

Report of the President

Meeting the Challenges of Covid-19

At the start of the academic year, the MIT community had no idea of the historic public health crisis that lay ahead. The fall semester began as usual, but by the spring, MIT was facing one of the greatest challenges in its history, the Covid-19 pandemic. Beginning in January, based on the counsel of many across MIT, including MIT Medical and MIT Emergency Management, we introduced measures to respond to Covid-19. By March it had become clear that the virus posed a real threat, and to keep our community safe, we had no choice but to close our campus for the vast majority of our community.

On March 10, we announced that classes were cancelled for the following week, and that students should not return to campus after spring break. Online instruction began for all classes on March 30 and continued for the rest of the semester. Undergraduates in campus residences were asked to begin packing and depart campus within seven days, with very limited exceptions.

Faculty scrambled to put classes online; research and technical staff and postdocs rapidly scaled back our vast research enterprise (but laid out a strategy for ramping up again in June). One research area, however, scaled up: more than 100 Covid-19 projects were initiated, engaging more than 300 researchers.

Staff and administrators worked around the clock, and those able to work remotely were encouraged to do so. Essential workers kept the campus functioning, but MIT's usual buzz of energy and activity was replaced by a quiet, subdued atmosphere.

Yet despite being scattered across cities, countries, and time zones, the members of the MIT community found ways to keep working, studying, and learning. We activated a range of support systems and created new ones. For students, we offered free wifi and equipment, financial hardship grants, and prorated refunds on housing, dining, and student life fees. Through the Student Success Coaching program, 600 volunteer coaches helped 5,000 students through the sudden and drastic disruption. The chair of the faculty mandated alternate grading options, aimed at mitigating the stress and anxiety of students and offering flexibility to instructors.

We reinvigorated the Staff Emergency Hardship Fund and expanded childcare benefits. And we connected with the local Cambridge community to provide disaster relief, assisting in constructing a homeless shelter, opening the Sean Collier Care Center for patients with Covid-19, and providing testing kits and personal protective equipment.

MIT also moved swiftly to address the immense financial risks that loomed as Covid-19 roiled the economy and the markets. We paused hiring and merit increases, and revised our FY2021 budget to reduce expenses. Although we expected a decline in endowment and other economic pressures on revenues, in the end MIT achieved exceptional financial results for the year, further strengthening our ability to weather the pandemic.

To keep our community connected and informed, we hosted a range of meetings, from MIT-wide town halls to smaller groups designed for students, staff, and faculty. We connected, commiserated, examined problems, and brainstormed solutions on how to teach, learn, and work in new ways.

With an eye to managing Covid through the upcoming academic year, in late March I charged [Team 2020](#) to evaluate and present options to inform final decisions by the senior administration and invited students, staff, and faculty to join in the strategizing. The group presented five options, from conducting all instruction online to bringing all undergraduates back to campus. In May, I charged a new group, [Task Force 2021 and Beyond](#), with a more far-reaching assignment: to develop blueprints for the future, incorporating what we had learned from the pandemic to help us imagine a better MIT.

The Institute experienced many “firsts” as we adapted to social distancing, isolation, and a strange new normal. These included MIT’s first online Commencement and Reunions. Despite the deep disappointment that we could not come together in the traditional way to celebrate the Class of 2020, MIT staff worked miracles to offer a [lively, fun, online event](#) that showcased the energy, creativity, and resilience of the MIT community.

Responding to a Difficult Situation and Taking Action

A deeply disturbing situation came to light as we prepared to begin this academic year. In August, we learned that convicted sex offender Jeffrey Epstein had made donations to MIT and had gained access to our campus in ways that were unacceptable and harmful to our community. Over the course of 15 years, MIT received approximately \$850,000 via foundations that Epstein controlled, much of it directed to the MIT Media Lab.

In September, an article in *The New Yorker* revealed additional links between Epstein and individuals at the Media Lab. In response, the Executive Committee of the MIT Corporation commissioned an independent fact-finding report by the law firm Goodwin Procter. In January, the Executive Committee released [Goodwin Procter’s report](#), which cited “collective and significant errors in judgment that resulted in serious damage to the MIT community.” The report helped us understand the origins, nature, and extent of Epstein’s ties to MIT and enabled us to create safeguards to prevent similar mistakes in the future.

Following Media Lab director Joi Ito’s decision to step down in September, we focused on supporting the lab’s staff and improving its operations in key areas including governance, funding, and the relationship between students and advisors. Separately, on the advice of the MIT Committee on Sexual Misconduct Prevention and Response, MIT [made gifts totaling \\$850,000](#) to four nonprofits that serve sexual abuse survivors.

While much of the public attention was focused on the Media Lab, the entire MIT community was profoundly affected. In large public forums, in smaller private meetings, and through hundreds of emails and comment cards, students, staff, postdocs, faculty, trustees, parents, and alumni spoke poignantly about the painful impact on our community of MIT’s engagement with Epstein, including the intense effects on survivors. This feedback highlighted misalignments and fractures that go to the very

foundation of our community and that demand our shared attention; themes included lack of respect and disempowerment, especially for women and staff, and a desire for increased voice in decision making.

Following the release of Goodwin Procter’s report, I expressed my hope for the future in a letter to the community: “If we can face the Institute’s flaws with honesty and build on its great strengths, we can not only make our community stronger, more equitable, more inclusive and more effective, we can offer a model for deliberate self-assessment, growth, and change.”

Heightening Our Impact in Education and Research

Despite the uncertainty, pain, and disruption of this year, we advanced MIT’s mission in important ways. At the MIT Schwarzman College of Computing, three assistant professors in Electrical Engineering and Computer Science (EECS) were hired as core faculty, with more searches under way for faculty who will serve in the college or in joint roles with departments.

We initiated design for the college’s physical home, centrally located on Vassar Street, to bring the college together with disciplines across the Institute and the bustling innovation community of Kendall Square. And we developed a key component of the college, the program in [Social and Ethical Responsibilities of Computing \(SERC\)](#). Through teaching, research, and engagement, SERC will aid in improving design, policy, implementation, and impact in computing, helping ensure that technologies are developed in the public interest.

We also took steps to improve the first-year undergraduate experience, piloting a network advising approach in which students are assigned a staff advisor, faculty mentor, and student associate advisor. And we launched an experimental program that offers first-year “discovery subjects,” aimed at giving students more time to explore departments before choosing a major.

MIT expanded access to digital learning opportunities, invaluable at a time when in-person instruction has been so deeply disrupted. edX experienced a tenfold increase in enrollment and a 15-fold increase in registration. Open edX reached more than 80 million unique learners, making edX the world’s largest education platform.

The MITx residential platform offered 100 courses led by faculty from 19 departments with more than 10,000 active enrollments. And 4.4 million learners accessed massive open online course (MOOC) modules, with MOOCs based on most MIT core science subjects now online. MITxPRO offered 11 programs for more than 14,000 working professionals in technical fields, and we continued to expand our global impact through the MicroMasters program; in June, we graduated 63 blended master’s students, bringing the total to 139. We also continued to run MIT bootcamps for entrepreneurs, including a pilot online bootcamp on innovation and leadership.

We had an occasion to celebrate two extraordinary faculty members: Esther Duflo and Abhijit Banerjee of the [Jameel Poverty Action Lab \(J-PAL\)](#) were honored with the

[2019 Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences](#), along with Harvard’s Michael Kremer. They were awarded the prize for their pioneering approach to alleviating global poverty by testing potential interventions with the rigor of double-blind trials—work that has revolutionized development economics.

Strengthening MIT’s Voice and Influence

This academic year saw the Institute expand its influence in key areas, in part by maintaining a strong voice in Washington, DC. MIT’s Task Force on the Work of the Future presented a briefing at the National Press Club outlining how automation will transform our society and the role that technologists have to play in shaping the future of work.

On behalf of MIT, I was invited to testify before Congress on US-China trade and competition. My testimony focused on the need to increase our investment in research in key technology areas and enhance our capacity to get the most out of that investment. I also represented MIT at a National Academies symposium on the [75th anniversary of Vannevar Bush’s Science: The Endless Frontier](#), a 1945 report many consider the founding document of the US scientific enterprise. Building on that report, I advocated for an aggressive competitiveness strategy designed to make rapid progress in educating our human capital, discovering and developing novel ideas in specific research domains, and accelerating innovation.

MIT played a central role in helping to inform bipartisan legislation to authorize \$100 billion over five years for new technology-focused research at the National Science Foundation, known as the Endless Frontier Act. And the Institute helped shape federal policy toward university interactions with China, communicating constructively with Congress, the White House, and federal agencies.

MIT’s voice was also heard in the media. In March, I collaborated with Harvard University President Lawrence Bacow and Stanford University President Marc Tessier-Lavigne on an [op-ed for *The New York Times*](#), urging communities and organizations to act quickly and boldly in response to the accelerating spread of Covid-19. A month later, I contributed an opinion piece to *The Boston Globe* – [“Has the coronavirus finally taught us how to listen to science?”](#) – which argued that if we can take the right lessons from the Covid-19 crisis, we will find ourselves better prepared to tackle the health of our planet. I included a reminder that our deepest well of practical hope for both of these urgent challenges is in science and the people who practice it.

Enhancing MIT’s Campus and Innovation Ecosystem

The extreme challenges we faced this year did not lessen MIT’s spirit of innovation. MIT Solve, an initiative that advances solutions from tech entrepreneurs to address the world’s most pressing problems, attracted new funding and partnerships. The annual event [Solve at MIT](#) shifted to a virtual format that allowed more people around the world to join in. The closing plenary livestream, featuring IBM CEO Mary Barra and cellist Yo-Yo Ma, garnered 10,000 views.

MIT venture firm [The Engine](#) hosted a Tough Tech Summit that convened 500 founders, investors, academics, policymakers, and business leaders to explore ways to bring

tough tech to market. The Engine also announced plans to expand its physical space by 200,000 square feet, with the goal of accommodating up to 100 companies and 1,000 entrepreneurs at a time. In addition, it broadened the perception of its portfolio, from AI and machine learning to advanced computing.

While the MIT campus was severely underpopulated this spring, capital projects continued, including development of MIT's new Open Space and the new home for the MIT Museum, situated at the gateway to Kendall Square. We initiated design for redevelopment of the historic Metropolitan Storage Warehouse, which will become an interdisciplinary design center, and the new state-of-the-art music building. And we advanced our commitment to student housing, nearing completion of a new graduate student residence in Kendall Square and an undergraduate residence at Vassar Street. When our community is able to gather on campus once again, there will be wonderful new spaces and places to explore.

Facing Injustice in Our Society and Our Community

This academic year was marked by horrific incidents of racism and police brutality that profoundly affected our community, in particular people of color. The killing of George Floyd and the tragedies that unfolded from Minneapolis to Georgia to New York highlighted yet again the persistence of racism and systemic injustice. We were compelled to take a harder look at injustice within our own community and the elements of MIT's culture that allow it to persist.

We took steps to promote diversity, equity, and inclusion, which included hiring [John Dozier](#) as Institute Community and Equity Officer (ICEO). John will provide outstanding leadership as MIT continues to cultivate a caring community founded on mutual respect in which all faculty, students, postdocs, and staff enjoy a sense of safety and belonging. To assist John in advancing this vital work, we will hire a senior officer in each MIT school and the College.

In June, the ICEO hosted an online MIT community vigil. Speakers from across the Institute expressed their grief and urged viewers to work for racial justice in the world and at MIT.

In October, Chancellor Cynthia Barnhart shared the results of the [2019 MIT Association of American Universities Campus Climate Survey](#). Although we have worked diligently to prevent and respond to sexual misconduct at MIT, it is clear from the results that important work remains. In a series of open forums, the anguished personal stories of many members of our community underscored what the survey results made clear: that we must take action against sexual assault, misconduct, and harassment as a community and push back against those aspects of MIT's culture that make these problems worse.

We addressed these problems in multiple ways, emphasizing community engagement and increased education and resources. We hired additional staff to enable the creation of a new central office, [Institute Discrimination and Harassment Response](#), which will strengthen our ability to effectively address discrimination and harassment, including sexual misconduct under Title IX federal regulations.

In February, we shared the final reports of the working groups formed in response to the 2018 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine report on sexual harassment in academia. We began advancing the working groups' recommendations, which emphasized a need for broad change, responding not only to sexual and gender harassment but harassment of any kind.

Looking Ahead to MIT's Future

This year, the MIT Campaign for a Better World reached a total of \$5.64 billion—94% of the new \$6 billion goal set in early 2019. As of May 20, we had raised \$460 million this fiscal year, including gifts for a range of key initiatives, including the MIT-Takeda Program in the School of Engineering, the King Climate Action Initiative in J-PAL, and the Yang-Tan Center for Molecular Therapeutics in Neuroscience. MIT's dedicated campaign staff also assisted with Covid-19 fundraising efforts to support our emergency outreach, research, and student support.

The New England Commission of Higher Education (NECHE) extended MIT's accreditation through 2030, following a two-year, community-wide self-study and comprehensive review. NECHE commended MIT for its continued commitment to education, research, and the sharing of knowledge, and emphasized several priority areas for MIT moving forward, all of which we are pursuing actively. These include:

- Achieving our goals for the College of Computing
- Achieving our diversity, equity, and inclusion goals while developing a culture that values risk taking and open dialogue
- Developing learning outcomes for all programs and assessing student learning

The commission also identified priorities such as developing new gift policies, guidelines on visitors to campus, and whistleblower protections for those who speak up about their concerns—all aimed at keeping our community safe and ensuring that we act in alignment with our values.

We all dream of getting back to the habits, rhythms, and rituals of life on campus, but our first priority must continue to be protecting the health and well-being of our community and the many communities we touch. As we weigh decisions and make plans for an unknowable future, I have enormous faith that we will find a way to move forward together with grace and strength.

L. Rafael Reif
President