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Task Force group relishes 'shared sense of experiment'

Student Life Working Group finds reasons for optimism amid economic challenges

David L. Chandler, MIT News Office

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Seeking ways of achieving economies in the operations of the Institute, including the broad category of student life at MIT, might sound like a daunting task. But for the 18 faculty members, staff and students who served for the last several months on a working group tackling that challenge, the process produced some real optimism and even excitement about where it could lead.

The Student Life Working Group is one of nine such groups that make up the Institute-wide Planning Task Force, which was set up in response to the decline in revenues as a result of the global economic crisis. The Task Force is trying to identify opportunities to reduce MIT's expenses by \$50 million to \$100 million over the next two to three years, starting with the 2011 fiscal year; this follows an initial \$50 million expense reduction already in effect for FY 2010.

The Task Force will release its preliminary report later this month, comprising a set of recommendations distilled from the ideas contributed by all the working groups. This report, along with feedback that the whole MIT community will be encouraged to contribute, will then be considered by the Institute's administration, and a final report will be released in the fall.

David Singerman, a graduate student in the Program in Science, Technology and Society and one of the members of the working group on Student Life, said he joined the process because "it seemed like a historic and important thing." And in the end, he said, he was left with "a sense that the whole place is in it together" - a sense that was fostered by the open and transparent process that the Task Force has followed. The group, he said, felt "a shared sense of experiment."

That's very much what the organizers of the process had hoped for. Because of its emphasis on students' experience within the Institute, this working group had an especially "participatory and consultative flavor within the MIT community," said Muriel Medard, a professor in the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, who was co-chair of the Student Life Working Group.

As part of the process, the group had many meetings with different student organizations and individuals, seeking a broad spectrum of input to their deliberations in addition to the online Idea Bank that generated hundreds of specific suggestions from members of the MIT community.

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Medard said committee members and the groups they met with approached the work with great enthusiasm, because tackling such a complex task "is part of the problem-solving DNA of this place." Many of the student groups consulted by the panel "got really jazzed up" about searching for new approaches.

Vice Chancellor and Dean for Graduate Education Steven R. Lerman, one of three coordinators of the overall Task Force and co-chair of the Student Life Working Group, found himself impressed with the fact that so many people the group heard from "were really ready to embrace significant changes, as opposed to 'let's just make small incremental changes to the status quo.' I would characterize it as a very collegial process."

That's all the more remarkable given the uncharted territory the group is exploring, he said. "I can't remember a process like this on budgets since I've been here," said Lerman, a member of the MIT faculty since 1975.

As part of the openness of the process, Medard said that the organizers "didn't come in with a set of ideas. We really wanted to get ideas from the community, and then let them gel." And in the end, she said, "they gelled relatively quickly."

Lerman said he expects the Task Force recommendations will be more easily accepted by the MIT community even though they may involve significant changes to how MIT operates "because the community was involved in the process from the beginning."

Singerman said that for the group's members, after several months working on the process, overall "the spirit was optimistic" - not in the way that might be expected after an initial pep talk, but from a real sense that "everybody's confident that the place that comes out of this will be better adapted" to weather any lean years that may come along.

Although the Task Force process was initiated specifically in response to declining revenues as a result of the global economic downturn, Medard said it seemed like such a useful exercise that she felt "we should do this every so often, budgetary problem or no budgetary problem... It's like spring cleaning." Lerman echoed that sentiment, saying that many of the recommendations that emerged are "the things we should just be doing," regardless of any financial pressure.

The kinds of recommendations that came out of this analysis vary in how easily and quickly they can be implemented. "There's a wide variety," Medard said. "They range from rather straightforward to rather transformative." And some ideas that were proposed, she said, "should be done, but are too small-scale to rise to the level of the group's report." Instead, they forwarded these ideas to the appropriate people with the suggestion that they should "just do it!"

For example, Lerman said, one strong recommendation that emerged was to find creative ways to make use of undergraduate dormitory space that is largely empty through the summer months, even though the dorms remain open year-round. "Wouldn't it be better to find ways to use that capacity, rather than just letting it sit empty?" Finding appropriate good uses for that space, he said, could be "really a win-win."

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