In Spring 2018, the Physics Department began its biannual preparations for the Physics Visiting Committee meeting taking place on October 2nd and 3rd, 2018.

Visiting Committees are a big deal at MIT: they were established in 1875 and have become a central part of the operation of the Institute. Members are appointed from a diverse pool of distinguished professionals, academics and alumni, and play an independent, advisory role. Each Department has a 1½ day Visiting Committee meeting every two years. Our Committee is chaired by Phillip T. “Terry” Ragon, and includes Lars Bildsten, Michael F. Bos, Patricia Burchat, John K. Castle, Leslie C. Dewan, George J. Elbaum, Thomas A. J. Frank, Wendy L. Freedman, Perry Young Soo Ha, Shirley Ann Jackson, L. Robert Johnson, Robert W. Lourie, Berndt Mueller, David R. Nelson, A. Neil Pappalardo, John S. Reed, John S. Seo, A. J. Stewart Smith, Juan-Carlos Torres, and Anita Xiao Qi Wu.

The first day consists of the Committee meeting with multiple constituents of the Department, and a few research highlight presentations from faculty. Following is a dinner with the Department Head (myself), faculty and the Dean of Science, plus the President, Provost and Chancellor—all of whom give the Committee further insights into how the Department is doing. The next morning, the meetings and science talks continue, then lunch and a closed-door executive session where the Committee gathers its initial thoughts. At about 2:00 p.m., the Department Head, Dean, President, Provost, Chair of the MIT Corporation, Chancellor, and Vice President for Research are let in and the Committee “reports out” for about an hour. A formal, written report by the Committee is sent to the Corporation by December. An intensive process, to say the least.

The Visiting Committee report can be challenging to hear. In 2016, we learned that the student climate in the Department was not as positive overall as we had thought, and instances of gender and racial inequality at all levels of the community had been spoken of to the Committee. So the Department made it an immediate and top priority to engage with the Physics Community over the past two years to address these issues.

When faced with my first Visiting Committee in 2014, less than a year after becoming Department Head, my initial thought was “How daunting!” But, I was quickly reassured, as I had a good example to follow: former Department Heads Marc Kastner and Ed Bertschinger launched a strategic planning process with
faculty leadership each Spring semester prior to a Fall Visiting Committee meeting. Each of the Department’s four Divisions—Astrophysics (Deep Chakrabarty), the Center for Theoretical Physics (Washington Taylor), Nuclear and Particle Experiment (Joseph Formaggio), and Condensed Matter, Atomic, Biological and Plasma Physics (Martin Zwierlein)—submits a written plan for their research and hiring. Our two major labs, the Laboratory for Nuclear Science (Bolek Wyslouch) and the Kavli Institute for Astrophysics and Space Research (Jacqueline Hewitt), also contribute sections on their plans and needs. Then, from Physics headquarters, Administrative Officer Matt Cubstead provides fiscal data; Associate Department Head Nergis Mavalvala and Academic Administrator Cathy Modica outline the Education Program; and my executive assistant Christina Andújar gathers information on faculty committee service, awards, Departmental events, and more.

Finally, I write an introduction, point out some Departmental concerns, and wrap up with a summary, “Building Our Department.” This describes our faculty and graduate student recruitment, efforts to improve the climate and breadth of our Department, and engagement with our students. Also, Lydia Snover from Institutional Research provides a lot of invaluable, correlated charts and statistics.

This Departmental Strategic Plan runs to over 250 pages, and it matters. Creating it forms the basis for our faculty searches, requests to MIT, and allocation of resources within the Department. Recently, we made a request to Dean Michael Sipser for five faculty hires, an unusually large number, but the fact that all proposed hires lined up with our Strategic Plan made it possible for the Dean to support us.

Visiting Committees are a lot of work, but they are the primary way MIT continually reviews itself, and improves. And we have the dedication and hard work of both the Committee members and Department communities to thank.

With best regards,

Peter Fisher
Head, Department of Physics