


MIT Faculty Newsletter

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From The Faculty Chair **Initial Thoughts**

Steven R. Hall

This is my first *Faculty Newsletter* column as Chair of the Faculty. Like my predecessors, I hope to use the column as a way to communicate with faculty about ongoing issues of concern to you as well as the broader MIT community, and to invite feedback to the faculty officers and committees of the faculty.

I'm fortunate to be working with two other faculty officers, elected in May of this year. Prof. John Belcher is the new Associate Chair of the Faculty. John is the Class of '22 Professor of Physics and a former MacVicar Fellow, with research interests in astrophysics. He has led several innovations in the teaching of physics at MIT, including the development of the Technology Enabled Active Learning (TEAL) format for teaching 8.02. His expertise in the technology of learning is especially valuable at this time, as the *MITx* and *edX* initiatives continue to grow in size and influence. Prof. Susan Silbey is the new Secretary of the Faculty. She is Leon and Anne Goldberg Professor of Humanities, Sociology and Anthropology; Professor of Behavioral and Policy Sciences (Sloan School of Management); and head of Anthropology. With research interests in governance, regulatory, and audit processes in complex organizations, she brings an interesting perspective to MIT governance that I've found enlightening and useful.

All of the faculty officers are available for discussions with faculty. We welcome e-mail, phone calls, or face-to-face meetings. The officers can be reached collectively at faculty-officers@mit.edu.

Faculty Role in Shared Governance

MIT's shared governance structure gives faculty a variety of opportunities to affect the future of the Institute. There are two key ways to make your voice heard. The first is participation in faculty meetings. Traditionally chaired by the Institute President, faculty meetings are a monthly opportunity to catch up with the administration, members of faculty committees, and faculty members from other MIT Schools – plus to enjoy an informal post-meeting reception. This year, I anticipate a number of important issues will come before the faculty, from new degrees to exam policies to the use of the H-level subject designation.

Given the many demands on faculty time, it's no secret that attendance at faculty meetings fluctuates, and we occasionally struggle to achieve a quorum – sometimes forcing the delay of agenda items. Other than the procedural problem of needing a quorum to do business, is attendance at faculty meetings a problem? I think it is.

A typical pattern is that when a vote is scheduled for an issue that especially affects a single department or unit (say, the approval of a new degree program), proponents show up in relatively large numbers to support the proposal. While special interests are inevitable, the result is that the attendance at any given faculty meeting is likely to be highly

non-representative of the faculty.

While it's traditional for a new Chair of the Faculty to exhort colleagues to attend faculty meetings (and you should!), I think it's also important to look for opportunities to strengthen our governance structure to make participation in faculty governance in general and faculty meetings in particular more meaningful. For example, a common complaint I hear is that faculty meetings spend too much time on informational reports that require no action on the part of the faculty, and not enough time to consider and debate issues that require faculty attention. Yet many of those reports are mandated by the faculty, and can't simply be eliminated without further action by the faculty.

Increasing Faculty Participation

Given the importance of informed debate, is there another way to make information available? Some schools have experimented with online voting, with voting open for a short time (say, a day or two) following meetings. While online voting wouldn't be a substitute for faculty meetings, does it have the potential to make the faculty decision-making process more representative and inclusive? For those who've spent time at other institutions, we would be interested to hear comparative perspectives.

There is a second important way to participate in governance: membership on the standing committees of the faculty. Most of the work of the faculty governance system is accomplished by the 11 standing committees of the faculty.

These committees oversee matters of broad faculty interest, such as the curriculum, the library system, and graduate programs. Nominees for standing committees are selected by the Committee on Nominations, which presents a slate of candidates for open committee and faculty officer positions to the faculty at the March faculty meeting. (Members of the Committee on Nominations are appointed by the President.) In addition to the 11 standing committees, there are two awards committees (the Harold E. Edgerton Faculty Achievement Award and the James R. Killian Jr. Faculty Achievement Award Selection Committees), whose members are nominated by the Committee on Nominations and elected by the faculty, and two standing subcommittees (on the Communication Requirement and the HASS Requirement), whose members are appointed through the Committee on the Undergraduate Program.

In all, more than 90 faculty members serve on standing committees, and close to 40 must be elected or appointed each year to replace committee members with expiring terms. Generally, faculty members nominated or appointed to standing committees are selected from among those who volunteer on the Institute Committee Preference Questionnaire, which is sent to faculty early in the fall term.

While serving on faculty committees has few extrinsic rewards, there are intrinsic rewards. I've found my time on Institute committees to be interesting, challenging, and worthwhile. When you receive the survey this fall, please review the committee list and submit your preferred assignments. Most importantly, if asked by the Committee on Nominations to serve on a committee, please say yes.

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Engagement Around the Aaron Swartz Review

In January of this year, our community was shocked and saddened by the suicide of Aaron Swartz. Aaron was a brilliant young programmer and activist who helped develop, while still a teenager, Internet infrastructure that many of us now take for granted, such as RSS. Aaron's death came two years after his arrest and subsequent prosecution on charges

related to his use of the MIT computer network to download thousands of academic articles from the JSTOR digital depository. Aaron's friends and supporters believe that Aaron's prosecution was unjust. As the case continued, MIT received substantial scrutiny for its role in the matter.

On January 22, President Reif charged Prof. Hal Abelson of EECS to review MIT's involvement in the Swartz matter. Specifically, the review was to (1) describe MIT's actions and decisions during the period beginning when MIT first became aware of unusual JSTOR-related activity on its network by a then-unidentified person, until the death of Aaron Swartz on January 11, 2013, (2) review the context of these decisions and the options that MIT considered, and (3) identify the issues that warrant further analysis in order to learn from these events. The review panel consisted of Prof. Abelson, Institute Professor Emeritus Peter Diamond, and Andrew Grosso, an attorney and former Assistant U.S. Attorney. Their report was released on July 30. I would like to offer my thanks and appreciation on behalf of the faculty to Profs. Abelson and Diamond and Mr. Grosso for the thorough and thoughtful report that they produced.

Concurrent with the release of the report, President Reif sent a letter to the community, thanking the review committee, and beginning a process through which the MIT community will try to address the questions raised by the report, specifically the eight questions posed in Part V of the report. Among other actions, President Reif charged Provost Chris Kaiser and me "to design a process of community engagement that will allow students, alumni, faculty, staff and MIT Corporation members to explore these subjects together this fall and shape the best course for MIT." As of the writing of this column in mid-August, the Provost and I are still working on the form of that engagement. However, as a first step, we have launched a forum, Swartz-review.mit.edu, to gather input from the MIT community. (The URL for the site is the same as the one that was used by the review committee. Issues raised by the community provided important direction for the panel during the first part of the review.) The site can be viewed by anyone, but commenting is restricted to members of the MIT community. Current members of the community can log in with a valid Kerberos username and password or MIT network certificate. Alumni can log in using their Infinite Connection username and password. The site is organized around the eight questions posed in Part V of the report.

Prior to the release of the review committee findings, MIT, as an institution, understandably made few statements about the facts surrounding the Swartz case. My sense is that both the lack of information and the desire to see the results of the review before forming opinions may have muted discussion of the matter during that time. Now that the review is available, I urge you to read it and provide feedback on the Website as part of our community discussion on issues surrounding open access, intellectual property, responsibility, leadership, policy, and ethics.

President Reif noted in his letter that he has heard from many in our community who believe that MIT's actions were proper and justified; he also noted that others believe that MIT should have been more active in the case. I also have heard a range of thoughtful perspectives, both on the actions that were taken and how our ethical commitments might be tested in the future. I look forward to hearing more from the faculty and the broader community on these important questions. On this or any other topic, we look forward to your comments at faculty-officers@mit.edu.

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