On Values and a Caring Meritocracy for MIT

An Invitation to the MIT community

Joseph H. Saleh

There is a sign-post one can find in France, at train crossings or in stations that reads as follows: "Attention! Un train peut cacher un autre." Beware! One train might hide/be hiding another one. I often found the statement amusing, and useful. Taken figuratively, I imagined the sign to serve as an invitation to be cautious or mindful of potential negative side effects that can come in the wake of a commitment to an idea: whether one is watching a train coming his or her way, or riding a train heading in some direction, or designing the train and the tracks to head in some direction (an observer, a participant, and a designer respectively), that sign-post stood as a reminder for me to be mindful, however attractive an idea or a direction might be, of the possible hidden trains or negative side-effects that can come in its wake. And to do something about them when I can. It is in this spirit that I write this piece, and the train that I want to both celebrate and participate in mitigating its possible negative effects is MIT’s commitment to meritocracy.

I feel privileged and grateful to be part of an institution committed to meritocracy.

Having come to the English language through a couple of language hops, I have often found it useful, in order to understand a new English word, to look up its antonyms. For meritocracy, I found nepotism, favoritism, preferential treatment, and discrimination: opportunities given to individuals based on other considerations than their personal merit. That, along with some personal experience of these latter attitudes, only strengthened my conviction of the merits of meritocracy, and my gratefulness for the opportunity to be part of an institution that shuns all these unpleasant dispositions, and proclaims that individuals will be evaluated based on the content of their character and their merit, not what they have inherited or were born into (of wealth, of physical traits). This is one train I am happy to be on.

But then, that French sign-post comes to mind: "Attention! Un train peut cacher un autre." And I find myself incapable of being unconditionally enthusiastic about meritocracy: in its wake, a few unpleasant things can tag along if one is not careful. I hope the following is seen as my meager attempt to make MIT a better, more caring place; I have a lot of affection for this wonderful place and the people who make it, and I hope this write-up is viewed as an attempt to start and enrich a dialogue on meritocracy.

Performance pressure and careless meritocracy
There is a wonderful work ethic among students, faculty, and staff at MIT. People work very hard at the Institute, and feel to a varying degree, but it is undeniably there, some performance pressure or work-related stress. Performance pressure in turn, while useful in small doses, when it spirals out of control, can become quite distressful and significantly compromise the happiness and well-being of an individual. Meritocracy, without further qualification, can be seen as a cold, impersonal system that order ranks individuals based on some performance metric(s), and may foster an environment of increased competitiveness among individuals, thus increasing performance pressure and work-related stress. This is not what MIT needs, increased emphasis on performance. Academic excellence and intellectual leadership are as intrinsic to MIT as the Infinite Corridor. And even when the Infinite Corridor moves out of MIT, academic excellence, I suspect, will remain. Instead, what I believe is most needed at MIT is the commitment from the faculty and senior administration to create a caring environment.

"Caring" is perhaps the most underrated characteristic of academic institutions and yet I believe it is one that is most useful and needed. Until social scientists prove me wrong, I will keep believing that people work better and more creatively when they are feeling happy and empowered than when they are feeling sad, depressed, or helpless. And should I be proven wrong, I would prefer to foster an environment in which people are happy rather than "better workers."

In a recent mental health survey at Berkeley, 12% of the respondents reported feeling helpless, 50% overwhelmed, 41% exhausted, 10% depressed, and 10% seriously contemplated suicide.

These are very sad findings! I cannot help but wonder what is the root cause of this, whether at Berkeley, MIT, or elsewhere, and what can be done about it. At the root of it, I hypothesize, there is the following dangerous mixture: significant performance pressure, coupled with a careless environment (e.g., a dysfunctional relationship between a student and his or her advisor, or between a junior faculty and his or her senior mentors). In order to do something about these numbers, and I take it for granted that we all feel a collective responsibility towards making MIT a better, happier place for studying and working, I invite the faculty and administration to slightly shift the emphasis from (valuing only) the performance of an individual to the well-being of each individual. Let me propose the following compromise: instead of talking about meritocracy, perhaps our administration can promote a "caring meritocracy" instead.

Meritocracy without empowerment can be a scary system

Despite my previous concerns, I remain enthusiastic about meritocracy, and even more so if it were a "caring meritocracy," and feel privileged to be part of an institution committed to meritocracy (the anti-nepotism, favoritism, and discrimination).

Still, that French signpost comes again to mind. And I see another potential problem with
meritocracy. Let me tell you a story to illustrate my point. I recently learned that in my home country, sometime during the 1950s, a group of villagers came to their representative, a member of a rich and powerful family, and asked him to intercede with the government in order to build schools for their communities. That person replied that that should not be necessary since "I am sending my son to school for you, so that he can later care for your interests." After my disgust subsided, I imagined that the son, in a meritocracy, would most likely have a leadership position in his community, simply because others less privileged did not have an opportunity to attend school and later compete with him. This is the other potential problem with meritocracy: it can promote the privileged and lock those who had less fortunate initial socio-economic conditions out of the system.

It seems one problem with meritocracy revolves around the timing of meritocracy: when should it start? And when should the promotion of inclusiveness and egalitarian ethics prevail? I have no ready answer for this, but I have a slight preference for inclusiveness and diversity before the race for performance begins (e.g., when recruiting new students or faculty). Only afterwards, can and should the same performance standards apply to all. I am sure different groups would want to be evaluated according to the same standards and figures of merit as everybody else.

I know the social structure in this country is very complex and I will not venture an opinion on this vast subject. I only hope that MIT has some thoughtful policies in place to overcome legacies of past discriminations before a meritocracy is committed to.

**Meritocracy implies transparency and consistency on what constitutes "merit"**

Despite my previous concerns, I remain enthusiastic about meritocracy, and even more so if it were a "caring meritocracy" that first includes and empowers a diverse group of individuals before it sets up to evaluate them based on some performance measure.

But whichever way I look at it, meritocracy remains ill-defined until one articulates what constitutes "merit" in an environment, and what are the figures of merit that are being evaluated. It is also only fair that these figures of merit be explicitly stated and made known to everyone on the starting blocks (not mentioned later during the race, or kept hidden with the evaluators).

Transparency of the figures of merit is a necessary condition for a meritocracy to actually be one. Without this transparency, favoritism and even discrimination can be cloaked in a meritocratic mantle. So what are the figures of merit in the meritocracy that MIT is committed to? I hope the administration will articulate to the MIT community what constitutes "merit" (and I hope fostering a caring environment will figure in the figures of merit for faculty). What goes without saying goes even better by saying it.

Consistency: In addition to transparency, when I think about meritocracy, I associate with it the word "one-ness." One meritocracy for all, at all times. A meritocracy becomes suspicious when it is temporarily or locally suspended (pockets of un-meritocracy). Let me tell you another story before I continue this line of thought. There is an interesting ritual in
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In the space industry before a new satellite is launched: the operators get together before the launch date and think very hard about all the ways they can imagine to break the satellite. Once they have done that, they use what they have come up with as the list of what they should absolutely not to do when flying the satellite. I feel on a similar list for a meritocracy, there is inconsistency: different performance standards applying to different people, some of the time. One guaranteed way for breaking a meritocracy is to have different figures of merit for different individuals.

Consistency and transparency on what constitutes merit are necessary conditions for a meritocracy to actually be one.

On meritocracy and values

My last point is not really a new one. I have already alluded to this concern in the last two sections: that performance measures will drive, to a certain extent, some corresponding behavior in individuals, and perhaps curtail other behaviors. For example, if in a galaxy far far away, a university president claims that rudeness is the measure of merit in his or her establishment, such a statement will most likely encourage rudeness at this university and curtail respectful interactions among its members. It is also likely to attract and retain rude people. More seriously, my point is that meritocracy requires that we first articulate what constitutes "merit," and what constitutes merit in turn should reflect 1) our values, 2) what kind of people we want to attract and retain, and 3) what kind of behaviors we want to promote and encourage. So while talking about meritocracy, perhaps even better while talking about a "caring meritocracy," we can also talk about our shared values at MIT.

I hope that my take on meritocracy is seen as my meager attempt to make MIT a better, more caring place; I recognize meritocracy is a delicate topic and any expression of opinion about it may be subject to misinterpretation. I am happy to further clarify points I raised in this write-up, to further discuss it, or to be convinced of different views on the subject. I hope this write-up is viewed as my attempt to start and enrich a dialogue on meritocracy.