

International Students Office

The mission of the International Students Office (ISO) is to help the international student population at MIT fulfill academic goals by providing services and support programs that facilitate adjustment to a new academic and cultural environment. The office assists students in maintaining their legal status in the United States, provides support for their dependents, and promotes their interaction with and integration into the MIT community at large. In general, the ISO advocates for awareness in the community of issues salient to the international student.

The international student population represents 108 countries, with the largest representation from the People's Republic of China. In AY2004, over 25 percent of the MIT student population was international and, at the graduate level, over 36 percent. These percentages have remained constant over the past five years.

In July 2003, foreign nationals wishing to pursue study and research in the United States faced new challenges with the advent of the Student Exchange Visitor Information System (SEVIS), an electronic tracking database monitored by the Department of Homeland Security. Along with the USA Patriot Act and other federal mandates, SEVIS has fundamentally overhauled international student immigration regulations. The ISO spent the previous year making the transition to new, more stringent procedures and regulations. Educating the MIT community about international student regulatory issues was the most critical and compelling function of the ISO this year.

With regulations in force, the MIT community needed to adjust to new realities governing aspects of international student life and learning such as registration, research, paid internships, international travel, health issues, and academic and disciplinary issues. For example, SEVIS requires semiannual registration reporting for all full-time international students. A student's legal status in the United States will be "terminated" by the Department of Homeland Security if he or she is not reported as fully registered within 30 days of the official registration period. In response to this new requirement, MIT needed to tighten policies with respect to late registration and retroactive registration, which in previous years had been commonplace. Departmental and Institute policies and procedures were reviewed and rewritten to address the changes in student regulations. The ISO spearheaded many of these evaluative efforts as new policies and practice were implemented with respect to medical leave, financial aid, counseling and support, and the Committees on Discipline and Academic Performance.

By December 2003, the ISO advising staff observed a pronounced increase in the number of appointments with individual MIT staff who wished to become informed about regulatory issues pertaining to international students in their specific programs and with students appearing at ISO appointments accompanied by a faculty advisor or administrative staff.

In the spring of 2004, the ISO initiated collaboration with MIT's Center for International Studies (CIS) to establish the Kailath Series for Global Citizenship. With a generous

grant from Professor George Verghese, this new series will provide opportunities for the MIT community, both international and domestic, to come together to discuss vital topics of global concern. The first of such events, “Science in an Age of Terrorism,” took place in April 2004. The ISO looks forward to further collaborations across campus with CIS and other groups in efforts to promote the positive international exchange of ideas in the face of a troubled international climate.

International Admissions

The ISO continues to play a pivotal role in admissions, which enables international students admitted to MIT to secure their visas, arrive in a timely fashion, and receive some cultural and legal orientation to life in the United States and at MIT.

Prior to 2004, 9-11 and its aftermath had not slowed international graduate (or undergraduate) applications to the Institute. However, by the spring of 2004, applications to MIT from internationals had decreased by 12 percent. Whether or not a decrease in international applicants will result in a substantial decrease in actual international admits is not yet clear. The ISO will monitor the number of admits who choose to come to MIT and matriculate in an attempt to determine if visa delays, immigration regulations, and/or perceived climate in the United States might impact an international student’s decision to enroll.

Despite the array of post-9/11 security measures and visa application procedures, the approximately 750 international students admitted for AY2004 arrived by Registration Day in September 2003. However, graduate admits from the People’s Republic of China and from countries that have been designated “state sponsors of terrorism” (Iran, Iraq, Libya, North Korea, Syria, and the Sudan) faced rigorous scrutiny at the US Embassy and consulates.

Visiting students (who continue to be invited to the Institute in record numbers) tax the ISO from both a legal and an advising perspective since they must comply with SEVIS requirements. Since they arrive at any time during the year—outside the normal admissions process and often at short notice—they are particularly vulnerable to SEVIS compliance issues. They also have problems competing with regularly enrolled MIT students for physical space in labs and departments and, since they are not entitled to on-campus housing, finding accommodations in the Cambridge area. To address their unique needs, the ISO has created a special SEVIS reporting protocol and specialized programming.

The Cambridge–MIT Exchange, the MIT–Singapore Alliance, Sloan Fellows, and Systems and Design Management all continued to expand their programs in AY2004, specifically targeting foreign national participation. The ISO staff became proficient in applying new legal admissions requirements to specialized programs such as these.

International Student Advising

Advising is at the heart of the ISO's responsibility to the international student. ISO advisors provide legal and personal advice to prospective students, admitted students, current students, and graduated students (who seek our counsel long after commencement) through individual appointments, the website, and email. In AY2004, the number of students seeking ISO appointments nearly doubled. As in the past, ISO advisors have visited students who have been hospitalized, comforted students grieving the loss of a loved one back home, and intervened on behalf of troubled students with immigration officers, consular officials, and other government agencies.

Orientation Programs for International Students

All international students, regardless of age, degree program, or familiarity with life in the United States, undergo a period of cultural adjustment. Through the use of the web and email, incoming students are now able to address many of their practical concerns before arrival in the country. Once on campus, students take advantage of individual and small group orientation sessions open to all incoming internationals daily from mid-August to mid-September.

In AY2004, the ISO began a fruitful collaboration with and participation in the Graduate Student Council's expanding orientation program. We participated in several panels on Graduate Student Day. ISO staff promoted the GSC's Airport Shuttle Service and Graduate Student Mentor Program via the web and in all orientation events. Celebrating the vibrant and diverse graduate student body through shared orientation activities is a new and essential component of the GSO's ongoing efforts to enhance the graduate student experience.

The ISO continues to be responsible for Freshman International Orientation. In AY2004, with a bevy of upperclassman volunteers, the ISO expanded its intensive two-day program to include informal social nights, midnight soccer games, and off-campus shopping and dining excursions. The new USA 101 Workshop, inspired by an ISO advisor, gave newcomers insights into American and MIT culture.

The International Freshman Mentor Program, currently in its sixth year, has become a mainstay of freshman orientation. This program matches incoming international freshmen with upperclass students before their arrival in the United States. Strong bonds develop between student and mentor, from email correspondence to airport pickup to many yearlong mentor-organized activities. The Mentor Program has been staffed and organized entirely by volunteer students (both domestic and international upperclass students) and program founder, Paulette Schwartz.

Host to International Students Program

The Host to International Students Program provides new students with supportive emotional and social ties to MIT community members and their families. Coordinator Kerry Tucker brought new families into the program, updated its database and

infrastructure, and created new events in which more than 150 students and community members participated. Next year, a new coordinator will fine-tune this invaluable program.

Future Goals

As MIT adjusts to new regulatory realities governing international students, the ISO's role in providing a welcoming and supportive interface with the international student body is more important than ever. Maintaining the balance between fulfilling the Institute's legal responsibilities and providing a welcoming environment will remain a challenge.

However, the ISO will proactively seek ways to address the challenges inherent in these disparate yet critical roles by developing new programming initiatives, enhancing day-to-day operations, and promoting cross-cultural training across the Institute. With strong leadership, creative energy, collaborative teamwork, and sustained support from the Institute, we will work to ensure that international students feel that they are respected and valued members of the MIT community.

Danielle Guichard-Ashbrook
Associate Dean and Director