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**A Teachable Moment: Reflections on the President's Visit to MIT**  
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Friday was a typical MIT day. Typical in a very special sense: MIT showed the President of the United States what goes on here every day. But it often takes extraordinary events like a Presidential visit (or some equivalent unplanned crisis/opportunity) for those of us who work here to recognize the full power and capacity of the Institute. Friday was such a day and it is worth reflecting on why this event took place here, how the community mobilized to organize the visit on six days' notice, and what we learned about ourselves in the process.

First, why did the President choose MIT as the venue for a major speech on energy policy (aside from the fact that his main purpose in coming to Boston was to support the re-election efforts of his friend Governor Deval Patrick)? Maybe it is because five years ago, upon her arrival at MIT, President Susan Hockfield identified energy as a strategic initiative. She could not have done so if she had not found a strong mix of faculty and students around the Institute already working on energy issues of one sort or another. The MIT genius lies in figuring out ways to mobilize this talent and present it to the external world as a unified force, in this case under the umbrella of the MIT Energy Initiative (MITEI). As President Hockfield said in her introductory remarks in Kresge, now nearly 20 percent of the faculty is involved in some aspect of energy research. And this doesn't count the additional faculty and staff now devoted to various green jobs and sustainability projects. MIT is at its best when it mobilizes the talents of researchers and students from multiple disciplines to focus on meeting the biggest challenges facing society. That's what we illustrated to the President and the external world on Friday.

The day made apparent that MIT researchers are not cloistered souls toiling away in their laboratories apart from the real world of policy and practice. President Hockfield and many MIT faculty and staff spend countless days and hours promoting science and research in Washington, in partnership initiatives with industry, and in work around the world with international agencies and non-governmental organizations. President Obama mentioned that two of our faculty, Eric Lander and Ernie Moniz, are on his Council of Advisors on Science and Technology. *Mens et Manus* is alive and well.



Then there is the unique MIT research style. I chuckled, as I suspect many of you did, when I saw the front page picture in Saturday's *Boston Globe* of the President looking with interest over the shoulder of Professor Alex Slocum as Alex, decked out in one of his finest Hawaiian shirts, demonstrated his wind experiment that will someday, perhaps sooner than we think, be part of the world's clean energy options. Alex's response to a congratulatory note said it best: "I am just being what we all r, a geek having fun chatting about what we love and believe in – whether it's a new freshman, or the supreme leader, it's what MIT is all about."

Then there was the Kresge event. One of the advantages of having to assemble there two hours before the President's speech is that I could put on my social scientist hat and see who was there and how the assembled mix of faculty, students, staff, members of the MIT Corporation, White House guests, local politicians, and members of MIT's unions interacted. This mix was itself a statement of what we mean when we use the term "the MIT community." In this case it might have been the extended community.

The first thing I noticed was that we were all treated with equal and appropriate suspicion by the Secret Service as we queued up to enter. No VIP exceptions here. For example, I happened to be in line near the Provost, President of the Graduate Student Association, Dean of Students, Dean of Undergraduate Education, and staff members from several student service groups. We all waited our turn and submitted to the same security checks upon entering Kresge. I liked that example of egalitarianism. It is good to remind ourselves that in the eyes of the real world, we are members of a single community.

Milling around during the two hour wait for the President gave us all a chance to "network." In those two hours, I talked to members of the Corporation and members of Service Employees Local 615, the largest union of our staff on campus. I chatted with the local politicians, some of whom are running for office and some of whom are part of the state government. I met the Mayor of Cambridge. A special highlight was seeing colleagues Phil Thompson and Dayna Cunningham from Urban Studies and their two young sons. Phil and Dayna are very active in the White House's green jobs initiatives and so the White House allocated them enough tickets to bring their family and a number of students from MIT's Community Innovators Lab/Green Hub team. Their son James recorded the event on his camera for his classmates in the School within a School unit at Brookline High, the same program two of my sons and Sloan School Deputy Dean Richard Locke attended. So we were able to record three generations of links between SWS and MIT!



Another favorite moment was when some unknown photographer took a picture of several undergraduate and graduate student leaders and me. The collaborative relationship among faculty, students, and the administration is a unique strength of the MIT governance system. That picture captured the spirit we need to sustain as we chart the future of the Institute.

And finally, another often unseen and underappreciated part of the MIT community's work was apparent on Friday: the staff that organized and coordinated the event on such short notice. Just think of the logistical and security challenges the team assembled on the preceding Sunday faced with five days to go. They had to work with the White House and Secret Service on arrangements – not easy groups to negotiate with. I have a little experience dealing with both groups and they tend to negotiate from positions of power. Some things (thankfully) are simply non-negotiable. You don't negotiate much with the Secret Service. They tell you what you need to do and you do it, whatever the cost and inconvenience.

Kirk Kolenbrander assembled a team of approximately 200 staff people to arrange and coordinate lab visits, transportation and related logistics, MIT security and facilities alterations (and spruce ups), and the distribution of the 200 tickets to the speech made available to MIT (yes the White House controlled the rest of them).

This team did an outstanding job for MIT and we should all recognize their good work on our behalf. This is especially the case now since so many members of our administrative staff are feeling the direct stress and impacts of the budget cuts, layoffs, and restructuring of their work. The faculty in particular needs to recognize the important and excellent work our staff does behind the scenes to make MIT a great place to teach, study, and innovate.

My purpose in reflecting on the day is not just to recount an historic moment for MIT but to bolster our confidence for tackling together what lies ahead. Only by recognizing that none of us can do our best without the support and commitment of the diverse components that make up the MIT community will we come through this year of budget reductions and planning for the future stronger and more unified than before. That for me was Friday's lesson.