

Update from Bob Ferrara '67, Director of FSILG Alumni Relations

June 26, 2008

Hello FSILG alums,

This is another of a series of messages sent to you every six months regarding MIT's Fraternity, Sorority, and Independent Living Group (FSILG) community. It may surprise you, but today our community now includes more undergraduates than at any time in MIT's history, although a few groups continue to struggle with low membership. And for that matter, aided by today's longer life spans, our FSILG alumni base is now the largest ever also. So all in all, we collectively are making headway in passing on this special living experience, which we value so much, to current and future generations of MIT students. Today's challenges offer each of us an opportunity to help. Here are some recent highlights:

The Situation Today.

The circumstances of the FSILG community at MIT continue to improve. Most chapters are successfully adapting to new circumstances and demographics at MIT. But as reported below in the section on "Accreditation", a handful of them are struggling; though now there is a more systematic way for chapters to seek help and get back on track.

The overall positive trend is due to the many collaborations and contributions from all of us – alums, students, volunteers, and professional staff. The Annual Meeting of the [Association of Independent Living Groups](#) (AILG) was a good vantage point to get a sense of the range of people involved in this effort. The meeting was held this past June 11 in the MIT Faculty Club, where the dinnertime gathering filled the better part of the main dining room overlooking the Boston skyline. As you would expect, the largest number were alumni volunteers and officers from the chapters. Many of these people also participate in one of the half-dozen AILG committees aimed at promoting some common FSILG interest; these committees included 58 volunteers this past year. The whole event was arranged by the FSILG Cooperative, Inc., the very successful purchasing group jointly owned by MIT's FSILGs. A large number of MIT staff were also on hand, representing no less than a dozen offices.

New MIT Admissions Director Stu Schmill '86 gave an informative keynote address focusing on the profiles of the students MIT is admitting today (almost half of whom will become FSILG members tomorrow). As the annual dinner custom has developed, the evening is primarily social, but the AILG also gets some business done as well, such as the presentation of the Annual Report, voting on the annual budget, and the election of AILG officers. For many of us, it has the feel of a New England style "town meeting" for the FSILG community.

In the elections, Steve Baker '84 of Theta Xi was re-elected to a full three year term on the Board, along with newcomer Sara Pierce '03 of Sigma Kappa. Stan Wulf '65 of Phi Delta Theta, and David Burmaster '69 of Epsilon Theta were elected to one-year terms. The idea for a new set of officers, the Ombudspersons, was developed during incorporation discussions this past year and three were elected for the first time ever – Raffaella Wakeman '08 of Alpha Chi Omega, Emily Marcus '01 of Epsilon Theta, and veteran Steve Stuntz '67 of Sigma Phi Epsilon. Thanks to all of these people for their additional service to the community.

Accreditation Milestone: Alumni Peer Review of Every Chapter.

This spring marked an important milestone for the AILG's [Accreditation Program](#); each of the 36 FSILGs housing MIT students has been visited and reviewed by a peer group of alums. This ambitious program was begun three years ago at the request of Dean Larry Benedict, who was seeking a better way to provide more systematic and broader information in discharging MIT's responsibility of granting FSILG recognition. The AILG accepted this assignment, seeing it as a way to learn about and exchange "best practices", thus strengthening the overall community. The first two years were bumpy ones, part of the learning process, but the program continued to evolve to its current, sustainable operation. The process now involves the alumni corporation and the actives jointly filling out a detailed questionnaire and meeting for a few hours with a carefully selected peer review team. With this preparation, the conversations are rich and mutually productive.

The first complete round of results are now in and posted on the [Accreditation Coordinator's web site](#). They can be readily summarized into each of the three possible "review findings".

* The large majority of FSILGs were judged as "Recommend Accreditation" and this finding is immediately posted and forwarded to the Dean's Office.

* Four others now have a finding of "Recommend with Reservation". In these cases, a list of specific concerns is reviewed by the chapter and the AILG Board, and a revisit is always scheduled for the following term to ensure progress is being made. Typical reservations have included increasing undergraduate membership and training, adequacy of alumni corporation reserves, and even serious physical issues with the house.

* Two were "Not Recommended for Accreditation", a finding which leads directly to active intervention by MIT. These two just occurred and all parties are taking the findings quite seriously, since - if the underlying conditions remain unaddressed - this will lead to loss of recognition by MIT. The actives and alums of these two organizations have all received an e-mail notifying them of this condition; so if you have not seen such a notice, please be assured that your FSILG is not one of these two.

The first intervention just got underway two weeks ago and has already seen a very substantial and encouraging outpouring of alumni volunteer support, a crucial ingredient in turning the situation around. Accreditation Coordinator John Covert succinctly captured it, "Those of us who work with the FSILG system today see many healthy organizations, and the healthiest are the ones with strong and active alumni involvement". In fact, given the empirical data on the importance of active alumni groups, MIT's FSILG Office updated its published policies regarding our community to explicitly encourage and even require alumni involvement in key aspects of chapter operations.

Pi Beta Phi – the Newest MIT Sorority.

A sixth national sorority chapter will begin on campus recruitment in the fall. After a months long, multi-stage selection process involving students, alumni, and administrators, Pi Beta Phi was asked to start a new colony at MIT. Because of the great success that sororities have had here, there is clearly room for another. As noted before, the number of sorority-affiliated women has grown each year for two decades, to the point where the Panhellenic Association is the largest women's organization on campus.

With its outstanding students, strong campus leadership, and supportive administration, MIT is viewed as perhaps the best opportunity for a new sorority chapter in the nation, so it was no surprise that 11 of 21 eligible National Panhellenic organizations applied. All were credible, but the evaluation committee was particularly impressed with Pi Beta Phi's strong community service focus, long history with a literacy philanthropy, and widespread national support. They look to be a very good fit with our MIT culture. And Pi Beta Phi officials have made it clear that, like us, they view alumni involvement as central to their success. They are also interested in acquiring housing in a few years, and have already begun discussions with a few fraternities about leasing their annexes. Lauren Wojtkun, Assistant Director for FSILGs, has been overseeing the entire effort. Lauren, the AILG, the Panhellenic Association, and a cadre of MIT alumnae (and me, too) will be working to ensure the new chapter is as successful as its sister organizations.

Only at MIT! – Stories of Smoots, Fight Songs, and Reunions.

There are some traditions that you can find only at MIT. Among the very best of these is the treasured metric of the Smoot. On Saturday October 4, 2008, the MIT community will host a celebration in honor of the 50th anniversary of the first Smoot painting. The web site at <http://web.mit.edu/smoot/> describes the day's planned events and will soon have a registration page if you wish to participate. Led by the InterFraternity Council and the Panhellenic Association, several hundred students have already committed to repaint the thousands of feet of bridge railings that day. Alums can help if they wish, and also reminisce to the mellow sounds of that signature 1950's group, "The Platters", who will be performing as part of the celebration, a prelude to a festive 50's party at the MIT Museum. Ollie Smoot '62 himself will be there throughout, along with his accomplices on that fateful evening five decades ago. The major sponsors for the day are the MIT Club of Boston, and, fittingly, Ollie's MIT Class of 1962 and Lambda Chi Alpha fraternity, whose members have repainted the Smoot marks so faithfully all these years.

The brothers and guests at Beta Theta Pi's national convention, held here in Boston several months ago, also witnessed a very special MIT tradition. Yardley Chittick '22, Beta's and MIT's oldest living alum, was asked to come to the podium to address the several hundred brothers and guests gathered in the banquet hall at Anthony's Pier Four. Accompanied by his nurse and his walker, this 107-year-old icon slowly worked his way to the front, briefly addressed the group, and then proceeded to belt out the "[MIT Fight Song](#)". People went crazy. Yardley concluded by promising "to be back next year and do it again". We hope so. Yardley is a rare treat indeed. Incidentally, he also attended this June's MIT Reunions. So if he can do it, what is keeping us?

A new feature of this year's Reunions was a dedicated time slot for returning alums to attend Open Houses at their living groups. With seniors moving out and summer residents coming in, early June is a very tough time to accommodate the open houses. Nonetheless eight fraternities and WILG, the Women's Independent Living Group, rose to the challenge. From what we can tell everyone involved had a fun, relaxing time - very much appreciated by the returning alums. Once the cleanup was done, the hosts also found the events relatively easy to do logistically - just provide some light food and refreshment. Really people just love to tell a few stories, meet new and old friends, and see their old living group. All participants definitely want to try this again next year. Who knows, maybe this will become yet another MIT Reunion tradition.

The alumni and actives of Chi Phi have treasured traditions of their own, like restoring their magnificent home at the corner of Hereford and Commonwealth. This Back Bay mansion was built in the mid-1880s for John F. Andrew, a congressman and son of former Governor John A. Andrew. In fact, a noted architectural authority recently stated that this fraternity house was the best maintained of all the historically significant works by the renowned New York architectural firm of McKim, Mead, and White. While helping with Chi Phi's capital campaign, Dave Neuburger '75 was inspired to create a truly beautiful history of this magnificent building and the Chi Phi chapter. The book is called "House of Brothers" and the effort earned Dave an award as an "Outstanding Alumnus" this past May. A [complete list](#) of honorees can be found on the AILG web site.

MIT Administration Updates – Dean and Housing Changes Afoot.

As reported last time, Dean of Student Life Larry Benedict will be retiring this summer. The search committee, which includes AILG Chair Steve Baker '84, has just finished interviews with the short list of candidates. Larry has been a true friend and supporter of the FSILG community, and we anticipate his successor will be also. Sometime this fall, we will know who that is.

Dean of Residential Life Karen Nilsson is seeing through on one of Larry's goals - make MIT a better landlord for students. MIT owns the land and/or buildings for eight FSILGs. These chapters are primarily the more recent additions to the FSILG community, like the three sororities with houses in Kenmore Square or Zeta Psi fraternity, which occupies the upper floors of an MIT-owned building above a Massachusetts Avenue pizza shop. For historical reasons, all MIT leases were administered by the MIT Real Estate Office, which has a decidedly commercial focus. They agreed that Residential Life was a far more appropriate organization to deal with the FSILG tenants. So earlier this year, the Real Estate Office agreed to transfer lease oversight to Residential Life, whose first move was to retain the FSILG Cooperative, Inc. (FCI) to administer the leases. Given the existing positive business relationships every chapter already has with the FCI, this arrangement was welcomed by all. There is still considerable work to do, but at least all the right parties are now at the same table.

Another Residential Life goal has been to provide Kappa Alpha Theta sorority with more appropriate housing than a wing on a floor in the huge Sidney & Pacific Graduate Dormitory. KAT had accepted this arrangement several years earlier to ease an undergraduate housing crunch. This summer the sisters will be moving into Green Hall, next door to Baker House. This 40 bed building was most recently an all-female graduate dormitory. Well before that it was the Sancta Maria Hospital, where local Red Sox hero Tony Conigliaro recuperated after his beaming at Fenway during the "impossible dream" year of 1967. The future now looks very promising indeed, as the Theta sisters and alumnae are now busy making Green Hall a very welcoming home.

IRDF Role Continues to Expand.

As you know, the [Independent Residence Development Fund](#) (IRDF) has served our community exceedingly well since it was first established forty years ago to provide low cost renovation loans. This venerable fund has assumed ever greater importance today with the renewed re-investment in the FSILG community over the past few years. In particular, the IRDF has been funding a series of one-time community wide grant programs. It started last year, when installations of state-mandated Carbon Monoxide detection systems and fireplace conversion were financed by the IRDF. This year a million dollar plus [Community Network Upgrade project](#) is now well underway and, with the assistance of MIT's Information Technology & Services department, will upgrade the network infrastructure to the latest industry and MIT standards. Eight houses have already had new cabling and switching gear installed; the rest will follow over the coming year. The IRDF is also underwriting a smaller, related program to upgrade the fire alarm communications systems from the current dedicated, expensive analog lines to a more reliable and proven radio-based system.

Alongside all the above, the individual FSILGs continue to successfully apply for IRDF loans, renovation project grants, and annual educational operating grants. In the first six months, a new record was established, as more than a half million dollars of such grants were awarded. Now, thanks to the assistance of MIT's Procurement Department, deeply discounted pricing on quality desks and chairs are available to FSILGs, and these purchases qualify for complete educational reimbursement. Six houses have already ordered these items, and more are lining up to do so. While it's great to have all this activity, there needs to be comparable increases in donations to sustain it. The key IRDF oversight committees, composed primarily of MIT alumni and alumnae, are seeking more ways to encourage alums to do just that.

So please, if and when you make your annual donation to MIT, be sure to designate the "IRDF" as the recipient on the donor card or the on-line giving site. The IRDF has been funded by an enormous number of small to medium gifts, and they truly add up. Big gifts are welcome, too. My last message reported that Phi Kappa Sigma's President Keith Kallberg '68 and his wife Razel, also '68, worked with MIT fundraising staff to enable the IRDF to be the beneficiary of annuity gifts. And now there is another innovation in IRDF giving. Bob Steininger '76 of Phi Beta Epsilon has pioneered the means to make securities (e.g. common stock) gifts directly to IRDF. Thank you all.

Your Contributions are Making the Difference.

Thank you again for your continued help and support. Your personal touch is still very much needed and valued - whether it is in connecting with other alumni, advocating for your chapter and the FSILG community, mentoring an undergrad, doing other valuable volunteer work, or contributing much needed funds to your chapter or to the IRDF. With this sustained effort, we can indeed continue to be among the very best and most varied college residence communities in the nation, infused with our special MIT spirit.

Thank you,

Bob Ferrara '67
Director, FSILG Alumni Relations
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Email: rferrara@mit.edu

NB: All prior e-mails in this series, plus other FSILG-related alumni communications, can be found on the Aurora web site at this address: <http://web.mit.edu/dsl/aurora/community-reports.htm>