Advancing a Respectful and Caring Community:
Learning by Doing at MIT

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Institute Community and Equity Officer

Academic Council December 9, 2014
What have I learned about student life?

From the perspective of a faculty member who spent 1.5 years with striving to understand the MIT culture...
Student life and learning

1. Students respect and emulate the faculty – sometimes with greater success than the faculty desire.

2. Students reflect the US culture of individualism (autonomy, freedom of expression), amplified by the faculty culture.

3. Students are challenging the Culture of Suffering (IHTFP) more than ever before. Many want to “Hack the culture.”

4. Impostor syndrome is rampant. Stress is severe. The stigma around mental health concerns requires faculty and staff intervention to create safety for conversations.
What are the areas of concern?

What students tell me = What I have observed

1. Stress is too high, and it’s systemic
2. Freedom of expression must be balanced by respect for others
3. Diversity can be uncomfortable and requires education at all levels
What are some possible solutions?

1. Dialogues about race, the value of differences, inclusion

2. MIT Compact (inspired by Ernest Boyer)
Dialogues about race*

*And other elements of diversity

Jia-Hui Lee @zooanthrosmia Dec 10
Overflow audience hearing @MIT community discussion on #BlackLivesMatter
We must expand the conversations

MIT community engages in dialogue on race
President Reif: Winterfest protestors “are asking us to listen, to collaborate, and to act.”

Chuck Leddy | MIT News correspondent
February 11, 2014
This work is important for the simplest, but most urgent of reasons:
because the best and brightest people are found in many places, not few;
because our classrooms and residence halls are places of dialogue, not monologue;
because teaching and learning at their best are conversations with persons other than ourselves about ideas other than our own.

Amherst College Trustees’ Statement on Diversity
ICEO Report Recommendation 1: MIT Compact

Assemble a representative working group to write a brief statement of what we aspire to as a community and what we expect of each other as MIT community members.

1. Convene a representative community-wide Task Force on the MIT Compact, the first time such a broad group has ever been established at MIT.
2. Charge it to write a ≤300-word statement considering core values, community aspirations, and norms.
3. Gather input from all stakeholders, including a faculty working group
4. Ratification process starting from the top
Can a Compact work?

Driving forces

• Students and others want to “hack the culture”
• Several groups are already writing their own “Bill of Rights”
• Widespread concern about negative effects of stress

Restraining forces

• Faculty privilege and lack of ownership of community affairs
• Skepticism that a Compact will change behavior
• Paralyzing stress: many are “too busy for anything but tomorrow’s deadline”
How you can help

Keep doing what you’re doing

Support each other

Share your stories with others, including MIT leadership

Attend the Diversity Summit, 1-5pm Jan. 29 and Feb. 12

Work with students to bring dialogues to the dorms and FSILGs – this is a good project for the Multicultural Conference February 6-7, 2015.