MESSAGE FROM THE DEPARTMENT HEAD

Dear Members of the MIT Physics Community,

Improving the culture of a Department is hard, harder than any research I’ve been involved in. Even starting from a strong place, changing cultures that have formed over many generations takes broad community engagement, dogged will, sustained effort and leadership, and time. Even with all these forces at play, it’s hard to see the payoff; it takes time for culture to change, and the changes can feel incremental and insignificant at the outset. To be the best Department for everyone, we—all of us—have to continue to create a culture of respect and welcome for everyone. We do this because it’s needed, and because it’s the right thing to do.

A year or so after I became Department Head, I started hearing about instances of poor culture in the department, initially from some of our undergraduates. These ranged from disrespectful remarks, exclusion of some from informal group activities, excessive boasting and outright put-downs. I heard this from Nergis Mavalvala, our Undergraduate Coordinator and Associate Head; Cathy Modica, our academic programs officer; and my meetings with students. When we then received the same strong message from the Physics Visiting Committee in 2016, these individual observations crystallized—and we saw that we had a systemic challenge that would require the effort of the whole Department. In Fall 2016, we formed a volunteer group that included students, faculty and staff [1], who gathered to brainstorm about what to do.

There were a lot of interesting ideas in those first meetings and the thing that eventually gelled was the idea of a Code of Conduct written collectively by students, faculty and staff. What our working group eventually produced was a Physics Values Statement [2], centered on the core principles of well-being, respect, inclusion, collaboration and mentorship. Hearing about the experiences of some members of our community was at times very upsetting, though also a call to action, and figuring out what to do was challenging. Libby Mahaffy and Amanda Bennett from MIT HR and Maryanne Kirkbride from the Mind, Hand, and Heart Initiative helped guide our


[2] Both the Statement and current Committee membership are available at web.mit.edu/physics/about/values.html.
Values Committee. I’m very proud of the Statement that emerged, and the process by which we got to something we can all get behind. We provisionally adopted the statement in Spring 2017.

Writing high-minded principles is easy, encouraging people to adhere to them is harder. In that spirit, graduate students Carina Belvin and Nick Rivera developed very interesting training exercises. We created posters that could be hung in the public spaces of the Department and posted in classrooms, labs, offices and research spaces. It makes me happy when I walk around campus and see the Physics Values Statement posted in places that aren’t Departmental public space, affirming that many of our students, faculty and staff feel that it’s important to display them.

We’re now at a crossroads between expectation and intent, and action and impact, and now we face the hardest part: how to open constructive conversations with those who might not be adhering to our code. I reached the conclusion that the Department administration really has to start connecting our Departmental values with two of the core activities of the Department: teaching and advising. All of us on the faculty and our students need to think critically about how we approach our work as teachers, advisors and learners, to make sure it reflects the Department’s shared values.

We’re also going to work with the Labs and research groups to provide high-quality training exercises to help them inculcate the spirit of the Physics Values Statement in their daily interactions, and more broadly connect across the School of Science.

I’ve come to see that culture is the scaffolding that supports the social and intellectual fabric of our community. Our scaffold can be improved; I am tremendously proud to be part of a community that has worked so hard to examine its underlying structures and make them better and stronger. I’m optimistic that we’re ready for the work ahead.

With best regards,

Peter Fisher
Head, Department of Physics