iHouse Report

Brief Summary

iHouse, also known as International House, is the newest living learning community on campus. This house fosters International development and Global leadership and has been a venue for those likeminded students to bring their ideas out on the table and make it happen with the valuable resources that are available to them. iHouse currently has 21 students, with 11 males and 10 females. The students come from all walks of life, and each of their experiences adds a valuable perspective to the community. iHouse is also linked closely with the Public Service Center and has as its house fellow, Amy Smith, director of the Edgerton Center. More recently, an Advisory Panel has been formed, with Professors and resources from a varied selection of departments, to act as a residing body to help those intricately involves in iHouse with the future planning and current progress.

Coming together as a community was first and foremost the plan when iHouse was started in Fall 2007. To go about this, we came by some shared values to follow by. Those include:

1. We have mutual respect for each other and a strong sense of community.
2. Our environment is a wholesome, comfortable and nurturing home.
3. We will develop global leadership skills by pursing intrinsically worthwhile projects.
4. We are committed to the wholesome development of each of our members.
5. Technical excellence and high-integrity are the hallmarks of our activities.

These values are not extravagant, but they bring us together as a community and bring out qualities that are trademark of being part of the iHouse community. iHouse also focuses on three very important aspects for its students, which include Experiential Learning, Leadership Skills Development and Mentoring Programs. In the past semester, we have focused more on the Experiential learning portion by having activities that cultivate those qualities, but for the next semester, events have been organized to look into the other two focus points.

Events + Challenges

The first event that we had was the opening of iHouse to the MIT community and beyond. The purpose behind this was to inform the community about the new venture that MIT had started and for the community to be introduced to the students and vice versa. There were a lot of dignitaries within MIT and outside who were invited to the event and I think that there was a good turn out. It definitely allowed those that had been involved since the inception a venue to meet up with the students who were going to be involved, for the students to meet up with people who already had ideas about certain International development projects and for those outside of MIT, an opportunity to be involved with something that could be phenomenal. The New House housemaster, Sandra Harris, who has been very intimately involved with iHouse since the inception, organized this event. She did a wonderful job with the arrangements and she should be given full credit for it. It was a truly enjoyable event for one and all and I think, a perfect start for iHouse.

The second event that we had was the retreat. It was done early on in the semester and 19 people attended this event. We went to Camp Cody in New Hampshire and stayed there for 2 nights. The purpose of this event was so that the residents get to know each other and build a community, bounce off ideas about what everyone wants out of iHouse and what activities we would want in the future and vote for a new executive body. The event was also attended by Sandra Harris, Sally Susnowitz, Amy Smith and Cynthia Yanes. I think that the most important thing that we got out of this event was getting to know one another and try and make a community out of iHouse. With the amount of new students exceeding those that stayed from the past year, it was very important for everyone to get to know each other and be comfortable with each other if they might eventually want to do development projects as groups. I believe that was achieved early on in the semester, but for making a stronger community, more of these kind of community building activities must be implemented.

For the enhanced learning aspect of iHouse, we had several speakers come in to talk to us about their International Development projects. We had Prof Alice Amsden, Harish Hande and the SPURS-Humphrey Fellows dinner. While these dinners helped with the inception and development of International development ideas, I believe that if we had more of an interactive dinner, with more options of discussing International Development opportunities, it would be more beneficial to the students. Our other event, The Spurs-Humphrey dinner, is something that we should definitely continue in the coming years. They are a great resource for the students because they have a lot of experience in the area of international development and are looking at students to help them out with future endeavors and it should definitely be a plan to evolve the Spurs-Humphrey dinner into a continuing event.

A tradition that we have developed is our "Country of the Month". We have decided to dedicate to learn about a country each month and have out study breaks focused on these countries. For the past few months, we have has Sri Lanka and Tibet as our country of the months, and some of our students took the responsibility in coming up

with a study break that had both the food of the place and also a little game to do with the language spoken in the country also. The point of this is more as a community building exercise and just a general knowledge about the countries of the world and how one can help these countries based on the areas that they need help in.

Another tradition that we have kept is Saturday morning brunches. Every Saturday morning, we have had turns within the house to cook some kind of brunch so that the residents can get together to have free time to discuss certain international issues, development ideas or problems that they are facing with implementation. Within the Saturday brunches, we have invited some others from the MIT community to join us during several occasions, including Amy Smith and Alia Whitney Johnson. Alia came in during our Sri Lanka month to talk to us about her project in Sri Lanka and several people had some serious discussions with her about project opportunities during the Saturday brunch times and also made appointments with her to meet up later. The purpose we had with these brunches was so that the residents could get together in a comfortable atmosphere and communicate with each other freely, so that the community can be strengthened.

For the future, we are keeping up with the Saturday brunches and the Country of the month, and have already planned some speakers that will be coming in to speak to us about their projects. Since most of these events look towards the Experiential Learning aspect, we are also looking at the Leadership Skills development and the Mentoring aspect in the coming semesters. For this, we are having a Leadership workshop during the month of February and are using the results of this workshop to look at what to do in the future. Certain other things that were discussed include the prospect of an iHouse newsletter, which gives iHouse an opportunity to showcase its events to the public and document the ideas that are circulating around.

Certain challenges that I seem to face are that people don't seem to be seeing progress with iHouse. It is hard to convince them that it takes time for iHouse to get to a certain position, because all they are looking at is starting with projects and getting something concrete on the table. I don't hope that this will bring down the momentum of the residents within the house. I think that there needs to be certain activities that show some kind of concrete outcome so that they can be convinced otherwise. Secondly, it is hard to balance the amount of iHouse activities to the schoolwork. The amount of schoolwork changes with different semester, for example, being a junior, I will be spending a lot of time during the coming semester in looking for jobs for the summer and after graduation. So, there needs to be a lot of help from this end too. I also think that it would be good if we look for a project that we could do something about right now; it could be something that is existing and it requires students to come in and help out in some way. This way, the residents will feel like they are doing something during the semester, rather that just planning to do something for summer or IAP. These are just a few suggestions and difficulties that I faced, but I think that they are problems that would have definitely come up with such a new endeavor. I hope that the students and those involved have enough patience and determination to make sure that a program is set for the coming years and not give up in planning for the future!