

Building the Future of FSILGs: Project Aurora

Executive Summary

In the spring of 2003, MIT President Charles M. Vest convened a special Task Force to consider the status and future development of the Institute's 37 Fraternities, Sororities, and Independent Living Groups (FSILGs), which together serve roughly 1,000 current students and inspire the affection and loyalty of tens of thousands of alumni.

The FSILG community has been an important part of MIT since 1873 when the first fraternity chapter was colonized. Over more than a century, the community has adapted to the evolving needs and expectations of students, society, and the Institute to provide MIT students with valued living-group choices. Unfortunately, during the past decade, problems have emerged that put the system at risk. For example, the Freshmen On Campus (FOC) policy, decided upon in 1998 and implemented in 2002, introduced a discontinuity that amplified some pre-existing problems in communication, finance, and governance. Since then, three FSILG chapters have been closed or temporarily suspended for behavioral infractions. Others have made a successful transition. Most lie somewhere in between; many, even with wholesome records and significant effort by students, alumni and administration, are still struggling under the strain. Sustaining this community in the future will require serious new effort and support from all sides.

Various people argue that these difficult circumstances are the fault of society, the students, the alumni, or the administration; rather than getting bogged down in an unproductive effort to assign blame, we have focused on defining the specific problems and sketching out broad solutions. It is time to put the past to rest, look to the future, and build the excellent system only MIT can have.

Specifically, President Vest asked us to look at:

- Benefits of the FSILG system
- Recruiting problems faced by the FSILG system
- Connection between recruiting success and transition funding
- Role of alumni
- Strength of FSILG support mechanisms
- MIT leadership challenges
- Facilities, operations, and finances
- Relationship with local government agencies
- Relocation of houses to MIT owned land in Cambridge.

In preparing this study, we have tried to be sensitive both to perpetual characteristics of maturing men and women and to today's realities and societal expectations. We have also tried to show how an ideal FSILG system contributes to the intensity and excitement of an MIT education and operates in support of MIT's core principles of societal responsibility, learning by doing, and education as preparation for life.

Our product is a general plan focused on improving communication, solving financial problems, enabling successful recruiting, managing the transition, identifying roles and responsibilities, and addressing long-range housing needs. We offer a general plan, and do not prescribe details, because we believe that details are better worked out through the joint effort of elected students, alumni, and MIT officials who ultimately have to implement, act, and persevere.

Recognizing a need for action, we have helped to initiate action as we progressed through our study, and we are pleased that work on some tasks in our plan is already in progress. All stakeholders should be encouraged by adjustments made to the rush schedule in 2004, enabling help with the FSILG Cooperative, the appointment of a Director of FSILG Alumni Relations, efforts to enable tax-advantaged alumni giving, President Vest's remarks at the 2004 rush kickoff picnic, and intense interest throughout MIT's top administration in the findings, conclusions, and recommendations of this report.

The Task Force and its Research

The Task Force (TF) included a wide variety of students, alumni, faculty and staff. Virtually all of us are past or present members of FSILGs. Importantly, none of us is part of the MIT system responsible for FSILG development and oversight; and none of us is hostile to the FSILG idea.

To broaden our perspectives still further, in the course of our work we sought input from many other sources, including students, graduates, house corporation members, administrative leaders and other stakeholders.

Specifically, we:

- Carefully studied past reports on student life at MIT
- Talked with alumni, formally and informally
- Visited many FSILGs and met with students
- Collected relevant statistics
- Assessed the financial circumstances of FSILGs.

These diverse sources both confirmed and corrected our initial biases, which in some cases were formed many years ago. Among our findings:

- **FSILG alumni express near-universal enthusiasm for the benefits of independent living groups.** Among the many advantages they gained from their FSILG experiences were help in adjusting to the size and stresses of MIT (both in terms of personal and academic support) and the opportunity to build social skills, practice project management, take ownership and independent responsibility for important decisions, build a cross-generational network, and hold challenging leadership positions. **Several spoke of their FSILG experience as the most defining experience in their lives**, saying that they would not be what they were today without it.
- Through visiting and talking with groups of students at 14 of the 27 fraternities, three of the five sororities, and all five of the independent living groups, we learned that:
 - **An atmosphere of hostility continues.** Many students feel that MIT's administration fails to understand the value of the FSILG system, and may even intend for it to dissolve. Many also believe that "rush" had recently been scheduled in a way that undermines FSILGS, and that the administration fails to appreciate that FSILGs are actually prime promoters of community building campus-wide.
 - **Students value FSILG membership.** Like alumni, students spontaneously praise the value of their FSILG support network as fostering more and deeper friendships, and providing help with coursework. They also value the chance to "decompress," the fun and inspiration of FSILG social events, and the chance to develop useful skills, from leading people and managing finances to installing drywall.
 - **Risk management and drinking remain a serious concern.** Although this problem is national, exists elsewhere at MIT, and continues to be the subject of sincere and significant efforts at improvement, it is unarguable that there are FSILGs, especially among the fraternities, that manage risk poorly and engage in both illegal and risky drinking. Many FSILGs do have effective rules, effectively enforced, and such chapters express concern over the behavior of their peers. Unfortunately, we also observed attitudes on the subject that ranged from defiance and ignorance to denial.
- Hard data from a range of existing surveys of students and alumni led to the following observations:
 - **FSILG members give back more to the Institute as alumni.** Out of proportion to their percentage in the undergraduate population, FSILG members return to serve as faculty. FSILG membership is also highly correlated with much larger donations to MIT (3.5 times the annual gifts of residence hall students) – and even with higher income.

- **FSILGs either appeal to or foster an entrepreneurial spirit, or both.** High-risk/high-payoff ventures appealed to FSILG members at twice the percentage of others (24% versus 12%). Also, a much higher percentage would take an opportunity join a startup (20% versus 12%), and a smaller percentage feels it is smarter to build a career in an established firm (13% versus 20%).
- **FSILGs do not appear to influence student achievement academically.** Junior-year GPAs, controlled for gender, school, ethnicity, citizenship, and credit units are not significantly different between members of FSILGs and residence-hall students. However, FSILG members on average take one less subject during their undergraduate years.
- **FSILGs promote certain kinds of participation in campus life.** Students in all living groups spend about the same amount of time on jobs, student government, musical groups, theatrical productions, religious organizations, and volunteer work. However, FSILG members are far more likely to volunteer to help orient or host new or prospective students, and we know that male FSILG members are twice as likely to play varsity sports.
- **FSILG members were considerably more likely to ask another student for advice on a personal problem.** (84% versus 65% for males; 84% versus 76% overall) and reported stronger abilities to resolve interpersonal conflict (58% versus 43%).
- **FSILGs students do not appear to volunteer substantially more than residence hall students.**
- **FSILG members, on the whole, do drink more heavily.** Data indicates that members of fraternities and sororities, both nationally and at MIT, drink more than students in residence halls. Nationally, fraternity members engage in more heavy drinking than members of MIT fraternities (75% versus 28%); in fact, nationally, male non-fraternity members engage in more heavy drinking than members of MIT fraternities (49% versus 28%). However, locally, fraternity members engage in more heavy drinking than male students in MIT residence halls (roughly 28% versus 9%). That said, not every fraternity has a major problem, nor is drinking a major problem in the sororities and the ILGs.
- **The most influential factor in a student's decision to join an FSILG is face-to-face contact.** Also, many members report that they had no plans to join an FSILG when they were admitted to MIT, but changed their minds once they understood that MIT FSILGs are not stereotypical.
- **The future of the FSILG system depends on MIT helping to reverse the fact that, for a host of interlocking reasons, most FSILGs have been, for a significant period, decapitalizing their value so as to keep house bills low.** The transition financial support already committed by MIT has provided crucial assistance. However, from funding to financial training, additional support is vital, not least of all because FSILGS provide a significant, virtually irreplaceable, low-cost housing resource.

Task Force Conclusions

From these findings, we move further from fact and more toward opinion, with the goal of outlining what an ideal system should be. Threaded throughout our conclusions are three themes:

1. The FSILG system contributes importantly to MIT's success and greatly benefits many students at MIT.
2. All the stakeholders—administration, alumni, and students—must learn to work together better.
3. All the stakeholders—administration, alumni, and students—have substantial work to do.

Overall, we concluded that:

- **FSILGs are living-and-learning laboratories.** We have come to think of FSILGs as a range of distinctive living-and-learning laboratories where students develop a variety of skills that are valuable throughout life both before and after commencement.

- **The FSILG system is a system of systems.** Because fraternities, sororities, and independent living groups operate differently from one another, the FSILG system should be viewed as a system of three systems; even within each subsystem is a wide range of missions, styles, and approaches. Fundamentally, this diversity is good, helping to ensure a place in the system for everyone who seeks its benefits. We focus most on the fraternities because there are more of them and they tend to have more severe problems. However, each group has special needs that should be recognized – and that deserve special support from MIT.
- **The MIT FSILG system requires urgent attention.** MIT's administration, students, house corporations, and alumni must come to work together – energetically, for several years, in an atmosphere of mutual respect and trust -- to address lingering hostilities, acute financial problems, continuing problems with drinking, and practical issues around rush and recruitment policies and procedures.
- **An important educational asset lies underused.** We cannot allow “market forces” to correct the problem of over-capacity that threatens many FSILGs (especially fraternities) because the market might well not preserve those with the most studious or wholesome atmospheres. Given the benefits of FSILG living, we should be thinking of how to leverage an underused asset – of how to fill empty slots with students who can and wish to benefit from the experience, beginning by supporting the recruiting process in various ways.
- **The envelope of possible futures includes financial disaster and system collapse.** The fraternities and ILGs have serious membership problems, which could become much worse. With appropriate action and cooperation by all concerned, most of the existing fraternities and ILGs could survive, but many houses will face a financial crisis in the meantime; without dramatic assistance, as many as a third could be lost to MIT altogether.
- **It's time to review the results of the freshman-on-campus policy.** MIT launched the freshmen-on-campus policy with admirable goals, including fostering a mutually supportive, academically oriented environment for all students, and improving students' sense of connection to MIT. Experience suggests, however, that the FOC system may be producing the opposite effect. For the FOC policy to succeed, MIT needs to create and implement a plan to meet its original goals. It's time to review objectives, determine results, and suggest a plan for improving results where necessary – a plan that would benefit both the residence halls and the FSILGs.

Goals of an Ideal FSILG System

We list in this section our thoughts on the goals of an ideal FSILG system, as well as metrics, and observations on how well the MIT FSILGs are currently performing.

An ideal FSILG is a living and learning laboratory – a “training camp for life.” Formally and informally, FSILGs should offer opportunities to develop fundamental values and abilities, from tolerance, service to others, and integrity to ambition constrained by fair play and an ability to work out problems through constructive discussion.

An ideal FSILG system values scholarship and promotes activity.

An ideal FSILG system develops leadership skills. In a typical fraternity or ILG, a minimum of 25% of the members are practicing leadership directly, because there are so many real responsibilities to share and practical leadership roles to fill. MIT graduates have never needed these skills more than they do today.

An ideal FSILG system discourages illegal and dangerous behaviors, channeling risk-taking into socially applauded areas and away from the illegal and dangerous.

An ideal FSILG system eases the stress imposed by a stressful environment, by providing both fellowship and a homelike environment separated from MIT's powerful academic icons.

An ideal FSILG system promotes campus community and school spirit. When an FSILG system is functioning well, the members feel good about themselves, their FSILG affiliation, the student body as a whole, and the university they attend; in return, the university appreciates them as well.

An ideal FSILG system helps make a campus inviting to prospective students. Prospective students hosted by FSILGs during MIT Campus Preview Weekend are currently 5% more likely to choose MIT over other top schools, an impressive number that thrills our admissions office.

An ideal FSILG system ensures a range of residence and affiliation choices. To many students, alumni and, importantly, prospective students, MIT's large number of living and association options (in excess of 40), is a big plus -- a positive feature that sets MIT apart.

An ideal FSILG system develops loyal, enthusiastic alumni, who contribute time, energy and money to their houses and to MIT as a whole. To deal with those aspects of FSILG life that require continuity, the engagement of alumni is especially important now that members live in houses for just three years. MIT should take vigorous steps to increase volunteer alumni involvement, and alumni should have increased presence and influence in the MIT-FSILG-Alumni governance triad.

An ideal FSILG system is financially robust, with sound procedures for budgeting (including capital planning and price setting), accounting, and bill collection.

In an ideal FSILG system, behavioral responsibilities are welcomed. Because FSILGs are selective, each is expressly responsible for the behavior of its members, and each member's behavior shapes the reputation of the whole. Therefore, an ideal FSILG is not, for example, a place that encourages dangerous, immoral, or illegal behavior, nor that irritates its neighbors with unreasonable noise or shabby appearance.

Recommended Plan

This section lays out concrete tasks that we believe will help to ensure that MIT's FSILGs will be an enviable, distinguishing feature of MIT in the twenty-first century. This plan will be effective only if MIT's administration, along with students and alumni, are conspicuously committed to ensuring that the FSILG system reflects MIT's general satisfaction with nothing less than excellence. The full report offers much more detail as well as our rationale for each suggestion.

Above all, the FSILG system must be embraced with enthusiasm or shut down; mere toleration is not a viable option.

Task 1: Improve communication

This includes opening up the MIT decision-making process, identifying and exploiting opportunities to express positive views, and reassuring alumni that MIT supports the FSILG system. A key step toward better communication, already accomplished, is the appointment of Bob Ferrara as Director of FSILG Alumni Relations, reporting to the Dean for Student Life and to the Executive Vice President of the Alumni Association.

Task 2: Improve financial health and establish quality-of-life standards

Current conditions will produce a combined net operating loss among our FSILGs between one half to one million dollars per year over the next three to five years. That shortfall can be reduced or met through an extension of the FTP savings realized through membership in the FSILG Co-op, improved financial management and coordination between alumni and undergraduates, use of the IRDF Grants Program, increases in house bills, and increased alumni gifts. MIT also needs to facilitate alumni giving beneficial to the FSILG system.

MIT should also increase house bills and keep the playing field level; consider the beneficial impact of an increase in class size of perhaps 10 percent; institute a system of standards and inspections, and help with compliance; and institute a standard for risk management compliance.

Task 3: Facilitate rush and recruiting

Specifically, MIT must include recruitment and residence visits in the pre-class calendar, encourage and fund additional recruitment activities, encourage alumni involvement, require that recruitment be conducted safely and lawfully, minimize disappointments and hurt feelings connected with residence selection, allow MIT-controlled summer dialogue with students initiated by email, enable summer contact in connection with an enlarged summer orientation program, and give top available-slot priority in residence halls to students who have sampled an FSILG option.

Task 4: Jointly determine roles, standards, and expectations

MIT should bring together during the fall of 2004 representatives of all FSILG stakeholders --students, house corporations, alumni, and responsible MIT administrators -- to work out and agree to roles, standards, and expectations, from the overall mission of the FSILG system to the responsibilities of every player in it.

Task 5: Actively manage the transition

The FSILG system will need three to five years additional years to come back into something like a stable state. No one could have predicted the unintended consequences of past action and no one can predict the unintended consequences of the actions taken now. In the meantime, MIT needs to appoint a temporary transition manager with a broad portfolio and form a temporary transition advisory board.

Task 6: Include FSILGs in a long-term campus housing plan

MIT should develop a plan for building FSILG housing on campus. Likely candidates for such housing should be identified and continuously engaged in the planning process so as to ensure that plans are and remain congruent with desires and expectations.

In Conclusion

Through more than a year of careful study and intense, open-minded debate, we have worked to define a strong foundation for the future of FSILGs at MIT. We are also encouraged by the range of independent efforts already being made by the many stakeholders involved to strengthen the FSILG community.

However, much urgent work remains, to ensure that an extraordinarily important, differentiating, and irreplaceable asset will survive and prosper. To mark the significance of this challenge, and the sense of a fresh start, we are calling this effort **Project Aurora**.

With enthusiastic action on our recommended plan by MIT's administration, complemented by equally positive, energetic action by FSILG members and alumni, we have no doubt that the FSILG system's problems will be solved, enabling FSILGs to continue to be of great service to their members and to MIT. By sustaining the vibrancy of the FSILG community and maintaining the wide variety of dormitory arrangements, MIT will offer its students the most diverse and stimulating array of living options of any elite university in the country, if not the world.

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