Committee on Student Life (CSL)  
Friday, April 22, 2011  
Room 12-196 1pm – 2pm  
Minutes taken by Lisa Stagnone  
FINAL

**Present:** Alex Slocum, Enectali Figueroa, Barbara Baker, Lizhong Zheng, Robin Deits

**Guests:** Brian Spatocco (GSC), Allan Miramonti (UA)

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**TOPIC:** If Students Were Running MIT They Would...

UA rep, Allan Miramonti, is our guest today from the UA. Stated that If Students were running MIT they would change the interactive decision making process between administration and students. For example, one subject that was referenced was the dining plan. Robin Deits agreed with this statement saying that it’s frustrating not to be told the details of a decision when it effects them. They, as students, are scientist in training. They are taught to gather data, decipher and manipulate as part of the process. They cannot value these decisions as good or bad without experiencing the process of decision making. How can they feel good about the results? Scientist and engineers need to touch and feel what they are working with in order to understand and accept.

Tali Figueroa stated that students are busy people. They are busy until they hear that a decision has been made. Once a decision has been made they become outraged because they weren’t aware that this issue was out for discussion and being moved on. However, these topics have been in discussion but they were just too busy to get involved. Their response is to now demand all of the information that has been gathered through past research to come to this decision. This is the time that students get involved. Everyone is busy until something is being changed.

It’s been stated that students feel that there is a conspiracy theory. When they are busy, projects are being assessed; decisions made when they are working on finals. The timing seems to coincide with their busiest times or when they are about to leave.

Alex Slocum tells us that students in general are told what’s going on. He believes that the administration tries to be sensitive to the students but they aren’t sensitive enough. Maybe if the administration got technology behind them, everyone could be well informed (tweets, emails, blogs).

Brian Spatocco, our guest from the GSC, stated the he is on the Walker Memorial Committee and has been experiencing a positive relationship between the GSC and Administration. They are very happy with the openness and progress he has witnessed. They are involved and feel that they have been supported.

Lizhong Zheng recognizes that students are busy. Why bother them at this time when no decisions have been made yet? Have administration do the background work needed in these situations and then, after that, when things progress to the next stage, then bring students in and ask for feedback. Too much needs to happen behind closed doors in order to get to the point of asking for feedback. Not everyone should be involved in every step of the process. You should not disturb students in the beginning stages.
Robin Deits does not support this belief. He believes the students should be involved in everything at the beginning of the process.

Alex Slocum asked should we upset the “herd” at the beginning of everything the administration considers? What is worse; Upsetting the herd or scaring them to stampede with a BOO!? Students feel that as long as the administration is open they feel fine with administration first doing feasibility studies and then telling students what is being considered. However, we can’t let things go from hypothetical to decision too quickly. Too often now it seems we have a full study done, proposals completed, money committed, students then alerted and by then it’s too late for really effective student input.

Alex Slocum recommends the phase gate model used in industry. The Administration can look at anything behind closed doors. After a fixed number of person hours spent though, bring student leaders in to discuss the project. After that point, Administration can make an announcement that they are now prepared to go to the next step forward. A written development process is required, and this process should be created by a team from Administration and student government.

Students agreed with this approach. They stated that they may not need to know every bit of the process but before things are implemented they need to be brought in. Decision are made too fast.

It was noted by Tali Figueroa that, as with dining, this was discussed for years. Who was paying attention to it then? There is a balance to achieve. Scaring the herd, and/or too much involvement, isn’t right either. We need to change internal philosophy at MIT, not tweek it.

Robin Deits stated that having students fail once in a while can be helpful and viewed as part of the learning process. They can come to agreement on issues whether good or bad and have to learn from them.

Brian Spatocco stated that GSC level, we work with administration and said it’s not us versus them. When dealing with administration, it feels more like brainstorming. Capital expenses and Resource Development they are now working together. Used to be at one at a time, now it’s a parallel system. This makes me scared.

**TASK for Brian Spatocco:** Time line of issues/projects the GSC has worked on with Administration in order to use to build trust between UA and Administration.

Barbara Baker stated that the UA calendar needs to be taken in to consideration. Writing proposals is a big part of the process. We start at the beginning of the term. By the end of term, proposals are looked at and due to timing and other facts they get pushed further into the term. By then it seems that everyone’s leaving for break or finals so it looks like it is being done intentionally, however it just happens like that. Every time seems like a bad time on a students’ calendar. People are busy. The reality is that these projects are being worked on all year long. It’s not a plot. It’s nobody’s fault. It just happens.
Brian Spatocco and the GSC came prepared with three agenda items to put forth for discussion:

- Short term  (#1) Child Care
- Medium term  (#2) Affordable Housing
- Long term  (#3) Community Center for Graduate Students

**#1) Child Care:** Structurally and culturally, it doesn’t look good for grad students. Women and faculty report that tenure tracking is down due to the fact that they are taking away scholarship money for child care as well as international spouse cannot work. They are allowing $25,000 to raise family. They advertise to bring grad students in but don’t support it. Child care is not treated as a carat to bring students with families in. It’s subsidized to $13,000 per year for child care.

They are phasing out scholarships for grad students when the demand is increasing. People can’t afford child care and can’t find it. It should be considered when we are building new buildings. Also to note is that grad students are competing with faculty for these day care spots.

Some ideas suggested were:
- To have grad students spouses volunteer at these centers to offset the cost of their rent
- Trade of day care providing services for others
- Have MIT sponsor a program for state certification for spouses to support the need

Lizhong Zheng noted the there are laws covering day care providers, not to mention insurance. The wait at Stata at this time for an open spot is six months. All spaces are open to both grad students as well as faculty. Bright Horizon’s is the provider at the MIT locations.

Other locations for child care can be found at Westgate as well as Eastgate.

**Alex Slocum offers TASK for GSC:** What is the number of grad students with children; what was it in the past. How much space will be needed in the future?

Alex Slocum stated that today’s students are tomorrow’s givers. Start today. Bring in Resource Development. Ask past graduation student’s who they used for daycare when they were here. Were they happy with that? Will they contribute to the future day care needs for graduate students if they were happy with their providers? Talk with Judy Sager about this.

What about putting a day care center in Walker? We can get state run programs versus private programs. MIT could nurture children in a cultural diverse environment to instill creativity through the arts.

**#2) Affordable Housing:** Grad students are being pushed further away from campus in order to find affordable housing options. This in turn gives them a longer commute in unsafe neighborhoods. We need to address to root not the symptoms. Give gestation priority on the list. We need to look at the long term views of MIT when it comes to housing and child care.

Barbara Baker noted that Chancellor Clay was a champion for Student Life and made sure that the priorities of the institute where the priorities of the students.
Rents are high. Grad students need to work another job just to afford housing. This devotes more time to the student being off campus and not focusing on what they should be focusing on. More time off campus means less time at MIT.

Cost of living survey done by the GSC states that 70% of grad students live off campus. With the percent of on campus living, they’ve had their cost of living increased 2-3 times faster than undergrads. They are being squeezed tight with what they have now.

**#3) Community Graduation Student Center:** A place where grad students can go and relax. 
*Alex Slocom offers TASK for GSC:* Look at the Student Center. Look at options that are available. Define your requirements using existing building. Use air space. Build up: maybe a glass pyramid on the roof?! Get a plan in line, present it with possible scenarios. Make it viable.

Attachments: GSC notes for CSL Meeting by Brian Spatocco
Graduate Student Community and Identity (long term, 10 – 15 years)

It is surprising that MIT lacks one of the most basic amenities for graduate students. It is something our peer institutions across the country have had or have been improving for decades but here it still seems to gain relatively little traction. I am speaking of a graduate student center. This is an idea that has been thrown around since the 50’s, under president Killian’s leadership. **If students were in charge** decisions would be much more attuned towards the things which really attract and retain the top graduate candidates, as well as increase their quality of life while at the institute. Surely, the quality of our academic programs is the bedrock of any graduate student’s decision to apply to MIT, but when it comes to differentiating between MIT and other competitive universities, at the top of the list with academics are the social support structures and communities which exist for the benefit of graduates. For this reason, it is disappointing that we have spent such little time and so few resources into addressing this deficit with real action. We need a place where graduate students can go to relax, enjoy social and academic programming outside of their discipline, escape from the rigors of 14 hour days in the labs, and seek out graduate-specific services offered at MIT. To not have a center of gravity for the graduate community is to forgo an incredible opportunity to attract the best graduate students, help them cope with life while they are here, and to catalyze the personal and professional bonds which will carry on for the rest of their lives.

Affordable Housing (medium term, 5 – 10 years)

As MIT grows and develops technologies which spin out into high-tech starts, so too grows the surrounding community. In addition, Cambridge’s high concentration of technical talent attracts the top companies from around the world to start up and recruit from our pool. Clearly, both of these things are HUGE positives for both undergraduates and graduates at MIT. Having said that, there are dark repercussions of such growth in our surrounding community. A good case study of this would be the gentrification of University Park. What used to be some of the cheapest urban housing on the East Coast a couple decades ago is now among the most expensive. What results from our institute’s and community’s rapid development is a systematic pricing out of graduate students. Increasingly, we simply cannot afford the housing surrounding MIT. We are being forced farther and farther out and what was once a halo of graduate students surrounding MIT is now an ever-increasing concentration of young professionals who can afford 2 to 3 k / month for an apartment. Graduate students, 70% of which reside off campus, are being forced to search for housing in more distant, less safe, and less connected neighborhoods. **If students were in charge**, there would be a specific mandate placed upon new development in the regions surrounding MIT (e.g. Kendall Square) which would place affordable student housing as a priority, if not a high one.

Child care for Graduate Families (short, 1 – 5 years)

I’m going to give you $25,000 a year and I want you to continue raising three kids. $25,000 dollars a year for a family of five.
It is unfortunate the way the institute culturally and structurally discourages the pursuit of parenthood for our graduate student constituency... a group which is at the reproductive primes of their lives. In addition, having read the recent report of female faculty in science and engineering, it is altogether contradictory that at one moment we lament the dearth of female applicants to tenure track positions but at the same time the first introduction to the family-academia relationship that our female graduate students receive is one of disregard. Last year the decision was made to phase out graduate student scholarships to on-campus childcare. This year there are talks about developing more childcare spaces, but only in order to attract young faculty. **If graduate students were in charge,** childcare would not be treated as some carrot to be dangled in front of promising tenure track candidates; it would be viewed as a basic necessity and subsidized/supported accordingly.