Minutes arising from the international student group leaders' meeting
hosted by the Academics, Research, and Careers committee
at 5:30pm on December 12, 2002
in the Graduate Students Office, 50-220.

Agenda for the meeting:
1. Introductions
2. Update on institute reactions to international student concerns
   o CJAC meeting
   o Special task force
3. Brainstorming on actions the Institute should/could take
4. Data collection for international students-webpage with country specific info:
   o Consular services in country
   o Average time to obtain/renew visa
   o Required paperwork
5. Collection of personal accounts/experiences with new INS regulations
6. Open floor for suggestions/concerns etc

Glossary:
- ACLU: American Civil Liberties Union
- ARC: Academics, Research, and Careers, a GSC committee
- CJAC: Corporation Joint Advisory Committee
- GSC: Graduate Student Council
- ISO: International Students Office (serves undergraduate and graduate students, to be differentiated from the International Scholars Office, which serves staff, faculty, and visiting scholars)
- INS: Immigration and Naturalization Services
- NAGPS: National Association for Graduate Professional Students
- SEVIS: Student Exchange Visitor Information System

Discussion:

1. Introductions
2. Update on institute reactions to international student concerns

- International student issues have been discussed at a number of meetings. At a recent NAGPS national meeting, the **rapid changes in visa regulations, inaction of universities to lobby for international students and inability of ISOs to adequately respond** to changes in visa regulations were main concerns.
- Concern of lack of information flow to international students was raised during a meeting of a special task force appointed by the MIT Chancellor to determine the implications of a war on Iraq on the MIT community, but **requests for increased ISO funding were refused** by the administration.
- CJAC indicated that the situation of the MIT international community would be of **significant concern at the level of the Corporation** (to which the MIT administration is accountable).
- Support from the Corporation cannot be immediate. **In the interim, student mobilization, proactive-ness, and information sharing are priorities.**

3. Brainstorming on actions the Institute should/could take

Q What is the admin reasoning against increased ISO funding? What are the arguments for increasing funding?

A Chancellor Clay says the **ISO budget was adjusted two years ago**, and does not need further adjustments. However, ISO Director Danielle Guichard-Ashbrook has requested and been refused additional staff for six years.

A The **ISO is understaffed and cannot do outreach**. Mass emails don't work, and much of the time very individualized information (by nation, gender, religion) has to be disseminated.

A **Lobbying in Washington**, normally part of ISO activities, is constrained by increased pressures on ISO staff for new SEVIS requirements.

Q What's the number of staff at the ISO?

A About 3 full time staff.

Q What's SEVIS?

A Scheduled to be **implemented by January 30, 2003**, SEVIS is a newly piloted '**student tracking system**' that would require the entering of information on all international students in an electronic database. This information would have to be **entered every term**, and would track **traditional identifiers** such as name, SSN, department, address, etc. More **sensitive information** such as reasons for medical leave is planned for inclusion. Mistyped entries in the system cannot be corrected, and the piloting of the software has demonstrated that **system and human failures can occur** which result in students incorrectly falling out of status. **Students who fall out of status have no recourse** but to leave the country and reapply for admission. There is currently no relaxation of that policy.

Q Is SEVIS only being applied to MIT?

A No. It applies to the approximately **500,000 international students** in the US.

Q Can students access SEVIS on the web?

A No. **Students would have no access** to this database – access would be restricted to an as-yet unclear selection of bodies such as the INS, FBI, CIA, etc.

A One implication of the implementation of SEVIS is that international students will have to **guard against all the small mistakes** they may have made in the past with respect to their paperwork. Ignorance will not be an adequate defence against, for example, failure to report a change of address within 10 days. Numerous minor paperwork requirements (which are in continual flux currently) will have to be vigilantly maintained, or students will fall out of status, and have no recourse but to leave the country and reapply for admission.

Comment: We need to send a clear message that **if a student is in trouble, they should contact us**, and we will lobby for action on their behalf.

Comment: We need to be proactive rather than reactive. **Assign lawyers** to this issue.

Comment: **Lobbying efforts will require time,** as the Clinton-Bush change of administration has wiped the slate clean of previous lobbying relationships, and MIT's contacts will now have to be developed again. Furthermore, universities have a limited voice (relative to corporations, and this is perhaps the reason why H (or corporate) visa holders are not affected). Presenting a united front will take 1-2 years.

Comment: **Many elements are unclear in this issue**. 2 French students have been special registrants – one is Muslim and one not. Why? The INS is now to be part of the as yet undefined Homeland Security Department.

Comment: We have to **define MIT's responsibility** vis-a-vis minor (paperwork a few days later) and major (French Algerian student studying nuclear science) infractions. There should be an **emergency contact number** that triggers effective action.

Comment: **Some statistics:** 100 students have been delayed at the border, and 20 are still excluded from the US. There are no stats on the number who were admitted but were unable to attend through not being granted visas. There are cases where a student applies for a visa, is delayed 3-4 months, falls out of status because they have not completed their registration at MIT, and have to reapply for the next academic year. This process could iterate indefinitely. **Program deferrals are department dependent**.

Q How willing is MIT to change its registration rules to help MIT students maintain their 'in-status' designation?

A They are **more likely to change if they understand the situation**. Therefore we need to document specific cases that we can then present to them to demonstrate the need.

Q Can the ISO do a system to automatically notify students if they are in danger of falling out of status?

A The **ISO cannot do outreach, given current constraints**. The International Scholars Office can and does, however, and works with a relatively stronger resource base than the ISO.

Q All special interest groups want more funding. Is the GSC willing to cut from its own budget to fund the ISO?

A That can be an **effective strategy, but can also backfire**.
A Perhaps a stronger argument might be a **cost-benefit analysis** that expresses economic losses and lowered research quality resulting from inadequate proactive investment in this issue now.

Q Can human rights organizations help? This seems to be clear racial profiling.

A The **ACLU is working** on this, and uses suing as a means of addressing these issues. However, court cases can take years. We can't object, given our uncertain status.

Comment: We should get advisors involved. While some Lebanese students have been admitted with no problem, one advisor has been waiting for two years for a Lebanese researcher who has yet to be granted entrance to the US

4. Data collection for international students-webpage with country specific info

Christiane explained InterLink, the [proposal](#) for which was included in the meeting handout.

Interlink is modelled on MedLink as an **outreach program** that would recruit and **train volunteers from MIT departments to report on visa regulations** to their departments and relay their concerns, questions, and personal accounts back to the ISO. These volunteers would be easily accessible to faculty members, and would need to be highly visible and sociable.

Another InterLink component would be a **weekly coffee hour** for sharing information and stories.

A third activity would be **hosting seminars**.

Regardless of whether InterLink is funded, **the InterLink website is live** and needs support from international student group leaders for content and for networking. Christiane strongly suggested that student groups add a page to their websites with country-specific information on visa regulations, as incoming students need this information. Links to the InterLink website were also encouraged.