

# **Report to the Faculty on Advising and Mentoring of Undergraduates**

Committee on the Undergraduate Program  
Committee on Student Life

March 2005

## History

In its report of September 1998, the Task Force on Student Life and Learning called attention to the value of informal learning and of campus interaction in all of its forms:

The central and distinguishing feature of an MIT education is that it incorporates research, academics and community into an education that is greater than the sum of its parts... [T]he higher education of the future must go beyond classroom learning.

Among the activities that help define a truly exceptional academic experience for students are those that incorporate out-of-classroom interaction with others in the university community — particularly faculty. The Committee on the Undergraduate Program (CUP) and the Committee on Student Life (CSL) believe that MIT must cultivate an environment in which students can find a broad group of advisors and mentors to help them to explore the academic landscape more successfully; develop and refine their career interests; create a comprehensive educational and activities plan for their time at the Institute; and make an effective transition to life after graduation

To cultivate an exceptionally supportive environment for students at MIT, we all recognize that we must continue to develop an effective institutional support structure for advising and mentoring, and faculty participation will need to extend beyond the narrow concept of academic advising. With this in mind, the Institute Faculty at its meeting of May 15, 2002 requested that CUP and CSL undertake a joint effort to consider advising and mentoring at MIT and to make recommendations to the faculty.

This report is the result of the ensuing discussions.

## Two Key Principles for Effective Mentoring and Advising

While academic advising implies advice restricted to curriculum, mentoring has often been defined as guidance outside the academic sphere. However, these definitions overlap significantly. We have come to believe that two principles should underpin any effort to improve advising and mentoring at the Institute:

- **Advising and mentoring constitute a continuum of interactions between faculty, staff, and students.**

These interactions begin formally with classroom teaching, move to less formal contact in the teacher or advisor's office or with UROP supervisors, and extend to informal contacts that include a wide variety of seminars and extracurricular activities unique to each student's life, and most informally to social interactions. All of these interactions serve as opportunities for students to seek guidance and faculty to offer it. Together these activities, when they are working well, comprise a broad advising and mentoring experience.

- **Effective advising and mentoring involves creating a mentoring network for each student.**

Effective mentoring is more than one-on-one interaction between a mentor and advisor — it is certainly more than a once-a-semester meeting between an advisor and a student in which boxes are checked and forms are signed. Effective

mentoring is a collaborative effort in which faculty play a primary role, but in which advice and inspiration should come from a variety of sources including UROP supervisors, housemasters, coaches, and the many other adults that our students encounter while at MIT. Peer mentoring is a fundamental part of the undergraduate experience, and in many cases, the experiences of upperclass students provide valuable lessons for younger students, whether informally or through the program of associate advising. Alumni/ae offer useful perspectives on educational opportunities at MIT. The Office of Career Services and Pre-professional Advising provides resources for students moving into the workforce or going on to professional programs, and the Office of Counseling and Support Services, MIT Medical, and campus religious organizations all offer help to students searching for solutions.

## A Network of Mentors

As CUP and CSL members discussed advising and mentoring issues, we found ourselves more and more drawn to the metaphor of a “network of mentors.” If each student had such a network, and if it were working well, a student would enter into a variety of mentoring partnerships with other members of the MIT community.

Our thinking on this point was most fundamentally affected by reading Richard Light’s book, *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds*, in which he observes that a great college education is dependent on human relationships.<sup>1</sup> He recounts how he gives each of his advisees a “job”:

Each year I meet one-on-one with several new students.... [to discuss each] student’s goals at college... [his or her] background.... [and] what courses the student will take in this first year, and how those may lead to future courses....

Then we come to the part of our conversation that I look forward to most. I ask, “So, now that we have had this conversation, what do you see as your job for this term?” Just about all students answer that their job is to work hard and to do well [in college].... I ask what else they might set as a goal. This time their responses often emphasize participating in campus activities. And again, I press them to say more about their goal for the semester.

By now, most students look puzzled. They wonder what I am getting at. And then I share with them the single most important bit of advice I can possibly give to new advisees: “Your job is to get to know one faculty member reasonably well this semester, and also to have that faculty member get to know you reasonably well.”

...I point out that achieving that goal may require some effort and planning. Yet think of the benefits. Even if you only succeed half the time, I remind each new student, that means in your eight semesters here you will get to know four professors. And they will get to know you....

...As my first-year advisees approach graduation, many tell me that this advice was the single most helpful suggestion they got in freshman year.

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<sup>1</sup> Richard J. Light, *Making the Most of College: Students Speak Their Minds* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2001) pp. 85–86.

Adopting this idea and expanding it to include all of the individuals at MIT who could contribute to mentoring our students would go a long way toward improving the quality of our common educational endeavor.

One cannot will a network of mentors into existence, nor can one create it through rules or administrative procedures. Rather, one can aspire to bring it about through a set of mutual expectations and continual encouragement. As in any partnership, each participant has specific obligations. Those who give advice must make sure that their efforts are well informed. At the same time, students must take part of the responsibility for seeking out and developing strong, interpersonal relationships with others who form their mentoring network; they must seek out advice when it is needed.

The notion of creating a mentoring network may sound daunting, but for many students this might be quite simple, involving an academic advisor, at least one other faculty member (such as a UROP supervisor, an athletics coach or an extracurricular activities advisor), and clear knowledge of others in the Institute who would be available.

## **The Role of the Faculty**

By adopting the metaphor of a network of mentors, we do not mean to dismiss the primary role of faculty in advising and mentoring. There are four key roles for the faculty in such a system:

- **We must provide guidance in understanding and navigating the Institute and departmental requirements and opportunities to our students.** Access to the rich opportunities available at the Institute should not be restricted only to those who hear about them in some haphazard manner. This has a corollary that Institute requirements must be explained clearly and communicated to everyone at MIT. Unnecessarily complicated rules and procedures do not well serve an effective advising and mentoring network.
- **We must recognize that mentoring and advising go well beyond a simple explanation of the rules and requirements.** Advisors and mentors should be encouraged to consider themselves as life counselors, expressing interest in all aspects of the student's life at MIT.
- **We should be contributing to the task of career counseling and preparation for the steps that a student will undertake after graduating from MIT.** As a corollary to this, students should know several faculty members well enough that the eventual letters of recommendation that they write will have considerable weight and merit.
- **We must recognize that contributions to effective mentoring can be made by many members of the MIT community.** We should urge our advisees to develop and take advantage of the rich network that is available to be tapped.

**How much time will better advising and mentoring add to our already packed schedules?** First, we note that guiding students is an implicit role of an Institute faculty member. Second, we emphasize that the recommendations made in subsequent

sections of this report will facilitate advising and lead to more efficient, rather than simply more, advising meetings. In particular, if necessary information is available readily and both faculty and students are properly prepared, the resulting streamlined meeting will leave time available for additional discussion. However, students should be given realistic expectations of faculty time available for mentoring.

Recommendations made later in the report specifically address rewards to faculty for advising commitment.

## **Current Practice**

Within MIT, there are many examples of effective upperclass advising. Some departments are diligent in this endeavor, and many faculty members make excellent connections with student advisees. Thus, we critique current practices from the view of an intact advising system, but one that could, and should be strengthened in multiple places.

In particular, our current practice leaves the following to be desired:

- Advising quality varies widely across the Institute.
- Both the percentage of faculty actually involved in undergraduate advising and the ratio of students to advisors vary widely across departments.
- The contributions of Institute staff other than faculty to advising and mentoring are not fully engaged.
- Effective Undergraduate Offices are not present in all departments.
- Not all departments train their undergraduate advisors.
- Much faculty advising of undergraduates is limited to the signing of forms.
- UROP students too seldom have a meaningful interaction with the faculty member overseeing the research project of which they are a part.

Again, we emphasize that, in some departments, in some UROP experiences, and in a variety of special programs at the Institute, advising is viewed as an important and integral part of undergraduate education, and those are the places to look for best practices.<sup>2</sup> It is on these practices that many of our recommendations are based.

## **Recommendations**

We want to encourage, in every way possible, the development of a mentoring network for each student. This may be as simple, or as complex, as changing our mindset as to what faculty advising responsibilities entail. During our deliberations, a number of very specific ideas emerged, which we wish to embrace. We see each of

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<sup>2</sup> Another place to look is at earlier documents concerned with advising and mentoring at MIT. In particular, we refer to the June 1995 Baker Foundation report, "Upperclass Advising and Support System Recommendations."

these recommendations as leading the Institute toward the development of a rich advising and mentoring network.

### **The Role of the Freshman Advising System**

A strengthened system of upperclass advising and mentoring should begin with the student's freshman advisor and associate advisor.

- **Freshman advisors should be expected to work with their advisees to identify possible mentors beginning during the student's first semester at MIT.** The number of individuals in that network and the kinds of information passed on to each member of that network will depend on the needs of each student. It is important that clear signals be sent throughout the first year that faculty and staff regard mentoring relationships as important if students are to take full advantage of their time at MIT.

### **The Role of the Academic Departments**

The heart of upperclass academic advising and mentoring is the student's academic department. Accordingly, the academic departments are key to the development of mentoring networks — they have the primary responsibility for advising and mentoring students who are enrolled in their degree programs, and they need support improvements in the advising and mentoring system.

We propose several relatively simple ideas that we believe should be adopted immediately by individual departments and then more generally across the Institute:

- **The major advisor should be assigned during the freshman year.** In the second semester of the freshman year, as students begin to identify their prospective majors, they should contact the undergraduate office of the appropriate department, who will assign a "major advisor/mentor" from the ranks of its faculty. Identifying the departmentally based advisor in the second semester would have two advantages relating to our next recommendations.
- **The transition from freshman advisor to upperclass advisor should be improved.** A transitional meeting — or at least some form of transition contact — should be scheduled between the student, the freshman advisor, and the upperclass advisor. Such a meeting would greatly facilitate the transition from freshman to sophomore year, providing valuable information to the upperclass advisor. At this time, the role of principal mentor would shift in a deliberate manner from the freshman advisor to the departmental advisor/mentor. Even a phone call between the freshman and sophomore advisors would be very useful.
- **Effective Undergraduate Offices should be present in all departments.** Individual academic departments must be engaged in setting higher expectations for faculty with respect to advising and mentoring and in supporting those expectations. Departments should establish well structured and professional — although not necessarily heavily staffed — undergraduate offices to support faculty mentors for students in their majors and to serve as part of the larger mentoring network. This may require additional Institute resources. The key to the success of a mentoring program will be the identification of departmentally

based point persons who are valued by the department for the key roles they play in supporting and encouraging faculty-student interaction

- **Associate advisor programs should be implemented.** Upperclass advising does not have to be limited to the faculty mentor alone. We should borrow one of the most successful practices of the freshman-year advising process by encouraging departments to assign associate advisors from a pool of willing upperclass and graduate students. Associate advisors could handle a number of the more routine aspects of advising students on how to navigate the Institute and major requirements, freeing faculty time for discussions regarding career planning and intellectual development. The M.Eng. programs would be a place to turn for potential associate advisors, particularly those populated by MIT undergraduate alumni/ae.
- **Advisors should receive proper training.** The role of an advisor in the education and guidance of a student should be explained clearly. Beyond Institute-wide training, departments should play a pivotal role in advisor training. Departments should develop guidelines that communicate departmental expectations and specific requirements. Regular advisor training sessions should be held, perhaps prior to each Registration Day, and should particularly target new faculty members.
- **The number of advisees should be reasonable.** The number of advisees for each advisor must be reasonable if we are to achieve our goal of encouraging true mentoring relationships. Specifically, we recommend that a faculty advisor have fewer than eight advisees and that departments, where this number is routinely exceeded, re-examine their advising policies. This recommendation is particularly critical if additional advising meetings are to be facilitated.
- **The number of meetings between advisees and mentors should be increased.** Currently, many students meet only briefly with their advisors at the start of each term on Registration Day. These meetings are typically very short, and frustrating for students who need to discuss their semester in detail. The Registration Day experience, by itself, does not serve us well if we are serious about improving the quality of mentoring and advising for our students. One or more additional meetings that better allowed time for regular discussions between advisor and advisee would strengthen the mentoring process considerably.

We recommend that every department be encouraged to adopt a schedule of at least two advisor/advisee meetings per semester, in addition to the Registration Day meeting. These additional meetings would best take place during a pre-registration period and during a mid-term period. A pre-registration period of one to two weeks might be identified, with a date by which pre-registration for the next semester would have to be completed and authorized by the advisor. Similarly, a mid-semester advising period could be designated in the two weeks prior to Drop Date. A pre-registration meeting would provide an opportunity for discussion prior to making some academic course decisions, and the mid-semester meeting would help in assessing a student's progress. Both meetings would offer opportunities to discuss additional issues of concern to students,

including career and life guidance. With these additional meetings in place, a short Registration Day meeting would be sufficient to deal with last minute changes in a student's schedule. With respect to a mid-semester meeting, Biology now requires such a meeting between advisors and advisees, and its success seems to provide a promising model.

- **Departments should make additional efforts — beyond assigning an academic advisor — to include upperclass majors in the intellectual and social life of the department.** Such efforts, which might include colloquia, would provide opportunities for students to meet potential mentors, and should involve department faculty, administrative and research staff, postdoctoral fellows, graduate students and more senior upperclass students.

### **The Role of the Institute**

While much can be accomplished at the level of the individual department, it is important that the Institute Faculty as a whole be involved in articulating expectations and standards for advising and mentoring. When necessary the Faculty governance structure might well be involved in establishing new policy.

Chief among the concerns of the two committees is the lack of uniformity across academic departments in the quality of mentoring and advising received by undergraduates. Thus, some of the tasks involved in improving our mentoring and advising of undergraduates should be undertaken at the Institute level:

- **Advising periods should be set aside.** The Institute could set dates for pre-registration and mid-term advising periods in the academic calendar. Minimally, these could serve to remind students that these would be good times to contact an advisor for input. Individual departments could decide whether to use these periods as "required" or "encouraged."
- **Information should be available and reliable.** Up-to-date information for and about students should be available, easy to find and to navigate. Various administrative offices have a role to play in this regard. This effort should include the development of an information-rich, mentoring website for students and their mentors (as we are beginning to see represented by the U-Info website at <http://web.mit.edu/uinfo>). However, web-based information sources should not be regarded as a substitute for face-to-face contact between our students and their mentors.

Every effort should be made to preserve face-time between students and their advisors for those substantive interactions best accomplished through personal contact. To that end, the Institute should explore the possibility of developing a "virtual advisor" tool that could provide students with information and feedback on routine matters regarding the GIRs and degree requirements.

- **All members of the mentoring network should be trained.** A strong training program is needed not only for faculty in their roles as advisors/mentors, but for other members of the mentoring network. While this might be addressed at the departmental level, it would seem economical to address it across departments using existing cues. These include training activities for freshman

advisors and associate advisors, best practices from some departments, and information such as that put out by the Academic Resource Center. This training will be all the more important as the Task Force on the Undergraduate Educational Commons brings forth its recommendations for changes in the General Institute Requirements and other aspects of the undergraduate program.

- **Our core values with respect to advising and mentoring should be clearly articulated.** The core values of the Institute in regard to advising and mentoring of undergraduate students need to be clearly articulated, communicated, and supported by MIT's leadership, including the administration and the Faculty governance structure.
- **Improving advising and mentoring is an ongoing process.** Institute committees, most particularly CUP and CSL, should continue to identify best practices that are already in place in departments and other special programs and should seek to communicate these practices more widely across MIT.
- **Students must understand that they have a right to be advised and mentored well.** To this end, and in addition to the other recommendations that we have made, students should be provided with advice on how to establish a mentor network early in their MIT careers, possibly in a guidebook to be distributed at Orientation, in discussions with their freshman advisor, or when they declare their majors. Part of this should be a mechanism to encourage students to seek out faculty and other mentors, using, perhaps, the new, searchable, faculty database on the Interact at MIT website that is being established by CSL.
- **The importance of advising and mentoring must be recognized.** Finally, the Institute and its leadership (particularly department heads) should be encouraged to view integrated advising and mentoring activities as a fundamentally important role of the faculty, on par with teaching activities, and to develop appropriate expectations and rewards for these activities. There must be incentives to motivate advisors and mentors. Institute recognition would be helpful in order to engage junior faculty concerned about tenure. We should place importance on these activities in promotion and tenure decisions. Other incentives might include a lightened teaching load to recognize exceptional mentoring or advising along with resources to cover the costs of meals or travel, or support for UROP stipends. New junior faculty across the Institute might be provided with support for a UROP student as part of their start-up package. Finally, the Institute should insist that teaching credit be given for faculty participation in Freshman Advising Seminars.

## Appendix A: Background

Over the years, more than a few committees have taken up the question of effective advising of undergraduates. A list of the reports that have been issued is included in the bibliography to this report.

During the 2000–2001 academic year, a subcommittee of the CUP was charged with investigating the broad issue of mentoring undergraduates. Although it recognized numerous ongoing efforts to enhance the quality of teaching at MIT, the subcommittee found substantial (if colloquial) evidence that the Institute was not as attentive to other kinds of mentoring. This conclusion was not new — it was amply supported by the findings of both the Task Force on Student Life and Learning and the Educational Design Project, a joint faculty-administration committee convened in 1999 to review the freshman-year educational enterprise.

Based on these information resources and the work of the subcommittee, the CUP issued a report on *Mentoring Undergraduates at MIT*, in November 2001. The committee identified the following as principles that define high-quality faculty mentoring:

- Faculty must be willing to develop significant relationships with the students they mentor, such that each student can feel comfortable seeking general advice from at least one faculty member. Faculty-directed UROP projects and advanced student seminars are just two examples of the many kinds of formal and informal activities that can foster such relationships.
- Those faculty mentors who serve as academic advisors must have access to reliable and frequently updated information regarding departmental and Institute policies and procedures, as well as up-to-date academic records for the student.
- Faculty mentors must encourage students to work with their mentoring networks to establish comprehensive, though flexible, educational plans. Each student's plan naturally will include a program of coursework, but co-curricular, personal, and employment objectives will be important factors as well. This plan should be expected to evolve over time to suit the changing needs and desires of the student.
- Last, but certainly not least, faculty mentors must understand and appreciate the personal needs of each student, and they must be prepared to refer students to the appropriate resources within MIT for assistance as opportunities and problems arise.

It was noted that many faculty advisors already serve as excellent mentors to undergraduates, and some departments take a proactive approach to mentoring their majors. However, high-quality mentoring ought to be the responsibility of the Institute as a whole and not relegated to departments or individual faculty members.

In order to ensure a more systematic approach to this responsibility, it was felt that MIT had to find ways to:

- Recruit more faculty — particularly junior faculty, who are traditionally underrepresented in the ranks of academic advisors — to serve as mentors;
- Provide adequate resources to enable their participation in this endeavor; and
- Recognize the value of their service as mentors.

With this report as background, the CUP proposed a motion to the Institute faculty and worked with the CSL in its final formulation. The two committees jointly moved the following at the Faculty meeting of December 19, 2001:

The Faculty endorses the general spirit of the report by the Committee on the Undergraduate Program on Mentoring Undergraduates at MIT.

Recognizing that effective mentoring of undergraduates is the responsibility of the Institute as a whole, the faculty directs the Committee on the Undergraduate Program to develop a comprehensive plan for the design and implementation of new undergraduate mentoring guidelines in collaboration with the Office of the Dean for Undergraduate Education and the Committee on Student Affairs<sup>3</sup> by the end of the Spring term of 2002. We anticipate that these guidelines will be developed with sufficient flexibility to accommodate the special circumstances of each academic department, but nonetheless will help shape the development of new departmental mentoring policies as well as broader institutional policies.

This motion was approved unanimously at the Institute Faculty meeting of May 15, 2002.<sup>4</sup> This report is the (belated) response of CUP and CSL to that charge.

The two committees began working — jointly and separately — in March 2002. Much of the initial work focused on acquiring information about various approaches to advising and mentoring of undergraduates at the Institute.

With these items and associated work and interaction as background, CUP and CSL continued discussions and identified four core principles to be pursued in establishing effective undergraduate advising and mentoring. The committees agreed that it would be necessary to:

- Create a new advising/mentoring model through the development of mentoring networks. The network structure should be more effective than the single advisor alone and should also improve support to the faculty advisor.
- Recognize the different needs of individual students. The mentoring network has to be adaptable, with input from the individual student. The faculty member remains the principal advisor.
- Set policies, expectations, and standards for departments, individual faculty, students, and staff about their roles in and expected outcomes of the networks.
- Establish uniform quality in upperclass advising and mentoring. The current advising structure for sophomores, juniors, and seniors is not uniformly efficient or effective. Some students are served well; others are not.

Four areas were identified for more detailed consideration: Information, Infrastructure Support, Communications, and Incentives. A working group of CUP and CSL members

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<sup>3</sup> The name of this committee was change to Committee on Student Life by the Faculty in its meeting of December 19, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> This motion was not formally approved until the end of the spring term, when the proposed plan was to have been completed. Therefore, this report comes at a later time.

was established for each area; specific challenges were articulated for each group and associated background material was identified. The observations and recommendations of these groups were documented and provided as input into the current report.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> The reports of these working groups are available from CUP or CSL on request.

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With apologies to those whom we have forgotten, we would like to recognize the following:

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