

# MIT Faculty Newsletter

<https://fnl.mit.edu>

**in this issue** we offer “Work for this Fall and Winter,” by Faculty Chair Mary Fuller ([page 4](#)); “An Open Letter . . . From the MIT Chapter of the AAUP” ([page 16](#)) and “Free Expression and *Written Revolution*” ([page 18](#)) on similar concerns; “An Invitation to the MIT Council on Academic Freedom” ([page 21](#)); and “How MIT Can Educate the World for the Era of AI” ([page 22](#)).

[Deadline for submissions for the January/February FNL is January 27.]



F & T Diner, 1969

## MITx SPOCs for Gaza

Ayat Abodayeh and Haynes Miller

**IN THE COURSE OF ITS** current campaign against Palestine, Israel has systematically [demolished the once thriving educational infrastructure](#) in the Gaza Strip. More than 10,000 university students from Gaza have sought refuge in Egypt, with many more in other countries such as Cyprus and Turkey, while some 70,000 remain trapped in Gaza.

In an attempt to provide an educational experience for some of these students, a group of us here at MIT is currently running four MITx courses for students in the Gaza Strip or displaced to Cairo, augmented by extensive TA support in Arabic. They are based on MIT courses and led by MIT faculty:

- Introduction to Computer Science, led by Professors John Guttag and Eric Grimson and Senior Lecturer Ana Bell

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## Editorial The Pulse: Seeking Broader Retrospective and Prospective Faculty Participation

Yoel Fink, Robert P. Redwine, and  
Warren Seering

**AS FREE SPEECH ON** campuses faces scrutiny nationwide, asking tough questions has become more critical than ever. At MIT, The Pulse emerged from the recognition that many faculty members feel their perspectives are not represented – whether due to personal choice, fear of retribution, structural barriers, or even the passage of time. Created by Michael Short and Peko Hosoi, The Pulse seeks to foster open, participatory inquiry, enabling faculty to voice concerns, challenge norms, and promote diverse perspectives through a transparent three-step process of feedback and voting. Importantly it brings out those broadly supported perspectives on a relatively short time scale, allowing faculty to influence MIT’s priorities in new ways, both retrospectively and perhaps even prospectively.

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## Editorial What’s Driving This Bus?

Yoel Fink, Robert P. Redwine, and  
Warren Seering

**IN LIGHT OF PERCEIVED** and in some cases explicit threats to universities, we are being challenged, by Derek Bok<sup>1</sup> and others, to explain the ways that we operate. Before we try to explain these processes to others, we should understand them ourselves.

Some of our ways of operating, such as the undergraduate admissions process, have been made explicit though they may not be widely understood<sup>2</sup>.

<sup>1</sup> *Attacking the Elites: What Critics Get Wrong—and Right—About America’s Leading Universities*, Yale University Press, February 2024.

<https://www.harvardmagazine.com/2024/03/americans-hate-harvard-derek-bok>

<sup>2</sup> We know for example that there are no legacy admissions to MIT and that a student’s financial need is not considered until after the admission decision has been made. Those who are interested in learning

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### Subscriptions

\$15/year on campus  
\$25/year off campus

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**Photo Credit:** Pages 1, 3: R. B. Rettig, May 1969; Courtesy Cambridge Historical Commission; Page 9: American University in Cairo

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### What's Driving This Bus?

Fink, Redwine, and Seering, from page 1

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Others have emerged as a consequence of myriad decisions over time. When the Institute changes gradually, the consequent procedures can be harder to understand. It's these emergent processes that we focus on here. One way to look at them is to observe changes across time. Since we joined the faculty, numerous dimensions of gradual change have significantly altered the character of the Institute. We raise several such dimensions here.

In 1980, the ratio of undergraduate students to graduate students was about 1:1 (4517/4536)<sup>3</sup>. Currently, the ratio is about 1:1.6 (4535/7351). This does not include the almost 2400 students from other universities who are enrolled at MIT this semester<sup>4</sup>. By what process has this gradual change happened? Why have we made this commitment to educating more graduate students rather than more undergraduate students? Why are our undergraduate classes limited to about 8% international students while no such constraints are placed on graduate admissions? What is the process for deciding on the size and makeup of the student body?

The number of postdoctoral students at MIT has also grown since 1980, by a factor of 4, while the number of tenure track faculty has grown by less than 15%<sup>5</sup>. At the same time, faculty hours spent teaching have gone down – in 1980 the teaching load for most faculty was three courses per year – while the number of teaching instructors has risen along with the growth of the student body. These changes could be seen as coincidental or as a coherent set being executed to alter the way that MIT operates. Is this a plan? If so, whose? If not, why is it happening? (See MIT Numbers, [back page](#).)

more about recent developments in MIT undergraduate admissions and financial aid may want to look at the following links which have been provided by Stu Schmill, our Dean of Admissions and Student Financial Services.

<http://mitadmissions.org/blogs/entry/mit-after-sffa>

<http://news.mit.edu/2024/mit-tuition-under-graduates-family-income-1120>

<sup>3</sup> <https://ir.mit.edu/projects/population-dash-board/>

<sup>4</sup> <https://registrar.mit.edu/statistics-reports/enrollment-statistics-year>

<sup>5</sup> <https://ir.mit.edu/projects/population-dash-board/>

In 1980, most recruiting on campus was done by large and medium-sized corporations. Entrepreneurship was not a big part of the conversation. Now it is a dominant part, yet many of our graduates go to work for those corporations. How are our priorities set in this regard? Is there a right balance?

The grading heuristic that was in play in the 1980s: 25% A, 40%B, 25%C, 10% D/F; would be unfamiliar to many faculty today. When these guidelines were in place, all courses in the major



310 Main Street, Cambridge, May 1969

were taken for a grade. Back then, savvy students chose sections to avoid being in with “the smart kids.” Since then, and now with P/NR, ABC/NR, Flexible P/NR, and PDF, MIT GPAs have trended higher. Is this trend the result of a plan? What do we want to achieve by assigning grades? Does the current grading process enable the desired result? Along the same lines, why, other than to penalize failure, do we give an A a score of 5 rather than the universally recognized 4? Given that a large majority of our students now graduate with a GPA above 4, might it be time to revisit this?

In 1980, there was very little commercial activity (or any evening activity at all for that matter) near the Kendall T Stop. Where the Biology building now stands was a manufacturing plant that made car parts.

The F&T Diner at 310 Main Street was the only place to get a hot meal. Nowhere in Cambridge was there anything resembling a downtown area. Now there is. MIT has been active in developing office, lab, and commercial space in Kendall Square, and there is more to come. Today, a visitor to Cambridge, getting out of a cab at the Marriott, could be forgiven for not recognizing that they are surrounded by sec-

tions of the MIT campus. In what ways have these real estate changes benefitted our academic missions? How will they?

A good way to get insight into the effects of change is to follow the money. In 1980, MIT's endowment value was well below \$1 billion<sup>6</sup>. At that time, investment revenues, particularly from the endowment, contributed less than 10% to total Institute revenues. Today, the value of the endowment is somewhere north of \$25 billion, and investment revenues now provide 1/3 of

total Institute revenues, substantially more than the tuition stream. The ways that we operate now depend strongly on our receiving funds from the endowment. Given this dependence, who prioritizes our fundraising activities? How are these priorities set? What consequences are these decisions having? What role should we faculty play in this?

We've mentioned here just a few of the ongoing gradual changes that are shaping the Institute and the ways that we operate. There are numerous others, like the growth in head count of administrators, and particularly student services staff, when compared with growth in the number of faculty. We welcome your additions to the list.

Commensurate changes await those who join the faculty today. Where are we headed? How is this decided? How will future changes affect the ways that we operate? At least as important for us as faculty are the questions, “What has been our role in driving these changes?” and “What should our role be going forward?”

We'd like to hear from you. ■

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[https://alum.mit.edu/sites/default/files/2024-04/brochure-endowment-2023\\_202403.pdf](https://alum.mit.edu/sites/default/files/2024-04/brochure-endowment-2023_202403.pdf)

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## From The Faculty Chair Work for This Fall and Winter

Mary C. Fuller

**THE LAST INSTITUTE FACULTY** meeting included some lively discussion of two very big topics: learning and process goals for the undergraduate academic program that might be used to guide a redesign for future graduates, and implications of the current political landscape for MIT and other research universities. Both of these will no doubt concern us for months and years to come. This column focuses on two more immediate topics, which nonetheless are important enough to merit some attention.

At a faculty meeting earlier this fall, a group of colleagues requested that the faculty officers form a committee to review questions relating to the student disciplinary process at MIT, reporting out in late winter; you'll see the related motion on the agenda for December, which we expect will also include a briefing on MIT's research expenditures. When we learned of the request, I had in fact already charged a committee that has now been working for several weeks. In this column, I wanted to make available some context on this topic (updated from an enclosure circulated with the call to the November meeting); add some ideas about the use of parliamentary process in general that build on the historical cases described in my September column; and connect both of these topics with a bigger picture.

Here are some actions now in progress. In October, I charged a Student Discipline Working Group (SDWG) to review the process as it is overseen by faculty governance, and to engage with the chair, members and staff of Committee on Discipline (COD) as well as other institutional stakeholders so as to understand

pressures and frictions on the process and make responsive recommendations to the chair of the faculty.<sup>1</sup> After the October meeting, the Working Group agreed that the questions proposed by colleagues in the October motion are a reasonable addition to its work, and they have been added to its charge.<sup>2</sup> Another important input

A number of faculty have indicated an interest in the whole system of complaint-handling, triage, fact-finding and other process that precedes the arrival of cases at COD.

for the SDWG will be recommendations from a review of the student disciplinary process conducted at the request of President Kornbluth and Chair Mark Gorenberg by the Corporation Risk and Audit Committee (RAC). The report completed by RAC is the subject of active conversation between members of that committee and the Working Group, in order to understand the challenges and

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<sup>1</sup> COD is supported by staff in the Office of Student Conduct and Community Standards (OSCCS). Members of the SDWG include Andrew Whittle, CEE, Chair (former chair, COD); Krishna Rajagopal, Physics (former chair of the faculty; former chair, CAP); Martha Gray, EECS (former secretary of the faculty; former member, COD); Craig Wilder, History (former chair, CUAFA; member, FPC); Raúl Radovitzky, Aero/Astro (head of house; chair, CSL; former chair, CUAFA).

<sup>2</sup> Questions include "how triage is conducted, best practices to avoid racial/ethnic bias, and consistency of procedures and sanctions with the educational mission of the disciplinary process at MIT"; FPC will probably address the first question, as described below.

opportunities it identifies; nonetheless, given faculty interest in the text of the report, we will aim to provide an annotated version in early January, with indications of work that has already been done, is in progress, or may take a different form.

COD and its supporting staff in OSCCS work within a larger constellation of offices, and thus the Working Group will necessarily engage to some extent with the Division of Student Life (DSL), the Office of the General Counsel (OGC), and the Institute Discrimination & Harassment Response Office (IDHR) as part of its task.<sup>3</sup> A number of faculty have indicated an interest in the whole system of complaint-handling, triage, fact-finding and other process that precedes the arrival of cases at COD. This year, the Faculty Policy Committee (FPC) has already been engaged with key student-facing staff, from Campus Police through the Office of Religious, Spiritual and Ethical Life, including staff and senior leaders who have important responsibilities in handling complaints

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<sup>3</sup> For information on case triage, see "Reviewing Reports" at <http://idhr.mit.edu/policies-procedures/process-incidents-Israel-Hamas-War>.

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**Work for This Fall and Winter**

Fuller, from preceding page

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from and about students. Responding to faculty interest, we have reached an understanding that FPC will work with those engaged in these earlier stages of student conduct processes, and with others who have relevant knowledge, to gain insight and provide input and support to the process as needed. We have already begun these conversations, and will develop a work-plan that can be further described at the December meeting; work will continue over December and January, when the committee does not meet, through the efforts of a dedicated FPC sub-committee.<sup>4</sup>

Faculty have requested a forum for mid-stream discussion of these two reviews by the SDWG and the FPC, as well as an opportunity for the question and answer session with the chair of COD that was curtailed by parliamentary process at the October meeting. We will try to schedule such a forum in late January or early February. In other words, we will be hard at work over the next few months – during a time I hope at least some of *you* will be thinking about white papers with proposals on the undergraduate curriculum. (As we heard at the November meeting, the Task Force on the Undergraduate Academic Program will issue revised goals and an RFP in early December.)

In another life from this one at MIT, one of my teachers was famous for reminding students, “keep your eyes on the distant mountains.” There is a high-level (or deep-level) connection between these topics. The Task Force has identified as one of its learning goals that our students acquire “strategies for . . . finding . . . belonging.” We want our students to feel enough sense of belonging to this community that they can thrive *as* students; and right now, I hear that sense of belonging has been challenged for enough of them that we should be concerned. How

can they manage these challenges, and avoid adding to the challenges for others? How can we offer support, and model ways of navigating differences with humility, respect, and self-respect? These are questions that can’t be outsourced to the most thoughtfully created of committees or processes, and they are ones we should all take a part in resolving.

In September, I tried to derive some lessons about the optimal use of faculty meetings from the archives, and these relate in turn to basic principles underlying the rules of process that we use.<sup>5</sup> The

numbers of faculty, resulting in well-designed actions that unfolded over years to come. And there are many variations between these poles.

So what does it take to bring a motion to a successful conclusion? Only motions to change the *Rules and Regulations of the Faculty* are required to be held over to a second meeting for voting, but principle and precedent recommend making faculty aware of substantive business in advance, so that all concerned can inform themselves and make plans to attend the meeting where business will be done.

Debating the final text of the faculty statement on free expression occupied multiple specially scheduled meetings, *after* preliminary forums had been held; the faculty officers also devoted significant time to thinking about process considerations. That process showed that when multiple groups were at work on alternate versions of motions or amendments, coordination outside the meeting helped smooth process in the meeting.

majority of the motions that come before the faculty result from consultation, information-gathering, and discussion by committees. The result typically lacks drama, because this prior effort tends to produce carefully-drafted proposals that have anticipated, if not done away with contentious issues. History indicates that motions coming *directly* to the meeting without prior process can vary widely in the amount of time they require for debate, amendment and voting, as well as in the degree of approval they can command. In the past, some motions have occasioned a great deal of process only to result in a narrow majority voted at a sparsely attended meeting. At the other end of the spectrum, some motions have gained increasing amounts of support through redrafting and consultation, occasioning rich discussion and almost unanimous approval from large

There should be no surprises. Faculty have frequently voted to postpone debate on a motion until a second meeting in order to ensure that all are properly informed, and these delays provide an opportunity for consultation and consensus-building. To get the ball rolling, the intent to prepare a motion might be shared in new business for consideration at a subsequent meeting, with follow-up to shape a concrete plan.

One consideration for shaping potential motions is their intended aim. If the aim is to convey a unified sentiment on the part of the faculty, consider whether unanimity is likely (sometimes it is), but also what the prospects are if the faculty are actually going to be of different minds about a statement or recommended action. If the end goal is to discover faculty views, that can take considerable process beyond the monthly meeting, extending potentially to specially appointed committees, town halls, surveys, and so on.

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<sup>4</sup> Including Elly Nedivi (BCS, associate chair of the faculty), Tavneet Suri (Sloan), and another member to be identified.

<sup>5</sup> See “Governance and How to Use It: Some MIT Case Studies,” FNL XXXVI (1), Sept./Oct. 2024.

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**Work for This Fall and Winter**

Fuller, from preceding page

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Debating the final text of the faculty statement on free expression occupied multiple specially scheduled meetings, *after* preliminary forums had been held; the faculty officers also devoted significant time to thinking about process considerations. That process showed that when multiple groups were at work on alternate versions of motions or amendments, coordination outside the meeting helped smooth process in the meeting. Amendments were put in final form in time to be circulated to faculty before the meeting, another practice that helped the rest of us to understand the choices being offered.

Generally, faculty meeting agendas begin to be set by the faculty officers and the senior administration four weeks in advance, to allow for scheduling speakers and preparing presentations. With consultation two to three weeks in advance of the meeting, we can try to adjust the timing of other items on the agenda; one week's notice allows materials to go out with the call to the meeting, though it may be harder to allocate time. On any topic that calls for rapid action, we advise reaching out directly to the person or group who would be responsible for the action, before or even instead of using parliamentary process.

As the last comment suggests, motions are not always necessary as a way to make things happen; though they can draw focus to a topic and (ideally) register and record a consensus on sentiment or action. Some objectives may not need or

benefit from the process of seeking a vote from the faculty at large. Others call for a depth of information and deliberation that makes them more suited to one of the standing committees or one appointed for the purpose. All motions that generate debate have effects on the group that considers them; if the group is really divided

Generally, faculty meeting agendas begin to be set by the faculty officers and the senior administration four weeks in advance, to allow for scheduling speakers and preparing presentations. With consultation two to three weeks in advance of the meeting, we can try to adjust the timing of other items on the agenda . . . .

on a topic, voting something into action by a narrow majority will have costs that should be factored into whatever subsequent actions are undertaken. Whatever the content or the outcome of a motion, careful attention to process and consultation before, during, and after our meetings respects the use of the faculty's time, and will help those in the minority feel the outcome was fairly arrived at even if it was not their most preferred choice.

These *are* the faculty's meetings; when a motion is on the floor for debate, all of us have not only a vote and a voice, but a variety of tools we can use to affect the pace and sequence of discussion, when discussion will conclude, or whether we have the discussion in a meeting at all.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> MIT Libraries now offers online access to [Robert's New Rules of Order](#); for quicker reference, please see the two explainers on parliamentary process posted on the faculty governance website.

Meetings are for learning, persuading, and enacting – when we can reach agreement, and maybe this is a moment when we are rediscovering what is required to get there. In *Areopagitica* (1644), his treatise on liberty of printing, the poet John Milton wrote: “Where there is much desire to learn, there of necessity will be

much arguing, much writing, many opinions; for opinion in good men (sic) is but knowledge in the making.” As we engage in that making, let's seek to join our efforts, with Milton's recommendation of “a little generous prudence, a little forbearance of one another, and some grain of charity” as we do so. And if new proposals on the undergraduate program emerge from the Task Force, we will be glad to have recent practice in the arts of debate and consensus-seeking as we consider them. ■

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## Where Do We Go From Here?

Malick W. Ghachem

**FOR ABOUT 10 YEARS** – when I was between the ages of about six and sixteen – I lived with my family in Saudi Arabia. The American school I attended there did not go past the ninth grade, and so at the start of tenth grade I made my way to a boarding school in Connecticut. In the fall of my senior year, Salman Rushdie’s novel *The Satanic Verses* was published in London. Shortly thereafter, Iran’s supreme leader the Ayatollah Khomeini issued a fatwa against the book and placed a bounty on Rushdie’s head. Demonstrators in both South Asia and Britain denounced the novel as blasphemous. Even critics who had no particular investment in the charge of blasphemy distanced themselves from Rushdie as a purveyor of allegedly “Islamophobic” tropes.

When the book appeared in the United States (in February 1989) I promptly bought a copy and decided to carry it with me home for spring break reading in Saudi Arabia. My mother accompanied me on that trip home, and as we waited to pass through customs I divulged to her that I harbored a copy of the illicit text in my backpack. She panicked. Customs inspections in Saudi Arabia were overseen by the kingdom’s religious police. My mother took my copy of the book, wrapped it in a plastic bag, and promptly disposed of it in the women’s restroom. We then passed through customs without incident. I haven’t seen the book since, though over the years I acquired two more copies (including a first edition).

As someone of Arab-Muslim background, I felt ambivalent about Rushdie’s

text even without reading it. The charge that it trafficked in anti-Muslim prejudice troubled me. It would continue to trouble me over the many years of America’s disastrous wars in the Middle East (which are ongoing as I write these words). But the mistake I made as I waited to pass through customs in Jeddah that spring day was not one of ambivalence. It was, rather, that I took free expression for granted. I assumed that I could simply pass through a carefully policed international boundary with my American habits and ways of thinking unhindered. In *Knife*, his moving account of having barely survived an assassin’s blade at the Chautauqua Institution in upstate New York in August 2022, Rushdie writes that “the first lesson of free expression [is] that you must take it for granted. If you are afraid of the consequences of what you say, then you are not free.”

The ambivalence about free expression that some – many? – on our campus feel today is an ambivalence that I too have known. I felt it during [our protracted debates over DEI and the Carlson lecture affair](#) in 2021 and 2022. And I have felt it throughout the even more acrimonious campus conflict over Israel and Palestine of 2023 and 2024. But if the only thing you see when you look out the window of your MIT office these days is anti-semitism, then you are [not looking hard or far enough](#). One of the most right-wing, racist governments in Israel’s history has systematically used anti-anti-semitism to legitimate its horrific infliction of suffering on the people of Gaza.

Anti-antisemitism has also become one of the principal vectors of the American rightwing assault on higher education. The Biden administration has enabled both developments, first by providing unconditional material support for Israel’s war on Gaza, and second by failing to take a stand in favor of institutional academic freedom and free expression.

As the [incoming presidential administration](#) prepares to help us focus our vision on the problem of antisemitism in American higher education, we are all very soon going to have to begin looking harder and further. There is no way around the coming battles. We must fight these battles wisely and compassionately, with due concern for the diversity of our community in all its forms. But silence will probably not be a viable option. And too many of us have been silent about the longstanding injustice of America’s and Israel’s treatment of the Palestinian people. If the best thing one can say about these policies is that they do not (yet) quite amount to genocide, something has gone awfully wrong. For fear of the consequences of what we say, many of us are, on this issue at least, not free.

[My Academe essay](#) explains why I believe MIT and other American universities must ensure a wide berth for students and faculty to contest these policies notwithstanding our ambivalence over free expression. I thank the FNL editors for their interest in reprinting the essay [here](#) (page 30). ■

**Malick W. Ghachem** is a Professor of History and Department Head ([mghachem@mit.edu](mailto:mghachem@mit.edu)).

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### MITx SPOCs for Gaza

Abodayeh and Miller, from page 1

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- Data Analysis for Social Scientists, led by Professor Esther Duflo (2019 Nobel Prize in Economics) and Senior Lecturer Sara Ellison

- Calculus 1A (differentiation) and Calculus 1B (integration), led by Professors David Jerison and Gigliola Staffilani

This initiative began in May 2024, with a meeting with Chancellor for Academic Advancement Eric Grimson, Dean for Digital Learning Cynthia Breazeal, and Senior Associate Dean for Open Learning Chris Capozzola to explore what MIT Open Learning might be able to do to provide these students with educational opportunities of some sort. They immediately suggested running one or several “SPOC”s, Small Private Online Courses, from the MITx Open or the edX catalogue. This seemed like a wonderful idea, and, with the consistent support of MITx/MicroMasters Program Senior Director Dana Doyle and MITx Senior Product Manager Joe Martis leading the MITx effort, this project got underway.

There have been many surprises as this program evolved. First of all, a call for expression of interest quickly drew about 200 responses, more than half from the Gaza Strip itself! The courage and dedication of these students is simply astounding – mostly displaced from their homes, surrounded by war and destruction, in continual danger, and under great pressure to help their family survive – but still able to find internet service and still interested in continuing their education!

A second major surprise was the outpouring of dedication, energy, and creativity by a large number of current and recent MIT students (many under sanction by the Department of Student Life (DSL)). It has transformed these SPOCs from a chilly, impersonal MOOC experience to a caring and supportive environment for our students, and provided important enhancements of the MITx

material that will be of use in other situations of constrained internet access.

A third surprise was the embrace of this project by the leadership of the American University in Cairo. Following outreach by MIT Professor Ahmed Ghoniem, President Ahmad Dallal opened the doors of AUC to our students. Directed by its Senior Director of Academic Affairs Projects Rachel Awad, AUC has made available classroom space equipped with internet, projectors, and computers, providing on-campus educational experience for some 30 of our students displaced from Gaza to Egypt. We work closely with a team of TAs at the AUC, who lead in-person teaching sessions twice a week at the New Cairo campus. AUC has granted these students university IDs, allowing them to access essential campus resources like the library and classrooms with computer devices, and provides dedicated bus service from Tahrir Square. Moreover, AUC is offering mental health support opportunities and scholarships for interested students, helping them continue their education in a supportive environment. This has transformed the learning experience of these students.

Finally, we have found brave and generous partners working on the ground in Gaza to provide space and internet connectivity for our students. The organization [HopeHub](#) provides solar-powered internet workspaces dedicated to freelancers and students and has arranged study spaces for our students. We are also collaborating with the [Future Development Commission](#), which has administered funding to cover costs for cafes and workspaces. FDC also organizes recreational and psychosocial support activities, supervised by Dr. Stephen Friend, starting with a remarkable event on November 2, 2024. At this event, one student in Gaza said:

*“Thank you, MIT. This program makes me remember who I was before the war.”*

We now have 36 students signing in from different parts of the Gaza Strip, and

49 students in Egypt. Our MIT student staffing is impressive: For Calculus 1a and Calculus 1b, we have four MIT students in each; for Data Analysis, we have nine TAs, with two students volunteering from Harvard and one student from the Broad Institute; and for Introduction to Computer Science, we have six MIT students as TAs. Each course TA team is supervised by a Head TA that oversees the course progress and assigns the work accordingly. Head TAs have received training from Open Learning in optimal use of the platform.

Our TA teams are committed not only to making the MITx content accessible to students but also to providing twice-weekly teaching sessions, in Arabic, over Zoom for students in Gaza. During these sessions, TAs review the material scheduled for the week, using custom slides with practice problems to further clarify the content, including Arabic explanations as needed. Our TAs personally reach out to students who may have missed sessions due to poor internet connectivity, ensuring no one falls behind. They maintain active group chats where students can engage in Q&A and receive additional support.

We have confronted and overcome several technological challenges. The MITx course webpages are quite heavy, not packaged appropriately for use in narrow bandwidth situations. Our team breaks up course content and uploads it to Google Drive, making it easy for students to download. For the Introduction to Computer Science course, a significant issue is that the MITx platform does not currently support the edX automated code grader. Consequently, having students submit answers directly through the exercises is not an option. To address this, our team has created comprehensive documents detailing the assessments and exercises so that students can work on them independently of the MITx website. We have also developed our own auto-grader system, managed by a dedicated grader team, to assess student submissions efficiently. Much of this work was

[continued on next page](#)



**MITx SPOCs for Gaza**

Abodayeh and Miller, from preceding page

carried out by a team of 40 – yes, 40! – MIT students at a “hackathon” on October 27. We hope this work will find application in other resource-constrained environments.

Our team has funded devices for two students in need and are currently raising money to help provide food for a student and her family of five. We continuously reach out to each student to understand their needs and allocate resources accordingly.

SPOCs4Gaza joins several other MIT initiatives in support of education in Palestine. The PalUROP program, supporting collaborative research projects for students from Palestinian universities, is now in its fourth year. A dozen students from three West Bank universities participated in IDSS’s Data Science and Machine Learning Summer Opportunities Program. Emerging Talent, an extensive educational and career development program directed by Prof. Admir Masic, has dedicated half of the 2025 cohort – 50 spots – to displaced students from Gaza.

Brand new is the [Global MIT At-Risk Fellows Program for Palestine](https://global.mit.edu/gmaf-palestine) <https://global.mit.edu/gmaf-palestine>.

Directed by Prof. Kamal Yousef-Toumi, this MIT-funded pilot program will support up to 10 Palestinian academics for a semester at MIT over the next two years. ■

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**Haynes Miller** is a Professor of Mathematics, Emeritus ([hmm@math.mit.edu](mailto:hmm@math.mit.edu)).



**Students Enrolled in SPOCs for Gaza Program at the American University in Cairo**

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**The Pulse: Seeking Broader Retrospective and Prospective Faculty Participation**  
Fink, Redwine, and Seering, from page 1

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MIT's decentralized structure poses challenges to the collective expression of faculty perspectives. Departments and Schools operate independently, making it difficult to identify and address shared concerns across boundaries. Faculty meetings are limited in scope, time, and attendance, while Institute committees are by nature slow and not necessarily representative of the faculty at large.

Adding to these structural hurdles is MIT's lack of systematic reflection, "lessons learned" processes. The absence of "mea culpa" amplifies the need for a platform like The Pulse – an anonymous, independent forum where no question is too controversial. By enabling faculty to propose, prioritize, and vote on questions, The Pulse has the potential to channel the

full breadth of MIT's intellectual diversity, providing a mechanism for aligning the faculty community with coherence around key issues.

In an era of social media and rapid information spread, fears of doxxing, defamation, and misinterpretation inhibit open expression. By ensuring anonymity The Pulse focuses our attention on ideas rather than personalities. Questioning drives innovation in an environment where curiosity meets openness.

The Pulse serves to remind us that asking tough questions is not an act of defiance but a commitment to excellence. While still an experiment, it has already sparked essential conversations that might otherwise have gone unspoken, from administrative accountability to pursuit of major institutional initiatives.

This issue of the *Faculty Newsletter* seeks to open a dialogue about The Pulse

as a work in progress, inviting deeper analysis and discussion. The Pulse is not without its weaknesses or its critics. It does not provide a rigorous measure of opinion. Its sometimes lighthearted choice of response options could enable the voice of faculty members to be misrepresented by those who might choose to do so. For starters, Professors Hosoi and Sheffi, both former and current Pulse question Keepers, have penned their perspectives. We hope this conversation will enhance our experience, enabling faculty to better identify areas for improvement and help shape MIT's future. ■

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**Robert P. Redwine** is a Professor of Physics, Emeritus ([redwine@mit.edu](mailto:redwine@mit.edu)).

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## The Pulse Update

Yossi Sheffi

**THE LAST FACULTY NEWSLETTER** included an article authored by Roger Levy and me explaining many of the facets of The Pulse. As we go deeper into our tenure as the Keepers, we are working to improve several aspects of this tool. First, however, one should look at the similarities and the differences between The Pulse and the FNL, both of which are tools for the faculty to express their opinions, raise issues, and be an impetus to discussions among faculty members. In addition, both venues can bring faculty issues to the attention of senior management.

The FNL allows each faculty member to express an opinion, subject to minimal editing. In fact, many of the opinions have

been inflammatory, and yet this is a vehicle for such opinions. What the FNL does not enable is reasoned debate and respectful exchange of opinions – the bimonthly schedule and the academic load on the faculty mean that there is no room for quick and timely exchanges.

By its very nature, the FNL typically reflects the opinion of a single faculty member or a small group. In that, it is similar to a newspaper opinion page. This, however, is not the only function of the FNL. At its best it informs and raises issues which can be then taken by the faculty governance and debated in faculty meetings. At its worst, it masquerades as the "opinion of MIT faculty" by allowing arti-

cles by the Editorial Subcommittee, which can be perceived as the "official MIT faculty voice." It also betrays its own rules by allowing unsigned articles to be published, sometimes by non-faculty members of the community.

The Pulse is a different tool. It does suffer, however, from some of the same drawbacks of the FNL. For example, the platform does not enable reasoned debate on issues of interest for the faculty. At its best, The Pulse can elicit what a good majority of the voting faculty think about an issue. Of course, the higher the number of participants, the more representative the votes are of faculty opinions.

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### The Pulse Update

Sheffi, from preceding page

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Amazingly, some questions get a high number of participants and a clear vote, leading to a “voice of the faculty” result. For example, 2/3 of the votes regarding teaching evaluations agree that they are useful (196 votes). Similarly, 87% of the voting faculty thought that students should be forbidden, in general, from taking classes that meet at the same time (187 votes). In other cases, opinions are split. 40% of the voting faculty thought that MIT should avoid faculty meetings during school vacations, while 37% thought that the dates should stay; (177 votes, with 26% abstaining or not finding an opinion that reflects their views). A high percentage of abstaining votes, like in this example, probably reflects a question that is not well formulated to include other options. The weekly cadence of The Pulse allows for quick responses, and the little effort required for voting results in respectable faculty participation (although we would love to see more).

Many of The Pulse questions are not well-formulated and thus lose their potential value to the community. This is an issue of proper survey design, but it is not clear which way to go with it. On the one hand, the original intent of Peko and Mike, the founders of The Pulse, was to allow faculty members to pose whatever question they have in mind, subject to no editing (but, the ability of the Keepers not to move questions to prioritization or a vote if certain guard rails are crossed). This policy encourages participation in submitting questions. Yet, a better survey design means that the Keepers will have to edit the questions as well as add context and explanations. The first problem with this is that The Pulse was conceived to be anonymous. Unless a person who poses a question contacts the Keepers, there is no way for the Keepers to get back to the person and negotiate edits. Thus, the editing will have to be done without con-

sulting the submitter. (A few submitters do contact the Keepers and negotiated edits do take place.)

A second issue is that many questions require background material. For example, the question about transparency of salaries is something that management specialists have written and debated extensively. It would be useful to provide some arguments with reference material explaining the pros and cons of various

... a question about increasing faculty compensation would surely get a majority of votes, but it is meaningless. A more balanced question should include what faculty are willing to give up in order to achieve this without taxing the Institute's finances. For example, do we prefer increasing the overhead, stopping need-blind admission, or cutting staff?

levels of transparency. Unfortunately, this may detract from the immediacy of the responses (for example, how many colleagues want to spend 15 minutes reading reference material before voting on a question?).

In addition, the Keepers are not experts in survey design. Yet, some questions cry for edits or changes. For example, a question about increasing faculty compensation would surely get a majority of votes, but it is meaningless. A more balanced question should include what faculty are willing to give up in order to achieve this without taxing the Institute's finances. For example, do we prefer increasing the overhead, stopping need-blind admission, or cutting staff? Such a balanced question may have a chance of being taken up by the administration. In addition, some question submitters are not aware of MIT procedures (for example, for setting compensation) or ongoing efforts by various committees.

Implementing many of these ideas and more requires staff time, which The Pulse does not have. We are in discussion with

the administration about this. We have also contacted a faculty member whose field is survey design to give the keepers a rudimentary education on the subject. Yet the question of whether the Keepers should edit faculty-submitted questions remains.

The role of explaining how MIT works is something where The Pulse and the FNL can provide complementary functions. For example – when the Keepers

identify a question that demonstrates a lack of knowledge of Institute procedures, pressures, regulations, or whatever – they can contact the provost, who will assign the appropriate senior administrator to explain the issues on the pages of the FNL. (To be fair, even the provost does not have extra staff . . .)

The one element that I wish the FNL would adopt, is The Pulse process of the transparency of the choice of the Keepers. Currently both Keepers are voted by the faculty in open elections. (We are thinking about staggering the service period of the two Keepers so there is always one veteran and one new Keeper.)

In any case, Roger and I enjoy the feedback we get (which is sometimes unpleasant but always helpful). We hope faculty members will increase their participation by voting and submitting questions, and also keep telling us how bad we are doing. ■

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**Yossi Sheffi** is a Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering and Engineering Systems, and Director of the Center for Transportation and Logistics ([sheffi@mit.edu](mailto:sheffi@mit.edu)).

## Thoughts on The Pulse

Peko Hosoi

**REMEMBER 2020? IT WAS** the height of the pandemic. It was a time when we as an institute had to make weighty decisions quickly. It was also a time when we were physically separated from one another, making it logistically challenging to converse and to participate in decision-making processes.

At that time, Mike Short reached out to me and articulated a concern about faculty input on important Institute-wide decisions. He noted (and I agreed) that we were hearing a lot from the loud extremes and very little from the (often quiet) middle of the community. We were very keen to hear from this middle group, but all of the existing communication channels that we could think of – faculty meetings, the FNL, directly reaching out to leadership, etc. – tended to damp out moderate voices and amplify the passionate extremes. The lack of a channel for this largely unheard part of the community inspired us to search for another vehicle that could work in concert with the existing communication channels. We called our pet project “The Pulse of the Faculty.”

To give this busy, mostly silent cohort a chance to engage, we needed a tool with the following properties:

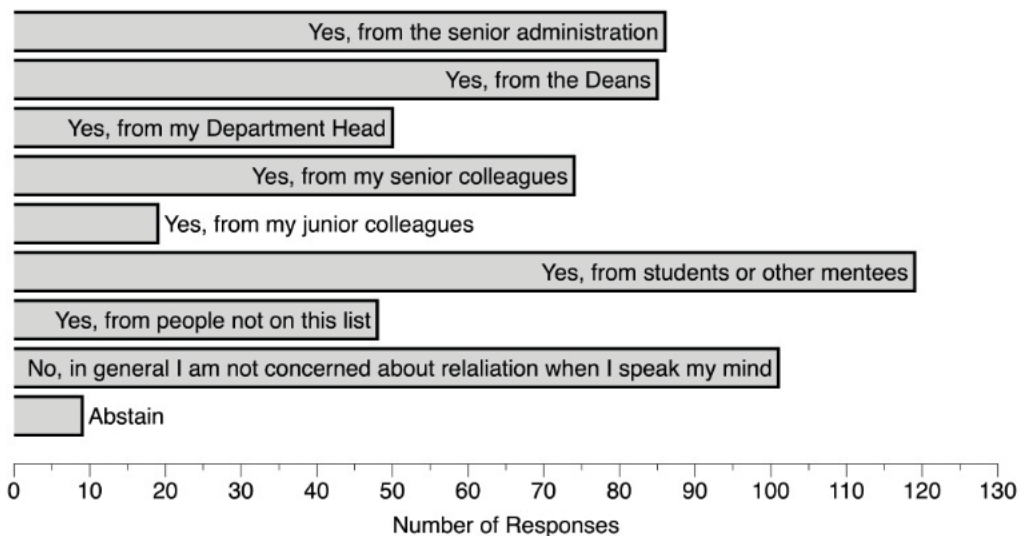
1. It had to be *quick and easy* to use.
2. There should be mechanisms that *allow faculty to pick the topic of conversation*. (The FNL is another great example of a medium with this property.)
3. In order for busy people to prioritize participation in The Pulse, it should either be *fun* and/or *interesting* and/or *impactful*.
4. Users should be able to *change their mind*. In an ideal world, Pulse questions would stimulate conversations which may change peoples’ perspectives; if that happens, users should be able to update their Pulse response.

Note that none of these properties are necessarily characteristics of a high-quality survey. For example, a high-quality survey would typically not share the results until the survey is closed. On The Pulse, in contrast, many people have expressed that they enjoy seeing what other people are saying throughout the week. This feature is interesting and many users have shared that it makes them feel connected to the community – even if their response is an outlier. When Mike and I launched The Pulse, we chose to prioritize the properties above, which means that The Pulse is closer to a community game than a survey. It is not a definitive conclusion; it is the beginning of a conversation.

### What do the faculty want to talk about?

If The Pulse is the beginning of a conversation, high-engagement questions suggest topics that we may want to discuss as a community. I have picked a few of those questions from Spring 2024 to highlight below.<sup>1</sup>

*Are you concerned about retaliation from any of the people listed below when you speak your mind?*



<sup>1</sup> Note that all MIT faculty have access to all of the previous Pulse questions and responses under “Home” → “Results” on the Pulse website.

This question had the most engagement of any Pulse question with 320 people responding, and touches on a number of important issues. First, many people have shared their concern that the speed and prevalence of social media has changed the landscape of retaliation. Doxxing, defamation, and the spread of misinformation are now common occurrences; a meaningful ability to retaliate is not necessarily aligned with institutional power. Our policies may not be equipped to handle this new retaliation environment and we as a community need to decide what is culturally acceptable in this space. This issue was foreshadowed in recommendation 9 in the [Freedom of Expression Working Group](#) Report which states: “Because the technological landscape is continually changing with a concomitant proliferation of digital platforms on campus, we recommend periodic review of relevant Institute policies to ensure consistency with the MIT Statement on Freedom of Expression.” The [ad hoc Committee on Academic Freedom and Campus Expression](#) (CAFCE) will sunset in December 2024 and we have been asked by the President and the Chair of the Faculty to provide recommendations regarding the free expression landscape on campus; social media will certainly be one of the many topics on our mind. If you have suggestions that you would like to share on this topic, as always, you may reach out to [any of the members of CAFCE](#).

Second, some of the responses to the retaliation question may reflect concerns about complaint resolution processes at MIT. Vice Provost for Faculty Paula Hammond has assembled a [Faculty Advisory Committee](#) which is mindful of faculty concerns in this space. They have been collecting input, reflecting on next steps, and plan to issue a report with recommendations when their work is complete. We look forward to hearing from them in the coming months.

Finally, a significant number of faculty report feeling concerned about retaliation from senior administrators and deans. Whether or not this is likely, the fact that people feel this way is troubling. One strategy to help identify where this feeling is coming from is suggested in the next Pulse question . . .

*Should the faculty have opportunities to rate senior administrators?*

265 people responded to this question and needless to say, the overwhelming answer was YES. Our community is no stranger to evaluation. Students are rated through grades; faculty are rated through course evaluations and performance reviews; department and unit heads are rated through visiting committees. We tell our students: “Feedback given in good faith is a gift.” Given the abundance of evaluation and assessment on college campuses, this question made me appreciate how odd it is that we do not rate our senior administrators.

Rating administrators is not uncharted territory. The University of Michigan not only allows faculty to rate their administrators, but also [posts the results online](#). This seems like a golden opportunity. If the administration were to ask the faculty “How are we doing?” and share the responses – as is done at UMich and as we do for all faculty course evaluations – my guess is that it would go a long way towards building trust with the faculty and, as a bonus, the faculty might even provide some useful advice.

The topic of feedback and advice brings me to the next question:

*The Schwarzman College of Computing: Your opinion now?*

This question received 290 responses; 53 people feel that things are going well, but 197 people had concerns (the remainder were neutral or abstained). Given that we are coming up on the five-year anniversary of the founding of the College, this seems like a terrific opportunity to assess how things are going. Many faculty have suggested that, when there are major initiatives which involve a significant amount of MIT resources and a large number of faculty (such as the College of Computing or the upcoming Climate Initiative), best practices dictate that serious assessments should be performed, including gathering input from stakeholders. Engaging faculty in meaningful assessment processes for major initiatives in general seems like another excellent opportunity to build goodwill and perhaps get a bit of useful information to boot.

*Your preferred grad admissions site: Slate or Gradapply?*

272 people responded to this question with overwhelming support for Gradapply. I included this question because we received thanks from a number of faculty for precipitating a conversation on this topic that many felt needed to happen. It is certainly possible that the conversation would have occurred anyway. But the sense at the time was that faculty felt frustrated and unheard; this Pulse question made it clear that they were not alone in their frustration. There is power in the faculty when we are united, but we do not always know whether our views are aligned with our colleagues. A good Pulse question can provide transparency and reveal when we are all pointed in the same direction.

Finally, there are many Pulse questions which essentially boil down to suggestions for spending money. In general, these questions are not framed as trade-offs, so the answers are not terribly informative. Despite that, there are two that I highlight here because both have come up sufficiently frequently in other venues (e.g., in the Random Dinners) that I feel they deserve special attention:

*Should we restore the faculty dining area on the 4th floor of the Stata Center? (319 responses)  
and Bring back the food trucks?<sup>2</sup> (241 responses)*

Campus dining is clearly on the minds of many people. The Committee on Student Life, chaired by Raul Radovitzky, recently issued a [report on campus dining](#). The report is a short two pages and includes useful estimates and context; I encourage everyone to read it. Campus dining is an issue that is growing more acute and, in upcoming discussions, it may be helpful if we all shared a common understanding of the scale, the opportunities, and the constraints.

*Should MIT focus on lowering the cost of graduate students?<sup>2</sup> (250 responses) and  
Should MIT reduce tuition cost for graduate students after the second year? (247 responses)*

The high cost of graduate students is an enormous pain point for the faculty. This is not a new challenge. Rick Danheiser made addressing this a priority when he was chair of the faculty and some of the recent history around this issue is highlighted in [his last FNL piece](#) as chair (see page 8); it also appears as RIC 15 in the [Report of Task Force 2021 and Beyond](#). Progress has certainly been made on this front – covering the shortfall of NSF Fellowship funding is a huge help! But these historical documents suggest that covering the shortfall was intended as a first step, and that there is more work that needs to be done.

#### **Tips on how to engage with The Pulse**

If you would like to take part in future Pulse conversations, all MIT faculty have access at: <https://pripyat.mit.edu/Pulse/Home.php>. Typically two new questions are posted every Wednesday and remain live for one week. The preponderance of questions are submitted by the faculty.

*Tips for responding to questions.* “Be curious, not judgemental.”<sup>3</sup> Your colleagues may not write things the way you would. Their questions and responses may be unclear. They may come from a place that has different norms, perspectives, and vocabulary than yours. Try to hear what they are asking without being judgemental; be interested in why they are asking the question.

*Tips for question-writers.* I love the questions that come in from the community and I often find the questions more interesting than the answers. The submitted questions are a reflection of the ideas, frustrations, creativity and feelings of the faculty. The topics are almost always interesting.

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<sup>2</sup> To the anonymous person who wrote the food truck question: I laughed out loud when I read the responses. Thank you for making my day!

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.charlotteobserver.com/charlottefive/c5-people/article275467806.html>

The challenge typically comes, not in picking a topic, but in writing a set of multiple-choice responses that capture the views of most participants. To write a good set of responses we recommend:

1. Put yourself in someone else's shoes. What would a reasonable person who has a different perspective from yours like to convey? Make sure those perspectives are captured in the response options.
2. Don't assume the responders' reasoning is the same as yours. We have heard many times that people are frustrated by answers of the form: "Yes, because ...". Responders may want to answer "yes" but they may disagree with the "because" part of the answer. One of the easiest ways to avoid this problem is to ...
3. ... just use a Likert scale i.e., use a scale of 1 to N with 1 being "strongly disagree" and N being "strongly agree,"
4. Leading or judgy questions and answers annoy everyone.
5. Some people like funny answers (I'm one of those people); some people do not. Each to their own.

*For Question Keepers.* The Question Keepers (QK) are a pair of faculty who select the weekly Pulse questions. Mike Short and I served as the first pair of Question Keepers, but we did not want the conversation dominated by our biases. To avoid this, we stipulated that the QKs should change every 6-12 months, and the new pair would be selected by the community via a Pulse question.

The most important tip for QKs is to maintain a predictable schedule: release submitted questions quickly for prioritization, and send out reminders at roughly the same time and day every week. We are all very busy and predictability in small things like Pulse can be helpful in navigating our chaotic schedules. I personally prefer that the QKs maintain a light touch to give the faculty more ownership over the tool. But this is a suggestion not a requirement; all QKs have the authority to decide how heavy-handed they would like to be. If you are willing to serve as a QK, please respond when the current Keepers reach out for volunteers in the Spring.

### **Final thoughts**

There is a lot of wisdom in the faculty. Yes, we are annoying; yes, we are often ill-informed; and yes, we let our emotions run away with us. But when we focus and pull together, there is no better group of problem-solvers on the planet than the MIT faculty. And if Pulse can unlock even a tiny fraction of that problem-solving potential – by identifying common challenges, highlighting alignment, or just allowing us to pick a surprising topic of conversation – I consider that a win.

As always, thank you for sharing your opinion! ■

**Peko Hosoi** is a Professor of Mechanical Engineering and Mathematics and Associate Chair of the Faculty ([peko@mit.edu](mailto:peko@mit.edu)).

## An Open Letter to the MIT Community from the MIT Chapter of the AAUP

Sally Haslanger, President  
Erica James, Vice-President  
on behalf of the MIT AAUP Chapter

**THE MIT CHAPTER OF** the American Association of University Professors (AAUP) calls on MIT to immediately reinstate Prahlad Iyengar's access to campus, with full rights, and for his case to be heard in a fair, rules-based disciplinary process that is based on credible evidence and facts, and that is protected by principles of freedom of speech, expression, and due process.

Prahlad Iyengar, an MIT graduate student, was charged on November 1, 2024, with policy violations for which he was immediately banned from campus before he was given a COD [Committee on Discipline] hearing. The alleged violations are serious, and they call for a proper investigation of facts found in evidence, not suspicions or hearsay. Instead, Iyengar has been pre-judged, banned, and assigned punitive consequences without due process.

The allegations against Iyengar would have us believe that (1) his article in the *Written Revolution* #5 is an incitement to violence by the protest movement; (2) that this call was heard by the students, and led them to protest on October 22, 2024 in front of CSAIL offices; and (3) that Prahlad was the mastermind behind it all, not only through his article, but as active planner and organizer of this unauthorized protest.

However, members of the AAUP have seen compelling evidence that Iyengar was not involved in "planning or organizing [a student] protest" in front of CSAIL at MIT on October 22. An investigation focusing on evidence would have discovered that he was only informed about the protest once it had concluded.

In another allegation, Iyengar was charged for his role as writer of an article in and editor of an MIT-recognized and student-run magazine, *Written Revolution*. There are two parts to this allegation. One is that issue #5, in which Iyengar's article appears, vitiated the MIT brand by including an image of a vintage poster featuring the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine (PFLP) logo. The second part is that Iyengar's article included an incitement to violence. The DSL [Division of Student Life] letter claims that "the article makes several troubling statements that could be interpreted as a call for more violent or destructive forms of protest at MIT, including stating that it is time to 'begin wreaking havoc' and 'exact[ing] a cost' at MIT and highlighting self-immolation as a form of the 'tactical pacifism' that is the centerpiece of the article."

For these reasons, on November 1, 2024, the Division of Student Life sent a letter to the editors of the *Written Revolution*, including Iyengar, asserting that "At this time, you are directed to no longer distribute this issue [#5] of *Written Revolution* on MIT's campus. You are also prohibited from distributing it elsewhere using the MIT name or that of any MIT-recognized organization." According to DSL, "this decision [to forbid distribution of issue #5 of *Written Revolution* and to temporarily banish Prahlad Iyengar from campus] was made after consultation with the faculty co-chairs of the Ad Hoc Committee on Academic Freedom and Campus Expression (CAFCE), the faculty Chair of the Committee on Discipline, and MIT's senior leadership."

Following this line of reasoning leads down a dark path. Let's start with the first part of the allegation concerning the PFLP logo. Though it is true that in the late 1990s, the Department of State designated the PFLP a foreign terrorist organization, we are left to ask whether MIT will ban all publications – books published by MIT Press, publications made available at MIT Libraries, etc. – that show images of any group that is or has been labeled as "terrorist" by the Department of State or the FBI? A historical study of social movements, for example, would surely require scholarly treatment of such images. In fact, scholars have recently visited campus who specialize in the work of the PFLP at MIT's request. What distinguishes legitimate and illegitimate inclusion of problematic images in a publication? This is a well-known challenge that scholars have debated for decades. If we assume that any inclusion of such images warrants a ban, then other, plausibly valuable, publications would have to be banned. And will MIT Press and MIT Libraries be banned from campus as an interim measure pending fact-finding about these MIT Press and MIT Libraries books?

What about the second part of the allegation, that Iyengar's article incites violence? Members of the AAUP have evidence that the DSL charges are based on IDHR [Institute Discrimination and Harassment Response] reports from anonymous students who quote Iyengar's article out of context and go on to make erroneous conclusions about the content. A well-informed reading of the article easily situates it as rehearsing and respond-

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**Open Letter from the MIT AAUP Chapter**  
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ing to well-known debates within peace studies. The most famous of these debates is the disagreement between Martin Luther King Jr. and Malcolm X, particularly vis-a-vis the use of force to effect peace. Although Iyengar's article describes a range of strategies towards peace, including self-immolation, many of the examples of "strategic" and "tactical" pacifism are part of a discussion of historical cases. The article also extends, though in sometimes controversial ways, basic arguments around the definition of peace: suggesting, as Johan Galtung does, that "negative peace" (or the absence of violence) does not indicate actually existing peace. Moreover, we could see the article as raising questions about the realpolitik of peace, or institutions and mechanisms of peace: for example, our present-day peace strategies include the enforcement of peace through militarized peacekeeping; more diplomatic forms of negotiation as evident in peacemaking; and a range of state, international, and every day (i.e., social and mutual aid-oriented) forms of peacebuilding. The conclusion we should draw is that this article was not an incitement to violence. Those who claim it to be such are taking the nuanced and historically grounded arguments out of context. Although many of us personally would disagree with some of the claims that are made in the article, it is an attempt to articulate a reasoned point of view within a debate and is protected by Iyengar's right of free expression.

The DSL seems to suggest that whatever we might learn from a closer reading of the text, we should be concerned about the welfare of members of the MIT community. We agree that members of our community should be able to do their jobs without threat of violence. But Iyengar's essay is not the source of any such threats. More specifically, the article and imagery do not violate the 1969 Brandenburg test for incitement: it does not cause imminent harm, it is unlikely to produce illegal action, and it does not intend to cause imminent illegality.

We also want to point out that although the DSL claims to have consulted with CAFCE in suspending Iyengar, members of the AAUP have heard different and conflicting reports about CAFCE's recommendation, including a report that they did not judge that the content of the article was such as to prevent it from being circulated. We call on CAFCE, as a faculty committee, to be

Suspending a student for their contributions (as author and editor) to a publication that does not incite violence but instead constitutes a serious engagement with an ongoing political debate is a violation of longstanding principles of free expression on American college campuses and MIT's own endorsement of these same principles

transparent in its decisions and recommendations.

Suspending a student for their contributions (as author and editor) to a publication that does not incite violence but instead constitutes a serious engagement with an ongoing political debate is a violation of longstanding principles of free expression on American college campuses and MIT's own endorsement of these same principles. Without a thorough and meticulous investigation of the relevance and credibility of the alleged violations, Iyengar is being pushed through a hastily implemented expedited process: a one-stop COD committee meeting that will decide his future.

Even though Iyengar has his COD hearing scheduled in the coming days, a ban from campus may have already biased the COD committee. The disciplinary process, which is supposed to be fair, has, instead, stacked the cards against him. While we recognize the significant pressures on the Committee on Discipline and the broader disciplinary system, MIT faculty must stand together and firmly declare that we cannot sacrifice due process, academic freedom, and freedom of expression in the name of expedient discipline.

In the past few years, multiple groups have been formed in the MIT community due to a heightened awareness of the need to protect freedom of expression (the Ad Hoc Working Group on Free Expression, CAFCE, MITCAF, MIT Free Speech Alliance). Rather than punishing student expression and silencing student voices, members of the AAUP defend students' right to publish and distribute *Written*

*Revolution*, not because we endorse arguments contained therein, but precisely because our opinions vary. Our position is that these disagreements must take place in the open, as part of the core educational mission of our institution and community. As the MIT Values Statement suggests, "we strive to be transparent and worthy of each other's trust – and we challenge ourselves to face difficult facts, speak plainly about failings in our systems, and work to overcome them."

We call on the COD and MIT more broadly to return to a disciplinary process that supports its mission: education. Education is based on facts and evidence that are verified for relevance and credibility. A commitment to education means that we do not banish members of our own community for their ideas or their engagement in political protest. ■

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## Free Expression and *Written Revolution*

Alex Byrne  
Brad Skow

**WE HELPED FOUND MITCAF**, the MIT Council on Academic Freedom (see “An Invitation to the MIT Council on Academic Freedom” in this issue, [page 21](#)) because we believe that free expression and academic freedom at the Institute need independent faculty oversight in order to flourish. Perhaps the threats to these intellectual virtues are not as great as they are at the [other end](#) of Mass. Ave., but a recent case on our own campus shows that they cannot be disregarded. (We should emphasize that we aren’t speaking for MITCAF – we know that members have different opinions about the topic of this article.)

A November 7 [opinion piece](#) in *The Tech* reports on sanctions imposed on a student publication, *Written Revolution*. The publication also has a corresponding [student group](#), recognized by the Association of Student Activities. There are 353 ASA-recognized groups, including [MIT Divest](#), the [MIT Israel Alliance](#), and [Jews for Ceasefire](#). *Written Revolution* describes itself as “platform[ing] revolutionary thought on campus – we believe that writing and art are among the most powerful tools for conducting a revolution. . . . We also summarize revolutionary actions and activities taken on campus to further the call to liberation, be it through student unions, grassroots movements and demonstrations, or large-scale organizing. We are here to encourage such collective action on our campus. We are the revolution, and we are writing our own history.” No prizes for guessing which side *Written Revolution* picks in the Israel-Hamas war: “One year after the Palestinian resistance broke down the

prison wall that has entrapped Gaza for decades. . . .”

The sanctions imposed on *Written Revolution* appear to have been based entirely on an essay (and accompanying images) in the current issue, “On Pacifism,” concerning “the movement for

The sanctions imposed on *Written Revolution* appear to have been based entirely on an essay (and accompanying images) in the current issue, “On Pacifism,” concerning “the movement for Palestinian liberation today.” The author is Prahlad Iyengar, a graduate student in EECS and a chief editor of *Written Revolution*.

Palestinian liberation today.” The author is Prahlad Iyengar, a graduate student in EECS and a chief editor of *Written Revolution*. *The Tech* also reports that Mr. Iyengar has been banned from campus by the Committee on Discipline. We don’t know the details (COD processes are [confidential](#)) and it would be inappropriate for us to comment. Instead, we will discuss the *Written Revolution* episode, where the relevant facts are – or at least seem to be – open to view. We should note that, as part of our preparation for this article, we consulted some faculty members with knowledge of the decision.

What were the sanctions? According to *The Tech*:

On November 1st, *Written Revolution* editors received an email from Dean of Student Life David Randall informing them that their publication had been banned and censored:

“At this time, you are directed to no longer distribute this issue of *Written Revolution* on MIT’s campus. You are also prohibited from distributing it elsewhere using the MIT name or that of any MIT-recognized organization.”

What does “On Pacifism” say? *The Tech* opinion misleadingly underplays its white-hot revolutionary zeal, blandly saying that “the piece calls for MIT students to build stronger connections with the greater Boston community.” Here is how Iyengar puts his main point:

To date, the movement on Turtle Island has seen virtually no success towards its main demands – ending the genocide, ending the apartheid, and dismantling the occupation. Fundamentally, a movement which is not nearer to achieving its goals one year later cannot be considered a success. Here, I argue that the root of the problem is not merely the vastness of the enemy we have before us – American imperialism and Zionist occupation – but in fact in our own strategic decision to embrace nonviolence as our primary vehicle of change.

[continued on next page](#)

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**Free Expression and *Written Revolution***  
Byrne and Skow, from preceding page

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One year into a horrific genocide, it is time for the movement to begin wreaking havoc, or else, as we've seen, business will indeed go on as usual.

"Turtle Island," in case you were wondering, is North America. "On Pacifism" argues for "wreaking havoc," or using "non-pacifist means," although is silent on the details. In fact, the essay ends rather tamely (as *The Tech* chose to highlight), with a plea "to connect with the community and build root-mycelial networks of mutual aid."

Whatever one's intellectual, literary, or moral assessment of "On Pacifism," is it somehow out of bounds? Does it contravene any MIT policy, or run afoul of the 2022 Faculty Statement on Freedom of Expression and Academic Freedom? Here are some relevant passages from the [latter](#):

MIT does not protect direct threats, harassment, plagiarism, or other speech that falls outside the boundaries of the First Amendment.

We cannot prohibit speech that some experience as offensive or injurious. . . . Even robust disagreements shall not be liable to official censure or disciplinary action.

A commitment to free expression includes hearing and hosting speakers, including those whose views or opinions may not be shared by many members of the MIT community and may be harmful to some. This commitment includes the freedom to criticize and peacefully protest speakers to whom one may object, but it does not extend to suppressing or restricting such speakers from expressing their views.

"On Pacifism" is clearly within the boundaries of the First Amendment. It is neither harassment nor a direct threat. What about incitement? As the Supreme

Court wrote in [Brandenburg vs. Ohio](#) (1969), "the constitutional guarantees of free speech and free press do not permit a State to forbid or proscribe advocacy of the use of force or of law violation except where such advocacy is directed to inciting or producing *imminent* lawless action and is likely to incite or produce such action" (emphasis added). The *Written Revolution* essay advocates force, but isn't directed at producing imminent lawless action – it isn't the unprotected kind of "incitement."

Admittedly, the "Free Expression at MIT" website does say that "not all speech that is protected under the First Amendment is allowed at MIT," but there is no indication that essays vaguely advocating "wreaking havoc" or lawbreaking are proscribed, and the website emphasizes in the same section that "MIT strongly adheres to the principles of freedom of expression."

If an invited speaker proposed to deliver "On Pacifism" as a talk, the Faculty Statement implies that it would be improper to suppress it. Invited speakers have no more privileges than MIT community members. Therefore, by the lights of the Faculty Statement – which has in effect been endorsed by MIT's administration – *Written Revolution* should not have been sanctioned. (We don't think the accompanying images, which we discuss below, affect this conclusion.)

It is our understanding that Dean Randall's email conveyed a collective decision, and that the chair of the Committee on Discipline and the co-chairs of the Committee on Academic Freedom and Campus Expression were consulted. Evidently the decision was not taken lightly. Still, what were the reasons given for the sanctions? Despite our efforts to obtain it, we have not seen the email. Dean Randall declined to show it to us (not unreasonably); however, he did provide some helpful context. We emailed the author of the opinion piece in *The Tech* and received no reply. That article gives one allegedly problematic example, an iconic photograph (accompanying the essay) of the Buddhist monk [Thích](#)

[Quáng Duc](#) burning himself to death in 1963. We cannot even confirm that this was cited in the email.

A WBUR [story](#) from November 14 gives some more details:

The latest issue of the publication, *Written Revolution*, included the article "On Pacifism," which featured imagery and language that "could be interpreted as a call for more violent or destructive forms of protest at MIT," according to an email sent by MIT Dean of Student Life David Warren Randall to the editors of the magazine.

The email is correct – "On Pacifism" could be interpreted that way. But why does that justify the ban on distribution? If the concern is that the "call" might be answered, the [Streisand Effect](#) has ensured that the essay has been read by many more agitators than would have read it have otherwise, and MIT is powerless to shut the *Written Revolution* website down. Moreover, letting potential troublemakers have their say in public might well reduce the chance of violence: it is now known whom and what to watch out for.

The WBUR story also has this:

In addition to concerns about violent language, Randall's email also cited the inclusion of several images in the article, including one that incorporates the logo of the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine, which has been [designated by the U.S. State Department](#) as a terrorist organization.

Embedded in "On Pacifism" are images of two posters – one particularly menacing – from the [PFLP](#). There is also an "[Intifada Everywhere](#)" image which dates from 10 years ago. (Awareness of these images is needed for a proper evaluation of the case against *Written Revolution*; in a striking lapse of integrity, none is mentioned in the article in *The Tech*.) The reader of "On Pacifism" is left with the [continued on next page](#)

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**Free Expression and** *Written Revolution*  
Byrne and Skow, from preceding page

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impression that the author wouldn't object to lobbing a brick at the police and approves of the PFLP, but that Marxist-Leninist group is not identified in a caption or mentioned in the text. A small PFLP logo is on both posters, which has the full name only in Arabic.

We should be able to work, study and play on campus without being assailed by derogatory or alarming images or slogans. Posters in public spaces need to have some sense of decorum – no gruesome depictions of late-term abortions, [cartoons](#) of Muhammad wearing a bomb-shaped turban, celebrations of terrorism, or photos of Kathy Griffin [holding](#) Donald Trump's severed head. We gather that a PFLP poster was displayed on a door a few months ago, before being taken down after complaints. That was reasonable. The *Mind and Hand Book* [sets out](#) the expectation that “members of the MIT community will not engage in behavior . . . that has serious ramifications” for the “mental health, safety, welfare, academic well-being” of others.

The *Mind and Hand Book* also suggests that this applies to “all communications,” but is that really intended to cover images or other material that can readily be avoided? Free expression means little if one is prevented from trying to attract an audience. Student groups should therefore be allowed to offer magazines or pamphlets containing indecorous images to community members – an invitation which they are naturally free to reject.

The quotation from the email given by *The Tech* suggests that “using the MIT name” was an issue – which it would have been if the official MIT logo had been reproduced or there was some other indication that the essay bore the imprimatur

of the Institute. But there was no such indication. *Written Revolution* does not even note that it is recognized by the Association of Student Activities. The name of the “MIT Coalition for Palestine” (together with its logo) appears on the last page of the current issue, which of course uses “MIT.” However, it is hard to see why this is a problem. The rules on the “Use of MIT Logo, Name and/or Brand” by student groups (see the [MIT Student Organization Handbook](#), p. 66.) prohibit the use of the Institute's name “when such use is likely to be understood as an endorsement, even if such an endorsement is not the intention of the person or

More generally, there is little temptation to confuse the views of an “MIT student group” or its individual members with those of MIT itself, especially when it is so salient that some student groups disagree with each other. . . . “Using the MIT name” to protest against MIT is a feature, not a bug.

organization seeking to use MIT's name.” The cover art of *Written Revolution's* current issue “stands as a protest against drone research at MIT's CSAIL.” It is most improbable that anyone would take MIT to endorse *Written Revolution*!

More generally, there is little temptation to confuse the views of an “MIT student group” or its individual members with those of MIT itself, especially when it is so salient that some student groups disagree with each other. Indeed, given the Institute's commitment to free expression, one would expect some MIT student groups to strongly disagree with positions and policies endorsed by the administration. “Using the MIT name” to protest against MIT is a feature, not a bug.

Universities should protect their members against harassment. As the

Provost and Chancellor have [recently](#) written, regarding recent reprehensible protests in CSAIL, “We can agree or disagree on research or policies at MIT, but we cannot at any time accept individualized targeting of staff, students, and faculty that aims to intimidate them from carrying out their work and studies, or which makes them fearful for their security in their offices, labs and other activities.” We strongly support enforcing rules that enable faculty, staff, and students to do their jobs in the distinctively stimulating environment of MIT. But there is a world of difference between accosting people in their offices, disrupting classes,

or building encampments on campus, and writing opinion pieces – no matter how offensive, misguided or distastefully illustrated. The administration's attempts to protect the community from harassment, and from the real possibility of violence, risk being delegitimized if they are coupled with unreasonable censorship. Wrongful or dubious sanctions will only feed skepticism about punishment that is clearly deserved. Opaque efforts to punish student publications for printing controversial essays undermine free expression, and the sanctions against *Written Revolution* should be lifted. ■

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## An Invitation to the MIT Council on Academic Freedom

**ON DECEMBER 21, 2022**, the MIT Faculty adopted a Statement on Freedom of Expression and Academic Freedom. Its first paragraph concludes,

*With a tradition of celebrating provocative thinking, controversial views, and nonconformity, MIT unequivocally endorses the principles of freedom of expression and academic freedom.*

The promotion and defense of these principles is the purpose of the recently-founded MIT Council on Academic Freedom, of which we are the founding co-presidents. MITCAF membership is open to any faculty member (including lecturers and emeriti) who supports its mission. We invite you to join us.

MITCAF's members agree on the following principles (all quotations are from the 2022 Faculty Statement):

**Intellectual Diversity.** "We cannot have a truly free community of expression if some perspectives can be heard and others cannot. Learning from a diversity of viewpoints, and from the deliberation, debate, and dissent that accompany them, is an essential ingredient of academic excellence."

**Academic Freedom & Open Inquiry.** "Free expression is enhanced by the doctrine of academic freedom, which protects both intramural and extramural expression without institutional censorship or discipline. Academic freedom promotes scholarly rigor and

the testing of ideas by protecting research, publication, and teaching from interference."

**Free Expression & Civil Discourse.** "We cannot prohibit speech that some experience as offensive or injurious. At the same time, MIT deeply values civility, mutual respect, and uninhibited, wide-open debate."

The Council provides a forum for the discussion, interpretation, and encouragement of Academic Freedom. It also provides a watchful eye to guard against encroachments on its principles, especially when events on campus and beyond have put them under renewed stress.

MITCAF is a non-partisan organization. While agreeing on the above principles, its members have a diversity of views; this includes disagreement on the precise bounds of free expression and academic freedom.

MITCAF is independent of the MIT administration. We applaud the administration's endorsement of the Faculty Free Expression Statement, while remaining aware that its policies and actions may infringe those freedoms; we will take note if they do. MITCAF is also independent of other organizations devoted, in whole or part, to free expression or academic freedom. We have an interest in what opinions such organizations express and what actions they take, and we are eager to work for common purpose when possible, but we are not bound by them.

MITCAF's founding members came together out of the conviction that a university, to thrive, must protect freedom of expression and academic freedom. If you'd like to join us, email [mitcaf@mit.edu](mailto:mitcaf@mit.edu). For more information, visit [mitcaf.mit.edu](http://mitcaf.mit.edu). ■

(Signed),

**Ian Hutchinson**, Professor of Nuclear Science and Engineering, Emeritus ([ihutch@mit.edu](mailto:ihutch@mit.edu))

**John Lienhard**, Abdul Latif Jameel Professor of Water and Mechanical Engineering ([lienhard@mit.edu](mailto:lienhard@mit.edu))

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## How MIT Can Educate the World for the Era of AI

Dimitris Bertsimas

**IMAGINE A WORLD WHERE** MIT educates hundreds of millions of learners across the globe on the fundamentals of AI with an application-oriented process. A world where we educate learners of all ages on AI's potential to revolutionize every field, from medicine and climate studies to law and the humanities. A world where modules taught by MIT faculty are delivered to universities, two-year colleges, medical and financial institutions, companies, and even high schools.

With an idea I call Universal AI, that world is at our fingertips – and I need the help of every MIT faculty member as I embark on this groundbreaking educational journey in my role as vice provost for open learning. But first, let me explain what I mean by Universal AI and how you – MIT faculty – are key to making it a reality.

### A vision for Universal AI

Universal AI is a platform that involves a horizontal collection of modules covering the fundamentals of AI with an application-oriented process. Each module contains three to four lectures – approximately 70 lectures in total. These horizontal modules cover four areas:

1. predictive AI using structured data;
2. predictive AI using unstructured data;
3. multimodal AI combining multiple structured and unstructured modes; and
4. prescriptive AI where we try to make decisions.

To complement the horizontal modules on the fundamentals of AI, the platform will include vertical modules of AI + X highlighting the various applications of AI

in specific fields. In health care, for example, we could have vertical modules for AI + oncology, AI + cardiology, and AI + hospital operations – to name a few.

Last summer, I tested this idea and the results were encouraging. I taught an accelerated class in Greece using some horizontal AI modules that drew participation from 500 students in person and 1,500 remotely. I also led lectures on universal AI for health at Hartford Hospital, with oncologists, cardiologists, and others who discussed how AI is being used to solve real problems in health care. My goal is to scale these pilot programs and offer them to a global audience of learners, by packaging and delivering these modules through MIT Learn<sup>1</sup>. To ensure that all learners receive guidance, each module will be supported by automated tutors that have been trained using generative AI. At MIT Open Learning, we are developing these tutors.

In the rapidly evolving field of AI, these modules are easier to maintain up to date than traditional longer classes, and they are relevant to a universal audience of learners across all fields of study.

### A vision with campus and global impact

While MIT is a global leader in AI, it doesn't currently have AI + X. The Universal AI horizontal and vertical modules offer a great opportunity to expand our students' horizons. The more we prepare our students for the era of AI, the better we do our jobs. *Together, we can positively affect MIT's residential education.*

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<sup>1</sup> The new MIT Learn website ([learn.mit.edu](https://learn.mit.edu)) enables learners across the world to access all MIT non-degree learning opportunities, making it easier for them to find more than 12,500 educational resources available on the Institute's various learning platforms.

As we enter the era of artificial intelligence, AI will be for every field what calculus currently is for engineers and scientists. It will become essential knowledge. By providing horizontal AI modules along with AI + X verticals, we will affect higher education at a global scale. At MIT, we have the talent and the knowledge needed to create the Universal AI platform and educate hundreds of millions of learners. *Together, we can revolutionize higher education and have a greater impact on the world.*

We'll offer a license for the Universal AI platform to universities, two-year colleges, medical schools, hospitals, as well as companies. Multiple national and international universities have already confirmed their interest in participating in a pilot with MIT for the Universal AI platform, and I have started meeting with hospitals interested in using Universal AI to upskill their staff.

### How you can participate

Universal AI scales MIT's mission by combining the Institute's breadth of expertise and research and MIT Open Learning's track record of delivering digital learning experiences. My goal is to launch the Universal AI platform in May 2025 with at least 10 institutions around the world. Learning from this initial experience, my plan is to then scale this initiative to many other institutions. However, this effort cannot succeed without your help. Join me in educating the world in AI and its potential to revolutionize all fields. You may participate in three ways:

[continued on next page](#)

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## How MIT Can Educate the World for the Era of AI

Bertsimas, from preceding page

1. Propose a particular AI + X vertical based on your research and area of expertise. MIT Open Learning will issue an official request for proposals by the end of the year.
2. Participate in the soon-to-be launched seminar series on AI + X, which will be held every two weeks in the spring term 2025. I'm developing the seminar series in partner-

ship with Asu Ozdaglar, deputy dean of academics at MIT Schwarzman College of Computing, with the goal of fostering a research community around AI + X.

3. Contact me at [dbertsim@mit.edu](mailto:dbertsim@mit.edu) to discuss Universal AI and your ideas for AI + X verticals.

I recognize that the Universal AI vision is highly ambitious. However, to reach the millions of people across the world whose lives will be affected by the rapid growth

of AI technology, we need to reimagine how to deliver AI education at scale. With your help, Universal AI can impact the world in ways and magnitudes never seen before. Together, we will educate and prepare hundreds of millions of learners in every field for the era of AI. ■

**Dimitris Bertsimas** is Vice Provost for Open Learning, Associate Dean of Business Analytics, the Boeing Leaders of Global Operations Professor of Management, and Professor of Operations Research at the Sloan School of Management ([dbertsim@mit.edu](mailto:dbertsim@mit.edu)).

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## Go Fly A Kite: Academic Freedom and Student Protests

Yossi Sheffi

**RECENTLY, THE VICE PRESIDENT** for Research (VPR) reached out to me asking for the content of a project at the Center for Transportation and Logistics (CTL) involving Maersk, the world's largest maritime container carrier based in Denmark. CTL has had a longstanding, productive collaboration with Maersk, resulting in numerous publications and student theses. I was taken aback, however. In my 49 years at MIT – including as a professor, department head, and CTL's director – this marked the first time a senior administrator asked for details on a specific project. When I asked why, the VPR explained that Pro-Palestine demonstrators wanted this information. My response? "Tell them to *Go Fly A Kite*."

All MIT projects undergo rigorous review and contractual approval, and our work with Maersk is no exception. Students are not entitled to detailed information on faculty projects, nor do they have the authority to scrutinize them in this way. Yet, a day later, I received a demand from an MIT attorney insisting I provide the requested details. It was startling to see the Office of General Counsel mobilized over student demands. My

response was simple: "You have the contract; read it. Our work aligns fully with its framework. As for the students, they can *Go Fly A Kite*." While I have no problem taking such a stand, I'm not sure how a younger faculty member might have responded to such a "request" and subsequent legal pressure.

A recent article in *The Tech* presented the protesting students' perspective, full of accusations about MIT, grievances against "racist" campus police, frustration over MIT's potential enforcement of its own rules, and threats against CTL due to its collaboration with Maersk. Regarding CTL's research, it included the line, "Those certainly are ties that we're going after." The reason for targeting Maersk? It operates in Mediterranean ports, including Israel. Of course, Maersk is not alone; nearly every major maritime carrier calls on Israeli ports. In addition, air carriers, including TNT, DHL, UPS, and FedEx, serve the Israeli market. CTL works with several of them and hopes to work with many more.

The reason I am sharing this incident with my faculty colleagues is not because of the targeting of CTL and Maersk, but

because of the administration's response: engaging in meetings and negotiations with these student groups. By doing so, MIT is validating and emboldening these attacks on academic freedom. My experience reflects a disturbing trend, with faculty and research projects repeatedly under fire. Recently, colleagues have been targeted for research in areas like theoretical communication protocols, robotics, biology, and more. This escalation of student activism, crossing into interference with faculty research, and intimidation of research assistants, is an unacceptable infringement on our academic autonomy.

As faculty, we must remind the administration that every project conducted at MIT has been thoroughly vetted, and students do not hold veto power over legitimate research endeavors. The only appropriate response to demands for information and attempts to target faculty based on their research areas is to respectfully tell students to *Go Fly A Kite*. ■

**Yossi Sheffi** is a Professor of Civil and Environmental Engineering and Engineering Systems, and Director of the Center for Transportation and Logistics ([sheffi@mit.edu](mailto:sheffi@mit.edu)).

## Interim Report on Committee to Review Faculty Newsletter Policies and Procedures

Amy Brand  
Nazli Choucri  
Roger Levy  
Nasser Rabbat  
Susan Silbey

**AT THE MAY 15, 2024**, Institute faculty meeting, a motion passed to stand up an ad hoc committee to review and revise the policies and procedures of the *MIT Faculty Newsletter* (FNL) and clarify its relation to the Faculty as a whole. The membership of the committee was appointed by Faculty Chair Mary C. Fuller, and included Susan Silbey (Committee Chair), Amy Brand (director and publisher, MIT Press); Nazli Choucri (FNL editorial board member); Roger Levy (faculty chair-elect); Nasser Rabbat (FNL editorial board member). The committee has been meeting regularly since the semester began, reviewing prior reports and archival materials, and conversing with current and former members of the FNL editorial board and the managing editor individually, and in small groups. An interim report, presented at the October 17, 2024 faculty meeting, is included ([see page 25](#)).

We plan to complete the committee's work by the end of Spring Semester 2025. To complete this work, we are mounting a specifically designed survey, to which we hope you will respond by providing comments and suggestions. Enter the survey via this link: ([https://bit.ly/fnl\\_survey](https://bit.ly/fnl_survey)); we will also discuss the committee's work during scheduled open meetings which will be announced in January and February. If you have any questions about

the survey, you can email [fnl\\_survey@mit.edu](mailto:fnl_survey@mit.edu). This email address is for messages; it does not get you to the survey. The url link above enters the survey.

Among the issues that we are currently addressing and for which we are seeking more information are the following:

- (a) Given the informality of the FNL, we hope to identify ways to routinize process in the flow of materials, and to provide added support for the current personnel.
- (b) Especially notable is the need to address the orientation of new members and facilitate their information of, integration in, current practices – as seamlessly as possible.
- (c) While we are confident that we have cleared up the misunderstanding surrounding the nomination process for the FNL board, we would like to make sure that there are no further ambiguities.
- (d) Ideally, we would like faculty members to consider contributing to the FNL as an attractive proposition. This issue calls for further exploration.
- (e) Eventually we hope to succeed in reducing the labor to secure the FNL content. We hope to elicit from the faculty topics that may be of interest.
- (f) Further clarification is needed about contributors to the FNL other than members of the faculty or of the administration.
- (g) While we know that insufficient labor makes it difficult to ensure a regular and transparent process for participation and organization, we still seek to identify ways of addressing this aspect of the FNL reality.

We look forward to receiving your input via the survey or messages at this address: [fnl\\_survey@mit.edu](mailto:fnl_survey@mit.edu), or through face-to-face meetings from now through the spring. ■

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**Nazli Choucri** is a Professor of Political Science and Associate Director, Technology and Development Program ([nchoucri@mit.edu](mailto:nchoucri@mit.edu)).  
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**Nasser Rabbat** is Aga Khan Professor in the Department of Architecture ([nasser@mit.edu](mailto:nasser@mit.edu)).  
**Susan Silbey** is Leon and Anna Goldberg Professor of Sociology and Anthropology, Professor in Behavioral and Policy Sciences, Sloan School of Management ([ssilbey@mit.edu](mailto:ssilbey@mit.edu)).



## Interim Report on Committee to Review Faculty Newsletter Policies and Procedures

October 17, 2024

Susan Silbey (Committee Chair)  
Amy Brand (Director and Publisher, MIT Press)  
Nazli Choucrist (FNL Editorial Board member)  
Roger Levy (Faculty Chair-elect)  
Nasser Rabbat (FNL Editorial Board member)

### 1. Committee Charge

At the May 15, 2024 faculty meeting, a motion passed to stand up an ad hoc committee to review and revise the policies and procedures of the FNL and clarify its relation to the Faculty as a whole. The membership of the committee was appointed by the Faculty Chair, with representation from the Editorial Board of the FNL. In addition, the committee was asked to report at the 2024 October meeting, with recommendations voted as a resolution by the Faculty.

The committee membership was finalized in August. The committee has been meeting regularly since the semester began, reviewing prior reports and archival materials, and meeting with current and former members of the FNL editorial board and Managing Editor individually, and in small groups.

This report reviews the work thus far with plans for further inquiry and recommendations, which we hope to deliver in the spring 2025.

### 2. Committee Meetings and Documents Reviewed

The committee has thus far met with Managing Editor David Lewis twice, and once each with the following current or past members of the FNL Editorial Board: Yoel Fink, Sally Haslanger, Jean Jackson, Anthony Patera, Robert Redwine, Warren Seering, George Verghese, Jonathan King. We have invitations outstanding and will continue to meet with whomever agrees to speak with us.

We have reviewed the following documents: Report of the Ad Hoc Committee on the Faculty Newsletter (May 20, 2002); Faculty Newsletters Policies and Procedures (April 19, 2007; Spring 2024); "A Brief History of the Origins of the Faculty Newsletter as it Marks its 35th Anniversary" by John A. Belcher and Jonathan King, FNL, SEPTEMBER/OCTOBER 2023 VOL. XXXVI NO. 1; results of annual faculty service with list of faculty checking preference to serve on the FNL Editorial Board (2008-2024); plus documents from archives 1989-2002 reviewed by Ad Hoc Committee in 2002.

### 3. FNL Policies and Procedures

In its published policies and procedures, revised 2024 (<https://fnl.mit.edu/wp-content/uploads/2024/05/FNL-PP-4.30.24.pdf>), the MIT Faculty Newsletter (FNL) describes itself as a medium for communication among MIT faculty, and as a forum for the diversity of faculty views and voices within MIT as well as in the broader academic world. The FNL publishes articles, letters, poems, editorials and data it considers of interest to the faculty, welcoming contributions from all members of the faculty and emeritus faculty. Contributions represent the views of the author, and not those of the FNL editorial board. Only the Editorials "reflect the view of an Editorial Sub-Committee... [or] the Board." (The Chair of the Board constitutes an Editorial Subcommittee for each issue, in consultation with the Board.)

The *Editorial Board* is composed of at least 9, but not more than 12, members of the faculty, serving for staggered three-year terms, with 1/3 of the members elected each year. Prior to 2024, policies stipulated a board of 12 to 15 members. Board members may be re-elected; faculty emeritus shall be eligible to serve; and seven members shall constitute a quorum for Editorial Board meetings, which shall take place not less than four times per year, fall, winter, and spring; prior to 2024, policies stipulated three times per year.

The *Nominations Committee* will present not fewer than four nor more than eight candidates to the faculty-at-large. Nominees shall have the opportunity of circulating a short statement of their qualifications and/or views. The nominees corresponding to the number of open seats and receiving the most votes will be elected for three-year terms. Candidates for election to the board shall give evidence to the Nominations Committee of the FNL of commitment to the integrity and independence of the faculty, and to the role of the FNL as an important voice of the faculty.

Prior to current policy changes (2024), the Nominations Committee consisted of four members of the Editorial Board, serving staggered two-year appointments, with two members selected each year. Currently, the policies state that “The Board at its first winter meeting shall elect from among its members a Nominations Committee consisting of at least three members, including a designated Nominations Chair, to serve two-year terms.” We will learn more about these changes and consider whether additional clarification may be helpful. The Nominations Committee will recruit and evaluate candidates for the editorial board, “taking into account the need for representation from different Schools and sectors of the Institute, from different ranks, male and female faculty, and underrepresented groups or faculty constituencies.”

The *Editorial Board* shall elect a Chair, Vice-Chair and a Secretary at its spring meeting for two-year terms. The Chair will be responsible for ensuring circulation of an agenda for Board meetings. The Vice-Chair will stand in for the Chair when needed. The Secretary will be responsible for communicating minutes and financial reports when appropriate. Among candidates nominated, the nominee receiving a majority of ballots shall be elected. In the case of more than two nominees, and no majority, the nominee receiving the fewest votes will be eliminated, and further ballot taken, until one individual has received a majority of the ballots cast. The Secretary shall be responsible for counting of ballots. Between Board meetings the Chair, Secretary, and Chair of the current Editorial Sub-Committee will constitute an Executive Committee to deal with matters arising, with serious issues communicated electronically to the Editorial Board for rapid comment.

#### 4. Observations and preliminary recommendations

- a. The FNL operates more informally than the published policies and procedures summarized above might suggest. *This is true for the content of the FNL and for its governance procedures.* From our conversations thus far, it appears that the informality of governance and irregularity of FNL production is primarily a consequence of *the unpredictable flow of material for publication*, and the absence of organizational management per se to oversee scheduling, on-boarding, preparation of minutes, and solicitation of content. The current personnel are devoted entirely to newsletter production. This is a sharp contrast to the standard practice of standing MIT committees amply supported by excellent, efficient, and experienced staff.
- b. With respect to *governance*, the FNL Editorial Board does not seem to work with *fixed calendars* of meeting times, nor orientation on-boarding of new members to acquaint them with processes and work expectations, nor with respect to nominating persons for election.

With respect to filling positions on the Editorial Board, we learned last spring that faculty preferences to serve have been submitted annually to the FNL but misunderstood in the communication. Between 2008 and 2024, 204 members of the faculty indicated interest in serving on the editorial board, with the average per year increasing steadily from a half dozen volunteers between 2008-2016 to more than a dozen and, in some years, over 20 to 33 volunteering in 2019 and 2020. The FNL Nominations Committee mis-interpreted the preferences, considering for possible nomination only those saying FNL was their first choice of service. As a consequence, few faculty were considered for nomination and a sense of exclusion may have been, perhaps inadvertently, created. Following discussion at the Faculty Meeting, in May 2024, the FNL announced that it would accept self-nominations. The election was supervised by Institutional Research with 3 new members and 10 continuing members now serving.

Notably, the Editorial Board has often contained less than the minimal 12 members that were required by its Policies and Procedures prior to the April 2024 revisions. We will inquire about the consequences of the 2024 open solicitation of nominations of self-nominations, full consideration of the annual survey of service preferences and the election implementation by Institutional Research.

c. The FNL *does not publish fixed deadlines for submissions and publication*. The publication schedule depends entirely on the rate and volume of unsolicited submissions from faculty. Although the Faculty Chair, and some committee chairs are asked to submit articles describing their work, and similar issues of interest to the faculty, and sometimes do contribute text, most of the published material is the consequence of voluntary submissions by members of the faculty with very little material secured through solicitation. *Thus, the major challenge to producing the FNL is finding authors*, and securing completion within constraints of actually producing the newsletter within the mechanical /material publication constraints, e.g. filling space in 4 page increments.

Almost all the labor of managing and producing the FNL is devoted to corralling authors to collect sufficient material to fill an issue. The inability to predict timing and quantity of submission is a common problem for any kind of publication, the appropriate response to which is to create a large enough pipeline, with overflow, to prevent a short fall in any one issue. We cannot overemphasize the labor involved in securing content for the newsletter on a regular basis.

Importantly, although there is considerable work, performed by the Managing Editor and sub-contracted professionals, overseeing the proof reading and formatting, the board claims that submissions are almost never rejected, nor substantively edited other than for minor issues of style, which would be consistent with the articulated mission of the FNL. *“What is published in the newsletter is essentially what the authors submit.”* As one of our interviewees described the process, “If anything is submitted that’s not libelous, you know, it will be published.” This is a subject of continuing inquiry.

d. *Production and Management.*

The policies and procedures do not cover the actual production of the newsletter, but primarily the governance expectations. A single Managing Editor is responsible for both content and production. Although anxious to contribute, Board members are given minimal introduction to the work and procedures. Opaque processes produce inconsistent participation in terms of content or oversight. Simply, there is insufficient labor to manage a participatory organization with transparent, regularized processes.

In our continuing inquiries, we will examine the budget and current endowment for the FNL, as well as options for management support.

e. *Committee Plans.*

We plan to continue speaking with current and former Editorial Board members, solicit suggestions and feedback from the faculty at large through a dedicated survey, interviews, and perhaps some open meetings. At present, we are focusing on recommendations with respect to (i) more regular and systematic solicitation, collection, and production of substantive content; (ii) transparent and consistent processes for both election to the Editorial Board, and routine organizational management of the Editorial Board’s work as well as the newsletter production; (iii) resources for adequately staffed management and production.

The committee is committed to securing for MIT a faculty newsletter that remains vibrant, open, and independent of both Faculty Governance and the Institute Administration. This autonomous publication is, to our knowledge, unique in American universities. We recognize the structural tension of a committee that seeks autonomy and yet accountability to the faculty. We think this is a productive tension and, toward supporting that mission, hope to receive the widest possible input for a set of recommendations for consideration at a meeting in the spring 2025.

## letters

### A Painful Personal Reality and a Call to MIT Faculty

*To The Faculty Newsletter:*

**ON AUGUST 17, 2023** my host brother from Gaza, Mohammed Masbah, was killed in an Israeli airstrike with his mom, dad, and brother. He stayed with my family in the US for several months to get fitted for a prosthetic limb. Israeli snipers shot off his leg as a child during the 2018 Great March of Return protests, and we were happy to get him out of Gaza and give him the chance to walk again. We stayed close even after his return to Gaza. Two years ago, he even sent my mom a WhatsApp message: “Mama I am getting married. No matter how far I am from you, you will be my second mother.”

The strikes that killed Mohammed and tens of thousands of other Palestinians

likely relied on ballistics positioning systems and AI targeting algorithms developed in American academic institutions like MIT. An Israeli weapons company, Elbit, which supplies the drones that may have killed Mohammed is still a member of MIT’s Industrial Liaison Program. Three MIT laboratory groups still take research funding from the Israeli military, which operates [torture camps](#) and provides armed cover for a 21st century settler colonial project in the Occupied Territories. This occupation denies millions of Palestinians under its rule the right to habeas corpus, and rights to vote, worship, move from city to city, and marry other kinds of Palestinians (or Jews).

It’s time for MIT’s faculty to enter the fight and say no to abetting crimes against humanity and [apartheid](#) in the Holy Land. These collaborations break MIT’s own ethical funding criteria and health and safety [policies](#). I invite faculty to immediately suspend all collaborations with Elbit and the Israeli military and use all available means to force MIT to sever institutional ties with the state of Israel. In the 1980s, the cumulative campaigns to globally boycott and isolate the South African regime [paved](#) the way to democracy and the end to apartheid. A similar campaign is required of us today. ■

**Richard Solomon.** A PhD student in Course 17 (Political Science) at MIT.



2024.05.08

Alex Slocum

### Footprints++

Hate feeds

Evil's needs

Day of the Dove

starves it with love

Step back from the brink

Write, read, listen and think

Peace comes to those willing

Move away from hurt and killing

Say nyet to social media pollution

Share ideas for rational solution

Test numbers with simulation

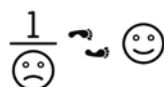
This is the Way as a Nation

Together break bread

Not the other's head

Extend your hand

Be the new land



## Where Do We Go From Here?

Malick W. Ghachem

### Lessons from last year's Israel-Palestine campus showdown



*This article is reprinted from the fall 2024 issue of *Academe*, published by the American Association of University Professors (AAUP).*

**AS WE HEAD INTO** the new academic year, American colleges and universities that last spring were at the center of protests over Israel's war on Gaza face two major challenges. The first is the risk that administrations will double down on discipline, policing, and restrictions on student protest as solutions to the conflicts on campus. On my own campus, and elsewhere, there are indications that [this train has already left the station](#). The prospect of a "surveillance university," where campus police roam college and university grounds trying to determine whether student protesters are violating codes of conduct or probationary terms, has become very real. This is not a future any of us in the academy should want. The second risk is that American

college and university leaders will continue their passive cooperation with the right-wing agenda of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce (HCEW). The thrust of that agenda is to paint pro-Palestinian student protesters as campus terrorists stoking the flames of antisemitism on their campuses while hapless university administrators sit by and watch. There have been some anti-semitic incidents on American campuses, but it is a gross mischaracterization to label what has transpired in the academy over the last academic year as a pandemic of "antisemitic college chaos" (in the tendentious words of the HCEW). The combination of a punitive turn and passivity in the face of the McCarthyite political circus unfolding in Washington, DC, means that academic freedom and free expression are at a low point in our history. To turn this tide, college and university leaders must begin to make a principled case to the public that academic

freedom and free expression alike require a robust space for pro-Palestinian dissent on our campuses as the epic cruelty of the war on Gaza continues.

#### **Missed Opportunities**

Changing course will require a dramatic rewriting of the script that informed the tumultuous 2023–24 academic year. From the beginning, a concerted campaign to conflate pro-Palestinian student voices with the official position of their institutions pressured college and university leaders to enter into a war of attrition with their own students. Instead of explaining that students do not speak for the university, administrators succumbed to the demand that they adjudicate the Israel-Palestine conflict on their campuses by promising to ferret out antisemitism. This is an important and laudable goal, but it involves contested definitions of the subject that are extremely difficult to apply given the need to ensure a wide berth for political expression critical of the state of Israel. Academic leaders then sought to recover the appearance of neutrality by invoking an equally problematic notion of "Islamophobia" as a substitute for the sin that dare not speak its name in America: anti-Palestinian racism. The reactionary shenanigans of the HCEW forced administrators into the untenable position of having to pretend that they exercise unilateral control over the levers of speech and protest on their campuses. Thrown into this harsh and unfamiliar public spotlight, college and university leaders then used every tool at their disposal in an effort to make the pretense a

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reality. Through a combination of restrictions on student protest, disciplinary processes, and police intervention, administrators ended the last academic year by investing heavily in the notion that student antiwar protests, rather than state-sponsored, right-wing campaigns to suppress dissent, constitute the principal threat to academic freedom.

These administrators appear to have done so for two reasons. First, they believed, wrongly, that institutional neutrality required them to avoid any criticism of Israel's appalling war on Gaza. This position would have some merit but for the fact that many of these same leaders showed no hesitation (appropriately, in my view) in denouncing the horrific Hamas-led attacks of October 7, 2023. The second reason for institutional passivity is essentially legal and political: a fear of exposure to Title VI litigation alleging a hostile environment for Jewish and Israeli students on campus, and the prospect of a cutoff of federal funding. This latter threat is itself a core element of the right-wing assault on academic freedom. Rather than capitulate to this assault, administrations must mount a principled challenge to the authoritarian campaign of Republican politicians. Such a challenge would be entirely consistent with efforts to minimize an institution's legal and political exposure. To the extent that administrators remain mired in a war of attrition with pro-Palestinian student protesters – and refusing to challenge the right-wing weaponization of anti-semitism that seeks to suppress criticism of the war on Gaza guarantees that they will – the tension between free expression and academic freedom, on the one hand, and the preservation of a diverse and inclusive learning environment, on the other, will continue to seem like an impossible choice. There may be reasons for colleges and universities to resist the demands of the student movement protesting the war on Gaza. But academic freedom, particularly when it is [confused](#)

[with the issue of institutional neutrality](#), is not one of them.

Why the current student protest movement has set its sights primarily on institutions of higher education rather than the federal government is an interesting and important question. The vastness and inaccessibility of federal institutions are probably part of the answer. But another part is that our government has itself tried to shift the focus to higher education rather than interrogate its own role in supporting Israel's brutal war on Gaza. The correlation between the encampment movement, police crackdowns, and the appeal to academic freedom as a reason for rejecting student protest demands is striking. The first encampment, at Columbia University, went up essentially in tandem with the spectacle of Columbia president Minouche Shafik's disastrous testimony before the HCEW on April 17, 2024. The first crackdown followed the day after. Other university encampments and crackdowns swiftly followed. None of our academic leaders seemed able to see this historical moment for what it was: the product of national and local forces that conspired together, as if on cue, to bring about the largest use of force on American campuses since 1969.

That history provides another explanation for why student protesters have centered their grievances on the university. War-related research programs and policies at both the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, where I teach, and the University of Chicago were at the core of student demands in the late 1960s and (especially at MIT) continue to be today. Administrators borrowed from the script of 1969 in some of their responses to the student demands. In other respects, they improvised according to the specific circumstances and logic of the Israel-Palestine conflict on their campuses. In doing so, they tended to overlook one of the key lessons of this history: that students and faculty members, no less than administrators, have always determined the contours and meaning of academic freedom and institutional neutrality. The result is a costly mess that now includes

the bitter aftertaste of police intervention (not likely to be quickly or easily forgotten) and the hastily improvised, excessive, and clearly flawed disciplinary crackdowns that, on my campus at least, involved multiple miscarriages of justice that were corrected only after faculty protests. But perhaps the biggest casualty is the ideal of academic freedom, which is under real threat from the political crackdown on the antiwar movement.

At MIT, negotiations between the encampment leaders and the administration centered on student demands that the institution end the involvement of the Israeli Ministry of Defense in two faculty research programs. These discussions concluded with MIT's president, Sally Kornbluth, [proclaiming](#) that she was "not going to compromise the academic freedom of our faculty, in any field of study" – even though MIT has taken steps recently to limit faculty research programs either because of the nature of the partner (in the cases of China, Russia, and Saudi Arabia) or the source of the funding (in the case of Jeffrey Epstein). More to my point, that admirable defense of academic freedom would have been easier for faculty and students to swallow had it also been directed at the authoritarian, right-wing assault on the purpose and nature of the American research university.

The jarring character of the crackdown on the encampments has been aggravated by what can only be described as failures of listening. MIT's leadership team did not even pretend to tie its position on academic freedom to any existing scholarship or AAUP statement or to the work of any faculty committee past or present. The position is aggressive, [if not unprecedented](#), insofar as it would extend academic freedom from the realm of ideas (once the coin of the academic realm) to the choice of institutional partners and to the nature of research funding. At MIT, these are especially thorny issues because so many of our scholars are engaged in research projects that intersect with industry and government, including mili-

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tary agencies. Perhaps we do want academic freedom to extend this far, given the [AAUP's long-standing position](#) that "teachers are entitled to full freedom in research." But if we do, that decision should be informed by history, applied consistently across a range of cases, and accompanied by an effort to consult a range of faculty members, who are, after all, the core repositories of academic freedom.

The MIT administration did manage to procure [an advisory opinion](#) effectively endorsing its decision to end the encampment from a new faculty-student-staff committee convened to implement the recommendations of a prior Ad Hoc Working Group on Free Expression, on which I served. The new committee, known as the Ad Hoc Committee on Academic Freedom and Campus Expression, has seen fit to publicly pronounce thus far only on the encampment issue. (The committee published some recommendations related to postering in March 2024.) It did so in order to explain why the doctrine of time, place, and manner restrictions on free speech supported ending the encampment. The committee has yet to issue an opinion or statement finding that any forms of student antiwar protest constitute protected expression. It is highly unusual, in my experience, for a faculty-led committee at MIT to issue pronouncements prior to concluding its work and issuing a draft report. I believe that my colleagues on this committee, and in the MIT administration, genuinely value free expression and academic freedom. But the public record has left an awkward impression that is not quite dispelled by any number of formal declarations of allegiance to the values of the First Amendment.

The administration has also struggled to come up with the right words to respond to the appalling brutality of the Israeli government's war on Gaza. The charitable interpretation of this failure is that it involves a confusion over the ideal

of institutional neutrality. In the [same statement](#) in which MIT's president defended academic freedom, she observed that the student protesters' "grief and pain over the terrible loss of life and suffering in Gaza are palpable." Contrast this with her October 10, 2023, [statement](#) about the horrific attacks of October 7: "The brutality perpetrated on innocent civilians in Israel by terrorists from Hamas is horrifying. In my opinion, such a deliberate attack on civilians can never be justified." (President Kornbluth added, "And now we are bracing for a prolonged conflict that will also gravely harm or kill many innocent Palestinians in Gaza. The suffering and destruction of human life are intolerable.") In the first case, there is an acknowledgment of (psychological) grief and pain, with no attribution of responsibility to any state authority for the violence that has produced that grief and pain, let alone a characterization of the (il)legitimacy of such violence. In the other, there is a commendable willingness to speak frankly and even personally. Harvard University's leadership (including its corporation, which serves as a board) has demonstrated a similar tendency in its public pronouncements, going back to October 7. Clearly, concerns over institutional neutrality cannot be the reason why American university leaders have found it necessary to mince their words in denouncing the atrocious conduct of the Israeli government's war on Gaza.

And yet, one such university leader appears to think that the [1967 Kalven Report](#) not only prevents such moral candor but actually required police suppression of a student encampment. In an [op-ed](#) published in *The Wall Street Journal* last May, University of Chicago President Paul Alivisatos argued that, in order to uphold the sacrosanct Chicago principle of institutional neutrality, he had no choice but to call in the police to arrest pro-Palestinian demonstrators and dismantle their encampment. Turning neutrality and academic freedom on their heads and confusing the one with the other, Alivisatos effectively interred the

Kalven Report. It is one thing to say that safety or the need to ensure the continued academic operations of the university required ending the encampment. (I believe that MIT's leadership was genuinely concerned with the safety of all students when it moved to end the encampment last May.) But even those arguments must be handled with care, given that they can so easily slide into content-based suppression of disfavored speech. Some might say the Kalven Report had already perished of [self-inflicted wounds](#) present at its [creation](#). Either way, we have almost certainly reached the end of the ideal of institutional neutrality. Rumors of the report's death were confirmed last May when Harvard issued a [new policy on "institutional voice"](#) that (correctly, in my view) rejected neutrality as a philosophical framework for the university while adhering for all practical purposes to the core prudential principles of the Kalven Report.

### Echoes of the Past

How did it come to this? Another teaspoon of history is worth a pound of polemics in a field not short on the latter. Here I speak specifically of MIT's history, but my campus's experience holds many implications for other institutions.

The encampment movement at MIT focused on the issue of war-related research rather than (as at some other institutions) the need to divest the endowment of funds tied to Israel. This emphasis runs deep in MIT's tradition of student protest, and it hearkens back specifically to the anti-Vietnam activism of 1969. As historian Stuart Leslie has shown in an [excellent essay](#) on the 1969 debates over MIT's special laboratories, MIT students and faculty emphasized the university's own role in the wartime effort rather than national wartime policy itself. The result was a protest movement that centered on whether MIT should end its relationship to the Lincoln Laboratory and the Instrumentation Laboratory, both of which were then engaged in Department of Defense-funded weapons-related proj-

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ects, such as moving-target-indicator radar systems.

Assembled under the banner of the Science Action Coordinating Committee (SACC), the student leaders directly challenged the application of principles of academic freedom and institutional neutrality to such wartime research. In a 1969 statement, SACC observed,

*It is frequently argued that in demanding the termination of war related research at MIT, SACC is violating the concept of a politically “neutral” university; that individual scientists should be guaranteed the “academic freedom” to pursue any research which interests them or which they consider to be important. It is feared that the introduction of political criteria to judge the appropriateness of specific research projects would undermine the university’s unique position in society as the last haven of free thought, destroy its independence, and open it to attacks by pressure groups from both the left and the right.*

If you substitute the Scientists Against Genocide Encampment (SAGE) – the name of the MIT Gaza encampment – for SACC, it becomes clear that the positions on either side of the debate over MIT’s relationship to military research are largely unchanged. In this sense, although not in others, we are still living in the 1960s.

In effect, the SAGE students were answering the administration’s assertion of academic freedom with the same point the administration had been making all year long in respect of free expression: Just because you can research or say something does not mean that you should, at least not in connection with institutional partners who violate certain norms (including, most notably in this context, the Israeli Ministry of Defense). MIT’s negotiators seemed unwilling to listen to that reasonable view – perhaps more out of concerns over institutional neutrality than over academic freedom.

As a result, they failed to apply the norms that MIT has already developed and applied to other controversial research programs and partnerships. The obtuseness or reticence regarding the war on Gaza contributed to the impasse between the encampment leaders and the administration.

The former, for their part, also played a role in producing the impasse, which was an essentially political conflict involving pragmatic factors rather than a show-down over abstract principles. Some of the language used by students who participated in the MIT encampment ultimately made it difficult for others outside the encampment to hear and identify with the moral justice of the antiwar cause. And the students missed several opportunities to end the encampment on their own terms.

At MIT and elsewhere, student protesters have become necessary leaders in the campaign against the unjust war on Gaza and the broader injustice of the decades-long occupation of the Palestinian territories. No one else has done as much as they to bring public attention to the systemic racism and discrimination reflected in Israel’s policies. But to say that students have been necessary leaders in this fight does not mean that their approach has been sufficient. The actions of a group of hapless university administrators engaged in a war of attrition with students are far less consequential to the subjugation of the Palestinians than those of decision-makers in Washington, DC. The protesters’ cause would also be helped by devoting more time and space to envisioning Arab-Jewish solidarity in Israel and Palestine alongside the messages of resistance and opposition. Every civil rights movement needs a vision of coexistence if it is to succeed in retaining the moral high ground, as Martin Luther King Jr. preached in [his final book](#), written in isolation in Jamaica in 1967 (and from which I have borrowed the title for this essay).

The students and faculty involved in counterprotests, for their part, displayed a stark unwillingness to listen to the moral

core of the encampment message. From the start of last year’s campus conflicts, those who seek to equate criticism of the state of Israel with antisemitism have shown over and over again, by their words and their deeds, that they simply do not wish to allow speech in protest of Israel’s cruel war on Gaza to be heard on American university campuses. This refusal is a factor in enabling the slaughter and deprivation in Gaza to continue.

For me, the most poignant moment of the 2023–24 *annus horribilis* was when the SAGE students first met counterprotesting students in the heart of the encampment last spring. I was there at that time, and tried, with others, to help keep tempers calm. But the truth is that this encounter was one of the few moments when it might have been possible for the two groups of students to enter into dialogue with one another. Their intense distaste for one another notwithstanding, each of these groups needs to hear what the other has to say if there is to be a shared future for the people of Israel and Palestine. Yet each does so much to shield themselves from the voices of the other – increasingly with the aid of administrators (and some faculty members), who are now apparently hoping that restrictions on student protest alone can produce the physical, intellectual, and even acoustic separation that they believe will keep the peace on campus.

### Reasons for Hope

There is not much good to say about where we landed at the end of the 2023–24 academic year, but let me try to identify at least a few silver linings.

First, the willingness of some American college and university leaders to invoke academic freedom is cause for hope. They should now embrace academic freedom in the name of speaking truth to power. The university officials who testified at the May 23 hearing, titled “Calling for Accountability: Stopping Antisemitic College Chaos,” [largely avoided Shafik’s obsequiousness](#) and violation of long-standing academic norms.

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But the political circus persists. On June 3, the chairs of six House committees sent [letters to ten universities](#) announcing a Congress-wide probe into campus anti-semitism and threatening a cutoff of all federal funding. And on August 21, the HCEW issued [a subpoena](#) to compel production of information related to the encampment crisis and other matters. This script seems likely to become even more bombastic and demagogic as the November 2024 elections approach, so important have the attacks on a handful of elite universities become to the Republican Party's prosecution of the culture wars.

MIT and other American universities are a bit like Florence circa 1300, as the chair of the MIT faculty, [Mary Fuller, has observed](#): riven by internal conflict and vulnerable to external pressures and interventions, most notably those of the federal government. But that was equally true of American universities in the 1960s, when Congress also threatened to withhold funding in response to universities' handling of student demonstrations. Today, once again, student protest is shaping the national political conversation. College and university leaders seem to be hoping that, if they just lie low and keep their heads down until November, the storm will pass. But even if Vice President Harris prevails in the election, this storm is not going away. The culture wars, having previously come for our public universities, have now arrived at leading private institutions. Our fates are connected: An attack on academic freedom and free expression at the University of Florida or the University of Texas is an attack on all American universities. The public-private distinction is eroding. The wealthiest private universities have been slow to appreciate this point, in part because of the increasingly vast gulf that separates administrators and faculty at these institutions. A university like MIT now does too many other things

beside teaching and research – from leasing land to forming partnerships with corporations and foreign governments – to believe that it has much of a stake in the spat over critical race theory or LGBTQ books in conservative and battleground states.

An assertion of academic freedom as a shield against political or legislative interference should entail explaining to the public that the struggle in higher education over Israel and Palestine stems not from any pathologies peculiar to the academy but from the crisis facing our government's Middle East policy, now decades in the making. The federal government that subsidizes and enables Israel's increasingly brazen brutalization of the Palestinian people must begin to face squarely its own failure to foster a just peace in the Middle East. A little more time spent on that mission will go a long way. Such a reckoning will help, in particular, to address the disturbing [resurgence in antisemitism](#) that we have seen around the world over the past year. Ideally, it will also aim to ensure that the Palestinian people can live in "[dignity, freedom, security, and self-determination](#)" – for those who still care that they do, and are willing to raise their voices in support of that future. The first American university leader to make these points, preferably while testifying live before the HCEW, will earn a rightful place in the history of academic freedom in this country.

A second cause for hope is that faculty members have been instrumental in pushing back against the threats to punish student demonstrators. Only that push-back prevents our universities from encountering the fate that befell Harvard in 1969–70. The draconian expulsion of sixteen students for their role in seizing University Hall in 1969 – an act that has no parallel in the recent encampment episodes except for the occupation of one of Columbia's main buildings – "changed the whole tenor of dissent at Harvard," observed the authors of the 1970 book *The Harvard Strike*. "All future political dissent at Harvard," they wrote,

"would be circumscribed by the shift in attitude that the discipline of the University Hall demonstrators represented." The risk that American universities today will produce a similar quashing of political dissent is real, and it extends to a broad range of issues other than the Israel-Palestine conflict. The next generation of student demonstrators is watching (some of them are even participating). An immediate priority must be to roll back the show of force on campus. At my own institution, the campus police performed an outstanding job in mediating conflict throughout the year. But asking campus police officers to enforce an ongoing disciplinary settlement is a recipe for the creation of a surveillance university. The [quirkiness of MIT's student culture](#), its fondness for out-of-the-box thinking, and its allergy to hierarchy form a delicate ecosystem that MIT's students, faculty, and leadership alike must take special care to preserve at this time. A heavy burden of responsibility in this area lies with my faculty colleagues who, only a few years ago, were so outspoken about free expression when the issue was diversity, equity, and inclusion, and who seem not so eager now to accept the perhaps unintended consequences of their campaign against so-called cancel culture.

Finally, the dynamics of the encampment crackdown should encourage faculty members on divided campuses to unite in standing up for academic freedom (and free expression) whenever the next effort to speak out against the carnage in Gaza is subjected to HCEW-style suppression. At MIT and elsewhere, administrators have allowed themselves to be bullied by a handful of student and faculty social media accounts into an endless pattern of whack-a-mole-style crisis management. That pattern, a reflection of the authoritarian political culture of our time, seems [likely to persist over the 2024–25 academic year](#). The case for robust protection of student protest comes down to an old version of the "marketplace of ideas" argument: The policies our government has pursued in

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### Where Do We Go From Here?

Ghachem, from preceding page

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attempting to manage the Israel-Palestine conflict for the last fifty to sixty years (those of the Biden administration very much included) have not worked. Can anyone say in good faith that the situation in Israel and Palestine is where we want it to be, regardless of where you land on the tragic events of the past year? If we could have complete confidence that our government knew what it was doing in the Middle East, then the case for suppressing student dissent would be stronger. The temptation to enforce an official orthodoxy on a matter so deeply bound up with traumatic histories and memories of various kinds will always impede the cause of peace and coexistence.

How exactly we get from here to there is difficult to say. The unstable domestic political climate, the uncertain direction of the conflict in Gaza and the West Bank, and the unpredictability of student protest tactics will continue to make improvisation necessary. Those of us who work in higher education will simply have to muddle through as best we can, being of support to students, faculty and staff colleagues, and administrators when possible while continuing the important work of teaching and research. (Being of support to our institutions includes insisting on robust protections for free expression and academic freedom, because administrators merely exercise temporary custodianship of our institutions; they are not to be confused with the college or university itself, the heart of which will always be faculty and students brought together in shared learning spaces enabled by the

labors of a large and growing staff. The Kalven Report got this point essentially right.) We should not underestimate the importance of many small acts of kindness in the current conflict. But our core missions remain teaching and research. We were not commissioned to solve the Israel-Palestine conflict, but we can alleviate its side effects on our campuses until our government steps up and becomes part of the solution in the Middle East. The steps that some have outlined for America's universities to take a role in the rebuilding of Gaza's educational system, combined with fair treatment of student protest, can help to point the way forward.

Another idea worth considering on my own campus would be to convene a panel similar to the 1969 Pounds Panel, which brought faculty and students together (today we would add staff) to dig into MIT's connection to wartime research and to consider the possibility of "converting" some of that research to civilian purposes. Thus far, MIT's leadership has seemed determined to handle any questions involving research connected to foreign militaries through existing processes and protocols, which has contributed to the impasse. No doubt the hesitancy is connected to MIT's reliance on the US Department of Defense for almost 20 percent of its research budget. The line between American and foreign military action and research has not always been apparent, especially where the Middle East is concerned. Depending on how you look at it, that is either a defense or an indictment of MIT's position (or both). Either way, a collective effort to help students understand how MIT has or has not changed in this regard seems like the kind

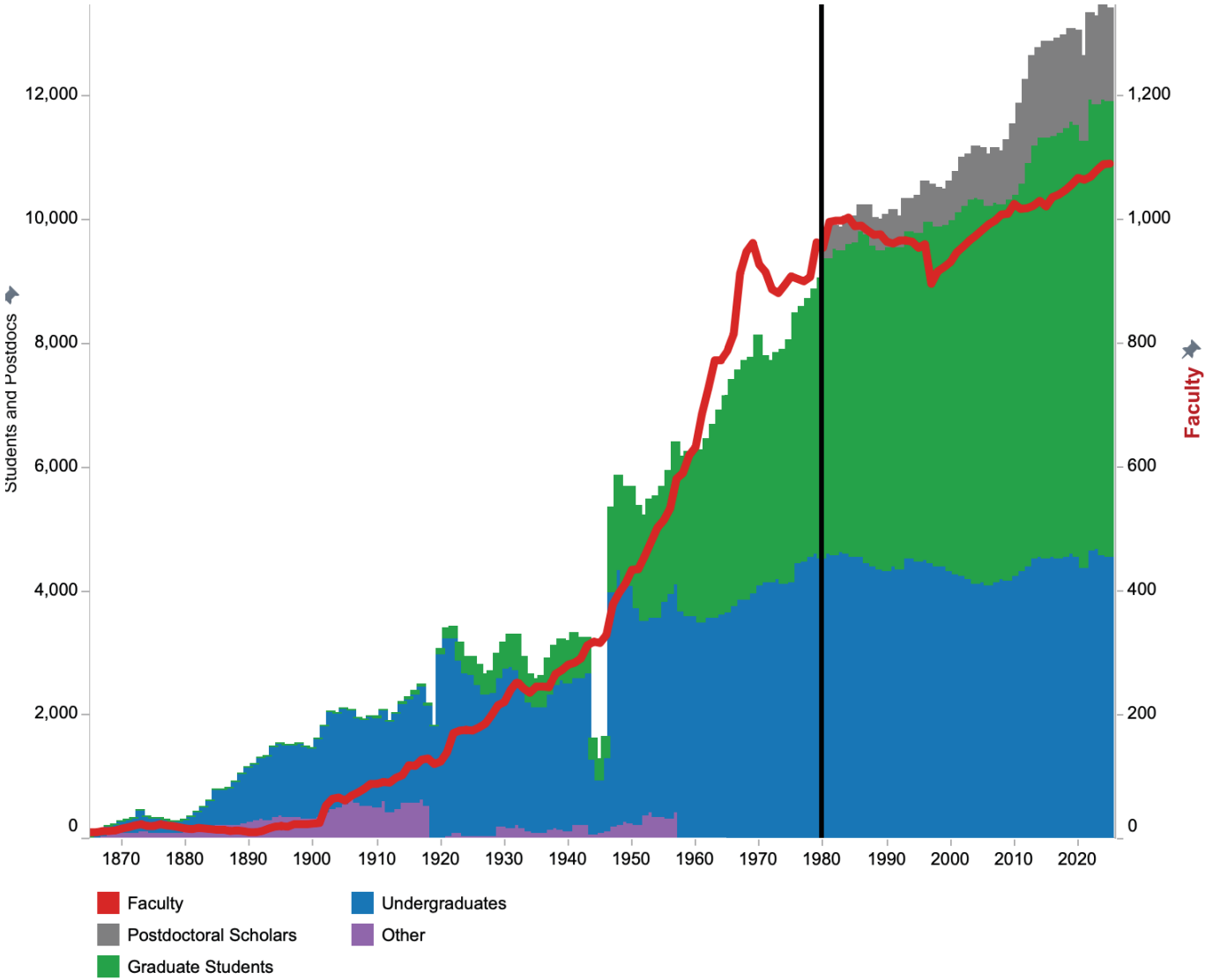
of educational effort that could contribute to overcoming some of the deadlock of the past year.

These kinds of efforts can succeed only if we can recover a sense of common purpose on our campuses. We have lost that sense of shared mission. Tribal affiliations have taken hold of campus culture, bringing students and faculty together for certain purposes but separating them for others. Efforts to bring together students and faculty aligned with either side of the Israel-Palestine conflict have proven exceedingly challenging. Above all, we must discover a way for all of us to rally around the principles that define higher education communities: a commitment to learning and research, [curiosity](#), academic freedom, and free expression. These principles cannot be allowed to serve as buzzwords for one side or another on a charged political issue. We can care greatly about the Israel-Palestine conflict, but we can also recognize that people in other parts of the world are suffering, too, and need our attention – including neighborhoods in our own country. A community defined only by conflict has no space for the kind of generous openness that makes it a trusting one. We will have to reach out, as individuals, across the gulfs that separate us from one another, and discover at least some common ground – something that permits us to see one another in relationships of solidarity, collegiality, and even friendship. This is the precondition for a robust culture of academic freedom and free expression. It may never be perfect, and it probably never was, but it could be enough. ■

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# MIT Numbers Faculty, Students, and Postdoctoral Scholars 1870–2025



Source: Office of the Provost/Institutional Research