A “Weather Map” of Quality of Life @MIT

Working Paper V1.1
March 1, 2004

Prepared by the Council on Family and Work for a meeting of Committees and Councils Whose Charges Relate to Quality of Life @MIT

Child Care Advisory Committee
Committee on Campus Race Relations
Committee on Community
Council on Faculty Diversity
  Sub-committee on Faculty Family Policies
  Sub-committee on Quality of Life
Council on Family and Work
Council on Staff Diversity
Faculty Quality of Life Committee
Gender Equity Committees
Graduate Student Council
Lincoln Laboratory Professional and Community Enhancement (PACE) Committee
Postdoctoral Scholars at MIT
Staff Job Flexibility Team
Staff Quality of Life Committee
Undergraduate Association
Women’s Advisory Group
Working Group on Support Staff Issues
BACKGROUND

In Fall 2001, the MIT Council on Family and Work conducted major surveys of MIT faculty and staff designed to assess quality of life, defined as the ability to integrate a fulfilling and productive work life with a fulfilling personal and/or family life. After an analysis of the survey data, the Council reported to the community a mixed picture, in which the Institute showed both significant strengths and significant weaknesses as a working environment. Reports of the survey results are available on the Council’s web site, http://web.mit.edu/workfamily.

As a next step, the Council has been exploring ways to monitor quality of life at MIT in an ongoing way, since the institutional climate can be presumed to have changed, and to continue to change, in response to a number of factors, including new initiatives and policy decisions within the Institute and political and economic conditions locally and nationally.

This working paper represents an initial experiment in providing an informal “weather map” of the current climate at MIT. It has been prepared quickly, in order to respond to the need for feedback about the effects of recent and ongoing budget cuts and layoffs on the community’s quality of life.

To create this map, the Council tapped the expertise of a number of committees and councils at MIT whose charges and work plans relate to quality of life at MIT. These committees vary in the constituencies they serve—undergraduates, graduate students, postdocs, staff groups, faculty—and in the aspects of quality of life that they address.

The 16 committees and councils that contributed to this document are listed on the cover page. Further description of each group is given in a separate document also prepared for this meeting, entitled Overview of Current Committees and Councils Whose Charges Relate to Quality of Life at MIT. The process of identifying relevant committees is ongoing, and we expect that others will be added in the future.

The co-chairs of the Council gathered information from the heads or representatives of these committees, asking for their perspective on current climate at MIT, recent changes, and anticipated changes. Representatives of each of the 16 groups were interviewed by telephone and/or provided information by email exchange.

Representatives were asked to respond by telephone or email to a few, general, open-ended questions about issues in the current climate at MIT and the factors influencing their committee’s ability to address those issues. Questions included: In seeking to accomplish your goals with respect to quality of life at MIT, what barriers are your group finding? What would help? What are your concerns? Based on the work of your group, what would you say is the current “weather” with respect to quality of life in the segment(s) of the MIT community within...
its charge? What are the main features of the weather map? What has changed recently, and why? What is expected to change in the next few months, and why?

Below is a summary of the main points to emerge from these interviews and email exchanges. These views are not intended to reflect a systematic sampling of Institute constituents. They are also not prioritized at this point. Rather, they are a snapshot of the current observations of a number of faculty, staff, and students who hold committee responsibilities related to quality of life at MIT.

On the one hand, this group may be more oriented toward seeing the negative side of the climate picture because they have self-selected to work on these issues. On the other hand, they are in an excellent position to see problems, and to give them voice, at a time when many in the community have indicated that they are feeling unheard. These representatives are also in a position to offer solutions, having given significant thought not only to the problems but also to ways we can overcome them.

In other words, this working paper is a draft, and an invitation. If its ideas are useful, it is, of course, possible to do further research and analysis regarding current perceptions within the community; in fact, some groups already have further initiatives planned. There is also within the groups both the expertise and the willingness to generate cost-effective solutions and to take timely action. We look forward to further discussion and response.

LEGEND

There are a few graphical conventions used in this document. When a particular viewpoint is relevant to a broadly defined group at the Institute, an icon is used for emphasis.

F  Faculty
S  Staff
A  Postdocs
U  Undergraduate Students
G  Graduate Students

NOTE

We apologize for any errors in this draft. Please notify the Council with any corrections or additions at your earliest convenience. Thank you.
B.1/ ISOLATION.

Across constituencies within the MIT community, people are feeling the need for more interaction with each other: faculty with other faculty, postdocs with faculty, staff with faculty, staff with other staff, people in minorities with others like themselves, people in minorities with people in the majority, and everyone with senior administration. They are seeking three things:

1) **connection**: relief from a powerful sense of isolation

2) **communication**: both being heard and being informed

3) **appreciation**: recognition that they are playing a valuable role at the Institute

In different groups, this need takes different forms:

a) Faculty feel underappreciated by senior administration. “It’s still a praise-free zone.” As faculty work longer hours under greater stress, frustration is rising that no one seems to realize how hard they are working.

b) Staff, in particular support staff, feel underappreciated by faculty and senior administration and underrepresented on committees (such as the presidential search committee).

c) Faculty and staff members of color feel that the current climate is cold, does not allow minority voices to be fully considered and included, and is not conducive to change. They note that the acts of small groups “ripple through the environment, dampening the weather in other corners of the community.” They are also concerned that it will get worse, given budget cuts and further decentralization. On the staff side, some fear that pockets of effective initiatives may not be sustained, let alone expanded. Administrators, in turn, are frustrated by the recent attacks on affirmative action at the national level and confused about how these attacks affect what they should do and can do.

d) Postdocs feel especially isolated and vulnerable, each postdoc being connected to the Institute primarily only through her/his laboratory head.

e) Postdocs, graduate students, and some staff feel that senior administrators do not appreciate the economic hardship with which they contend, for example, that stipends and salaries are not keeping up with costs of housing, health insurance, and child care. “Fees keep increasing while budgets are shrinking.” They feel that the plight of international students and scholars is especially hard, and that the situation for postdoctoral fellows is more difficult than for associates because of the critical differences in benefits.

f) Students demonstrate caring for each other in face-to-face interactions, but they are “brutal” with each other via email, seemingly unaware of the power of the written word.

g) Students, postdocs, and faculty feel anxious about ways in which the budget cuts could affect them, and lacking in information to address their anxiety.
h) Perhaps most strikingly, members of every group—from faculty to staff to students—put themselves “at the bottom of the heap,” seeing other groups as more central and more valued. As in a dysfunctional family whose siblings vie for attention, recognition, and resources, the subpopulations within MIT seem to feel that other subpopulations are more valued and better supported. Groups seem to lack the information for assessing what resources are realistic to request and why. When new resources become available, such as expanded child care, there is competition for them, as well as resentment and suspicion that some groups are benefiting more than others.

B.2/ LAYOFFS

The groups—administrative, support, and service staff—who are experiencing layoffs are feeling angry and, worse, helpless. These feelings can lead to looking for someone or something to blame; the Stata Center, for some, has become a symbol of botched financial management and/or priorities in which buildings matter more than people. (Others, however, think that the opening of Stata may bring a boost to morale.) There is also a suspicion among some that senior administration’s philosophy is to cut the deadwood every few years, and that the budget crisis is not real but rather an excuse to do this. Also, there is disillusionment, especially that long-term, high-functioning, well-respected employees can be dismissed after years of service. Questions abound:

a) Why cut people rather than waiting for the stock market to rebound?
b) Why are other major university endowments doing well and MIT’s not?
c) How can we avoid getting into the same problems again?
d) Is this really the bottom? Can we really start to recover, or will there be more bad news next year?
e) Why cut the very services on which everyone is so dependent, such as I/S and facilities, and in areas that are needed more than ever in times of stress, such as medical?
f) Why are departments, labs, and centers that have been doing well financially being “punished” with budget cuts to address problems that are not of their making?
g) How will all the work that is being deferred, such as maintenance problems, be made up?
h) Is the corporation aware of the consequences of their decisions on quality of life at MIT?
i) Who is responsible for what work, as layoffs, working notice periods, and shifting assignments leave survivors confused and overloaded?
j) Who do I go to for information, now that the person I used to rely on has been laid off? How do I find out, amid shifting work responsibilities, who does what?
“Rumor mills” are substituting in some instances for hard, direct information. “Staff are tense/uneasy about the fiscal situation, feel powerless to do anything, yet responsible for making things right. Administrative, support, and service staff are being laid off but their work is not going away.”

The groups who are not directly experiencing layoffs—faculty, research staff, postdocs, and students—are anxious, “waiting for the other shoe to drop,” wondering how the cuts will affect them and assuming there will be serious consequences. Questions include:

k) Will important services be cut?
l) Will graduate students be levied with more fees, shifting expenses from administration to individual students?
m) Will departmental intellectual activities be in shorter supply?
n) As budget cuts decentralize key services, pushing more functions to the local level, what is the impact on the larger community? How is cohesion maintained among the new villages? Is anything being done to acknowledge and/or address this issue?

Furthermore, very importantly, people are feeling that these are risky times, not the time to stand out, either to express fresh ideas or to ask for special consideration. Needs are going unmet—and opportunities are going unrealized. For example:

o) Some staff are not feeling free to ask for the supports they need to integrate work and personal life, such as job flexibility, for fear it will suggest that they are expendable or less valuable.
p) Some committee leaders and members are feeling that it is a waste of time, in this fiscal climate, to make recommendations or explore new initiatives, even ones that might impact significantly the quality of life and ultimately the productivity of the community.

B.3/ OVERWORK

These concerns and questions take place in a context of overwork and stress. Every group is feeling that they are working longer hours under greater stress than ever before. For faculty, the workload is seen to be increasing, often crushing, exacerbated by reductions in administrative support as positions are cut and remaining staff are spread thinner. For staff, the experience is that work is shifting from those laid off to the retained employees, and from central services to individual offices. “Everyone is working harder than five years ago.” Those with children and elders report that family responsibilities, too, are increasing, in part because of greater pressures on partners and extended family who are themselves pursuing work and/or study.

Faculty and staff worry not only about the direct impacts of this chronic overwork but also about indirect impacts. Examples of observed indirect impacts include:
a) Acts of meanness, hostility, and intolerance are seen to be on the rise. This is attributed in part to the national climate of intolerance, heightened by the war and fear of terrorism, and in part to stresses within MIT: When people are exhausted and/or anxious about their jobs, they tend to be less considerate of others and less respectful of differences.

b) Creativity and big picture thinking are less in evidence; people are behaving more reactively and less proactively. This is, again, attributed to exhaustion, anxiety, and overwork.

c) Fears continue to be expressed that the norm of “working at breakneck speed all the time” is impacting recruitment and/or retention. This is especially expressed among those who do not see the same pace and pressure at peer institutions. Concerns are increasing that people may be bringing home the added stresses from work, with subsequent negative effects on family and personal life.

d) However, many hold strong beliefs that long work hours and stress are essential to excelling, both as individuals and as an institution. In the absence of data to test its validity, this belief leaves people fearful of making changes that might reduce the pace and pressure, because that might also reduce productivity and excellence.

THE GOOD NEWS

G.1/ A SENSE OF COMMUNITY REMAINS.

Underlying the concern about isolation is a great deal of caring, both within and across groups. Knowing that layoffs are occurring in administrative, support, and service staff, many faculty are concerned not only about the consequences to themselves but also about the stress that staff are experiencing. If this snapshot were being taken in another moment in time, the focus of concern might have been undergraduate students during the wave of suicides, or international students during the political reaction to the terrorist attacks. This sense of community offers a foundation on which to build initiatives, and a resource for doing so.

G.2/ PROACTIVE INITIATIVES CAN MAKE A DIFFERENCE.

A number of recent programmatic and policy changes at MIT have been perceived as highly effective. For example:

a) Among faculty: Work/family issues have been experienced as “coming out of the caves” since the advent of the new family leave policies. Important features include the automatic nature of some leaves and the existence of options for tenure clock extension. The issues, invisible until a few years ago, are now visible. (Concerns remain, however. Child care continues to be a major source of stress, as does the “two-body problem.” There is also the ongoing question about whether women still fear retaliation for using the new policies.)
b) Among postdocs: The new Postdoctoral Scholars Advisory Council and Postdoctoral Scholars at MIT have engendered significant hope among postdocs that isolation issues, if not financial issues, are improving and will improve.

c) Among staff: The “mandated vacation period” over the holidays is perceived to have been a significant boost to morale for some groups of staff, in particular within support and administrative staff. “There was an instant morale upturn on the day the President’s letter came about Christmas closing.” Some members of groups that bore continued responsibilities over the break—such as some faculty, research, and accounting staff—resented the closing, noting that they were given little notice for making the necessary arrangements, they did not benefit as much as others, and they were left short-handed.

G.3/ FURTHER INITIATIVES, INCLUDING LOW-COST MEASURES, CAN BE EXPECTED TO HAVE ADDITIONAL IMPACT.

Virtually all constituencies—faculty, staff, postdocs, and students—have expressed a need to hear more from senior administration. The Institute has invested significant dollars in initiatives that lend support to quality of life. The message from the community to senior administration seems to be that these initiatives are helpful, but that the motives behind them are unclear. With more expression of support, these initiatives will be more effective, better utilized, and capable of attracting more volunteer resources. While “talk is cheap,” at this point, it appears as if clear, official statements of support for quality of life would in fact be highly valued.

Communication has to be continuous, responsive, targeted to specific groups, inclusive of all groups, and proactive. Many members in the community still feel in the dark about layoffs, their numbers, their implications, and their causes. There need to be continued briefings in different settings about the relationship between Stata and the budget cuts, the causes of the budget cuts, and steps being taken to prevent further problems. The message must be repeated over and over. Some members of the quality of life committees also expressed a need for centralized information regarding resources for their work, perhaps via a web site.

In short, the budget cuts can be a time of opportunity as well as crisis, in particular in the area of quality of life. This time of transition offers an opening for improvements in community and morale, not just to repair the damage from the current cuts but also to address long-standing needs in connection, communication, and morale. We look forward to exchanging ideas on the best ways to do so.

Acknowledgements/ Thanks to Erika Simmons and Heather Childress in the preparation of this document.