

MIT Faculty Newsletter

<https://fnl.mit.edu>

in this issue we offer the results of last month's FNL Editorial Board Election ([page 3](#)); Faculty Chair Roger Levy on "Committees, Task Forces, and Working Groups – the Ins and Outs" ([page 4](#)); a reflection on the end of tuition support for research assistants ([page 7](#)); and an analysis of the Institute's student disciplinary process ([page 12](#)).
[Deadline for submissions for the March/April FNL is March 23.]



Geeseprints?

Faculty Travelogue How Birding and Engineering Brought Me to Write *Birds Up Close:* *An Engineer Explores Their Hidden Wonders*

Lorna Gibson

MY UPCOMING BOOK, *Birds Up Close: An Engineer Explores Their Hidden Wonders*, will be published by MIT Press on April 28. How did I get from my research on the mechanical behavior of cellular materials (think engineering honeycombs and foams, natural materials like wood and bamboo, and medical materials such as scaffolds for regenerating damaged tissues in the body) to writing a book about how birds work? It's been a journey.

I grew up in Niagara Falls, Ontario, famously home to many tourist traps around the falls and, less famously, to many large, impressive feats of engineering: an observation tower, 50 stories tall, near the falls; bridges high up over the gorge and river; and the canals, tunnels, and reservoirs that all feed water from

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The Freedom of the University: A History in Eleven Quotations

Malick W. Ghachem

"THERE IS NO DRAMA like the drama of history," wrote the great Trinidadian historian C.L.R. James in *The Black Jacobins* (1938). During the last few years, we have lived a drama in the university that seems unlike few chapters in the history of American higher education. But history has a way of humbling all claims of exceptionalism. These 11 quotations, shared with colleagues at an MIT Faculty Seminar on "Academic Freedom: The Relationship Between Institutions and the State" on February 9, 2026, show that universities have seen versions of our current drama several times before. And they will see them again. I hope these quotations can provide at least some sense of context, purpose, and vision for the challenges that lie ahead.

*

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Editorial Moving Forward

THE ELECTIONS ARE OVER. The voters – the faculty – have spoken.

We begin with gratitude. Eleven colleagues stepped forward as candidates in this election, placing their names before the faculty at a moment that demanded judgment, patience, and readiness to serve. To stand for election to the *Faculty Newsletter* editorial board today is to affirm, in action, the importance of an independent faculty voice. We thank every candidate for that affirmation.

These elections should have been held in May 2025, with a slate that had already been announced. Their postponement by the (then) Provost's Office introduced uncertainty at a time when institutional confidence was already strained. That the elections were ultimately reinstated owes much to negotiations led by our co-chairs, Professors

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Christopher Cummins

Chemistry

Yoel Fink

DMSE/EECS/RLE/ISN

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Urban Studies and Planning

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Mechanical Engineering

Franz-Josef Ulm

Civil and Environmental Engineering

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*Editorial Subcommittee for this issue

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Moving Forward
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Professors Sally Haslanger and Ceasar McDowell, and to careful work and thoughtful guidance by the Transition Committee formed in the wake of the Silbey Report. The committee – comprising Professors Thomas Kochan, Krishna Rajagopal, and Donca Steriade – helped restore the conditions under which a legitimate and orderly election could take place, and reaffirmed that governance of the *Faculty Newsletter* rests with the faculty, and only with the faculty.

For the five elected candidates, the results may bring satisfaction at being chosen to serve in this role, perhaps mixed with a sober awareness of the work that lies ahead. Whether elected or not, each candidate has shown a readiness to act as a guardian of the *Faculty Newsletter*. Guardianship concerns protection: vigilance for editorial independence, adherence to rigorous standards, and a refusal

to allow the forum for faculty debate to be narrowed or silenced.

That guardianship rests on a deeper stewardship. Stewardship concerns purpose. It is grounded in a simple principle: all 1,450 faculty voices count equally – professors of every rank, professors of the practice, professors post-tenure, and emeritae and emeriti. This equality is not a courtesy extended at convenience; it is the condition of genuine faculty governance. The Institute’s strength lies in the breadth of its intellectual community and in the friction, candor, and creativity that diversity of experience and perspective produces. This diversity is foundational to MIT’s character and to its resilience, even against considerable odds.

We owe special gratitude to the outgoing FNL co-chairs, Professors Sally Haslanger and Ceasar McDowell. Through months of scrutiny and uncertainty they led with steadiness and resolve born of long commitment to the *Faculty Newsletter*, guiding it through a difficult

chapter, and preserving its defining impulse: to be an independent voice of the faculty. Their principled service exemplified both guardianship and stewardship.

Elections close one chapter. In due course the newly elected editorial board will be seated. It will inherit a tradition of more than three decades: a responsibility to preserve the *Newsletter’s* independence and credibility. Institutions endure when their members accept the obligation to protect open discourse and to sustain the conditions under which such discourse can flourish. Guardianship and stewardship together sustain the *Faculty Newsletter* as an independent forum for the entire faculty. ■

Nazli Choucri
Christopher Cummins
Yoel Fink
Thomas Heldt
Tanalis Padilla
Nasser Rabbat
Balakrishnan Rajagopal
Robert Redwine
Franz-Josef Ulm

FNL Editorial Board Election Outcome

FNL Election Subcommittee

THIS SPECIAL ELECTION was held to fill five open seats on the *Faculty Newsletter* editorial board after the originally scheduled May 2025 election was postponed. Eleven candidates stood for election, representing all five Schools. Seven of the eight candidates from the May ballot agreed to stand again in the rescheduled vote.

Candidate statements and a description of the election process were posted on the FNL website. The statements were also distributed with the call to vote from Faculty Chair Roger Levy. As in previous elections, MIT Institutional Research administered the ballot and tallied the results.

Professor Levy announced the outcome to the faculty on February 18 (see table). The results combine renewal with continuity: four members are newly elected, and one is re-elected. All five had also appeared on the original May 2025 ballot. A record 455 of 1,450 eligible faculty members cast votes. Professors Catherine D’Ignazio, Alan Jasanoff, Nancy Kanwisher, Warren Seering, and Yang Shao-Horn will serve the remainder of the three-year term that began at the start of the 2025-26 academic year. ■

Christopher Cummins
Thomas Heldt
Robert Redwine

| Candidate | Votes |
|---------------------|-------|
| Dwaipayan Banerjee | 157 |
| Catherine D’Ignazio | 197 |
| Amy Glasmeier | 116 |
| Sally Haslanger | 184 |
| Or Hen | 160 |
| Alan Jasanoff | 240 |
| Nancy Kanwisher | 195 |
| Retsef Levi | 121 |
| Ceasar McDowell | 193 |
| Warren Seering | 219 |
| Yang Shao-Horn | 252 |

From The Faculty Chair Committees, Task Forces, and Working Groups – the Ins and Outs

Roger Levy

NOT SO MANY WEEKS have elapsed in academic-semester time since my [first column](#), but the interim has been eventful. On February 4, the [Task Force on the Undergraduate Academic Program](#) released its draft recommendations, and as I describe in the last paragraphs of this column, we are now in a crucial phase of public deliberation and feedback. On January 16 [Paula Hammond became our new Dean of Engineering](#), and on February 15 [Maria Yang became our new Vice Provost for Faculty](#). The faculty officers work closely with the vice provost for faculty (who [meets every two weeks with the chair of the faculty](#)) including collaborating on Women Faculty Advocates gatherings and a new faculty event series on academic freedom. The first academic freedom event took place on February 9, a *Faculty Seminar on Academic Freedom: The Relationship Between Institutions and the State*, and featured a lecture by Professor Malick Ghachem (History) followed by Q&A and small-table discussion. Professor Ghachem’s lecture was built around eleven key quotations, which also appear as [an article](#) in this issue of the *Faculty Newsletter* (see page 1).

From my vantage point, much of the activity of note in recent months has involved committees, task forces, and working groups, which along with similar bodies I’ll sometimes collectively refer to in my columns as “committees” for convenience. A few general notes on the ins and outs of committees – both how they work and the nature of their substantive inputs and outputs. At MIT, some committees are “persistent,” with no end date: these include the [Standing](#) and [Special](#)

[Committees of the Faculty](#), the [Standing Institute Committees Appointed by the President](#), the [Standing and Visiting Committees of the Corporation](#), and others. Other committees have a life cycle: a charge is written, members are assembled, the group does its work, and reports out (with interim or draft reports sometimes preceding the final report). The final report concludes the committee’s work, and at that point it is up to the community and in particular those who charged the committee to determine next steps. For some committees, the inputs and outputs are primarily formal and may involve decision-making authority. The [Committee on Curricula](#), for example, takes as inputs proposals for new subjects and curricula, and [acts with power](#) in response to them; these actions, typically conveyed in letters from the committee, are its output. For other committees, the inputs and outputs may vary in form. For the [Faculty Policy Committee](#) (FPC), for example, the inputs and outputs are wide-ranging, at present primarily involving discussions with and feedback to leaders across the MIT community, but sometimes taking other forms. An example of the latter occurred during the days following MIT’s [receipt](#) of the “Compact for Academic Excellence in Higher Education,” when FPC played a key role in conveying faculty perspectives to the faculty officers, President Kornbluth, and ultimately the Corporation.

And now to the committees and their activities.

As you may recall from my first column, in the fall I appointed a Transitional Support Committee for the

Faculty Newsletter as part of the [recommendations accepted by the faculty in October 2025](#). With the Committee’s support, the *Newsletter* held a special election from February 10-17, 2026 to fill five vacancies on its Editorial Board. Out of 1,450 eligible to vote, 455 cast ballots, and [Catherine D’Ignazio](#), [Alan Jasanoff](#), [Nancy Kanwisher](#), [Warren Seering](#), and [Yang Shao-Horn](#) were elected to the Board. I am grateful to the Editorial Board, the Transitional Support Committee, Managing Editor David Lewis, the staff of Institutional Research, and all faculty colleagues who participated in the election by voting or standing for election.

In January, Chancellor Nobles, Provost Chandrakasan, and I jointly charged the [Committee on AI Use in Teaching, Learning, and Research Training](#), co-chaired by Professors [Eric Klopfer](#) and [Samuel Madden](#). As I noted in my [welcoming remarks](#) at the September 2025 Institute Faculty Meeting, artificial intelligence offers profound challenges and opportunities for what an MIT education can and should be. This committee’s charge includes assessing current uses of AI, identifying innovations, and proposing AI use policy. The committee seeks input from across the Institute and will hold in-person input sessions on March 5, 9, and 10, for which you can register online. You can also contact the committee directly at ai-teachingandlearning@mit.edu.

Also in January, President Kornbluth and Provost Chandrakasan charged the [Committee on Accelerating Translation and Entrepreneurship](#) (CATE), co-

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Committees, Task Forces, and Working Groups – the Ins and Outs

Levy, from preceding page

chaired by Professors [Jeffrey Grossman](#) and [Antoinette Schoar](#). The committee’s potential topics range broadly, including policies on faculty leave and conflict of interest, support for entrepreneurial activities by MIT community members and recent alumni, and strategies for global impact. The committee is intended to work rapidly; you can send your input directly to the co-chairs.

In February, Provost Chandrakasan charged the Committee on Guidelines for Establishing New Institute Entities (GENIE), chaired by Professor and Associate Vice President for Research Administration [Anne White](#). Here “entities” should be understood broadly, including alliances, centers, institutes, and initiatives. Comments can be directed to genie@mit.edu.

And also in February, the [Task Force on the Undergraduate Academic Program](#) (TFUAP), co-chaired by Professors [Adam Martin](#) and [Joel Voldman](#), released its [draft proposal](#) containing recommendations for strengthening the overall experience of MIT undergraduates. Developing recommendations for changing our undergraduate program is a significant undertaking. The Task Force was charged in February 2024 by then-Chair of the Faculty [Mary Fuller](#) and then-Vice Chancellor for Undergraduate and Graduate Education [Ian Waitz](#). In the two years since, it has devoted thousands of person-hours to preparing this proposal, including assessment of undergraduate educational programs at MIT and peer institutions, dozens of meetings with groups across the Institute, solicitation and review of white papers from across the community, and weekly internal deliberations. Potential changes range from curriculum to undergraduate-facing policies to pedagogy to governance. The undergraduate academic program draws on numerous constrained, non-fungible resources: student time, interest, and attention; availability and expertise of faculty and staff for curriculum develop-

ment, stewardship, and governance; and technological, financial, and logistical support from offices across the Institute. Additionally, the potential implications for [MIT’s 57 majors and 59 minors](#) of any curricular changes need to be accounted for. It’s reasonable to hypothesize that these factors create inertia, and there is evidence consistent with this hypothesis: the time since the [last changes](#) to the

And also in February, the Task Force on the Undergraduate Academic Program (TFUAP) . . . released its draft proposal containing recommendations for strengthening the overall experience of MIT undergraduates. Developing recommendations for changing our undergraduate program is a significant undertaking. The Task Force was charged in February 2024. . . . In the two years since, it has devoted thousands of person-hours to preparing this proposal. . . .

formal structure of our [General Institute Requirements](#) (GIRs), for example, is measured in decades – even as there has been considerable teaching innovation within that formal structure. That is not the only plausible hypothesis, however: structures may also be long-standing because they continue to serve needs. The goal, then, is not to change simply for change’s sake. Rather, the goal is to collectively formulate a vision for the program that will best serve students going forward, given (a) the resource constraints described above, together with (b) what is reachable from where we are today – and to make whatever changes our vision warrants. TFUAP has done the Institute a great service by formulating and disseminating such a vision.

Analogizing to academic publishing, the Task Force’s [draft proposal](#) of February 4 is a [preprint](#) reflecting not only its two years of hard work but also years of work by [committees](#) and [task forces](#) before it. The next phase, of public deliberation and feedback, has just begun, and it is absolutely crucial. The February 18 Institute Faculty Meeting was dedicated

entirely to presentation and discussion of TFUAP’s recommendations, and the Task Force held its first all-community town hall meeting on March 2. They will hold a second all-community town hall Tuesday, March 10, 2:00-3:30 pm in [W20-306](#), and a town hall specifically for students on Wednesday, March 11, 7:00-8:30 pm in [2-190](#). Feedback can be emailed to tfuap@mit.edu; please send it by March

15 if at all possible. Based on community feedback and on further deliberation, TFUAP will revise its recommendations and submit a final report. And at that point, it will be up to the community and in particular the offices of Chair of the Faculty and the Vice Chancellor for Graduate and Undergraduate Education, which originally charged the Task Force, to determine next steps. *Now is the time to engage in public discussion and to send feedback to the Task Force.* The first two such discussions were informative and constructive, with real potential to shape the final form of its recommendations. Not every suggestion will ultimately be adopted, but all inputs will be taken into account. Although many constituencies across MIT have stakes in our undergraduate academic program, decisions regarding its future are Institute-wide. I ask that you keep this perspective in mind. I urge you to engage, now and fully, in this crucial step toward shaping the future experiences of undergraduates at MIT. ■

Roger Levy is a Professor of Brain and Cognitive Sciences and Chair of the Faculty (rlevy@mit.edu).



Blue Skies Smiling At Me

On Fiscal Balance, Entropy, and the Temperature of Knowledge

Franz-Josef Ulm

THE RECENT ANNOUNCEMENT of the end of the 55% tuition support for research assistants has prompted many conversations across the Institute. I would like to contribute one from a narrow – and admittedly biased – engineering – perspective.

At first glance, the decision is easy to understand. We are told (and have no reason to doubt) that it is driven by financial realities: a difficult budget environment, the endowment tax, rising costs, and the general principle that, in the end, one cannot spend more than what comes in. Fiscal responsibility is not optional. From this perspective, the decision resembles a mass balance in dollars: inflows, outflows, conservation enforced.

As an engineer, I find that logic entirely coherent. As an academic, I find it incomplete.

Knowledge production – our stated mission – has surprisingly little to do with mass balance. It has much more in common with thermodynamics.

Consider the second law. When work is performed on a system, only part of that work can be stored as recoverable energy. The rest dissipates as heat. In the process, the system's internal entropy increases. Entropy, in this sense, is not disorder for its own sake; it is a measure of accessible states, of possible change. High-entropy systems are those in which new configurations – new outcomes – are more likely to occur.

This maps uncomfortably well onto how research actually works.

The work we put into the system includes proposal writing, mentoring, supervision, failed experiments, revisions, conversations in hallways, and the many

activities that never appear on a CV. Much of this work is carried out jointly with our graduate students. The recoverable energy – the part we can neatly account for – takes the form of papers, books, performances, patents, and other tangible outputs. If the work rate were perfectly matched to recoverable output, with no dissipation, the process would be reversible. Nothing would be lost. Nothing would linger. Knowledge production would leave no trace beyond the immediate system. In thermodynamic terms, it would be perfectly efficient – and, in academic terms, largely forgettable.

Impact arises precisely from dissipation. The “waste heat” of research – ideas that spill into adjacent fields, students who take unexpected paths, failed projects that inform future ones, informal networks that outlast grants – is where entropy increases. And higher entropy is what makes change possible: entrepreneurial activity, social progress, and, eventually, economic value.

If one accepts this analogy (and engineers are generally inclined to do so), the elimination of tuition support – along with related austerity measures such as library closures and hiring freezes – deserves a second look as a problem of thermodynamics.

Removing tuition support lowers the effective temperature of the system. Fewer students can be supported. Research groups contract. The rate of work decreases. Conservatively, the total work rate is reduced by 25-33% simply because fewer hands and minds are available to do the work.

If input and output scaled linearly, we would expect dissipation – and thus

impact – to decline by the same amount. In reality, research systems are rarely linear. Below certain temperatures, processes slow dramatically. Some stop altogether.

None of this negates the importance of fiscal responsibility. Budgets matter. Constraints are real. But a full appreciation of what the Institute can achieve requires recognizing that knowledge production does not obey a single conservation law. It follows many others, individually and collectively.

Decisions based solely on financial mass balance risk optimizing the wrong variable. What matters is how much energy is stored, how much entropy is produced, and whether the system remains warm enough for anything interesting to happen.

By contrast, adding students, faculty, or staff does more than add labor; in an open system each new member imports an entropy flux – a jumble of conversations, mistakes, cross-disciplinary misreadings, and serendipities – that widens the field of possible outcomes and raises the odds of lasting impact. At scale, higher impact can ease fiscal pressure by generating the kinds of returns and opportunities that broaden the Institute's options (including a reduction of the endowment tax¹).

The second law cannot tell us what decision to make. It does, however, suggest a useful diagnostic before making one: take the temperature. ■

Franz-Josef Ulm is Class of 1922 Professor in the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering (ulm@mit.edu).

¹ [Finance, Freedom, and the Faculty Post-Compact: The Case for Independence and Inclusion - MIT Faculty Newsletter](#)

**Birds Up Close: An Engineer Explores
Their Hidden Wonders**

Gibson, from page 1

above the falls to the hydroelectric power stations below. As a kid, I wondered how all these structures worked. How did the towers and bridges stand up? How did the canals, tunnels, and reservoir manage the huge flow of water to the power station? To learn more about mechanics – how forces are transmitted through materials and structures, how much force it takes to break something, how fluids flow – I studied civil engineering as an undergraduate at the University of Toronto and then materials engineering as a graduate student at Cambridge University.

Growing up, our family often took Sunday afternoon walks along the Niagara River or along the Niagara Escarpment. I especially loved going down the Niagara Glen, climbing down the metal staircase built into the cliff face of the gorge below the falls, walking along the more rugged trails through old growth forest and past huge boulders; it always seemed like a magical, hidden place, overlooked by most tourists. On our walks, my mother taught my two brothers and me how to identify the common birds, trees, and flowers in our area. In the winter, we always had a bird feeder in the backyard and got the usual customers: sparrows, chickadees, juncos, blue jays, cardinals, and the occasional woodpecker. I grew to love being outside and enjoying nature. And over the years, I became more of a birder, paying attention to the birds I saw in my daily activities and when I traveled.

When I tell my students that I go birding in Boston, they're often surprised, because they feel there aren't any interesting birds to see in the city. I tell them that if you think you won't see anything, and you don't look, then you won't see anything. Me, I'm always on the lookout: around Boston and on my travels.

I love it when migrating ducks appear at Jamaica Pond in the fall. It's quite a parade. The ever-so-elegant hooded mergansers usually arrive first, early in November, and stay until the pond freezes over. They're soon joined by a stream of others: ring-necked ducks and ruddy ducks, the latter almost comical with their stiff upward pointing tails and abrupt dives down into the water; a few common mergansers; the occasional red-breasted merganser; and, from



Three Great Horned Owlets at the Arnold Arboretum

time to time, wood ducks, the males with delicate feathers seemingly painted with a combination of colors that seems as though it just shouldn't be possible: green head crest, black face, white bridle on the front of the neck, speckled-chestnut breast, slaty-grey back, and buff belly. Joining the fray are pied-billed grebes, small and energetic, diving over and over again in the water, and northern shovelers, skimming the surface of the water for aquatic invertebrates with their shovel-like bills. And once in a rare while, a lone loon. It's all delightful.

Biking to MIT, I would sometimes see red-tailed hawks perched on the turret of Maseeh Hall or the roof of Hayden Library. In the spring of 2004, a pair of red-tails nested in a pine tree on Mass. Ave. just outside of Building 9; IS&T installed a webcam, keeping at least one of our colleagues distracted for weeks until the young fledged. And in June of 2018, a juvenile peregrine falcon standing in the roadway in Kendall Square brought traffic to a standstill; a Cambridge police spokesman thought that it had fallen from a nest at the old courthouse.

On my way to a conference in the Colorado Rockies, I abruptly pulled the rental car over

when I spotted a pair of bald eagles, their talons locked together, dropping out of the sky, spiraling down in their courtship cartwheel display before releasing and flying up and away just before reaching the ground. After giving a talk at Sandia National Labs in Albuquerque, my (fluid mechanics/ birder) host and I drove down to Bosque Del Apache National Wildlife Refuge where there were tens of thousands of wintering snow geese and sandhill cranes and even a few whooping cranes. As a coyote approached, a huge flock took off in a cloud of wingbeats, clattering as they rose into the sky.

Further afield, in the Galapagos I stood in awe as hundreds of blue-footed boobies dove into a bay, plunging head first, wings tucked in at the last moment before hitting the water, then bobbing up and taking off in a vortex of birds rising a hundred feet into the air before plunging again, over and over. I loved seeing Galapagos penguins swimming, zooming along beneath me as I snorkeled in a quiet bay (they can go up to 22 mph). In northeastern Australia, in the Daintree rainforest, it was a real treat to spot a rare, six-foot tall cassowary, with blue skin on its neck and a bony casque

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Birds Up Close: An Engineer Explores Their Hidden Wonders

Gibson, from preceding page

on the top of its head (cassowaries are ratites related to ostriches and emus). And at Phillips Island, roughly 90 miles from Melbourne, more penguins – little penguins – coming ashore and waddling to their burrows in the dunes above the beach at sunset.

When I was a graduate student working on the mechanics of foams, a colleague mentioned to me that he had heard that woodpeckers have a foam-like material between their skulls and brains to protect their brains from the impact of pecking. And protection certainly would seem to be something they need: they peck over and over, up to 20 times a second, and hard enough to make quite a racket. At the time, I was focused on my doctoral thesis, but I kept this in the back of my mind, thinking that one day I would look into it. After all, I love birds and specialize in the mechanical properties of foams, so how could I resist?

It turns out that there is no special foamy material protecting their brains. After studying the question, eventually I recognized that because woodpeckers have such tiny brains, they don't need the kind of protection that larger animals need. I wrote a scientific paper about this, going into more detail, and started giving talks about it – first to academic audiences, and then, in a slightly different version, to birding groups. Eventually, with MITx, I made a video series, *Built to Peck*, explaining how woodpeckers avoid brain injury when they peck. In the videos we also showed off the remarkable ornithology collection at Harvard's Museum of Comparative Zoology, which has specimens of 80% of the roughly 11,000 species of birds in the world; took a little field trip to Hall's Pond (in Brookline just over the BU bridge), named for Minna Hall, one of the founding mothers of the Massachusetts Audubon Society; and recounted the founding of Mass Audubon in 1896.

After finishing my last academic book, I began to think about writing a book for a general audience; browsing local bookstores, I noticed that while there were plenty of such books written by physicists, biologists, and mathematicians, there were few written by engineers. With my experiences with the woodpecker talk, I thought that a book about

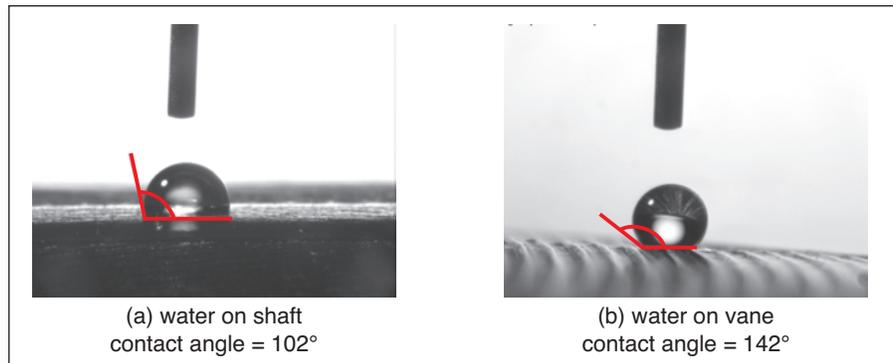
how birds work, using my background in materials science and mechanics and drawing on my love of birds, engineering and teaching, might have broad interest.

I started by reading ornithology textbooks and looking up the research findings behind the textbooks, thinking about how I could explain these ideas with what I had learned as an engineer. I quickly realized that there is a rich literature that birders would appreciate if explained well.

Think of feathers, for instance. Feathers give birds their color, from the bright red of a male cardinal to the iridescent reds and greens of

tension) as they are drawn out of the nectar and into the mouth. I used to think that sandpipers needling the wet sand at the beach were just randomly poking around, hoping to find prey. But, instead, it turns out that their needling generates waves that reflect off prey such as worms and mollusks and that pressure-sensing cells in the tips of their bills detect the resulting changes in water pressure, allowing them to find prey without touching it; ornithologists call this "remote touch."

Bird eggs come in a huge variety of colors, sizes, and shapes. A recent study of the shape of nearly 50,000 eggs has revealed that the shape



Water on a cleaned Canada goose flight feather (a) water on the shaft, (b) water on the vane. The increased contact angle and water repellency of the vane is due to the microscopic structure of the feather. [Photos taken by Drs. Isaac Cabrera and Geetha Berera.]

ruby-throated hummingbirds. Feathers keep birds warm and dry: down provides excellent insulation against heat loss; and water really does roll off a duck's back. Feathers form the aerodynamic shape of the wing, enabling flight. A barn owl's flight feathers suppress sound, allowing it to fly nearly silently, while its ruff feathers reflect and focus sound into its ears, enabling the owl to hunt in total darkness by sound alone. The two chapters of the book on feathers explain how their remarkable properties arise from their microscopic structure.

Bird bones are especially lightweight yet structurally efficient. The long bones in birds tend to be thinner walled, relative to their diameter, than those in mammals. Some are hollow, acting as reservoirs for air in the respiratory system. And many (e.g., vertebrae, pelvic bones) are fused together making them more rigid than the equivalent separate bones found in mammals.

Bird bills and tongues can be highly specialized. Hummingbirds, for instance, draw nectar into their bills with unusual split tongues with tiny fringes at the tips that open up when immersed in nectar, but that close up into tubes (from surface

of an egg is determined, at least in part, by the flight ability of a species: for two species of the same size, with eggs of the same volume, the species that is the more aerodynamic flier has narrower pelvis, and a narrower and longer egg, than a species that is a poorer flier.

It's hard not to be in awe of bird flight: the speed and maneuverability of a peregrine falcon that kills a pigeon by hitting it in mid-air, then catches it in its talons before the pigeon hits the ground; the hovering of hummingbirds that allows them to even fly backwards; and the dancing through the sky of thousands of starlings in a murmuration.

It is my hope that the book will give birders and others interested in natural history a new perspective on the wonder of birds. You can learn more about the book and watch the woodpecker video at www.birdsupclose.org.

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The Freedom of the University: A History in Eleven Quotations

Ghachem, from page 1

(1) “Scholars want to use the state and its support to work effectively toward their goals within the larger language area; they do not want to recognize the more circumscribed borders of the state as their own. ... Governments ... fear that scholarly and scientific associations extending beyond their borders might promote an indifference toward the state itself.”

Friedrich Schleiermacher, “Occasional Thoughts on German Universities in the German Sense” (1808), in **The Rise of the Research University: A Sourcebook**, ed. Louis Menand, Paul Reitter, and Chad Wellmon (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 51.

(2) “The state must always remain aware that it cannot and will not acquire on its own the scientific and scholarly knowledge it wants; in fact, that it is never anything but an impediment as soon as it meddles directly in the production of knowledge. ... [The state] has to ensure that [faculty] have the freedom they need to be effective. Not only does the state threaten this freedom, but so do the [higher education] institutions themselves, especially soon after being founded, when they adopt a certain stance and try to keep other perspectives from emerging. The state must work to prevent the disadvantages that arise from such one-sidedness.”

Wilhelm von Humboldt, “On the Internal Structure of the University of Berlin and its Relationship to Other Organizations” (1809), in *The Rise of the Research University*, 109, 111.

(3) “The term ‘academic freedom’ has traditionally had two applications – to the freedom of the teacher and to that of the student, *Lehrfreiheit* and *Lernfreiheit*. It need scarcely be pointed out that the freedom which is the subject of this report is that of the teacher. ... An inviolable refuge from [the] tyranny [of public opinion] should be found in the university. It should be an intellectual experiment station, where new ideas may germinate and where their fruit, though still distasteful to the community as a whole, may be allowed to ripen until finally, perchance, it may become a part of the accepted intellectual food of the nation or of the world.”

American Association of University Professors (AAUP), “Declaration of Principles on Academic Freedom and Academic Tenure” (1915).

(4) “There are three professions which are entitled to wear a gown: the judge, the priest, the scholar. ... [The gown] signifies the inner sovereignty of those three interrelated professions: they should be the very last to allow themselves to act under duress and yield to pressure.”

Ernst Kantorowicz, *The Fundamental Issue* (1950).

(5) “[T]he dependence of a free society on free universities ... means the exclusion of governmental intervention in the intellectual life of a university. It matters little whether such intervention occurs avowedly or through action that inevitably tends to check the ardor and fearlessness of scholars, qualities at once so fragile and so indispensable for fruitful academic labor.”

Frankfurter and Harlan, JJ., concurring in *Sweezy v. New Hampshire*, 354 U.S. 234 (1957).

(6) “[T]he Institute is vulnerable to disruption from within. ... There is no cure for our internal vulnerability. As James Madison once said, ‘Liberty is to faction what air is to fire.’ A free and open atmosphere is essential in a university. To preserve this atmosphere, two complementary conditions are needed: protection of the right to dissent and protection of the right of the university to function. ... Our institution, like other universities, is also vulnerable to external pressure. Much of our vulnerability results from our financial dependence upon the federal government. Since we are not now, and presumably never will become, an ivory-tower institution, we will always be vulnerable to outside pressure. The protection of MIT from such forces is the special responsibility of the Corporation. The Corporation’s record in this regard is one that commands respect and admiration. ... but they will need strong support, especially from MIT alumni and friends.”

“Creative Renewal: Report of the MIT Commission on Education” (1970), 67-69.

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The Freedom of the University: A History in Eleven Quotations

Ghachem, from preceding page

(7) “[I]f I see a tremendous institution like this university which serves other values which are also valuable, and I see it possibly destroyed by my pursuing a particular moral line, then I have a moral conflict and have to make a choice. ... And since I put such a high value on this oasis of an effort to preserve human reason and the free act of inquiry in a world that has never known many such institutions and never will have very many, then I would sacrifice all kinds of things in order to preserve it.”

Interview of a University of Chicago faculty member by Donald Light, Jr. (1970s), published in *The Dynamics of University Protest*, by Donald Light, Jr. and John Spiegel (Chicago, IL: Nelson-Hall, 1977), 119.

(8) “The Catholic University of America cherishes academic freedom, but academic freedom is not an absolute. Academic freedom may be limited by the religious aims of the institution, as the committee notes, and by the peculiar norms of the discipline. The physicist is not free to ignore the data of the laboratory. A Catholic theologian is not free to disregard Church teachings, which constitute indispensable data for Catholic theology.”

Comments from Counsel for the Administration of the Catholic University of America in the AAUP case of Charles Curran (1989).

(9) “Our primary aim as a university is to contribute to [the] historic struggle [of the poor majority in El Salvador] ... We are striving to do so as a university ... [This] demands that we strive for the greatest independence and freedom ... It is often said that the university should be impartial. We do not agree. The university should strive to be free and objective, but objectivity and freedom may demand taking sides.”

Ignacio Ellacuría, “The Challenge of the Poor Majority” (1989, trans. Philip Berryman), in *Towards a Society that Serves Its People: The Intellectual Contribution of El Salvador’s Murdered Jesuits*, ed. John Hassett and Hugh Lacey (Washington, D.C.: Georgetown University Press, 1991), 174-175.

(10) “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.”

MIT Statement on Freedom of Expression and Academic Freedom (2022).

(11) “[W]e need nothing less than a new conception of the role of the university in a free society under the First Amendment. ... If the press is the unofficial fourth branch of the system, the university is the fifth ... My highest hope would be to see our constitutional jurisprudence develop a robust principle of freedom of the university. ... [T]he value and role of the university emanate from the bedrock of American society.”

Lee C. Bollinger, *University: A Reckoning* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2026), 8-9. ■

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A Student Expulsion at MIT: Questions About the MIT Disciplinary Process

Dwaipayan Banerjee
Sally Haslanger
Nancy Kanwisher
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ON OCTOBER 8, 2025, Prahlad Iyengar, a graduate student in MIT's Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, received a notice of disciplinary expulsion from MIT. The purported basis for this rarely used sanction, the most serious punishment available to the MIT disciplinary system, was an article Prahlad had written for a student-run magazine a year earlier. This expulsion followed an earlier extreme and historically unusual disciplinary action – interim suspension – ordered, along with a campus ban on distribution of the magazine, immediately after the article was published in October 2024. At that time many groups, including the MIT chapter of AAUP, FIRE, the Scholars at Risk Network, the MIT Free Speech Alliance, and the co-founders of the MIT Council on Academic Freedom, noted that these abrupt and severe measures taken against Iyengar and the magazine raised important questions about MIT's commitment to freedom of expression and about the quality of the disciplinary process. The subsequent expulsion redoubles these concerns.

Prahlad's is a singularly dramatic case, but the failings of the disciplinary process presently in place at MIT are much broader. As Professor Marah Gubar has [written](#), “. . . to levy punishment on students engaged in a collective political protest represents a radical break with past precedent, whereby pro-Palestinian protesters have been subjected to a disproportionately harsh punishment compared to other prior groups of political protesters at MIT.” This break with precedent needs to be understood and corrected.

This article describes the grounds on which the Committee on Discipline (CoD) based its expulsion order and provides some background that brings into question the justifications for these unprecedented and punitive disciplinary actions. It identifies systemic flaws in the disciplinary system that were not adequately addressed by recent committee reports, and suggests that addressing these irregularities requires a fresh faculty review of the entire disciplinary process.

The grounds for Prahlad Iyengar's expulsion

Prahlad Iyengar's disciplinary expulsion from MIT was a response to the article “On Pacifism” published on October 28, 2024, in [Volume 5 of *Written Revolution*](#). (The zine *Written Revolution* is not formally affiliated with MIT.) The theme of this issue was “Honoring History, Shaping History.” Its contents reflected this broad theme:

- The Khan Younis massacre of 1956 https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Khan_Yunis_massacre
- A comparison of struggles for independence in Algeria and in Kashmir with that in Palestine
- A report and letter from several MIT student organizations on state-sponsored violence in the Chittagong Hill Tracts in Bangladesh
- Two pages of photographic artwork
- A call for an end to the Israeli system of Apartheid, occupation, and terror

- An essay on “Sustaining yourself through a revolution”
- A poem “Who should I save”
- The essay “On Pacifism” by Prahlad Iyengar

In this essay, Prahlad reflects on the actions taken by activists across the world in opposing immoral uses of authority. He voices his personal frustration at the paucity of results to date of the extensive, impassioned, and carefully considered anti-genocide protest movement at MIT – a movement that had already resulted in substantial disciplinary consequences for many. In this light, he appears as a classic figure, a young idealist disappointed by what his movement has been able to achieve. The essay is a cry from the heart, following the author's encounter with Ward Churchill's 1986 [Pacifism as Pathology](#). Churchill's thesis is that an approach of limited disruption, as an overall strategy, plays into the hands of the existing power structure; by adopting it, one simply enables the status quo. Iyengar sees this exemplified in the standard procedure for organizing a protest – carefully controlling the danger participants expose themselves to, dutifully recording the expected police excesses, preparing rousing speeches and banners. The entire essay is a painful re-examination of the author's previously held beliefs in “strategic pacifism,” and the consideration of an alternative strategy of “wreaking havoc.”

It is important to keep in mind what Prahlad did not do in his essay: he did not

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call for any specific action at the Institute, nor target any specific person. The purpose was to reflect on lessons from events in the past, especially within historical liberation movements, and compare these situations to the student movement for Palestine, including at MIT. He wrote an article. He exercised his right to freedom of expression. For simply expressing his ideas about political strategy, he received the maximum penalty from the MIT Committee on Discipline.

The CoD supported its interpretation of “On Pacifism” as inciting violence at MIT by referring to some of the artwork appearing in the same issue of *Written Revolution*, asserting that it somehow “reinforced” the “intimidating message” of the article. Of course, the inclusion and placement of these images was not a choice of Prahlad’s alone – it was a collaborative decision by the editors of this issue – but he is being singled out for punishment.

The Committee referred to two images. The first was the annual PFLP [Land Day](#) poster from 2024. Some background helps here. The Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine was founded in 1967, following the war during which Israel completed its occupation of historic Palestine. Between 1968 and 1993, it was part of the PLO. It was designated in 1997 by the US as a Foreign Terrorist Organization. The PFLP has always had a strong cultural component, and scores of striking PFLP prints can be found on the web, many by the well-known Swiss artist Marc Rudin. The one appearing in WR is [here](#), for example.

The second image was not a PFLP production, contrary to the CoD’s assertion, but rather [artwork](#) produced by American artist Mike Flugennock. Dating from 2014, it refers to three events from the summer of that year: the police killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; the abduction of 43 students from a teachers’ school in Mexico; and the 2014 Israeli attack on Gaza during which almost 100,000 homes were destroyed and more

than 2000 Palestinians killed. It supported the theme of the issue, bringing together diverse struggles for justice across the world.

Reactions to Iyengar’s suspension in November 2024

Prahlad’s expulsion followed – by almost a full year – an earlier “[interim suspension](#).” This mechanism enables the MIT administration to impose sanctions immediately, without due process or faculty involvement. It is an emergency measure, originally intended “to protect the intellectual integrity, health, safety, wellbeing, or educational or working experience of the campus community.” This was indeed the historical norm, but dozens of these preemptory measures were put in place between November 2023 and November 2024, invariably directed at students calling attention to the Israeli genocide in Gaza and to MIT’s complicity with it but posing no clear and present danger to the MIT community. We refer to Marah Gubar’s [article in the Faculty Newsletter](#) for an historical account of the unprecedented abuse of the interim suspension process by the MIT administration in its efforts to suppress pro-Palestinian speech. The effect of these “interim” measures was often dramatic. In Prahlad’s case, it resulted in his being banned from campus and losing his housing and his NSF support.

Reaction to Prahlad’s suspension – a sanction far less severe than his eventual expulsion – was immediate and widespread. The MIT chapter of AAUP wrote an [open letter](#) calling on MIT to reverse this disciplinary action as lacking due process and taking Prahlad’s “nuanced and historically grounded arguments” out of context. Professors Alex Byrne and Brad Skow, co-founders of MIT Council on Academic Freedom, end [a piece](#) for the November/December 2024 issue of the *MIT Faculty Newsletter* as follows: “Opaque efforts to punish student publications for printing controversial essays undermine free expression, and the sanctions against *Written Revolution* should be lifted.”

Expressions of dismay were not restricted to MIT. The Committee on Academic Freedom of the Middle East Studies Association, MESA, wrote a [public letter](#) to President Kornbluth and others, criticizing the harshness of this suspension. In December, The Foundation for Individual Rights and Expression, FIRE, wrote a [letter](#) to President Kornbluth demanding explanations for this disciplinary action, calling attention to the fact that “there is no indication that the article did produce any lawless action.” The Scholars at Risk Network [wrote](#) about it with alarm. A [detailed article](#) about Prahlad’s suspension appeared in *Inside Higher Education*.

Violations of MIT’s policies and committee rulings

The *Written Revolution* article is clearly speech protected by the First Amendment. But it is also protected by MIT stated policy. In 2022, after much deliberation, the MIT faculty promulgated the [MIT Statement on Freedom of Expression and Academic Freedom](#). It contains the following language:

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

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

The “Ad Hoc Committee on Freedom of Expression and Academic Freedom” (CAFCE) was constituted with the mandate to translate this statement into actionable policy. This committee deliberated on the issues presented by *Written Revolution* 5. The [CAFCE website](#) contains a statement that expresses no opinion whatsoever about the article itself. It concludes, however, with this:

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Regarding “On Pacifism,” CAFCE believes that it is not permissible for an MIT-recognized student organization to publish imagery linked to groups currently designated as terrorist organizations by the U.S. State Department in an MIT-affiliated publication in the context of advocacy.

The CAFCE statement regarding publication of this image is tendentious, and advocates an illegitimate restriction of speech on campus. Invoking this designation of PFLP suggests that the editors of *Written Revolution*, and MIT itself (based on the erroneous belief that the magazine is a recognized MIT organization), are at risk of being charged with providing “material support for a terrorist organization.” This statement confuses the magazine *Written Revolution* with a student group of the same name; the magazine has no official affiliation with MIT. The statement is a complete misrepresentation of the law and all existing applications of it. FIRE has an [excellent article](#) on this.

Two reports

On January 3, 2024, President Sally Kornbluth and Corporation Chair Mark Gorenberg requested that the Corporation Risk and Audit Committee (RAC) study the MIT disciplinary system, considering the volume of political speech cases it faced since the fall of 2023. The charge noted that “Community members have questioned ... the lengthy duration of the disciplinary process, its lack of transparency, and its rigid confidentiality rules, among other issues.” As Prahlad’s case was to show, these are serious issues. The requested report appeared on October 11, and Faculty Chair Mary Fuller immediately convened [the Student Discipline Working Group](#), SDWG, charged with responding to this report and its proposals, naming Professor Andrew Whittle as chair. Following demands from the faculty, the charge of this faculty committee “was broadened to look at all aspects of the faculty-led

student discipline system, including examining any potential bias.” The report was expected by the end of IAP 2025. A preliminary version was circulated on March 4, but the final report was only released in the middle of exam period in May 2025 and attracted little notice.

The SDWG report correctly pushes back on attempts embedded in the RAC proposals to increase the administrative control of the disciplinary process. But it largely failed to conduct a broader investigation of the student disciplinary system. At its core one finds a fundamental confusion, a version of the confusion of the notions of “safety” and “comfort.”

Title VI of the Civil Rights Act requires that MIT take measures to prevent “discrimination based on race, color, or national origin.” This is not the same as ensuring an environment free from challenges to one’s beliefs. This point is driven home in a [landmark decision](#) from October, 2025. In this decision the U.S. Court of Appeals for the First Circuit affirmed a lower court decision in favor of MIT in a suit alleging that MIT had insufficiently cracked down on discriminatory harassment by pro-Palestinian protesters. The Court affirmed that speech “cannot be restricted simply because it is upsetting or arouses contempt.”

But let us be clear: the pro-Palestinian protesters did in fact work to create a welcoming environment in the MIT encampment and at their rallies. [Videos](#) show their calm acceptance of counter-protesters harassing them. They actively engaged with anyone in the MIT community in discussion. No academic institution can mean by “a welcoming environment” one that is free of challenges to received opinions.

Both the RAC and the SDWG met several stakeholders, including “student leaders.” But neither committee heard directly from any student actually caught up in the tortuous disciplinary process nor from any faculty or others involved in the defense of these students. This avoidance of the evidence of the many failures in the system limits the reports’ utility in seeking constructive ways to make the system fairer.

The SDWG report ends by reassuring us that the existing disciplinary processes were “. . . ultimately effective in resolving cases in accordance with historical precedent and community values.” This statement is incorrect, as proven by the research of Professor Gubar.

Systemic failures of the disciplinary system

Actions of the MIT disciplinary system in response to political speech during the 2023–2025 period reveal serious flaws, and suggest the need for a careful study by the faculty. The egregious response to Prahlad Iyengar’s writing is in itself cause for concern, but the problems are much broader. The RAC and SDWG reports fail to address these problems.

The [Sixth Amendment](#) of the United States Constitution states: “In all criminal prosecutions, the accused shall enjoy the right to a speedy and public trial, . . . ; to be confronted with the witnesses against him; to have compulsory process for obtaining witnesses in his favor, . . .” While university disciplinary proceedings differ from courtroom trials, restrictions on rights demand justification. We note two dramatic restrictions on these rights in the existing CoD process. First, of course, the utter failure, in Prahlad’s case, of a speedy resolution of his case. He was left in suspense for a full year, a critical time in a graduate student’s life.

The existing CoD process also lacks the opportunity to confront witnesses bringing accusations. Many of the cases brought against students in the past two years have involved allegations of discrimination and harassment by community members. These accusations reflect personal reactions to a situation. It is possible to provide the accused student of this critical element of their defense without revealing the identity of the accuser. For instance, questions can be submitted in writing prior to a hearing, or (as has been CoD practice in the past in sexual harassment cases) accuser and accused can be in separate rooms with only sound connected and the accused can address questions to the accuser.

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The relationship between the IDHR and the CoD needs to be clarified. IDHR was created to address Title IX issues, not to adjudicate questions of academic freedom. As the [IDHR website](#) makes clear, it is not designed to deal with cases of political speech, in which intellectual content plays a prominent role. A thorough study should determine whether, how, and when IDHR participation in CoD complaints is appropriate.

As it currently stands the IDHR process is grievously flawed. The interviews with students – allegedly designed to ensure that students know their rights and understand the system – were often experienced as hostile interrogations, characterized by leading questions and insulting invitations to disavow or justify actions. Students report that complaints made to the IDHR often do not receive any response at all, in direct contradiction to stated policy. This general problem became more acute in the fall of 2023 when large numbers of complaints of infractions against pro-Palestinian protesters in November 2023 were ignored. See [this report](#). As far as we know, not a single complaint arising from violence by counter-protesters resulted in CoD action. This serious bias was addressed by a [Faculty Newsletter editorial](#).

A further failure of the CoD process, especially pronounced in cases of political speech, is its narrow focus on “bad behavior,” discounting the reality that the accused is a student and part of our community. This approach leaves no room for discussion of activities that provide a fuller picture of this individual. In Prahlad’s case, for example, the CoD ignores his remarkable work with the MIT [SPOCs4Gaza](#) project, starting in the fall of 2024. This project, supported by MIT OpenLearning, has brought high quality educational opportunities to hundreds of students in the Gaza Strip or displaced from Gaza to Cairo. The courseware is accompanied by intensive support provided by scores of MIT stu-

dents. It was Prahlad who saw the potential for this transformative communal effort. He was lead TA in two of the courses and wrote numerous powerful letters of recommendation. He conducted a [series of interviews](#) with program par-

As it currently stands the IDHR process is grievously flawed. The interviews with students – allegedly designed to ensure that students know their rights and understand the system – were often experienced as hostile interrogations . . .

ticipants, published in another issue of *Written Revolution*. There is no evidence suggesting that Prahlad’s work as a student was part of deliberations.

The process of identifying potential rules violators also needs reform. There is a repeated pattern of “rounding up the usual suspects.” Often, a student was served notice of having violated some regulation, when in fact he or she had nothing to do with the alleged conduct. These students were often highly vulnerable to persecution because of visa issues or other constraints. Such casual accusations had a profound impact on these students and had the effect of warning them to “behave.” Yet neither the SDWG Report nor the RAC Report suggests steps that would remedy this situation.

A call to action

While recognizing the usefulness of the SDWG and RAC reports, we see the need for a fresh, comprehensive, historically rooted, and broadly consultative task force on discipline. We call upon the Chair of the Faculty to convene a task force on campus discipline empowered with examining all aspects of the process. This review should include a study of IDHR and [OSCCS](#) procedures and how they have been used since October 2023. It should include an historical review of changes made to CoD process in the last decade. It should define a way to ensure confidentiality while protecting the right of the accused to question their accuser. Students and concerned faculty, e.g., advisors to students undergoing disciplinary procedures, should be interviewed to

provide perspective on the actual impact of MIT disciplinary proceedings on them. The makeup and regulations of the Committee on Discipline should be examined. Moreover, the conditions under which it is legitimate to impose

interim suspensions and who should be involved in considering such suspensions should be examined and clarified, with special attention to potential conflicts of interest. The role of historical precedents in judgments should be examined to prevent unfair determination of cases in a particular moment.

We also strongly endorse the urgent need, expressed by Professor Gubar in her *Faculty Newsletter* piece, for a faculty review of the narrowing of permissible modes of free expression embedded in the “time, place, and manner” restrictions added to the *Rules and Regulations* by the MIT administration over the summer of 2024 without any faculty input. Allowing the administration power to revise policy and impose discipline without oversight by faculty violates core principles of faculty governance.

The issues raised by Prahlad Iyengar’s expulsion and the disciplinary hearings of 2023-24 demand a broad review of the disciplinary process to ensure consistent, equal protection of all who come before the CoD. ■

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Where is Your Memory? On Historical Amnesia, Selective Moral Disengagement, and Reality-Bending

Michel DeGraff

MIT PROFESSOR YOSSE SHEFFI'S article in the November/December issue of the *MIT Faculty Newsletter* is a spectacular case study in the use and mis-use of language for reality-bending mirror accusations – yet another “textbook case of genocide denial and selective moral disengagement,” to quote from a recent [article](#) in the *Lancet* by Roberto De Vogli, Jonathan Montomoli, Ghassan Abu-Sittah and Ilan Pappé.

Sheffi's article is titled: “[Where Are You? On Selective Outrage and Moral Credibility](#)” and is a clear demonstration of Sheffi's own selective outrage and lack of moral credibility. Every accusation there is a confession.

Take, say, the very first sentence of the article: “The recent videos of Hamas executing Palestinians in Gaza were horrifying.” Indeed, they were, and so is the [history](#) leading to these executions.

But, given the title's reference to “selective outrage,” one must question whether Professor Sheffi could genuinely be unaware of the voluminous, horrifying reports – including videos – spanning over [one hundred years of settler-colonial Zionist war on Palestine](#). These reports have painstakingly documented acts by [Zionist terrorists](#), ranging from [Haganah](#), the [Irgun](#) and the [Stern Gang](#) of the 1920s to the 1940s in [Historic Palestine](#), to today's [Israel's Defense Force](#) – which, in reality, is mostly an occupation force. These acts involve the mass murder, bombing, execution, maiming and pulverization of thousands of Palestinians, predominantly children and women, in villages, hospitals, schools, universities, mosques, and so on. Such actions are part

of a sustained campaign of [genocide](#), [scholasticide](#), [domicide](#)...

Having flown planes for the [Israel's Occupation Forces for six years](#), Prof. Sheffi certainly has had a front-row seat to observe

The core linguistic strategy throughout Sheffi's piece is for him to consistently place “Israel” and “Israelis” in the grammatical role of object (as the patient at the receiving end of some adverse action) while foregrounding anti-Israel critics and Hamas as the active agents of the corresponding events.

firsthand, or at the very least hear about, some of the horrors that constitute what Israeli historian Ilan Pappé, in his book [Ten Myths about Israel](#), has called an “incremental genocide” over decades of an ongoing Nakba. Yet, looking again at the “selective outrage” part of Sheffi's title, one has got to be puzzled that the name “Hamas” occurs 14 times in a 700-word piece while “Israel” occurs six times, and genocide occurs ... nowhere! How selective is such moral engagement on the part of Yossi Sheffi? It's as if there had been no [ICJ case](#), no [UN report](#), no [Amnesty International warnings](#) about Israel's “[live-streamed genocide](#)” of Palestinians in Gaza – not even a [plausible case](#) for said genocide.

Even more striking, at least to a linguist, is the fact that, of the six occurrences of “Israel” and its derivatives or larger phrases that contain them (“Israeli civilians,” “Israel's every move”...),

- four are in object positions, undergoing actions denoted by verbs such as “tortured,” “denounce,” “[outrage] directed at,” “condemns”;

- one is part of the compound adjective “anti-Israel” in “anti-Israel outlets”; and

- one is in a symmetric position vis-à-vis Palestinians in “the right of all civilians – Israeli and Palestinian alike – to live free from terror.”

The core linguistic strategy throughout Sheffi's piece is for him to consistently place “Israel” and “Israelis” in the grammatical role of object (as the patient at the receiving end of some adverse action) while foregrounding anti-Israel critics and Hamas as the active agents of the corresponding events. This rhetorical positioning – making Israel the object of verbs like “torture,” “denounce,” “condemns,” etc. – systematically obscures Israeli agency and reinforces the narrative of Israelis, not Palestinians, as “[perfect](#)

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victims” while simultaneously rendering Palestinian suffering as an agentless event occurring in (quasi) happenstance. To wit, Sheffi’s strategic use of the passive verbal form “caught” in “Gazans caught in the crossfire,” as if the Israeli occupation forces’ innumerable crimes against humanity (genocide, scholasticide, domicile...) were all collateral damage of “crossfire” in which Palestinians are inadvertently “caught.”

In effect, Sheffi manages a linguistic tour de force that puts all but one occurrences of “Israel” and its word- and phrase-level derivatives in propositions that describe Israelis as utterly powerless victims who helplessly suffer the impact of negative actions by Palestinians and their allies near and far. The one exception is the proposition whereby Israelis and Palestinians are claimed to equally share the right “to live free from terror” – as if, it’s Israelis, and not Palestinians, who are being decimated in an ongoing genocide by a racist supremacist ethno-state.

In a related vein, Sheffi’s use of “anti-Israel” and “anti-Zionism” is particularly noteworthy as a rhetorical maneuver, as it represents what I’ve called the “[most insidious manipulation of words and concepts](#)” in creating fog around a genocide: these phrases seek to condemn any legitimate critique of Israel as “antisemitism,” thereby conveniently [diverting](#) attention from Israel’s genocidal actions by labeling its critics as bigots. Here it’s fortunate that recent rulings in Federal courts in [Stand With Us. v. MIT](#), [Sussman v. MIT](#), and against [Homeland Security](#) have consistently protected our First Amendment rights, including what [Judge Richard G. Stearns](#) calls “[anti-Israel sentiment](#),” against the [weaponization](#) of accusations of “antisemitism.”

Now let’s look at the 14 occurrences of “ Hamas ” and phrases that contain “ Hamas . ” These occurrences denote the agent of actions such as:

- “executing”
- “murdered, raped, and tortured”
- “firing [...] and carrying out public executions [...]”
- “control”
- “Perpetrators”
- “reign of terror”
- “information filters”
- “Crimes”
- “Atrocities”

Then there are two occurrences where Hamas is in object position – object of “demanding accountability from” and “excuses” (as in “A double standard that condemns Israel, but excuses Hamas”).

Inspired by MIT alum Holly Jackson’s analysis of “[anti-Palestinian bias in US news coverage](#)” (a topic discussed in my Fall 2024 People’s Seminar on “[Language and linguistics for decolonization and liberation in Haiti, Palestine and Israel](#)”), I observe that Sheffi consistently uses active-voice predicates and a dehumanizing and highly emotive lexicon – such as “executing,” “murdered, raped, and tortured,” and “reign of terror” – only when referring to Hamas. This linguistic pattern is a textbook example of what I have analyzed as the “[weaponization of language](#).” In their systematic denial of Palestinian humanity, Israeli leaders and their allies have employed terms like “beasts walking on two legs” and “children of darkness.” Such dehumanization is a prerequisite for the atrocities committed by Israelis, which Sheffi conveniently omits from his account, which amounts to a phenomenon that psychoanalysts [Lara and Stephen Sheehi](#) have called the “[Zionist reality-bending](#)” of mirror-accusations.

In Prof. Sheffi’s narrative, and in contradistinction with powerless Israelis who are tortured, denounced and condemned, it’s Hamas, and Hamas alone, that has the exclusive power to execute, murder, rape, torture, filter information, and commit crimes, atrocities and terror. From the River to the Sea?

How selective is that when talking about an organization like Hamas that’s been called, [controversially](#), “[a creation of Israel](#)” whose goal was to counter the

Palestine Liberation Organization (P.L.O.) and undermine Palestinian unity and its resistance to Israel’s occupation? The latter’s endgame is a [Greater Israel](#) where Gaza might be turned into some sort of [Riviera](#) ethnically-cleansed of these inconvenient Palestinians who refuse to forget their native homeland. Meanwhile it’s the Hamas terrorists who are asking for an [independent investigation](#) of the war since October 7, 2023, while Israel’s army (the so called “[most moral army in the world](#)”) has banned all journalists from entering Gaza since that date and, even worse yet, this army has killed the highest number of journalists in the [recent history](#) of armed conflicts. It’s also Israel that’s [committing, advertising and covering up](#) unspeakable abuses against Palestinians, with seemingly [absolute impunity](#) – in the [West Bank](#) as well, [far away](#) from Hamas “crossfire.” But none of that is mentioned by Sheffi.

These examples of linguistic trumpetry illustrate the sort of erasure of history that anthropologist Michel-Rolph Trouillot in [Silencing the Past: Power and the Production of History](#) and philosopher Jason Stanley in [Erasing History: How Fascists Rewrite the Past to Control the Future](#) have analyzed as tools in the intellectual arsenal of colonization and fascism.

Moral credibility, anyone?

None of that should come as a surprise in light of the fact that it was Yossi Sheffi himself who, during a public [lecture](#) by an Israeli reservist hosted by the MIT Israel Alliance on September 18, 2024, accused anti-genocide students, including two women of color in the room, of “making up lies” not only about Israel military’s sexual assaults against Palestinians, but about the widespread nature of sexual assault in general. This unfounded and insulting accusation came after one of these students had questioned the speaker about [well-documented](#) instances of [sexual violence](#) in Israeli prisons. The two students of color, myself and at least one other faculty reported this incident to MIT’s Institute Discrimination and

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Harassment Response Office. I myself felt compelled to file this report after watching a video of the incident.

Sheffi's denial of sexual violence by Israeli occupation forces against Palestinians aligns with his earlier insistence that MIT faculty should not regret collaborating with convicted child sex offender Jeffrey Epstein. As documented in the MIT Faculty Meeting [minutes](#), Sheffi's ethical calculus suggests that multiple wrongs make one right, and that the end (or the bottom line?) justifies the means (Epstein's gifts), based on Sheffi's premise that "there are very few angels among big-time donors and other organizations who fund research."

However, it is particularly egregious that he would accuse an entire generation of MIT students – some of them under his instruction – of "making up lies" about sexual violence. This accusation is leveled despite the fact that these two female students at the IDF soldier's lecture were accurately reporting violence that has been thoroughly documented by prominent human rights organizations, both within and outside Israel.

In yet another feat of reality-bending mirror accusations, Sheffi also misrepresents campus movements such as the MIT Coalition for Palestine (MIT C4P) when he describes their movement as "selective outrage that weakens moral credibility" and "a double-standard that condemns Israel" and when he writes:

"If the campus movements that mobilized under banners of 'liberation,' 'human rights,' and 'resistance' truly cared for Gazans, they would be protesting now. They would be demanding accountability from Hamas."

This is yet another classic example of "language as weapon" where the students' ethical use of terms like "liberation," "human rights," and "resistance" are tendentiously overloaded with inflammatory, eliminationist interpreta-

tions in order to manufacture psychological discomfort and to silence legitimate pro-Palestine advocacy and anti-genocide and anti-apartheid political dissent. Sheffi misrepresents MIT C4P students', including [MIT Jews for Collective Liberation's](#), agenda toward freedom and justice for all – Palestinians and Israeli Jews alike – from the River to the Sea.

Be that as it may, what we need to ask, in light of Sheffi's reproach to the students, is: What reasonable demands can students make of Hamas leadership fighting a nuclear-powered genocidal empire bent on infiltrating and weakening Palestinian resistance and to sew division from the inside? Sheffi seems to have forgotten the claims that Israel too [contributed](#) to the emergence and ascendance of Hamas in order to undermine Palestinian unity. This divide-and-conquer strategy failed since, as noted by Historian Rashid Khalidi in his essay "[The neck and the sword](#)," Palestinian solidarity, in Palestine and beyond, has now become stronger than ever.

Meanwhile, one of the main objectives of the students' movement has always been to contribute to a Free Palestine by "demanding accountability" *locally from our own MIT and from MIT faculty, like Yossi Sheffi, whose work contributes to Israel's genocide in Gaza. Indeed, since October 2023, the students have been asking for an end to MIT's complicity with what Amnesty International has called a "live-streamed genocide."* To that end, the students have published a most comprehensive research primer on said complicity, [MIT Science for Genocide](#), and a recent article "[Engineering for Genocide](#)" – to help document this complicity. The MIT C4P students have alerted us to "MIT's complicity with merchants of death":

"Firms that sell and transport weapons to Israel also recruit from MIT and enter institutional collaborations with the university – Lockheed Martin, Maersk, Boeing, BAE Systems, Northrop Grumman, Caterpillar, General Dynamics, and L3Harris."

MIT C4P is certainly not the only group [worried](#) about Maersk [delivering](#) military cargo to Israel. So Sheffi's long-standing [collaboration](#) with Maersk to help optimize its operations, including a [collaboration](#) with the port of Ashdod, stands in stark contrast to his unsubstantiated accusation that the students don't really care for Gazans. Maersk is among the "merchants of death" that, according to U.N. Rapporteur Francesca Albanese, derive immense profits from "the [economy of genocide](#)" in Gaza by "sustaining a steady flow of US-supplied military equipment post-October 2023." Unlike the students, who have no collaboration whatsoever with Hamas (despite [slander](#) from Israeli [propagandist](#) historians like Ute Deichmann of Ben-Gurion University), Sheffi [maintains](#), and is even [proud](#) of, his relationship with a company that aids and abets genocide. His collaboration with Maersk quite literally speeds up the shipment of weapons to Israel. This complicity is particularly notable given MIT President Sally Kornbluth's use of the adjective "[vibrant](#)" to describe this sort of collaboration, seemingly ignoring MIT's own "[red lights](#)" and "[elevated risks](#)" principles intended to prevent complicity with entities engaged in human-rights violations.

Sheffi, thus, seems to have failed to notice that his own title applies much more so to himself than to those he aims at critiquing. His is "selective outrage" on steroids – better known as "[implicatory denial](#)" or "[cognitive dissonance](#)" or, more simply, "historical amnesia," "selective empathy" and "selective moral disengagement." In order to help cure these, I'd like to recommend these texts which I've used in analyzing the [reality-bending allegations](#) against me in the Sussman v. MIT lawsuit:

- Nurit Peled-Elhanan's "[Education or Mind Infection](#)"
- Stanley Cohen's [States of Denial. Knowing about Atrocities and Suffering](#) on different levels of denial

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- Benjamin Lieberman’s *Terrible Fate: Ethnic Cleansing in the Making of Modern Europe* on cognitive dissonance among those who commit atrocities
- Lara and Stephen Sheehi’s *Psychoanalysis Under Occupation: Practicing Resistance in Palestine* on “reality-bending” in settler-colonial Zionism.

In closing, let’s adapt and transform a sentence from Sheffi’s article into one that seems more urgent than the original:

“Outrage that ignores [Israel’s genocide of Palestinians in Gaza and our own complicity in this genocide] is ideology [and greed] masquerading as empathy.”

In his book, *Selected Empathy: The West through the Gaze of Gaza*, Roberto de Vogli argues that the West’s indifference to

Gazan suffering is not due to a lack of knowledge or a universal failure of empathy. Instead, it is a “self-serving, tribal, and parochial” emotional response – “selective empathy” – that reserves compassion for the “in-group” based on factors like race or nationality, while denying it to the “out-group.” This biased, prejudiced, and exceptionalist “us versus them” mentality explains the absence of collective outrage at the ongoing genocide.

If Sheffi does care about universal empathy, universal morality and so on, without self-serving reality-bending, then it’s time for him to join the MIT C4P students’ high ground of moral credibility and to muster “the courage to confront evil wherever it occurs and to speak out, even when it challenges one’s preferred narratives [and bottom-line].”

Sheffi might well respond to me as he did to the students who are protesting his complicity with merchants of death. He might appeal to “academic freedom” and tell me “Go fly a kite!” To this I’ll respond: How about academic freedom denied by Israel’s *scholasticide* in Gaza? How about

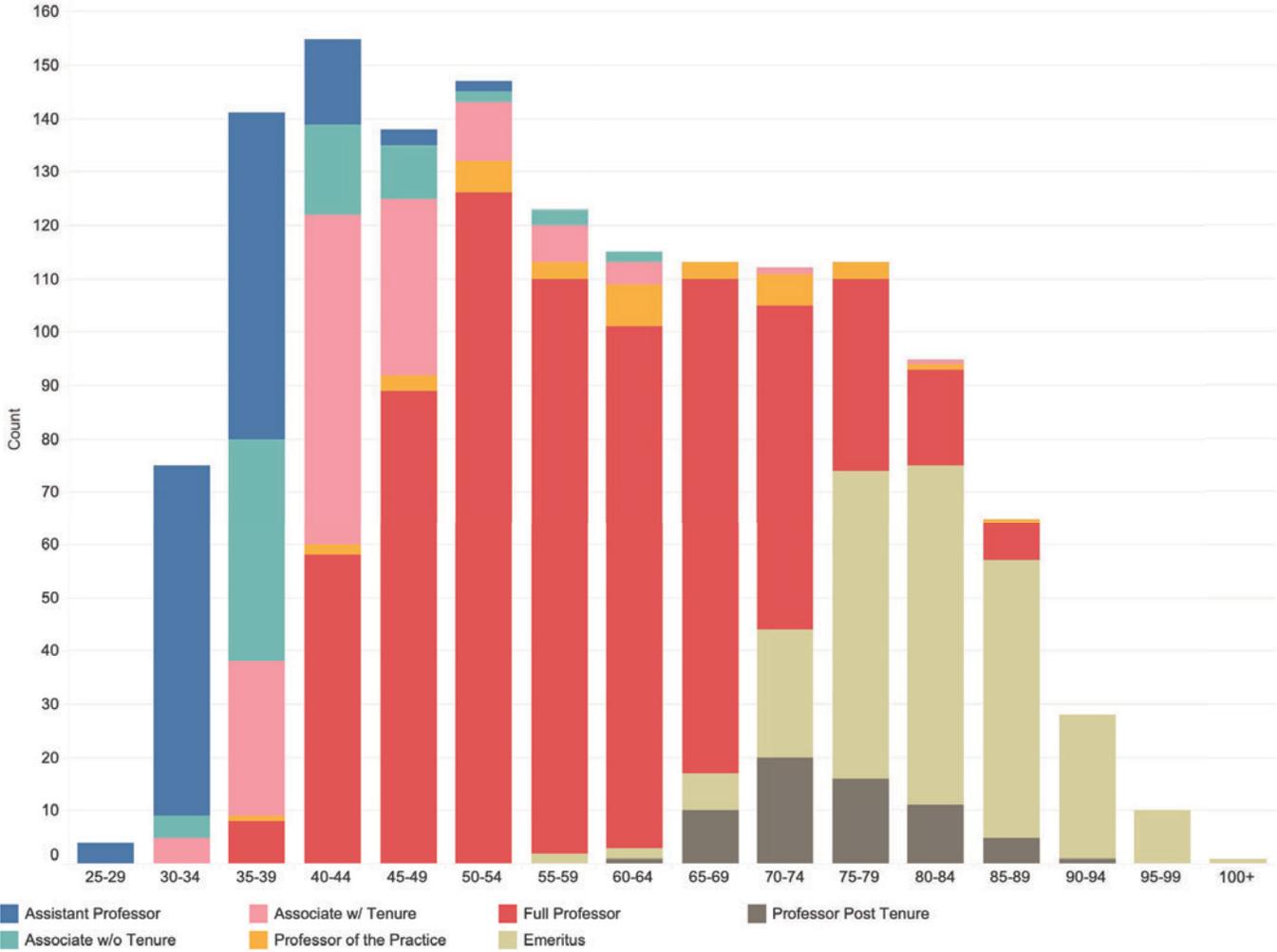
Gazan children’s freedom to be children? Why can’t they too *fly kites* without any *risk* of being *martyred* by Israeli snipers, drones, missiles or bombs? Their kites should not be final tales of martyrdom, but hopeful images of angels bringing back love, as in the poem “If I must die,” written by Palestinian poet Refaat Alareer before he, his brother Salah Alareer, Salah’s son, Muhammad, his sister, Asmaa Alareer, and her three children, Alaa, Yahia and Mohammad, were all murdered in Gazea City in December 2023 – “*caught in the crossfire*” (?) of yet another targeted criminal airstrike by Israel’s occupation forces.

Please, Prof. Sheffi, now is time for you too to speak up against the genocide and to cut your ties with Maersk, a company whose hands are red from the blood of the thousands and thousands of innocent civilians who have been martyred in Gaza by *military hardware* whose *components Maersk helps transport*. ■

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MIT Numbers

MIT Faculty Age Distribution



Source: Office of the Provost/Institutional Research