Summary: Report of the Presidential Task Force on Student Life and Learning
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In order to adequately prepare graduates of MIT for entry into research and industry jobs, the Task Force on Student Life and Learning concluded that the university's environment should be one where student life and learning seamlessly merge through increased connectivity between the three areas of the educational triad – academics, research and community. At a campus-based university characterized by innovation and individuality originating in independent departments, this connectivity, and the robustness of each facet of the triad can be best developed through increased collaboration between students, between students and faculty, and between different departments in formal and informal settings. Task Force Recommendations for each tenet of the triad are briefly mentioned below.

One reason for the strength of MIT's academic environment is that each department acts independent of the others, allocating resources where it sees the most need, creating strength within individual departments. However, this produces an environment where collaboration is not highly valued. Thus, more undergraduate research is called for in an attempt to increase collaboration between faculty and students while raising the amount of research carried out at MIT. It is recommended that the job of advising students be carried out by teams including faculty, appropriate staff, graduate students, and alumni, increasing interactions and the diversity of advice a student can receive. Finally, more encouragement for {review of, experimentation in, and addition of appropriate new courses to} academic programs is recommended to constantly make them more robust. However, a second piece of this program improvement is a demand for sharing of information between departments about what is found to be most successful. While each of these recommendations deals most specifically with academic goals, they work through avenues of social connectivity.

In terms of "community," in order to increase opportunities for interaction and collaboration, the Task Force recommends making the residence system a top priority. This includes housing all first-year undergraduates on campus; making orientation a shared experience for undergraduates, grad-students, and faculty; increasing the number and quality of dining options and bringing faculty to them; and making improvements to housing design on campus. This last goal includes providing more common space for interaction, making these spaces more attractive, and providing on-campus housing options for faculty. Housing faculty in student residence halls allows for more communication and cuts commute time, affording faculty more time to participate in social, community-building events. The Task Force also recommends that participation in such events be rewarded and that more funding be provided for such programs.

Finally, the Task Force recommends creating a Strategic Planning Group made up of the President, Provost, Chancellor, and their appointees, and that it focus on issues that involve boundary blurring like undergraduate versus graduate study programs, research versus practice preparation, residential education versus distance learning, etc. The Group will also define how scarce resources will be allocated among and shared across departments. The Task Force also recommends that faculty governance be streamlined to reflect the three areas of the triad keeping in mind that the foremost challenge to faculty participation in governance is lack of time.

A number of challenges exist that will make implementing these goals difficult. First, as was already mentioned, decisions at MIT are often made at the departmental level making integration and collaboration between departments difficult. Hopefully direction from the Strategic Planning Committee will help with this problem, especially with respect to funding allocation. However, a second challenge is the market-driven environment that universities are a part of today. At the present, what a school like MIT can and cannot implement may depend more on the resources made available to it by the government and other funders. Collaboration between departments could reduce the number of decisions made without respect for the needs of the university as a whole. The greatest challenge to the recommendations will be the availability of time for both faculty and students. Many calls for more participation and collaboration between faculty and students were made but with little suggestion as to where the time to do so will come from. One solution is providing more on-campus housing for faculty and students to allow more informal meetings and reduce commute times, but the number of faculty and students who can benefit from such improvements might be too small to have the desired effect.