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## MIT: Where Now?

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The August 2019 revelations that the MIT Media Lab had accepted donations from convicted pedophile Jeffrey Epstein sparked an upheaval among MIT faculty. A Media Lab faculty meeting on September 4, intended to be calming, culminated in sobbing and yelling. On September 6, an exposé of the Media Lab in *The New Yorker* accused MIT leaders of engaging in years of evasion and deceit to conceal the affiliation with Epstein. On September 18, at an overflowing and emotionally-charged Institute faculty meeting, MIT faculty lined up to express their collective shame, outrage, and revulsion.

Like many in the MIT community, we attended this meeting and participated in the dizzying whirl of communications involving multiple participants, venues, and formats. The Epstein affair uncovered so many problems that it was difficult to tease them apart or understand the contributing factors. To better understand what was happening, we decided to conduct some informal research consisting of interviews with 11 MIT senior faculty whose judgment we value either through personal acquaintance or reputation. Seven of the 11 have served on Academic Council, and all have held leadership positions at the Institute. They represent four of MIT's five Schools.

We carried out these interviews over a six-week period beginning in early October. At the outset of each conversation, we told our colleagues that we wanted to discuss current events at MIT. We were purposely vague. We were most interested in learning what was on their minds, not in imposing what was on ours. We heard a near-consensus that MIT has “lost its way”; that the faculty have had little voice in setting institutional priorities and direction; and that pursuit of “the almighty dollar” has warped MIT’s values and threatens to jeopardize its fundamental mission.

What has gone wrong?

In the first part of this article, we focus on the words and ideas that we heard repeatedly during our interviews. (All 11 interviewees have reviewed this report. Nine felt that this article accurately represented their views, but two felt that their perspective was not represented.)

In the last two sections, we present our own analysis and recommendations; these are ours alone.

## **A Breakdown of Trust**

The faculty we spoke with lamented a breakdown in trust between faculty and the senior administration. In fact, this topic was raised near the beginning of every conversation and many emphasized that the loss of trust began before and extends beyond the Epstein affair. We were told “trust has broken down”; “our sense of trust is badly shaken”; “it feels like things are falling apart”; and “our problems are much deeper than Epstein.”

When we asked more about loss of trust, our colleagues commonly began by citing the decision, starting in the Media Lab and eventually communicated upwards to a “senior team,” to negotiate with Epstein over donations and other forms of support. No one felt that this was an acceptable choice. The decision was interpreted not just as a failure of policies and procedures, but more fundamentally as a lack of judgment and integrity.

Particularly troubling was a perceived lack of honesty among MIT leadership to take full responsibility for these events. Our interviewees were dismayed by what they saw as long-running efforts to avoid accountability through evasion or obfuscation. Some repeated a litany of names now connected with MIT – most notably David Koch, Mohammed bin Salman, Henry Kissinger, and Stephen Schwarzman – who cause faculty moral embarrassment because their public reputations are so antithetical to MIT’s professed ideals. Our faculty colleagues felt that MIT needs to be more open and thoughtful in acknowledging the complexities and ambiguities of engaging with ethically-compromised individuals. They believe MIT leadership should promote community-wide discussion of these issues, especially when MIT’s educational initiatives repeatedly stress the need to include “ethics.”

Trust is a two-way street, and our colleagues also expressed the sense that top MIT leadership lacks trust in the faculty. They described the President and some others in the senior administration as “lacking respect for faculty in general” or “very cynical about faculty,” whom they often seem to regard as “selfish.” Some interviewees described MIT’s leaders as thinking that faculty do not appreciate the difficulties of management, do not grasp the big picture, nor the need to make tough decisions.

We heard a widespread complaint among faculty of “initiative fatigue,” caused by a struggle to deal with a steady stream of demands associated with an endless flow of new initiatives. “The rhythm is broken. What gives way is time to think, to sit down with students.” The result is mutual resentment. Faculty worry that their core activities of research and teaching are being shortchanged, while upper administration worry about faculty selfishness and short-sightedness. In this situation, loss of trust becomes a vicious circle.

Most of our interviewees expressed a strong opinion that, after the Epstein events, President Reif is not a leader who can restore trust at MIT. One person said, “He doesn’t own it.” Another said, “A lot comes back to him.” Although they had mixed assessments of Rafael Reif as a person, they believed that MIT would be better off with a new administration that could make a fresh start.

## **The Almighty Dollar**

When Rafael Reif became president of MIT in 2012, it was with the understanding that he would oversee a major capital campaign. Announced in 2016, the “Campaign for a Better World” is the fifth major capital campaign in MIT’s history, with a target of \$6 billion. So far it has raised \$5.5 billion.

Unlike the previous fundraising campaign that began in 1997, in which two-thirds of the funds came from MIT alumni and friends, the current campaign has succeeded by casting its net much more widely. MIT hired many fundraisers who do not know MIT well, and encouraged them to raise money wherever they could find it, including from donors who do not value or understand MIT’s core mission.

Our interviewees acknowledged that the senior leadership invited faculty participation at the outset of the campaign, when its priorities and goals were first established, but said proper oversight faded away as the campaign evolved. “Donors are setting the agenda,” one said. It is not clear to most faculty where the new money has been directed or how much of that direction has been determined by the donors. Others said “faculty have no idea how the campaign is being run,” and “the campaign has gone off the rails.”

A major source of frustration was the perceived disconnect between a highly successful campaign and a continuing shortage of resources for core educational and departmental needs. We kept hearing the question “Where’s the \$6 billion?” If the money being raised is not noticeable in departments, where is it going?

Our interviewees felt that there is a tacit agenda of transforming Kendall Square into a geographically condensed version of Silicon Valley, with venture capital flowing into it from around the world. The massive building campaign that MIT has undertaken seems a physical manifestation of this ambition. The rise of multiple skyscrapers, much of which will be rental property owned by MIT and leased to industry, sends a message of scale and ambition at once overwhelming and alienating.

There are many players in the development of Kendall Square, and it is reasonable the MIT Investment Management Company be involved in that activity. However, there was concern that the MIT senior administration has become too heavily invested in MIT’s business and real estate activities in Kendall Square and that this mission dominates the senior administration’s

thinking and decision-making. Faculty worry that the Institute's core mission of academic excellence and education is being left behind. Several of our interviewees were worried about how highly leveraged MIT may have become as a result of its recent expansion.

Our interviewees were concerned about the degree to which MIT, though legally a non-profit, is being conceptualized as a business. Many gave examples from the language of the leadership, described as “corporate-speak” or “boardroom culture.” Many pointed to the corporate-style measures of success cited by senior leadership: growth of endowment, growth of international commitments, and constant competition of MIT with peer institutions (above all Stanford) using metrics like endowment dollars per faculty member and admissions yield. Our faculty colleagues repeatedly wondered if these metrics and goals are appropriate or realistic for MIT.

The faculty members we interviewed repeatedly told us that that money-making is becoming MIT’s main institutional goal. “It’s the money.” “Money drives everything.” While the stated Campaign goal may be “a better world,” in practice its goal is to raise \$6 billion – or more, because the campaign creates a vicious circle with the need to raise ever more money. Stephen Schwarzman’s gift is a prime example. His donation of \$350 million is starter money for the College of Computing, which, faculty are told, needs \$1.1 billion to be up and running. His generous gift now commits MIT to raising another \$750 million.

### **A New College: The Expansion of Computing**

The establishment of the Schwarzman College of Computing has been celebrated as a great success for the Campaign. It is welcomed by many at MIT as a large part of the solution to pressing problems of faculty supply and student demand in computer science and related areas.

Yet during our interviews we were taken aback by the strength of resistance to the College – not necessarily to the College itself but to the process by which it was established. The Schwarzman College is seen by most of the faculty we interviewed as a “top down” initiative, decided by *pro forma* consultation rather than true discussion: “Decisions were already made, so ‘consultation’ is in quotes.” “The whole thing was a game.” One interviewee described the establishment of the College and the selection of its dean as “legitimation exercises for a course of action already preferred.”

The creation of the College is seen by many of our interviewees as triggering disputes and power struggles within MIT. They see it as damaging to trust among faculty and between faculty and senior leadership. One interviewee said “it could have been handled in a much more collegial way.” Because the undergraduate curriculum is already an arena of strong faculty disagreements and resentments, this is not a promising context for inevitable curricular discussions about the dominance of computing in undergraduate education. There will be more jostling for position as existing faculty figure out where they, their students, and their research

fit into the new academic structure. At the same time, confronted with this new reality, they are strategizing how to get a share of those resources.

### **Shared Governance: Is it Working?**

As the interviews progressed, it became clear to us that the problems at MIT are much bigger than the Epstein situation. We felt that we better understood some of the deep concerns and discontent among faculty. After some analysis, we have come to the conclusion that many of the issues described above have developed through recent change in the balance of power among faculty, senior administration, and the MIT Corporation – primarily the Corporation’s powerful Executive Committee.

MIT operates with a system of shared governance that functions through trust and collaboration. Most faculty are much more familiar with the structure and leadership of faculty and administrative governance than they are with the structure and leadership of the Corporation. Therefore, we will give an overview of this lesser known aspect of MIT governance.

The Corporation is large and unwieldy. It currently has 71 active members plus four officers and 35 emeriti members. Until 1930, the president of MIT presided over the Corporation. After 1930, the chair of the Corporation has been either a past MIT president or another member of the Corporation. Since Paul Gray stepped down as Corporation chair in 1997, no MIT president has served in this role; the Corporation has been chaired by individuals who do not have academic leadership experience.

Within the Corporation, power is largely vested in the Executive Committee. The role of the Executive Committee in shaping MIT’s direction cannot be overstated. The chair of the Executive Committee is especially powerful, setting the agenda and presiding over the meetings. The Executive Committee is composed of seven to 10 Corporation members, who serve five-year terms, as well as four *ex officio* members (including the president of MIT, the chair of the Corporation, and the board chief of MIT Investment Management Company) and three regular guests (including the provost and general counsel). Until 2012, the MIT president served as chair of the Executive Committee.

At the December 2012 quarterly meeting of the Corporation, a quiet revolution in MIT governance took place. Unnoticed by nearly all faculty, this changed the dynamic balance that had previously existed between the Executive Committee and MIT’s senior leadership. In a series of votes by the Corporation, what had formerly been “Bylaws of The Corporation” were renamed “Bylaws of MIT.” Hundreds of changes were made to the Bylaws, with the new Bylaws stating that “The members of the Corporation constitute the government of MIT.” These changes confirmed and extended the purview of the Executive Committee: “The Executive Committee shall have responsibility for overseeing the general administration and superintendence of all matters relating to the Institute.”<sup>1</sup>

Most significantly, the Executive Committee would no longer be chaired by the president of MIT, but by the chair of the Corporation. This means *de facto* that the Executive Committee is no longer likely to be headed by someone with experience as an academic leader. The lack of academic experience now extends to the entire Executive Committee where, at present, only one of the seven term members has significant academic leadership experience.

All these changes add up to a new relationship between the university and the Corporation. In the words of a *Tech* article at the time, “The Corporation appears not to be styling itself as a separate entity with oversight responsibility for MIT, but rather implying that its oversight is part of MIT itself.”<sup>2</sup> One faculty member we talked with commented that “It used to feel like MIT faculty and senior leadership worked together to control the Corporation. Now it feels like the Corporation and senior leadership are joining forces to control the faculty.”

It is not only the Executive Committee whose role has changed in recent years. Another critical player in shared governance, Academic Council, has changed significantly in form and function, with the net effect of reducing the influence and input of the faculty into MIT affairs.

Academic Council was introduced at MIT in 1949 by the then-new President James Killian to “be responsible for the executive coordination of the Institute’s educational activities and for the administration of education policy as determined by the Faculty.” The Council had 10 members: four school deans, the deans of undergraduate and graduate students, the faculty chair, and the president, provost, and executive vice-president.<sup>3</sup>

By the President Vest years (1990-2004), Academic Council had added new members, but still functioned to make decisions related to educational programs and policies. Overall it worked effectively to funnel concerns of the general faculty through the department heads to the school deans and thence to the president and provost. The composition and tone of the Council encouraged discussion and competing perspectives on the greater issues facing MIT.

Academic Council is now bloated to 30 members. Size has brought diffusion of focus and influence. From many accounts, the Council’s current role is primarily one of receiving reports rather than acting as a deliberative body. Some of the faculty that we interviewed told us that the outnumbered academic deans are “not mattering anymore” and “not happy.” They feel they have little opportunity for meaningful input into framing MIT’s mission and goals. Academic Council now has the reputation of being ineffectual: a passive audience for President Reif, rather than a place where the voices of the faculty are heard and alternative viewpoints are welcomed.

### **Where From Here?**

On January 10, as we were making final revisions to this article, the MIT Corporation released the Goodwin Procter report detailing its findings surrounding Jeffrey Epstein’s visits and donations to MIT. That report raises many difficult issues with which MIT will need to contend.

However, the findings of that report resonate with many of the themes we have noted: an institutional culture focused on fundraising; an uneasy, unclear relationship between the university administration and the MIT Corporation; and a widespread belief among MIT citizens that its leaders do not share their ethical concerns.

The recommendations in this section are ours alone, and at least two of our interviewees would disagree sharply with some of our points.

First, a number of immediate steps could, and probably should, be taken to do some fact-finding and air-clearing. For example, MIT should develop a clear mechanism for assessing ethical issues surrounding large donations, reinvigorate its oversight of outside professional activities, and conduct thorough financial audits of all units deeply involved with outside private funding. Some have suggested that the faculty resume active oversight of the Kendall Square and Volpe building projects, so that MIT priorities are not entirely lost in the construction boom.

Second, we would urge a greater level of transparency on the part of the senior administration. One example is an annual compilation, intended for faculty, describing where MIT's donations come from; for larger donations, the source and whether they are earmarked by the donor for a particular purpose; the use to which these funds are ultimately put; and a simple accounting of MIT's real estate investment and debt profile.

However, this is not enough. Our conversations with colleagues last semester suggest that none of these initiatives can be effective without reestablishing trust and a rebalanced system of governance. While some have suggested that MIT would benefit from creation of a faculty senate, we believe that no system of governance will be successful without trust between the faculty at large and the senior leadership.

Over the past semester, we have come to believe that many of the visible ills affecting MIT arise, at least partly, from an imbalance of power, most notably reflected in the composition and roles of the Executive Committee and Academic Council. Because this reflects the deepest level of organization at MIT, we believe that the way forward for MIT must involve change at a similarly deep level. We propose that:

- 1) The Corporation should reverse its 2012 decision, and reinstall the president of MIT as chair of the Executive Committee. We also recommend that, in addition to including at least one outside member with experience in academic leadership, the Executive Committee should include an *ex officio* representative of the MIT faculty. This individual would be elected by the faculty at large through a nomination and selection process, with details of the process to be defined by the chair of the faculty.

- 2) The role of Academic Council should be strengthened by reducing its membership so that it is better configured to fulfill its core mission. We propose that it revert to a structure and purpose

similar to those of the earlier Academic Councils, perhaps consisting of the MIT president, provost, chancellor, vice-chancellor, deans of the five Schools, the faculty chair, an equity officer or equivalent, and a few others.<sup>4</sup>

3) We believe that MIT needs new leadership to take on the restoration of trust and the rebalancing of power. In his seven-year tenure, President Reif has successfully fulfilled his promise to oversee the “Campaign for a Better World.” The issues of today require another vision and focus. President Reif should act with dignity to make way for new leadership.

MIT is at a turning point in its history comparable to the pivotal post-World War II years and the Sixties. Both were tumultuous for the Institute – and transformational. The fundamental questions MIT faced in the past about the role of universities in the larger world are on the table again, more than ever. MIT defines itself as a special kind of university; in President Killian’s memorable phrase, one that is “polarized around science, technology, and the arts.” What does this mean now? What is our identity and mission? Who should we be serving in education and research? What can we afford? How will we be affected by income inequality, environmental collapse, and doubts about reality? What is “a better world” and what would be a better MIT?

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<sup>1</sup> John A. Hawkinson, “MIT revises bylaws; Corp. chair to lead executive Committee, *The Tech* (December 11, 2012). <https://thetech.com/2012/12/11/corporation-v132-n60>. The responsibilities of the Executive Committee are enumerated in <https://thetech.com/2012/12/11/corporation-execduties-v132-n60>. *The Tech* published a redline copy of the new bylaws tracking all the changes from the previous (2008) version: <http://tech.mit.edu/V132/N60/corporation/bylaws-redline.pdf>.

<sup>2</sup> Hawkinson, “MIT revises Bylaws.”

<sup>3</sup> James R. Killian, Report of the President, MIT (1948), p. 21.

<sup>4</sup> A current sub-group of Academic Council, Dean’s group, has a composition similar to that which we propose, but the President of MIT is not a member of Dean’s group and its agenda does not mirror that of Academic Council.

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