers, I want to thank those faculty members for volunteering their time. We expect to work closely with the MIT administration because policy changes cannot be done without their full support. Ultimately, to be effective, both committees would need wide participation by you – the MIT faculty. I realize that you may be overcommitted already, but I hope that you will share your thoughts on both these issues either with the chairs of the two committees or the faculty officers.

Welcome to the academic year 2008-2009. Let us make this year one when we as faculty engage in serious reflection about how to make MIT an even better learning community than it is already.

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