

Community Comment

This report was released to the MIT community for comment in September, 2004. Since that release, we have received letters and email notes from approximately 50 individuals, from the Association of Independent Living Groups and from the Alumni Association of the MIT Phi Kappa Sigma Chapter. All the letters and notes made good points, and we greatly appreciate the considerable effort that went into their composition.

Some were complementary; a few were hostile. We were praised by those who found the report positive, refreshing, and thoughtful and by those who wanted findings and recommendations backed with numbers; we were criticized by those who saw our report as an apology for bad decisions, sluggish action, obstructionism, and poor policy. In between, several themes appeared with impressive frequency:

Testimony: Alumni wrote to assert the importance of their FSILG experience in developing leadership and social skills used throughout their careers. They wrote that the responsibilities inherent in managing an FSILG provide an important head start on adult life. And they wanted us to know that their FSILG environment provided essential help in making the transition from adolescence to the pressures of life at MIT.

Urgency: Alumni emphasized that the clock is ticking and that urgent action is required. We found these comments fully congruent with our own view that we have offered a plan and now it is time to get on with the work.

Management: Alumni pointed out that providing advice, support structures, and financial assistance is not the same as managing, and warned that the FSILG experience would be much devalued, and an important educational benefit squandered, if MIT were to assume the business functions now handled by students.

Revisiting the FOC decision: Without a doubt, to many alumni, the adoption of the freshman-on-campus policy was a highly alienating act that leaves them feeling that the MIT of today is not the same place from which they graduated and not a place deserving of their financial support.

Many of those commenting on the FOC policy applaud our call for a study of whether the goals of the FOC policy have been met, but wonder why our report is mute on whether or not the decision should be revisited. Our explanation is that the FOC decision is one of several subjects that we decided early on to leave alone. In technical terms, we concluded that the expected value of offering an opinion would be negative, no matter what the opinion turned out to be; in contrast, the expected value of providing a plan for going forward seemed extremely promising.

Faculty reaction to our report was a case of Holmes's dog not barking in the night. During the whole period of our study and the comment period afterward, only two or three faculty provided unsolicited commentary. Symmetrically, when we presented our report to the Committee on Student Life, members noted that we had written at length about bringing together students, alumni, and administration, but left out a discussion of a role for faculty, which, in retrospect, should have attracted our attention. Some of us believe few faculty members have an informed understanding of the value of the FSILG system to MIT, but we confess we have no hard data to back up our impressions, nor do we have a thoughtful plan for corrective action. Certainly, we encourage faculty inclined to offer opinions on the FSILG system to read our report, and certainly, we think it desirable to expand the faculty advisor program from its present coverage of about 20% of the FSILGs. Beyond that, we can only suggest that the continuing scarcity of faculty understanding of and involvement in student life is a large subject, specific neither to FSILGs nor residence halls, and perhaps constitutes a problem deserving of its own study.

In the final paragraph of our report, we noted that MIT's administration adopted many of our recommendations as we developed them, even before our report was completed, which we of the Task Force regard as a highly encouraging. To the list provided there, we are pleased to add that one of our own, our Co-Chair, Stephen Immerman, has taken on the transition-management responsibility we described in Task 5 of our plan. Stephen is the ideal choice by virtue of his energy, experience, good judgment, and positive outlook. With his appointment, and all the other encouraging signs in the air, we of the Task Force look back on our work together with growing confidence that our time was well spent.

Patrick Henry Winston,
Task force Co-Chair
December, 2004