

March 4, 2005

Dr. Susan Hockfield
President
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
77 Massachusetts Avenue
Cambridge, MA 02139

Dear President Hockfield,

We would like to join the MIT alumni community, and the MIT community at large, in welcoming you to the Institute. We hope that you find your time at MIT as special and wonderful as we have found ours.

We are writing you this letter as former leaders in the MIT dormitory community. We five have all served as Presidents of the MIT Dormitory Council (DormCon), with our collective tenures covering the time period from 1999 to 2004. During this time, we helped to support the MIT residential system through some of the most significant changes in its history.

Since leaving MIT, we have moved onto a variety of career paths. Two of us are enrolled in graduate school at different universities, one is an engineer for a defense contracting company, one is a community planner for the local government, and one is a residential life administrator at another university. While our perspectives have changed since leaving MIT, we agree that one sentiment has not changed—we all still feel that MIT has a very special, wonderfully unique dormitory system that was a valuable part of our educational experience at MIT.

We have decided to write this letter because we understand that you are engaged in an intensive learning process on all aspects of life at MIT, including the housing system. Our perspective is one that you have not yet heard, and one that we hope may be helpful to you in rounding out your knowledge of housing at MIT. In the following pages we explain what we feel are the key characteristics of the dormitory system that make it unique and special to students as well as important to MIT's overall educational mission. We also describe what we feel are the major challenges that the system will face in the near future.

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MIT's Educational Mission

In 1998, the MIT Presidential Task Force on Student Life and Learning released its final report, which articulated MIT's educational mission for the first time in fifty years. It identified several characteristics of the MIT community that it felt were strengths upon which MIT should draw in an effort to support and enhance the educational experience of students. We feel that the following three strengths are particularly relevant to understanding dormitory life at MIT:

1. Loyalty to Residence

A prominent feature of MIT's community is the strong feeling of loyalty that undergraduate students express toward their MIT residences or living groups. Residences at MIT are not just places of repose: in undergraduate life they are the central unit of student organization, and they act as a haven for social, cultural, and intellectual exchange among students. In surveys, students express a remarkably high level of satisfaction with their residential experience, particularly with the fraternities, sororities, and independent living groups. Residences also provide a strong academic and social support group. Students from multiple graduating classes share the same living group, providing valuable opportunities for advising and mentoring.

2. Independence of Community Groups

The community ties that have arisen at MIT have done so with little conscious design or plan, and they have remained largely self-sustaining and autonomous. In its commitment to individual responsibility, free choice, and self-governance, MIT's community resembles society at large in many respects. Undergraduate students, who come to the Institute at a critical point in their personal development, benefit from the gradual but intense exposure to the independence and responsibility expected of them here. By interacting with their peers and colleagues within a framework of independence and interdependence, MIT students help fulfill the Institute's principle of learning-by-doing.

3. Diversity of Existing Community Groups

The large number of activities and groups is another strength of the MIT community. These include social activities tied to departments and living groups, performance and artistic ensembles, cultural societies, political groups, student government, community-service groups, athletic and recreational activities, student publications, and many other activities. The dedication and commitment displayed by students and faculty who participate in community activities is impressive given the demands of research and academics. This dedication is more impressive given that such activities often go begging for funds and are seldom promoted outside their own venue. That such a system has evolved at MIT is a testament to the drive and diversity of interest found among those who are drawn to the Institute.

DormCon's Guiding Principles: "The Meaning of Dorm Life"

Those of us who have served in DormCon have always felt that MIT's residence system is among the best in the country. It has high student satisfaction, it is managed efficiently, it fosters strong social connections, it provides opportunities for active involvement in the community, and it provides a residential experience that is closely aligned with MIT's educational mission.

We view MIT's residential system in much the same way that MIT's academic program is viewed by the academic community at large. MIT's academic program is very different when compared to its peer institutions, but there is no question that MIT is academically at the forefront. MIT's residential system is also different from the norm, but the assumption has always been that MIT is lacking in the quality of its residential experience. However, while facilities, funding, and staffing have been lacking by some standards, students themselves have worked over time to develop their own programs, management and governance systems, and even funding sources to create a residential experience that is unique and of very high quality. While some might feel that MIT's system is antiquated, we feel that it is highly evolved. Moreover, the outcomes of MIT's unique residential experience – such as strong communities and the development of student responsibility and leadership – are the same qualities that are sought, but rarely achieved, by MIT's peers.

We would not argue that MIT's residential system is perfect, and we welcome an increased commitment to residential life on the part of the MIT. However, we think that MIT must be careful not to sacrifice the system's best qualities only to better align it with the norm. To help describe what we feel are the core qualities of the MIT dormitory system, we have created the following four principles: The Independent, Four-Year Community; Residence Exploration and Choice; Student Responsibility and Leadership; and Community and Diversity ("Unity Without Uniformity"). Throughout our tenures, DormCon has worked to ensure that these principles remain integral and essential parts of dormitory life at MIT.

1. The Independent, Four-Year Community

The Presidential Task Force on Student Life and Learning, after recommending that a system be phased-in to house all freshmen in dormitories, makes the following comment: "Housing freshmen with older students provides incoming students with academic and emotional guidance and support, as well as a ready supply of role-models and mentors. For this reason, incoming students should be placed in the same residence halls as older students, rather than in a residence constructed exclusively for freshmen." This notion is fundamental to dormitory life at MIT.

MIT has a very steep learning curve. In order to successfully handle a challenging first-year program, students must learn how to manage their classes while discovering and exploring other activities they would like to pursue. Moreover, they must learn much of this on their own. In MIT's mixed-year residences, older students are there to help freshmen academically, and more importantly to teach freshmen about getting around MIT, literally and figuratively. In short, MIT's four-year residential communities have proven to be very effective in teaching freshmen how to "grow up." Furthermore, upperclassmen do not expect compensation from MIT for

helping freshmen, they do it as a service to their community—because upperclassmen helped them when they were freshmen.

The mixed-year community also helps to build a distinct culture within each residence. Attitudes and traditions are passed down through generations of students, allowing students to share a common identity, which leads to the “sense of loyalty” that the Task Force on Student Life and Learning identified as one of the main strengths of the MIT community. Just like in the world, communities at MIT take time to form. If students only lived in the same residence for one year, then there would be no means of communicating culture across generations, and very little chance of forming a true community.

Along with this sense of culture and loyalty within a particular dorm comes a sense of autonomy. Because each dorm culture is shaped and perpetuated by the dorm residents themselves, each dorm develops its own unique types of programs, as well as its own unique types of problems, and its own unique systems of governance for managing both. MIT does not need to take an active role in “community-building” within the dorms, it only needs to provide the necessary tools for students to build it themselves. We have always felt that a community built by community members themselves will always be superior to a community imposed from the outside.

This sense of autonomy is part of what makes MIT’s support system of Housemasters and Graduate Resident Tutors effective. Because each dorm has its own Housemasters and GRTs who live within the dorm communities often for as long as, if not longer than, the undergraduates, they become part of the community themselves. Thus, Housemasters and GRTs can more effectively support the undergraduate community. Housemasters themselves also provide a sense of autonomy in that they are faculty, not residential life staff who are directly accountable to administrators. Housemasters rely on their own judgment and their knowledge of the dorm culture, not just system-wide rules and policies, when resolving and mediating issues within their dorm. This, in turn, helps foster a spirit of trust between the Housemasters and students and leads to better and healthier partnerships.

2. Residence Exploration and Choice

Because interaction with upperclassmen is a central part of the first-year residential experience, and because each dorm has its own culture that must grow and perpetuate over generations, it is important that freshmen are matched with residences in which they feel comfortable, welcomed, and encouraged to participate actively in the community. This is why, at MIT, freshmen are allowed to choose—or at least, express a preference for—where they would like to live. The dorm selection process not only helps match freshmen to dorms, it also teaches freshmen that residential life, and indeed the MIT experience in general, is something that needs to be pursued actively; MIT will not make their choices for them.

For over thirty years prior to the freshmen-on-campus decision, MIT students who did not choose to join fraternities or independent living groups participated in “dorm rush” during Orientation. While dorm rush occurred at the same time as fraternity rush, it was a fundamentally different process. Dorms would hold events to showcase their unique and varied

cultures, which would give freshmen an opportunity to interact with a diverse range of upperclassmen from all parts of campus (and also kept them well fed and entertained). Freshmen then entered their dorm preferences into a lottery that would place most freshmen in their first or second choice dorms, and almost all in one of their top four choices. Since all prior housing assignments were temporary, freshmen would be strongly encouraged to visit all the dorms, learn about their options, and make their preferences thoughtfully.

Since 2002, the “rush” period has been removed from Orientation, and some feel that a dorm selection period is no longer necessary. Freshmen now enter dorm preferences over the summer, based on information they receive through mailings, videos, and campus visits. We feel that an in-person residence exploration is still vital, because publications cannot substitute for the personal interaction that makes the process so fun, enriching and meaningful. Some also feel that the springtime Campus Preview Weekend (CPW) for admitted students may substitute for the dorm rush experience. However, this poses a number of difficulties—not all admitted students are able to visit during CPW, students on the admissions waiting list are not invited, and the middle of spring term is a difficult time for MIT students to hold large events. Moreover, the focus of CPW is for admitted students to decide whether or not to attend MIT, not to decide what dorm they might like to live in if they do attend. We always thought of CPW as a time when students “rush for MIT,” not for their living group.

There is also a larger reason why DormCon has always felt that “dorm rush,” now called “residence exploration” (REX), is important to community life at MIT. We feel that it is a special and rare event that simultaneously promotes loyalty to residence as well as a sense of “campus-wide community.” Dorm rush is a “uniquely MIT” experience and one that fosters a greater sense of involvement in, and enthusiasm for, the overall MIT community. It provides an opportunity for dorm residents to come together as members of their community to plan events that will excite freshmen and will be fun for them as well—dorm residents have often said that dorm rush is as important for upperclassmen as it is for freshmen. Also, with all of the dorms organizing and executing large events simultaneously, there is an atmosphere of excitement, creativity, and enjoyment that pervades the entire campus and makes incoming students feel welcome. For decades, participating in dorm rush and/or FSILG rush has been a part of what it means to be an MIT undergraduate. The dorm rush process has evolved and changed over time, but the spirit remains the same.

These are the reasons why DormCon has worked very hard to preserve a “residence exploration” period as a major part of Orientation in MIT’s post-freshmen-on-campus era, even in the face of strong opposition from some parts of the MIT administration and faculty.

3. Student Responsibility and Leadership

It is part of the mission of any college, including MIT, to teach its undergraduates responsibility. We think that the best way for students to learn responsibility is through practice. Indeed, one of the core principles of MIT is “learning by doing.” And one of the central themes of dorm life at MIT, one that DormCon has always worked to support, is broad student responsibility for themselves and for their community.

MIT students are entrusted with the management of their own academic program, and they are similarly entrusted with their own residential life. There are few residential programs that are compulsory. Instead, students can choose from a wide range of activities, and are especially encouraged to create new programs. There is also no in-dorm “policing” of student behavior. Students are responsible for their own behavior, and are expected to look out for each other as well. The Housemasters, GRTs, and other MIT residential staff are there to provide support and guidance, not to control student behavior or to direct all of the programming in the residence.

Students, collectively, take on a broad range of responsibility for dorms. They are directly responsible for most of the social programming in dorms, funded through a house tax that they themselves establish. Students are also responsible for making internal room assignments, which is unusual among college residential systems, but has been proven to be very efficient and effective in producing high student satisfaction and relatively few roommate conflicts. Additionally, elected student judicial boards are responsible for managing conflict resolution and disciplinary functions. Because students rely on each other, not on paid staff, for the programming and governance of a dorm, they are more strongly encouraged to play a part.

The wide range of leadership opportunities available to students enhances the MIT educational experience and supports the principle of “learning by doing.” Students have the opportunity to take leadership roles in event planning, money management, management of facilities and equipment, advocacy, advising, conflict resolution, and overall organizational governance. Moreover, students learn how to be accountable to their peers, which develops knowledge and skills that will be useful in students’ future careers. Indeed, we wouldn’t be writing this if we didn’t value our experience as leaders in the dorm community.

4. Community and Diversity: “Unity Without Uniformity”

We feel that strong communities are built from the bottom up. A sense of “campus-wide community” at MIT can only be achieved through the interlocking of strong smaller communities. These smaller communities might be based around residences, courses of study, research groups, athletics, clubs, or other activities. We have continually maintained that MIT must look to its residential communities as “building blocks” of a larger MIT community. As an example, we have already described how “residence exploration” provides an opportunity for dorms to work together in order to create a pervasive sense of enthusiasm, creativity, and fun on the campus.

We also believe that strong communities are built on diversity. A community that is comprised of identical parts is not really a community; if one part is the same as any other, then what is gained through interactions among them? Because of the autonomy of the dorms and the element of choice in dorm selection, dorms develop in distinct ways and establish communities with unique and varied characters. The more diverse these smaller communities are, the more opportunities students have to experience different environments and meet people with different points of view. The notion of a strong on-campus residential community comprised of diverse residential groups was a guiding principle of DormCon under our leadership, as illustrated in the slogan, “Unity Without Uniformity.”

Some within the MIT community have argued the opposite—that strong, partially self-selected, autonomous residential communities tend to become homogeneous, segregate themselves from each other, and detract from the goal of fostering campus-wide community. While it is possible that residential communities might become self-segregating, we don't believe that this is the case at MIT. In fact, we have found that dorm communities are quite diverse, as they all bring together students of different ages, backgrounds, courses of study, and ideologies. The campus-wide programs organized by many dorms serve as evidence that dorms are not necessarily self-isolating.

Looking at the residential communities as “building blocks,” we think that MIT should focus its efforts on fostering stronger links among them, and creating more opportunities for students—and even faculty—to interact with the diverse range of residential communities on and off of the campus. If MIT were to take steps to weaken the tight-knit dorm communities, eliminate the breadth of dorm cultures, and/or diminish the autonomy of the residential communities by eliminating choice in housing assignments, segregating students by class year, or replacing self-directed student leadership with an administrative system, the result would be a collection of residences without culture or community where students would have nothing with which to identify. As a result, students would be less willing to actively and voluntarily participate in community life, which would in turn confound the ultimate goal of creating a campus-wide community. Indeed, such a residential system would become much closer to the “national norm,” where universities have to invest countless dollars and hours of staff time to fix problems and foster a sense of community that just does not want to exist.

Issues Facing Dormitories

The freshmen-on-campus decision constituted a major change to all aspects of residential life at MIT, affecting dormitories as well as fraternities, sororities, and independent living groups (FSILGs). MIT has invested a great deal of time and effort thus far in examining the effects of the freshmen-on-campus policy for FSILGs and has provided the FSILG system with support in mitigating the negative impacts that the policy has had on their communities. However, no extensive, structured investigation has been undertaken to examine the effects of the policy on the dorm communities, which have experienced negative impacts as well.

Now that the freshmen-on-campus decision is in its early phases of implementation, the future of the MIT residential system is more uncertain than it has been in a very long time. We believe it is vitally important that MIT take careful consideration of the issues facing dormitory life if it wants to support and enhance the overall educational experience as recommended by the Presidential Task Force on Student Life and Learning. On the following two pages, we have listed some of the issues that we believe are in most immediate need of consideration.

We would also encourage an integrated effort to explore the future of dormitory life at MIT, with a focus on mitigating some of the adverse impacts of the freshmen-on-campus change. Ideally, such an effort would involve faculty, students, staff, and alumni/ae.

1. Freshman “overflow” in the dorm system

The four-year residential communities at MIT have become “unbalanced” as a result of the freshmen-on-campus policy change. While FSILGs now do not house any freshmen, dorms must house more than their normal share. As a result, the “informal advising” that occurs in dorm communities is strained as freshmen begin to outnumber upperclassmen. This may result in issues that require greater involvement from MIT. If so, support should be provided in such a way that it does not compromise the dorms’ autonomy in establishing and managing their own programs.

2. Residential exploration and choice in Orientation

The Presidential Task Force on Student Life and Learning and the Design of the New Residence System both state that choice will continue to be a part of dorm selection. However, the role that dorm selection should play within Orientation has been very unclear since the implementation of the freshmen-on-campus policy. As previously stated, we feel that the “residence exploration” period during Orientation plays an important role not just in allowing freshmen to make a better informed housing choice, but also in allowing freshmen to experience the diversity of smaller communities that comprise the larger MIT community. In recent years, the role of residence exploration has been greatly diminished, in favor of promoting activities that will make freshmen feel more “settled” into their assigned dorms. We agree with the Task Force when it states that “The central purpose of orientation should be to create the feeling of joining a single, campus-wide community,” and we think that limiting residential Orientation activities to the dorm to which freshmen have been assigned will harm campus-wide community in the long run.

Furthermore, we believe that MIT faculty, administrators and students should jointly examine, rethink and explore Orientation in greater detail. While the Task Force on Student Life and Learning has very loudly and clearly called for improving and expanding the role of Orientation, very few fundamental changes have been made over the past few years except for the elimination of “rush” and the compression of the dorm selection process. Indeed, Orientation altogether has been compressed from one and half weeks to one, which seems to run contrary to the Task Force’s recommendation of expanding Orientation activities and including undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty in a shared experience.

3. Relations between FSILGs and dorm communities

The freshmen-on-campus policy is meant to foster closer relationships among students and result in a stronger sense of campus-wide community. However, this policy also has the potential to complicate relationships between FSILGs and dorms in a number of ways. First, the prior rush system fostered a competitive atmosphere among FSILGs, as well as between FSILGs and dorms, which only lasted through the rush period. Now, with FSILGs recruiting new members during the school year, this competitive atmosphere lasts much longer, and animosity might build among residential groups as FSILGs aggressively recruit freshmen who are living in dorms. Also, there are sure to be a number of freshmen in dorms that would prefer to live in FSILGs, possibly weakening dorm communities and resulting in additional dorm/FSILG friction.

We have always felt that the freshmen-on-campus system can only work if FSILGs and dorms cooperate in both recruiting and first-year programs. However, this cooperation may not occur naturally, and MIT may need to play a more active role in supporting it.

4. Opportunities for interaction among students, faculty, staff, and alumni

The major focus of the Task Force on Student Life and Learning was increasing opportunities for interaction among all parts of the MIT community. The implementation of the Task Force report does not end with the housing of all freshmen on campus. Much more needs to be done to make real and substantial improvements to the shared experience of students, faculty, staff, and alumni. The residential communities should be looked to as allies, and even leaders, in this effort.

5. Ensuring community autonomy, student responsibility, and self-governance

We agree that more resources should be invested into MIT's residence system in order to maintain a high-quality experience, partly due to the recommendations of the Task Force and partly because of the challenges presented by the freshmen-on-campus decision. However, in doing so, MIT should be extremely careful not to compromise the independence and self-governance of MIT's dormitory communities, nor to interfere with students' opportunities to choose a living community that best fits their preferences, nor to discourage students from becoming loyal and dedicated to their communities.

Thus far, DormCon has generally been disappointed with the MIT administration's attempts to improve the residential experience, because its proposed programs are often prepared by the administration and handed down to the dorm communities instead of being shaped and driven by the dorm communities themselves. For instance, while the Task Force and many others have recommended bringing academic advising into the residences, on many occasions the programs proposed by the administration have not been well received by the student governments of the dorms. In dorms where residence-based advising (RBA) has been implemented, it has involved altering the dorms' residence selection processes and adding new layers of staff-supported dorm governance. We believe that a well-tailored residence-based advising program should be compatible with the student governance structures and with the residence selection system that students have worked very hard to support and maintain. Furthermore, such programs should use the existing strengths of the dorm communities to enhance connections between students and faculty.

In developing any new residential programs, MIT must look to the student leaders and Housemasters as the experts on residential life. Administrators and policy makers should cooperate with students and Housemasters in determining the type and level of support that is needed. By actively soliciting student and Housemaster input and forming true partnerships with them, the MIT administration can make wiser investments that will truly improve the MIT residential experience.

We hope that you have found this letter helpful.

Very Truly Yours,

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