

Title:

MIT Inclusion Initiative

Categories of the reform idea (keywords):

Inclusion, belonging, representation

What is the problem to be solved?

The systems of power at MIT have been decidedly monocultural for the majority of its history. This narrow perspective permeates all levels of activity at the Institute, from obvious areas like admissions and promotions, to less obvious outlets such as campus traditions and social life. The result is that individuals that do not identify with the prevailing cultural ethos are bombarded with both direct and indirect messages that they do not belong at MIT. A historical example of this is the fact that the buildings that constitute the original campus facility only had one bathroom per floor because all bathrooms were originally for men. The physical structure of the buildings was not designed to accommodate the presence of women. In similar but often more subtle ways, MIT was not designed to accommodate underrepresented minorities, and African Americans in particular. This proposal seeks to address this issue with a broad range of activities to combat the historical non-inclusive nature of the MIT community.

Proposed reform:

MIT should initiate a broad range of activities to tackle inclusion head on. Below is a selection of ideas and initiatives intended to challenge the status quo and promote radical thinking on the subject of inclusion.

Traditions and Social Life

The prominent student and alumni traditions at MIT have a very narrow cultural perspective. MIT should engage with staff, students, and faculty from diverse backgrounds to devise new events that can be used to establish new traditions. Alternatively, or perhaps in addition, MIT could adopt longstanding cultural traditions that simply haven't been celebrated historically at MIT. Examples of celebrations held in other parts of the U.S. and around the world that have had minimal presence at MIT include Cinco de Mayo, Mardi Gras, Kwanzaa, and Juneteenth. Further, MIT should make efforts to ensure that extracurricular activities, such as those provided by the MITAC cater to a broader cross section of the campus population. Events highlighted by MITAC should be more representative of the cultural diversity of the Boston Metropolitan area and feature discounts from organizations such as the [Museum of African American History](#).

Leadership

Underrepresented voices should be present in all rooms of power, on all issues. In the ideal case this is accomplished by having members of diverse groups seated in positions of power. However, that is not strictly necessary. When that is not feasible in the short term, Departments, Labs, Centers, and Schools can appoint committees to bring these voices to groups that are critical for the operation of MIT. These committees, which should be composed of staff, students, and faculty, can serve as an advisory or sounding board at all levels of the Institute. As an example, the leadership of a particular department could appoint a group of 3-5 individuals from across the department community to serve as an advisory group. This group would attend all meetings and thus be privy to all major decisions being made by the department. The group should be

empowered to provide their perspective on both routine and major efforts in the department because it's often unclear to those in power how their actions impact underrepresented members of the community. The input of the group should not be limited to topics that appear to pertain to diversity, their voice should be heard on all topics because to truly be inclusive you must consider broad perspectives in all of your activities. For example, a departmental decision about undergraduate advising may not appear to be an inclusion issue, but when underrepresented students have lower satisfaction with advising (as is often the case) it's critical to consider their perspective in even the most mundane policy decisions.

Education

The history and contemporary issues of underrepresented populations, and particularly African Americans, should be mandatory education for every member of the Institute community. This is not intended to be 'diversity training', it is education. No one should be able to spend five years at MIT, no matter their role, and remain ignorant of past and present struggles, triumphs, and inequalities in the United States. Also, MIT should offer an expanded array of majors and minors that will be of interest to underrepresented groups. Examples can include minors in fields such as justice and ethics. Members of underrepresented groups are often more keenly aware of systemic inequity and are thus motivated to tackle these issues intellectually. MIT should provide more outlets for students that are so inclined.

Housing

MIT should study the needs of graduate and undergraduate students from diverse groups to determine the types of housing arrangements that best suit them. Related to the traditions above, the MIT undergraduate housing system prides itself on the wide array of diverse housing options. However, the majority of these options were established at a time when MIT was decidedly homogeneous. The desire to hold onto these housing cultures is necessarily non-inclusive because they were formed at a time when the campus was far less diverse. As a result of this, some of the newer and larger communities on campus are 'majority minority'. It's likely that this is because the larger communities provide cultural safety in comparison to smaller, older communities at MIT that pride themselves on being culturally homogeneous (i.e. exclusive). When the parents of underrepresented students visit campus, they should feel confident that MIT has housing options that will explicitly serve their child's needs. Each house should therefore have a diversity and inclusion plan that outlines the specific steps they take to foster an inclusive environment. This plan should cover all aspects of life in the dorm including room selection and housing lottery (which in most cases is handled by students, the room assignment chairs), the menu in the dining hall, and activities hosted by the dorm.

Community Resources

When staff and faculty join MIT they should be made aware of **all** the communities in the Boston area, not just the ones with 'good schools', AKA 'white'. MIT should employ cultural ambassadors that can help members of underrepresented groups thrive in all aspects of life, not just at work. Boston has a negative reputation as being a town still fraught with racism. Whether or not this is true is irrelevant because many people believe it, posing a barrier to recruiting staff and faculty from diverse backgrounds. MIT must actively combat this perception during the interview and recruitment process, and continue to fight it when a new employee joins staff. Community resources that MIT could highlight, promote, and/or partner with include community organizations (e.g. school boards and volunteer organizations based in minority communities), religious organizations and particularly those that cater to different ethnicities (e.g. Black churches), local chapters of professional organizations (NAACP, NSBE, fraternities and sororities, HBCU alumni associations), and other groups that specifically target underrepresented populations. The best

way to determine the relevant partnerships would be to ask current faculty, staff, and students from underrepresented groups about the organizations that have enriched their life in Boston.

Dining

Food is a fundamental human need, and while MIT and the local community provide a variety of options the presence or absence of a particular culture's food sends a message. Further, when MIT conducts celebrations, meetings, or formal events the cuisine chosen sends a message about the cultures that are valued. This proposal is twofold. (1) MIT should seek to establish a restaurant that is attractive to the Black/African American community within the student center. Upon first glance it seems that the student center dining was designed with multiple cultures in mind, making the absence of options that cater to Black people stark. The implicit message is that the cultures represented are welcomed while others are an afterthought. Potential options include [Flames](#), [Ali's Roti](#), [Coast Cafe](#), and [Popeyes](#). (2) When considering catering for MIT events, staff and administrators should be enabled to explore a broad array of options and perhaps even have a list of preferred vendors that don't simply serve standard western cuisine.

Metrics to track and expected change:

- Staff, student, and faculty satisfaction surveys would be the best way to measure the impact of the proposed strategies
- It is anticipated that staff and faculty retention rates for underrepresented members of the population would increase

Implementation strategy:

- Some of these initiatives (such as the traditions, housing, and dining) require additional research to determine the needs of the population to be addressed. For these initiatives MIT should put together a task force to briefly study the issue and propose specific recommendations that come from the community.
- The rest of the initiatives take less planning in order to begin at least a pilot program. For example, the leadership initiative could be piloted in a few departments and the findings from the pilots could be used to roll out an institute wide initiative.
- **Address departmental vs. institutional initiatives.**

Cost/Resource Estimates:

- Traditions and Social Life. \$5-10k per new cultural event. Little to no cost to promote more diverse businesses/events through the MITAC. **Total of \$50k.**
- Leadership. \$5k per advisory committee. The students, staff, and faculty that serve in these roles should be compensated because they involve additional work that takes away from their ability to do their primary job at MIT. There should be an advisory committee for each department (roughly 30 in total) and for all five schools. **Total of \$175k.**
- Education. For undergraduates, many of the courses already exist, it is simply a matter of organizing them into cohesive educational tracks. For faculty and staff one would need to determine the number of courses to require and the cost for delivering each class, which is likely in the range of \$50k per course. **Total of \$500k+.**
- Housing. Little to no monetary costs.
- Community Resources. Little to no monetary costs.
- Dining. Expanding catering options requires no costs since it's money that would have been spent anyways. Bringing a new dining option to campus incurs a cost dependent upon the location. If the dining option is in a new location the cost is significant, if located in an existing space the cost is minimal. **Total of \$100k+.**

Values targeted:

Primary – Inclusion

Secondary – Diversity

References

N/A