

# MIT Faculty Newsletter

<https://fnl.mit.edu>

**in this issue** we offer “A Brief History of the Origins of the Faculty Newsletter” ([page 3](#)); the resumption of our From The Faculty Chair feature ([page 4](#)); “Civil Discourse in the Classroom and Beyond” ([page 7](#)); and a report by the Graduate Student Union on the recent agreement between the administration and the GSU ([page 8](#)).



Supreme Court Building at Dusk

## Curious About Curiosity Unbounded

**Bish Sanyal**

**I WAS INTRIGUED BY** the theme “Curiosity Unbounded” for President Sally Kornbluth’s inauguration, a theme she continued in her podcasts with recently tenured faculty at MIT (<https://president.mit.edu/podcasts>). At first hearing, the theme of curiosity sounds straightforward and evokes a positive note, an upbeat intellectual umbrella for all the decentralized research and teaching initiatives at MIT. After all, who could object to the celebration of curiosity, which is essential for learning. But, as I thought about the topic, I was intrigued by the second word of the theme – “Unbounded” – and asked myself: What binds curiosity; and what, if anything, should MIT do to unbind it?

I realize that the students who are admitted to MIT are generally curious and hard-working. So, how to unbind

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## Advancing Racial Equity After the End of Affirmative Action

**Faculty Advisory Committee,  
Office of Minority Education**

*“At the same time, as all parties agree, nothing in this opinion should be construed as prohibiting universities from considering an applicant’s discussion of how race affected his or her life, be it through discrimination, inspiration, or otherwise.”* Supreme Court Chief Justice John Roberts in his [opinion on Students for Fair Admissions v. Harvard College](#).

**ON JUNE 29**, in a 6-2 decision, the Supreme Court banned the use of applicants’ race in university admissions with the argument that doing so is discriminatory and involves racial stereotyping, among other reasons. MIT’s admission readers will no longer receive racial information about applicants unless applicants divulge this in essays. If they do,

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## Editorial Contract with the Graduate Student Union

**GRADUATE STUDENTS ARE CORE** partners with the faculty in the research and teaching activities of the Institute – we on the faculty explore and learn alongside them. It is essential that MIT nurture and support their creativity and productivity, and remain committed to their health and welfare. The *Newsletter* Editorial Board is pleased to learn that as of this writing the Graduate Student Union (GSU) and the MIT bargaining team have arrived at an agreement, which was voted on and accepted by the GSU membership.

The relationship of graduate students with their faculty mentors is central to their education. As we noted in the [Editorial of the May/June 2023 issue](#) of the *Faculty Newsletter*, it is unacceptable that the faculty lacks its own committee to address matters related to graduate students,

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**Contract with the Graduate Student Union**  
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including Graduate Student Union issues. We appreciate the work of the Faculty Advisory Committee in the negotiations, but that was not participatory, serving the MIT bargaining team. The faculty needs a committee that can listen to and speak to the Graduate Student Union and the Graduate Student Council representatives directly. One path would be for the chair

of the faculty to establish a Committee on Graduate Student Relations or similar, solicit nominations, and appoint such a committee.

If that path is unavailable, the *Faculty Newsletter* Editorial Board (all of whose members are elected by faculty vote) will consider soliciting nominations and convening an independent committee. Such a committee can always be subsequently adopted by vote of the faculty as its voice on the issues.

This issue of the *Faculty Newsletter* carries an [informative report](#) from the Bargaining Committee of the Graduate Student Union on their issues and priorities. We also invite faculty members with views on these issues to submit letters to the FNL.

Later in the semester, the FNL Editorial Board will sponsor a Faculty and Graduate Student Forum on the issues that have surfaced in the organizing drive and subsequent bargaining. ■

**Editorial Subcommittee**

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## A Brief History of the Origins of the Faculty Newsletter as it Marks its 35th Anniversary

John Belcher  
Jonathan A. King

**THIS PAST MARCH MARKED** the 35th anniversary of the “[zeroth](#)” issue of the *MIT Faculty Newsletter* (FNL). The FNL was founded in response to the decision of then Provost John Deutch and Dean Gene Brown of the School of Science to close the Department of Applied Biological Sciences (ABS), without following the *Rules and Regulations of the Faculty*.

Absent a faculty senate or equivalent deliberative body, there was no mechanism at the time for faculty to discuss key issues freely with each other. With limited ability to contact faculty colleagues through the Institute channels, Vera Kistiakowsky, Jonathan King, and Larry Lidsky hand-addressed a call to the faculty to resist and reverse the Provost’s action.

The initiation of the *MIT Faculty Newsletter* followed. Indeed, the Editorial Board of the FNL, elected only by faculty and emeritus faculty, is still the only committee at MIT where faculty discussions can occur without administrative intervention.

During the ensuing years, the *Newsletter* has provided a forum for expression of faculty concerns and views, a major channel of communication among the faculty, and a means for candid debate on difficult issues. The primary guiding principles have been to provide open access for faculty and emeritus faculty to express views on issues of concern through control of editorial policy by the faculty Editorial Board, independent of influence by the MIT

administration. Areas where the independence of the *Newsletter* have been important include the first public release, [on our Website](#), of the report on the “[Status of Women Faculty at MIT](#)”; the publication of the Special Edition *Newsletter* devoted to responses to the Report of the Task Force on the Undergraduate Educational Commons, to which more than 40 faculty contributed; exploration of health insurance, pension, and retirement issues; compacts with foreign governments; minority recruitment and promotion; provision of affordable graduate student housing; and the Special Edition *Newsletter* “[Women in Biotech](#)”.

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## From The Faculty Chair The Faculty Chair: A Job Description (2.0)

Mary C. Fuller

**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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup>

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)

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and Peko Hosoi (MechE/Math/IDSS) – and the faculty governance administrator, Tami Kaplan.<sup>3</sup> 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.

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<sup>1</sup> 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.

<sup>2</sup> Bacow, “Faculty Chair.”

<sup>3</sup> *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>).

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**The Faculty Chair: A Job Description (2.0)**  
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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.<sup>4</sup> 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."<sup>5</sup> 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.<sup>6</sup> 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 recommen-

dations 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

The chair of the faculty appoints chairs to the standing committees of the faculty and, to some extent, can direct their work. 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.

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 rela-

tionships 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

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

<sup>5</sup> Bacow, "Faculty Chair."

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

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**The Faculty Chair: A Job Description (2.0)**

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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.<sup>7</sup> 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

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<sup>7</sup> For instance, *The Tech* long provided coverage of Institute faculty meetings in a widely distributed weekly newspaper.

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).<sup>8</sup> Like every group of officers, we hope to leave the Institute a little better for whoever comes next. ■

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<sup>8</sup> 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>.

## Civil Discourse in the Classroom and Beyond

Alex Byrne  
Brad Skow

**IN ITS 2024 COLLEGE** Free Speech Rankings, FIRE (the Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression) ranked MIT 136th. While we can congratulate ourselves on beating Harvard (which came dead last at #248), there is undeniably room for improvement.

Academic disciplines in the sciences and humanities employ different methodologies and draw on different evidence, but all aim for, and often arrive at, knowledge. This process works best when universities provide space for the open exchange of ideas. A cursory glance at history shows many cases where disfavored ideas have turned out to be true (well-known is Galileo's heresy conviction for advocating heliocentrism); discouraging the investigation and debate of any idea, therefore, may impede the search for knowledge. Even false ideas are worth hearing and discussing, because a reasoned encounter between them and the truth can strengthen our conviction in the latter.

If a university should allow its faculty to pursue and debate ideas as they see fit, without interference, it should also do more: teach its students how to have productive good-faith conversations with others with whom they disagree. Having this ability is part of being a good citizen in a democracy. To the end of bringing MIT closer to this ideal, we have started a two-year project called *Civil Discourse in the Classroom and Beyond*, which will launch this fall, organized with Anne McCants (History, Concourse Director), and Linda Rabieh (Concourse). Generously funded by the [Arthur Vining Davis Foundations](#), the project has two core components: a speaker series open to the MIT community, and seminars in Concourse where students discuss freedom of expression and develop skills for successfully engaging in civil discourse.

For the speaker series this fall, we have two events. On October 24, Steven Koonin, former Caltech provost and author of [Unsettled](#), and MIT's Kerry Emanuel (EAPS), will discuss "Climate Change: 'Existential Threat' or 'Bump in the Road'?" And on November 9, Mary Harrington, author of [Feminism Against Progress](#), and Anne McCants (History), will discuss "Has Feminism Made Progress?". The talks are 7:00-8:30 in 2-190, with a reception to follow.

In the spring, on February 26, Vinay Prasad, author of [Malignant](#), will be discussing Covid policies with Peko Hosoi (MECHE). Our last speaker for the year, on April 8, is Freddie deBoer, author of [How Elites Ate the Social Justice Movement](#), details TBA. The speaker series will be integrated with the political scientist Yascha Mounk's podcast, [The Good Fight](#).

In addition to bringing in interesting and provocative speakers we thought it important to demonstrate to students that MIT faculty are willing to roll up their sleeves and engage with perspectives not often heard on our campus. We are delighted that Professors Emanuel, McCants, and Hosoi agreed to participate, and we are looking forward to what promises to be some intellectually stimulating evenings. As bringing the MIT community into dialogue with these ideas is part of the aim, ample time will be set aside for questions from those in attendance. Everyone is welcome, so please spread the word.

**Concourse** is one of MIT's first-year learning communities, and provides an ideal test bed for our Civil Discourse project. The entire class of 40 students will attend our speaker series as part of their advising seminar participation. Concourse is also devoting three of its regular Friday seminars this term to the project. In the first, the students will read excerpts from John Stuart Mill's *On*

*Liberty*, the MIT [statement](#) on free expression and academic freedom, and information about the Dorian Abbot episode at MIT. Students will discuss the Abbot affair in light of arguments that Mill gives for free speech.

The other two seminars will be on the Fridays after the events with Koonin and Harrington, in which the students will debate the topic of that week. Concourse will be using the debate format developed by [Braver Angels](#), which helps students develop the skills to discuss polarized issues productively and with civility. Concourse has three upper-class "debate fellows," who will help plan and conduct the debates to ensure that many different viewpoints are expressed.

In the spring, the plan is to open the Concourse debates to the wider MIT community. Our project dovetails nicely with the Concourse vision of a liberal education where opposing ideas are heard and argued over, in service of gaining a more nuanced common understanding of the world and humanity's place within it.

Although the Civil Discourse project is focused on students, we have not ignored the faculty entirely. We are organizing a seminar on free expression on the afternoon of March 6, with Yascha Mounk and other guests. All faculty are welcome.

The Concourse experiment will help us determine what works and what doesn't, and our longer-term ambition is to try to reach all MIT first-year students. Any feedback or suggestions (especially about publicizing the speaker series) from our faculty colleagues will be much appreciated. Our project has a website, [civildiscourse.mit.edu](#), where you can find the latest information about all our events. ■

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**Brad Skow** is the Laurance S. Rockefeller Professor, Department of Linguistics and Philosophy ([bskow@mit.edu](mailto:bskow@mit.edu)).

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## With the GSU Contract, A New Future for Graduate Workers at MIT

The MIT GSU Bargaining Committee

**ON LABOR DAY, THE** MIT Graduate Student Union (GSU) publicly announced our plans to strike in an email to graduate students and communicated our intent to escalate a strike threat. Just a week later, and a day before the launch of our strike pledge, the MIT administration met us on our core issues, and we reached a tentative agreement (TA). Make no mistake: the MIT admin met with us at the table in response to the significant ripple effects that would occur as a consequence of a graduate worker strike. The TA that was negotiated, which has since been ratified by an overwhelming majority of the GSU membership, empowers and protects graduate workers, so that they can focus on their research with the knowledge that they have strong workplace protections and economic benefits that will allow them to keep pace with the rising cost of living in the area.

MIT is at the forefront of a graduate student labor movement across the country. Since the graduate students voted to form our GSU (affiliated with the United Electrical, Radio, and Machine Workers of America, or UE) last year, tens of thousands of students have unionized at top universities across the country, including Stanford, Dartmouth, Boston University, Yale, Northwestern, the University of Chicago, and Duke. Given our early unionization, these schools are

looking to us to see if we can set a precedent in establishing strong protections for graduate students, which would lead to a compelling admissions package for future graduate workers. Our strong first con-

Other key protections of the contract include a “just cause” for discipline and discharge, strong health and safety provisions to protect graduate workers’ physical well-being, and a clear workload clause that will establish expectations around how many hours students can be required to work.

tract will provide MIT with a competitive edge that will support the Institute’s goal to be an innovative leader in academia.

The GSU and the administration are working on specific guidance regarding the implementation of various provisions in the contract, and will be sending out periodic communications on how to handle certain aspects of the contract. As part of our broader communications to faculty regarding the newly-ratified contract, the Bargaining Committee (BC) wanted to highlight some of the biggest changes included in the contract, including those that have positive ramifications for the student/advisor relationship.

A key complaint of graduate students is that the Institute Discrimination and Harassment Response (IDHR) process can often be slow and ineffective:

approximately 40% of graduate workers report that they have experienced harassment or discrimination at MIT, yet only a small fraction contact IDHR about these incidents. The contract establishes that

after the IDHR process, all harassment and discrimination cases can be moved to third party arbitration, with arbiters who have experience in academia and can hand down a decision to make the student whole. To ensure IDHR proceeds at a fast pace, graduate students may exit to arbitration after as little as six months, in non-Title IX cases.

Other key protections of the contract include a “just cause” for discipline and discharge, strong health and safety provisions to protect graduate workers’ physical well-being, and a clear workload clause that will establish expectations around how many hours students can be required to work. Additional support is offered to international employees and graduate workers who need to switch advisors.

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**With the GSU Contract, A New Future for Graduate Workers at MIT**  
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The economic package includes a 12.6% stipend increase over the life of the contract, an 83.8% dental subsidy for graduate workers, access to the employee vision plan, and a 70% subsidy on MBTA passes. Students with children are now eligible for a new \$10,000 needs-based childcare subsidy. The MIT administration indicated at the bargaining table that they will extend equity on all of these economic benefits to fellows, including an extra week of guaranteed vacation. We encourage faculty to remain flexible regarding this vacation provision, as has often been the case in the past.

The contract is backed by the power of the grievance procedure, which allows the GSU to support a student in full force. The union's ability to grieve is also bolstered by the agency shop provision, which means that everyone in the bargaining unit will pay their fair share for

representation by the GSU. With the ratification of this contract, we hope to continue to maintain and encourage ongoing broad participation in our union: UE has a [track record](#) as one of the most demo-

The economic package includes a 12.6% stipend increase over the life of the contract, an 83.8% dental subsidy for graduate workers, access to the employee vision plan, and a 70% subsidy on MBTA passes. Students with children are now eligible for a new \$10,000 needs-based childcare subsidy.

cratic unions in the country, and we hope to continue this tradition. Currently, we are in the process of electing a constitutional committee to write a set of bylaws to ensure that every graduate worker, whether RA, TA, or fellow, has the chance to make their voices heard in our union.

This contract is the culmination of years of graduate workers expressing a desire to unite and democratically self-

govern. During that time, the faculty as a whole have always maintained a neutral stance, allowing graduate workers to make important decisions around unionization for themselves. We appreciate this posi-

tion and hope to see this respectful relationship continue in the coming years. The GSU is excited for the new future that this contract will provide for graduate workers at MIT, and we are confident that future generations of graduate workers and faculty alike will be well served by the strong union we have created as part of this contract. ■

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**Curious About Curiosity Unbounded**

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their curiosity further may not be high on the agenda, compared to, say, how they may use artificial intelligence (AI) and advanced computing to address burning issues of our times, such as global warming and climate change. Yet, at the learning community we call MIT, one key objective must be to understand how to enhance learning capabilities; and towards that end we must be curious about curiosity, particularly how to unbind it. A second timely concern is: Are there historical moments when curiosity should be bounded by ethical and moral concerns, as some prominent proponents of AI have recently started to advocate? President Kornbluth has opened the organizational door for that deliberation to flourish. What follows are a few initial thoughts as I pondered President Kornbluth's call for curiosity unbounded.

There was a time, during the peak of the Cold War in the 1950s, when it was widely acknowledged that Western democratic nations that provide and protect freedom of intellectual imagination and of expression were ideal settings for curiosity to flourish. The incredible pace of scientific research and innovations of all kinds in the US and Western Europe during that time demonstrated how democracies that cherish freedom of thought and expression were better than Communist nations, like the old USSR, in creating vibrant learning environments which generated continuous new insights, not only in science and engineering, but in other disciplines and vocations as well. That unbridled optimism had one kink, however: the then USSR's surprising success in the operation of Sputnik alarmed many; but that technological success by a Communist nation was viewed as an exception rather than the norm of research excellence in Communist nations. Yet Sputnik did spur a national conversation in the US regarding how to win the "space race"; and there were calls for renewed emphasis on education that would produce a continuous stream of scientists and engineers.

Sputnik's success also raised questions within the US scientific community regarding the appropriate role of government in scientific research, because it demonstrated how large-scale targeted governmental spending for knowledge generation may succeed even in Communist nations: an observation that has reemerged recently as we witness China's success in catching up, technologically, with Western nations. One wonders

Even with the growing call for innovations to "solve" all sorts of problems in recent years, the old concern that basic research should be driven more by unbounded curiosity than by profit making has not yet become obsolete. On the contrary, there remain many advocates for curiosity-driven "basic research" until today.

whether authoritarian political systems can "demand" curiosity of handpicked scientists and force technological innovations by directing large-scale public resources towards research priorities set, not by scientific curiosity, but by national interests as decided by authoritarian governments.

The relationships among scientific curiosity, technological innovations, and the nature of political systems have, however, never been quite as straightforward as it seems at first hearing. As far back as the 1930s, when the Institute for Advanced Study at Princeton was created, there has been a strong strand of thinking among scientists which valorized curiosity over innovation. As Abraham Flexner, the first Director of the Institute of Advanced Study, wrote in the short book, *The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge* (Princeton University Press, 2017), the freedom to inquire and imagine should not be "bounded" by the need for innovations to solve societal problems.<sup>1</sup>

Even with the growing call for innovations to "solve" all sorts of problems in

recent years, the old concern that basic research should be driven more by unbounded curiosity than by profit making has not yet become obsolete. On the contrary, there remain many advocates for curiosity-driven "basic research" until today. As Professor Susan S. Silbey, Chair of the MIT Faculty from 2019 to 2020 reminded us, there is a danger of structuring education to "disrupt" the usual process of knowledge generation to

invent game changing innovations.<sup>2</sup> In that mode of thinking what binds curiosity is the urge to disrupt with "radical innovations," the sort of innovations which can yield stunning returns on investments. This motivation for quick and large financial return which drive many private firms that fund scientific research is viewed as utilitarian in nature, while scientific curiosity is viewed as a natural habit of mind not constrained by utilitarian goals.

These dual motivations of research are sometimes portrayed as a key difference between basic and applied research, but the truth is that basic and applied research are rarely two totally separate activities: they are usually interconnected, but the pathway of interconnection is neither unidirectional nor clear-cut. What is evident, however, is that governmental support for basic research has declined in the US over the years, as was documented carefully in a report by MIT titled, "The Future

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<sup>1</sup> A. Flexner with a companion essay by R. Dijkgraaf, *The Usefulness of Useless Knowledge*, 2017, Princeton University Press.

<sup>2</sup> Susan S. Silbey, "The Fundamental Challenge Facing Higher Education Today," *MIT Faculty Newsletter*, Vol. XXX, No.1, September/October 2017.

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**Curious About Curiosity Unbounded**  
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Postponed: Why Declining Investment in Basic Research Threatens a U.S. Innovation Deficit” (April, 2015)<sup>3</sup>. Is this the kind of concern implicit in President Kornbluth’s call for curiosity to be unbounded? Another related question, is even though we agree with President Kornbluth’s explicit call that the MIT community should focus on the problems of global warming and climate change, how will that problem-driven approach to knowledge generation affect cultivation of curiosity of the kind Flexner advocated in celebrating the use of “useless knowledge?”

A second set of questions regarding unbinding curiosity emerges from President Kornbluth’s interesting podcasts with MIT faculty. I listened to the podcasts to understand how and when did our colleagues become curious researchers. Were they born with the natural inclination toward curiosity, or did they become curious later due to force of circumstances? One would think that curiosity is best cultivated in an open-ended learning process in which both parents and schoolteachers must have played crucial roles. I come from an educational culture in India where, in general, performance in exams is given higher priority than whether or not a student is curious; and I wonder whether I would have been more curious in my early years if I were educated in the US style of teaching in primary and secondary schools. I also ask myself when and how I became interested in Architecture and Urban Planning. Was I naturally drawn to aesthetics, good design, and urbanism, or did force of circumstances lead me in that direction, evoking my curiosity as I grappled to learn the vocabulary of architectural design?

President Kornbluth’s podcasts with MIT faculty suggest that an individual need be observant of patterns, such as in

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<sup>3</sup> Marc Kastner et. al, *The Future Postponed: Why Declining Investment in Basic Research Threatens a U.S. Innovation Deficit*, MIT, April 2015.

the podcast where Professor Desiree Plata noticed that many families in her grandparents’ town were sick. Even at a rather early age she had hypothesized, intuitively, that there must be something wrong with either the water, air, or food in the neighborhood where her grandparents lived. Her observation raised the question of

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whether the origin of her curiosity was the concern for the health of her grandparents, or rather some innate quality of mind she was born with to be inquisitive, which would have flourished naturally over time, even if her grandparents lived in a healthier neighborhood. I raise this question because I think the notion of curiosity, as commonly understood, assumes that an independent mind and a free will are necessary for curiosity to flourish; but in real life one can become curious as one is boxed in an unforeseen situation, trying to make the best of the circumstances by acknowledging the constraints.

Perhaps it is too stark to pose the question in such a dualistic way; that curiosity is evoked or curbed differently in different individuals with different life experiences. We do not have a clear understanding of a generalizable process; that is why there are many “theories” about how parents of newborn children can make them curious. I raise this point to highlight the relationship between constraints and curiosity which intrigues me. In designing a building or planning a city one must first consider the constraints which define the boundaries within which a solution must be crafted. Thus, one becomes curious about how others have dealt with such constraints. Even though the prover-

bial ability “to think outside the box” is often considered necessary for creativity to flourish, it seems to me that creativity is the ability to think within the box by acknowledging constraints, while finding new ways to deal with them. This may seem obvious to engineers who are trained to optimize within constraints.

Acknowledging constraints that define the space within which a solution must be found seems to be a more pragmatic way to think about curiosity than the way it is described in popular discourse.

A third issue that was evoked by President Kornbluth’s call for curiosity unbounded is what scholars of technological change are currently grappling with: whether research on AI needs to be “curbed” somewhat so that we do not end up with a situation where AI dictates decision-making that may eventually harm the human race. I realize that this fear of new technologies is not a new phenomenon. Starting with the Industrial Revolution there have been many critics of technologies who predicted adverse outcomes of new technologies. The opposite tendency of unbridled optimism for technological progress is also not new, however, as our late colleague Professor Leo Marx cautioned us (Marx, 1999).<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> L. Marx, “Information Technology in Historical Perspective,” in *High Technology and Low-Income Communities*, (eds.) D. A. Schon, B. Sanyal, W.J. Mitchell, MIT Press, 1999, pp 131-150.

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**Curious About Curiosity Unbounded**

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This simultaneous anxiety and euphoria raises moral and ethical questions about technological curiosity as captured vividly in the recent movie about Robert Oppenheimer. Would we as a human race be safer today if Oppenheimer's curiosity was "bounded" by public concerns that the atom bomb would eventually lead to nuclear war, or are such concerns likely to lead to restrictions on scientific curiosity by public policies which may take us down the slippery slope of governmental command and control curbing the basic human instinct to probe the unknown?

I realize that the MIT community has already started deliberating such questions, and MIT's formal position on this issue will be watched worldwide, simply because of our global reputation as a leading hub of technological innovations. The recent book, *Power and Progress* (2023) by two MIT professors, Daron Acemoglu and Simon Johnson, reminds us that any deliberation on technological progress should take into account "the political economy" of technological innovations.<sup>5</sup> Endorsing this book, Professor Shoshana Zuboff, the author of *The Age of Surveillance Capitalism* (2018) wrote: "... technology only contributes to shared prosperity when it is tamed by democratic rights, values, principles and the laws that sustain them in our lives." This is not a new insight; similar concerns had led MIT's President Jerome B. Wiesner, (1971-1980), to create MIT's Program on Science, Technology, and Society.<sup>6</sup> Perhaps it is time to reexamine that history as we try to understand, now, how to unbind scientific curiosity amidst deep ideological differences and growing power imbalances, not only in the US but in the world in general.

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<sup>5</sup> D. Acemoglu and S. Johnson, *Power and Progress*, 2023, Public Affairs, NY.

<sup>6</sup> W. A. Rosenblith (ed.) *Jerry Wiesner: Scientist, Statesman, Humanist*, 2003, MIT Press.

Finally, as an educational institution, we would remiss if President Kornbluth's call for curiosity unbounded is confined only to research. Should we not inquire what kind of teaching frees curiosity and, conversely, which teaching style hurts its flourishing? You may recall that a decade or so ago MIT had signed a contract with Cambridge University in England to have undergraduate student exchanges. A key assumption underpinning this contract was that learning environments at Cambridge University and MIT were somewhat different even though both institutions nurtured excellence. The British government, which had paid for this exchange program, had hoped that students from Cambridge University would become more technologically innovative and entrepreneurial by their experience at MIT; while we at MIT had hoped that our students would become more well-rounded intellectually by being exposed to the long tradition of excellent scholarship in wide ranging fields of knowledge at Cambridge University. I taught students from Cambridge University in a course at MIT on technological innovations to enhance the quality of life of poor households. I had asked the Cambridge University students whether they found the teaching style at MIT different from what they were used to at home. The visiting students were unanimous that the teaching style at MIT was more participatory, that students and faculty have more exchanges in the classroom; but they did complain about heavier workloads at MIT in terms of course requirements.

The MIT-Cambridge University exchange experience was never formally evaluated to assess the validity of our initial expectations, but as I participated in a few meetings with faculty from both sides, I was struck by how many assumptions shaped our thinking about what kind of learning experience enhances curiosity, rigorous thinking, entrepreneurial attitude, and so on. President Kornbluth's recent call for curiosity

unbounded brought back those memories, and I wonder if it may be useful to initiate a campus-wide deliberation on how to nurture curiosity in an educational environment marked by high levels of stress, still a common MIT student complaint. Again, this too is not a new concern because MIT has made efforts in the past to enhance the teaching capabilities of faculty, particularly by incorporating new educational technologies. The MacVicar Program was created by President Charles Vest in 1991 to reward faculty with excellence in teaching undergraduate courses. As a past recipient of this award, I have served on the committee to select new awardees, and have reviewed many letters of endorsement. The letters by faculty colleagues usually highlight how popular are the courses, how large are the course enrollments, and how highly conscientious are the faculty nominated for the MacVicar award.

The students who write supporting letters usually mention the clarity of lectures, the high level of attention they had received from the faculty despite the large class sizes, and, occasionally, they do mention how enrolling in a certain course changed their career trajectories. The faculty's ability to cultivate curiosity is not mentioned very frequently, however, though it may be implicit in other comments regarding teaching styles. Perhaps it is the appropriate moment to have in-depth conversations about what style of teaching cultivates curiosity and, conversely, what diminishes it. That may be one way to build on President Kornbluth's aspiration to make MIT a learning community where curiosity is unbounded. ■

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**Advancing Racial Equity After  
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Justice Roberts wrote, “the student must be treated based on his or her experiences as an individual – not on the basis of race.”

This decision affects students applying this fall for undergraduate or graduate admissions. Graduate admissions committees should seek advice from the MIT Office of General Counsel (OGC) regarding changes to fellowships, post-baccalaureate programs, or any other practices that have previously involved race. OGC has shared preliminary guidance in a confidential and privileged communication to MIT faculty, PIs, and graduate admission administrators.

How will this impact MIT? The experience from states that have banned affirmative action in college admissions suggests that underrepresented racial and ethnic group members will become even less represented in our classrooms from 2024 on. It will become harder to achieve the goal set by the [Committee on Undergraduate Admissions and Financial Aid in October 2015](#):

Every student should feel that “there are people like me here” and “there are people different from me here.” No student should feel isolated; all students should come into contact with members of other groups and experience them as colleagues with valuable ideas and insights.

Compared with its peers, MIT has some advantages in recruiting a diverse student body. First, MIT [has never had legacy admissions](#), a practice of favoring children of alumni. Second, MIT is one of only seven American colleges or universities that practice [need-blind admissions and meet the full financial need of all undergraduates](#), including international students. MIT practices [holistic admissions](#) and works hard to attract applications from underrepresented populations. These practices are also generally followed in graduate admissions, although their

application is specific to each graduate program.

The SCOTUS decision also affects current students, some of whom have been told by peers that they were admitted

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because of their race. Currently enrolled students may be treated differently from incoming classes starting in 2024. Racism does not disappear because the Supreme Court says that race may no longer be considered in admissions. It also will not disappear if we say that we treat everyone the same regardless of race or any other personal characteristic.

The affirmative action ruling does not change the [MIT mission or values](#). But it *will* affect the composition of our student body, it *may* affect the experiences our students have at MIT, and it *should* inspire us to consider how to best carry out our mission in alignment with our values.

#### **What faculty can do to help students**

Faculty are responsible for “providing . . . students with an education that combines rigorous academic study and the excitement of discovery with the support and intellectual stimulation of a diverse campus community.” Now more than ever it is important for faculty members to recognize and communicate the values of higher education, including MIT’s commitment to diversity and equity.

An excellent example of such communication was provided by Dean of Admissions and Student Financial Services Stu Schmill ’86 in his June 7 blog

post [Reaffirming our commitment to diversity](#). In our many roles, we, too, can communicate our commitment. We can recruit, admit, and educate students who are [first generation or come from low-](#)

[income families](#). We can support and advocate for [pre-college programs](#) that provide transformative experiences to students who often do not see others like them in STEM. Even simply mentioning these opportunities to friends, colleagues, and students can make a difference.

Our biggest commitment as faculty is, however, to our current students whom we advise, teach, and mentor. As members of the Faculty Advisory Committee of the Office of Minority Education with many years of collective experience working to advance diversity and excellence at MIT, we have four suggestions for all faculty working with students.

#### *1. Focus on students’ potential for growth, not on what they lack*

The expectations we communicate have a profound effect on students’ sense of belonging and their mindset. It is foolish to conflate preparation with ability, yet we hear too often of students being told by faculty that “you should try doing something else” (indeed, several of us received that advice as students). This is especially harmful when it comes from a belief, even if not consciously held, that minoritized students may be less capable than others. Research shows that student performance is enhanced when faculty

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recognize student capabilities and build on their strengths (Wang & Hazari, 2018; Faulconer, Griffith, & Gruss 2021). If a student lacks the preparation needed to succeed in a class, it is best to show them what is needed, suggest ways they can obtain it, and encourage them to succeed.

*2. Use data to critically examine your impact as an educator*

MIT faculty love working with data, but beyond looking at our teaching evaluations, how many of us use data to assess our teaching? Although few of us are trained in the methodology, there are experts in both the Teaching and Learning Lab and Institutional Research.

MIT-wide information is available on six-year graduation rates, for example, at the publicly accessible [MIT Diversity Dashboard](#). Did you know that MIT women complete bachelor's degrees at consistently higher rates than men? Or that graduation rates have improved over the last decade for almost all racial groups?

Given the small numbers of students and the challenges of identifying and correcting for confounding variables, we do not recommend that faculty collect and analyze data from their own classrooms. However, at the level of a department or School, leaders can work with MIT Institutional Research to address questions about persistence and success across majors. Are there differences in degree attainment or other outcomes based on race or gender? If so, why?

*3. Find the stories in the data; recognize the data in the stories*

When we find patterns in data, we are drawn to ask what they mean. Why might there be different outcomes for people depending on gender or race? Should we be examining learning gains rather than absolute performance? Are there problems with our teaching that need to be solved?

Scientists and engineers use data to tell stories. It is equally important to understand that human stories are also data, even if they are not quantitative. When a student is told by peers they got into MIT only because of their race, that might encourage them to study independently, either because they want to avoid further slights or to prove that they can succeed on their own. The student then loses an opportunity to learn from their peers and

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to deepen their understanding by sharing it with others, who also lose the benefits of peer learning and community. They may spend so much time attempting to solve some problems that they do not advance to later material. Imposter feelings (“I was admitted by mistake; everyone is better than me”) are common and can make it harder to persist. A story can become a statistic.

Qualitative data such as human stories help us not only to understand patterns in quantitative data, but also to find meaning. Once a faculty member sees the positive effects of listening to and affirming students' experiences, they may be motivated to transform their approach to education.

*4. Adopt research-based teaching strategies*

How can we improve our educational practices to help all students succeed? Fortunately, there is a growing understanding of how people learn and what instructional strategies are most effective. The MIT Teaching and Learning Lab has an excellent set of [informational resources](#) and [events and programs](#) for interested faculty and other community members.

Effective teaching is far more than knowledge transfer and skill building. It requires creating an environment where all students feel both valued and challenged to grow within their zone of proximal development (Sanford 2020, Section 3.1). This concept refers to the situation where a student is capable of practicing a skill or solving a problem with help or guidance; the problem is neither impossibly difficult nor one they have already mastered.

Good teaching requires thinking about more than cognition; it also involves considering how learners plan, monitor, and evaluate their own learning ([metacognition](#)) as well as fostering a sense of belonging in the classroom. We do not expect our students to know all the material before they take our classes, and we should not expect to know educational psychology if we have not studied it. But we should make an effort to learn and practice those skills that will make us more effective.

Given our commitment to the success of all students, including those who may question whether they belong because of their race or other aspects of their identity, we should seek ways to inform ourselves. The physics community has prepared an informative report ([AIP, 2020](#)) that has good tips for all MIT faculty including a [departmental self-assessment rubric](#). It's also a good practice to encourage TAs, and graduate students interested in becoming faculty, to earn a [teaching certificate at the Teaching and Learning Lab](#) or to take a course such as the 3-unit class 8.998 Teaching and Mentoring MIT Students.

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**What the Office of Minority Education  
is doing**

The Office of Minority Education (OME) was founded in 1975 “to strengthen the sense of community among minority students and to facilitate access to the full range of educational and counseling resources that exist at the Institute” (Wiesner, 1973). The OME mission is “to promote academic excellence, build strong communities, and develop professional mindsets among students of underrepresented minority groups, with the ultimate goal of developing leaders in the academy, industry, and society.” It does so by offering a wide range of [services](#) and [programs](#) that are open to all MIT students. In particular, programs like Interphase EDGE, a program for admitted MIT students to ease the transition from high school and to build community among new students, will continue to play an important role. Indeed, this program has been expanded into a hybrid online/in-person version (Interphase EDGE/x) that increases the number of students served.

SCOTUS is not the only influence on university practices relating to diversity; some states (not including Massachusetts) have passed laws that would hamper or eliminate offices like the OME. Moreover, in August the founder of Students for Fair Admissions filed a new [lawsuit challenging diversity fellowships at law firms](#), and there are likely to be additional lawsuits against programs that use race in both companies and universities. The OME’s mission is to support minority students; yet, they are intentional about serving all students. The office is reviewing its policies, practices, and communications to ensure that they continue to be fully inclusive.

**What happens next?**

Higher education has had limited time to process the implications of the end of affirmative action. Important perspectives are available from the National Academies’ report *Advancing Antiracism, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion in STEMM Organizations: Beyond Broadening Participation* (NASEM, 2023) and from faculty leaders of color at other institutions (Gates, 2023; Maldonado-Vlaar, 2023). We encourage faculty to reflect on these writings, and to share their own

experiences and perspectives with colleagues and in the *Faculty Newsletter*.

On academic matters of societal importance such as race and diversity in higher education, our faculty should engage in Institute-wide conversations. These may occur in committees such as the [Institute Council on Belonging, Achievement, and Composition](#), departmental Visiting Committees, or the Academic Council. We feel, however, that broader and more inclusive discussions are needed. Faculty should be listening to students and also collaborating with them to host Institute-wide discussions on advancing racial equity after the end of affirmative action. We will be working with others to organize forums.

With its ruling, this Supreme Court has established its legacy in higher education. It’s time for us as faculty to plan and enact ours. ■

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For a list of members of the OME Faculty Advisory Committee and more information about the Office of Minority Education, see: <https://ome.mit.edu>.

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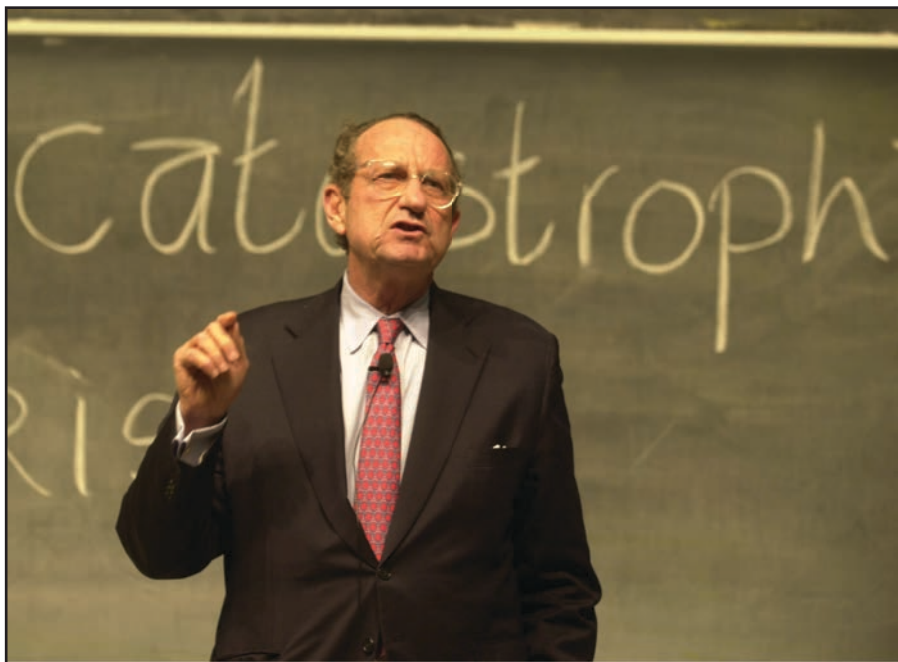
**A Brief History of the Faculty Newsletter**  
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We believe it is still instructive to reflect on the ABS case. On January 6, 1988, faculty members of the 43-year-old Department of Applied Biological Sciences, then Course 20, were informed by the MIT administration that the department would be phased out over the course of the coming 18 months. The department at that time consisted of about 200 members, including 24 faculty, 86 graduate students, plus undergraduate majors and support personnel. In a subsequent article in *The Boston Globe* of February 2, 1988, MIT officials were quoted as saying that the plans to phase out the department arose "... because it is not meeting the intellectual standards expected of a department at MIT. ..." The following paragraph is from the same article:

*"While no jobs will be immediately lost, MIT officials said some tenured and non-tenured faculty may end up leaving the Institute. They said "every effort" would be made to place tenured faculty in other departments, but no guarantees have been extended to faculty, or to secretaries and other support staff. Four non-tenured assistant professors may lose their jobs when the current contracts expire. Graduate students in the department will be allowed to finish their degrees."*

The response to this disbanding of the department was immediate and overwhelmingly negative. Graduate students in the department circulated a petition with over 110 signatures, maintaining that statements by the administration in the *Globe* as well as those "... appearing in *Science* and in other scientific journals seemed to publicly label the faculty and students as second rate. The question is not only whether MIT will award degrees to current students, but whether those degrees have been discredited, said a research associate who had gotten a graduate degree from the department..." [*The Tech*, February 19, 1988]. At the regularly



**Former MIT Provost John Deutch**

scheduled Institute faculty meeting in February, every faculty member who spoke deplored the decision-making process used in disbanding the department. "Professor Gerald Wogan, the head of the department, read a letter from the department faculty which expressed 'disagreement with the decision' and 'disappointment with the surprising process' by which the department was disbanded. The letter said the process lacked 'due process and adequate review' and noted that the faculties were not given 'the opportunity to respond professionally and effectively to criticism.'" [*The Tech*, February 19, 1988].

As a result of the March faculty meeting, an Ad Hoc Committee on Reorganization and Closing of Academic Units was formed whose members were Glen Berchtold, John Essigmann, Morris Halle, Henry Jacoby, Phillip Sharp, Arthur Smith, and Sheila Widnall (Chair). The complete report of this committee was distributed to the faculty prior to the May 18, 1988 faculty meeting. The conclusions of that report are online at [web.mit.edu/jbelcher/www/ABS/](http://web.mit.edu/jbelcher/www/ABS/), and we quote two of the paragraphs from those conclusions.

*"It is the view of this committee, and we believe of the faculty at large, that a key to the success of the Institute has been the maintenance of a system of shared governance. Few of the MIT faculty see themselves in an employee-employer relationship with the Administration. Rather, most feel that the Administration and faculty share a joint responsibility for sustaining the excellence of the Institute. They expect that, when important choices arise about mission or internal organization, they will naturally be involved in the process leading up to decisions and in the planning of implementation.*

...

*"Aside from the issue of shared responsibility, a source of concern in this case arises from the collective regard of the faculty for one another. It is the perception of the faculty that members of ABS were poorly treated in the process: the unfavorable publicity that impacted their careers, the lack of understanding and communication by the Administration as to the nature of the Institute's commitment to their careers, the lack of consultation prior to the decision, and the announcement of the decision without a detailed plan for assuring the*

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*continuity of the careers of the faculty. This is not acceptable treatment of faculty members at MIT by its administration. The incident raised apprehension in the minds of many about the meaning of tenure and the obligations to junior faculty, other MIT personnel and students. We believe the faculty needs a clear statement on these issues and below we make recommendations to this effect.”*

One of the lasting results of the ABS closing was the fact that the changes in *Policies and Procedures* recommended by the Widnall Committee were subsequently adopted. In the merger of the Mechanical Engineering and Ocean Engineering Departments, these procedures were carefully followed, but few current faculty members know the history that led to the adoption of those procedures.

The second lasting change (at least so far) resulting from the ABS closing was the founding of the *MIT Faculty Newsletter*. At the time of the dissolution of the ABS department, MIT faculty members preparing a petition calling for a reversal of the administration’s actions had difficulty in circulating the draft broadly due to the unwillingness of the administration to make faculty mailing lists available. In addition, with the faculty meeting agenda set and the faculty meeting chaired by the President, fully open discussion was not easy. The FNL emerged as an effort to establish open lines of communication among faculty. In the zeroth issue of the *Newsletter*, which is online at [mit.edu/fnl/vol/archives/fnl00.pdf](https://mit.edu/fnl/vol/archives/fnl00.pdf), Vera Kistiakowsky wrote:

*“A group of faculty members which has been discussing the recent events concerning the Department of Applied Biological Sciences has concluded that difficulty in communication prevents faculty consideration of the problems except in crisis situations. There exists no channel for the exchange of information between faculty*



**Former MIT Dean of Science Gene Brown**

*members for the discussion of problems at MIT, since neither **Tech Talk** nor the faculty meetings serve these purposes. Therefore, we decided to explore the desirability of a newsletter, and one purpose of this zeroth edition is to see whether there is support for such a publication.”*

There was significant support for such a publication, and the subsequent 35+ years of issues of the *Newsletter* after the “zeroth” issue can be found in the *Newsletter archives*. Initially the *Newsletter* was supported by contributions, but given that the faculty brings into MIT a large amount in research income, it seemed reasonable to the first FNL Editorial Board that a tiny fraction of that be returned directly to the faculty to finance the *Newsletter*. It was a full nine years after these origins that President Vest formally agreed to support the publication costs and a salary for the managing editor of the *Newsletter*. This battle has had to be fought continually in the years following.

For the first 20 years since its inception, the *Newsletter* was maintained by a volunteer Editorial Board, over time involving more than 30 members of the faculty from all Schools of the Institute.

Subsequently, we moved to a more formal nomination process, and direct election of Board members by the full faculty.

During this period there have been efforts by some administrators to end or limit the publication of the FNL. One case is described in “[The Saga of the Struggle for Survival of the Faculty Newsletter](#)” in the March/April 2007 issue.

The *Newsletter* has come to be widely read, not just at MIT but outside as well, through the online edition at [fnl.mit.edu](https://fnl.mit.edu). The FNL Website also can potentially serve as a forum for discussion of national and international issues. With the support and involvement of MIT’s faculty, the *Newsletter* will continue to play an important role at MIT and beyond. ■

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## Nominate a Colleague as a MacVicar Faculty Fellow



**Margaret MacVicar**

**PROVOST CYNTHIA BARNHART IS** calling for nominations of faculty as 2024 MacVicar Faculty Fellows.

The MacVicar Faculty Fellows Program recognizes MIT faculty who have made exemplary and sustained contributions to the teaching and education of undergraduates at the Institute. Together, the Fellows form a small academy of scholars committed to exceptional instruction and innovation in education.

MacVicar Faculty Fellows are selected through a competitive nomination process, appointed for 10-year terms, and receive \$10,000 per year of discretionary funds for educational activities, research, travel, and other scholarly expenses.

The MacVicar Program honors the life and contributions of the late Margaret MacVicar, Professor of Physical Science and Dean for Undergraduate Education.

Nominations should include:

- a primary nomination letter detailing the contributions of the nominee to undergraduate education,

- three to six supporting letters from faculty colleagues, including one from his or her department head if the primary letter is not from the department head,

- three to six supporting letters from present or former undergraduate students, with specific comments about the nominee's undergraduate teaching,

- the nominee's curriculum vitae,

- a list of undergraduate subjects, including the number of students taught, and

- a summary of available student evaluation results for the nominee.

For more information, visit [registrar.mit.edu/macvicar](https://registrar.mit.edu/macvicar) or contact the Registrar's Office, Curriculum and Faculty Support at x3-9763 or [macvicarprogram@mit.edu](mailto:macvicarprogram@mit.edu).

**Nominations are due by Friday, November 17, 2023.**

## Congratulations on Reaching a First Contract Agreement

Thomas A. Kochan  
Robert B. McKersie  
Mary Rowe  
Susan S. Silbey

**AS FACULTY MEMBERS WHO** have studied and been directly involved in labor-management relations for many years, we are very proud of the good work done by the MIT administration, the MIT Graduate Student Union, and the leaders of their parent union the United Electrical Workers in reaching a first contract. Their new agreement is a beacon that stands out in our country's otherwise very chaotic labor relations environment.

The fact that the first contract was achieved without a strike or a prolonged battle is in and of itself noteworthy. Getting a first contract is not a certainty for sure. Only about one-third of newly organized unions achieve a first contract within a year of their election and more than one-third never get one because of persistent managerial resistance.

Looking across the landscape of bargaining in universities, MIT's achievement is equally unique. Peer institutions like Harvard, Columbia, and the University of California statewide system all have experienced strikes in recent years while more than a dozen other universities are now in prolonged negotiations over a first contract. Let's hope that the successful contract achieved at MIT gives others the confidence to do the same.

But our congratulations go further. The way in which our colleagues negotiated this agreement was truly innovative. We know of no other university that had

faculty observers participate directly in the negotiations. The Chair of the Faculty and a team of MIT faculty members sat with the parties, not as a member of the administration's negotiating team, nor as neutral mediators. They were observers, signaling that our faculty has a keen interest in graduate student relationships and in these negotiations. Having the Faculty Chair present provided another channel for private discussions of the issues with the administration and with the Faculty Policy Committee as the process moved forward. And, the faculty observers served as stewards of our MIT community values, signaling they would expect the parties to conduct the negotiations in a professional and respectful manner, consistent with our community norms.

While we are proud of the good work everyone has done to date, the hard work has just begun. Now the parties need to implement the terms of the agreement in ways that are consistent with the contract language and at the same time be ready to solve problems that could not have and never can be anticipated in the negotiation of specific contract language. Walter Reuther, one of America's most famous and innovative labor leaders, once described labor contracts as "living documents" subject to updating and adjustment as new or unanticipated conditions warranted. The fact that the administration and the Union have set up a contract

implementation committee is a signal that they are ready to work together to solve problems as they arise and to rely on the grievance process only when necessary.

A final word is in order to the faculty. Each and every one of us needs to learn how to lead and work with our graduate students consistent with the requirements of the contract while simultaneously continuing to provide the mentorship and collegial interactions that are so critical to our faculty-student relationships. This will be a learning process and one that if we do well will make MIT stronger and a richer experience for all.

So let's celebrate why once again we can be proud of MIT's collective leadership and innovative culture. It is on display in this arena for all to see and applaud. ■

**Thomas A. Kochan** is George M. Bunker Professor Emeritus, MIT Sloan School of Management and Institute for Work and Employment Research ([tkochan@mit.edu](mailto:tkochan@mit.edu)).

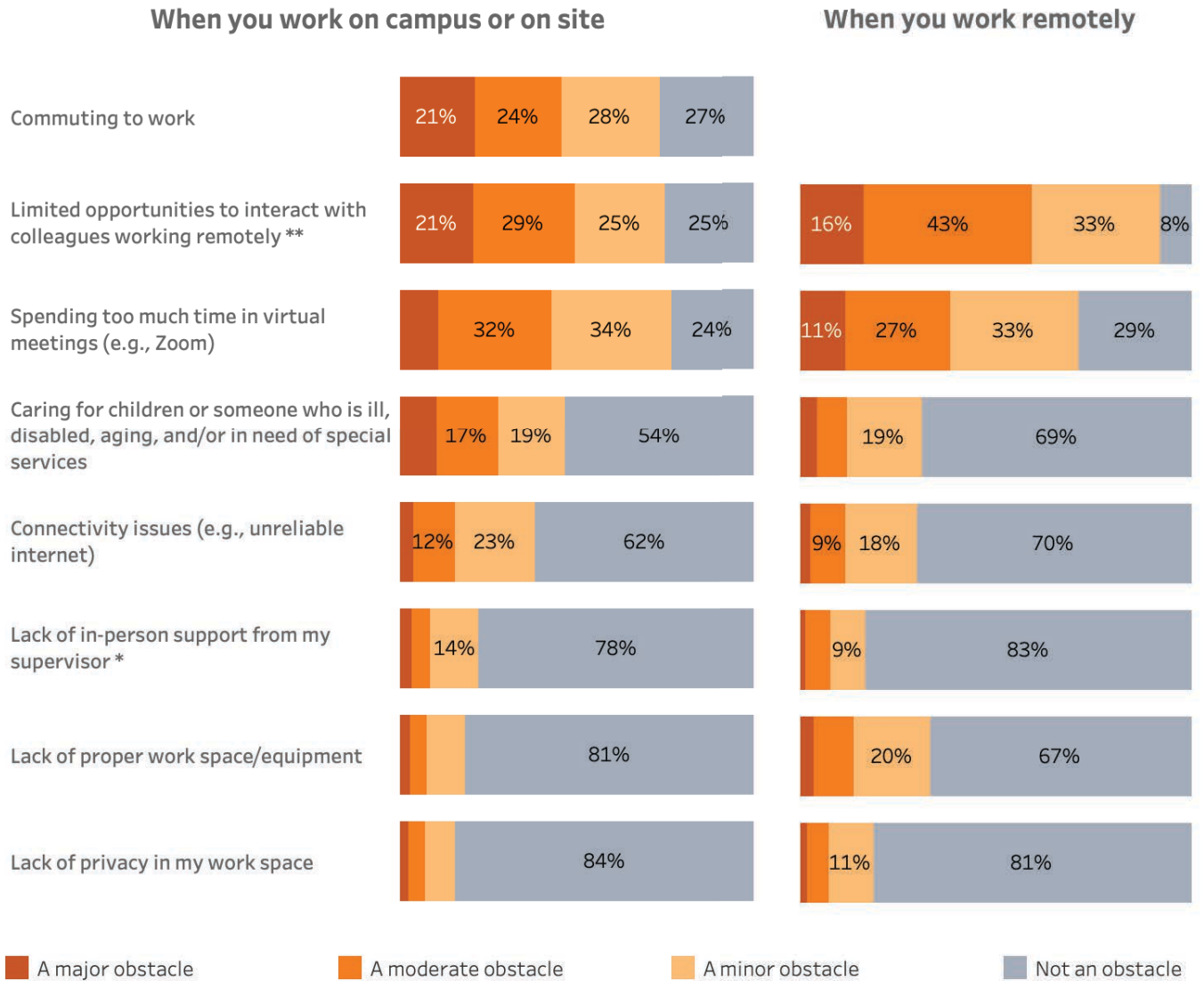
**Robert B. McKersie** is Sloan Fellows Professor Emeritus, MIT Sloan School of Management and Institute for Work and Employment Research ([rmckersi@mit.edu](mailto:rmckersi@mit.edu)).

**Mary Rowe** is Adjunct Professor of Negotiation and Conflict Management, MIT Sloan School of Management ([mrowe@mit.edu](mailto:mrowe@mit.edu)).

**Susan S. Silbey** is Leon and Anne Goldberg Professor of Sociology and Anthropology, Behavioral and Policy Sciences, MIT Sloan School of Management ([ssilbey@mit.edu](mailto:ssilbey@mit.edu)).

## MIT Numbers from the 2023 MIT How's It Working? Survey

### To what extent are the following obstacles to your work?



**Note:** Faculty Responses Only

"When you work on campus or on site" items shown to faculty who said they worked hybrid or fully on campus or on site.

"When you work remotely" items shown to faculty who said they worked hybrid or fully remote.

\* 'in-person' not included in label for "When you work remotely."

\*\* 'working remotely' not included in label for "When you work remotely."

**Source:** Office of the Provost/Institutional Research