Growing Levels of Distrust Detrimental for All

Undergrads,

The shift in the tone of the conversation regarding the future of campus dining over the past several weeks requires us to pause to address a storm that has clearly been gaining strength below the surface for some time. A growing level of distrust between undergraduate students and the MIT administration threatens to hinder the creative problem-solving and collaborative spirit that just last year brought the community together to spawn dozens of constructive ideas in light of the financial downturn. Given the nature of the challenges and the opportunities that the community still faces – including implementing the Task Force’s recommendations, growing the population of undergraduates, and re-envisioning Kendall Square – it behooves us to reflect on this matter and take steps to bridge the gap.

In my experience, student distrust arises from the perception of being treated unfairly, which arises from a lack of understanding. A first step, then, is to ensure that all stakeholders understand any given process. Students should ensure that their leaders understand why and how certain decisions will be made prior to the start of the decision-making process. Further, students should require a transparent process in order to hold their elected representatives accountable and so that the decision does not come as a surprise to anyone. Finally, students should insist on a data-driven approach so that there is no question later in the process about where different constituencies stand on any given issue. Representatives should provide their constituents with relevant historical information and identify key intangible factors so that students have sufficient context to understand why particular choices are being made.

Once a process is in progress, students should continue to be involved, and they should look to their elected leaders for direction on when to provide input. When providing feedback, students should be honest instead of saying what they think their student leaders want to hear. Student leaders should take care to ensure that feedback that they have solicited is submitted to the process at the appropriate point in time. Gathering input just to “check the box” should be avoided, since this actually destroys trust instead of building it. Simultaneously, if students feel as though their feedback is not being handled appropriately, or if students feel as though they are being misrepresented, they should escalate the issue immediately instead of waiting until the end of the decision-making process to voice their concerns. If the students who signed the petition that resulted in the emergency session of Senate had come forward sooner with their concerns, more flexibility and more time would have been available to achieve a better outcome.

As a decision-making process nears its final stages, the ability to shift the outcome diminishes. In rare cases, a change in circumstances, such as new information that has come to light, may warrant an outcome that is substantially different from the output of the process. In these cases, students and their representatives ought to indicate specifically what circumstance has changed and why reconsideration is justified. Students should take care to focus on challenging weaknesses in the process or proposal instead of pointing fingers at any particular individual. At this stage, the delivery of the message can carry more weight than the message itself, due to the amount of time and effort that has already been invested; unfortunately, people are seldom purely rational, and more often than not, sunk costs matter in real life. Leaving a channel open for dialogue greatly increases the chance of making a change at this stage; care should be taken to avoid drawing a line in the sand, since this approach is not conducive to integrative negotiation.

On the issue of dining, I agree with much of the sentiment and understand the frustration and anger among those who feel misrepresented or misled. Going forward, let us adjust the tone of the conversation and embrace the creative problem-solving and collaborative spirit that has characterized the MIT community to ensure that student input is incorporated into this plan.

Best wishes,
Vrajesh Modi, UA President
UA Survey Results

The following pages summarize the results of the UA survey and provide additional information on the progress that the UA has made in those areas. All survey data is available at ua.mit.edu/survey.

Students Want the UA to Address...

The UA recognizes that dining is clearly a big issue, and much effort has already been made to address the situation. The most up-to-date information is available at ua.mit.edu. Shuttles are addressed on Page 3, and specific questions may be directed to the UA Committee on Student Life. 42 UAS 3.2 creates a committee to interface with IS&T to roll out improvements to Athena printing, scanning, and computing.

UA Communication

It seems that generally the undergraduate student body is happy with the amount of communication from the UA this year. We encourage those who would like more information to look beyond the UA website and this newsletter. Consider attending our UA Officers’ Office Hours displayed on the website and joining UA mailing lists (ua-senate-listeners, ua-exec-listeners, ua-discuss). In addition, the new UA Booth in the Student Center that appears on most Fridays would be a great way to hear about our recent projects and to express your concerns. In addition, we also have our very own mailing list for questions, ua-questions@mit.edu, and a Google calendar on the website. Feel free to stop by one of our Senate or Exec meetings (schedule on the front cover). All meetings are open and food is provided for all students who attend. Keep in mind, as Janet Li, Chair of the Public Relations Committee, puts it, “We cannot represent you effectively unless there is constant two-way communication between the UA and the undergraduate population.”
Based on these mixed results, the UA will allow the individual committee chairs to decide how to best hold their meetings with regards to how green their meetings will be. This will allow groups that do not adamantly prefer paper to operate in a more sustainable manner.

The UA was generally pleased to see that most of the undergraduates were aware of their ability to compost on campus and were capable of differentiating trash, compost, and recyclables.

There is clearly interest in both a Target/Costco shuttle and a Boston Daytime shuttle on Saturdays. The UA Committee on Student Life is currently investigating possible sources of funding. If you would like more information, please contact Richard Dahan, Chair of the UA Committee on Student Life.

The chart on the right represents the percent of respondents by living group that replied “Yes” to “I want to live at Maseeh Hall (W1) next fall.” The fewest total responses came from New House and Random Hall (28 responses each). McCormick was excluded from this chart due to too few responses.
Meet the UA: Tim Jenks, Vice Speaker of the Senate

Tim Jenks, a sophomore in Course 2A-6 who lives at Zeta Psi, holds the position of Vice Speaker of the Senate. That means he helps the Speaker maintain the efficiency and effectiveness of the Senate body. As an additional perk to his position, he gets to choose what food and snacks are provided at the Senate meetings. In fact, his favorite snacks are single-stuffed Golden Oreos with milk! Outside of the UA, he loves participating in athletics, as he shoots on the MIT Varsity Rifle team and enjoys IM sports at MIT. He also enjoys playing Ultimate Frisbee and golf. On an academic note, his favorite class thus far is 6.270, MIT's Autonomous Robot Design competition. Tim also looks forward to taking 2.12, Introduction to Robotics, and obtaining a minor in Course 15. When asked for a random fact about himself, Tim says that he's genetically left-handed but practically right-handed. While a Texan at heart, Tim is enjoying his time in Boston, and looks forward to his remaining time at MIT.

Scanner Access

Around 65% of the respondents do not always have access to scanners. IS&T is considering replacing the printers with multifunction devices (“all-in-one’s”) in Athena clusters. The UA will be participating in this process. 42 UAS 3.2 establishes an ad-hoc committee to address Athena Printing. We look forward to the implementation of these and other improvements, such as the hold-and-release system over IAP.

As the very first bill for the UA, the UA passed 42 UAS 2.1, a bill to reutilize the Game Room on the 1st floor of the student center (to the right of LaVerde's) via student opinion. Currently, a high percentage of the undergraduates wish to have a smoothie or ice cream vendor. The Committee on Space Planning and the Committee on Dining will be working with CAC and with MIT Campus Dining to identify potential vendors.