# Statement of the UA Ad Hoc Committee on Student-Administrator Collaboration

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# 1 Introduction to the SAC

## 1.1 Creation of the UA Ad Hoc Committee on Student-Administrator Collaboration

The UA Ad Hoc Committee on Student-Administrator Collaboration (SAC) was created by the UA Council to directly address issues of communication and transparency between the MIT administration and the undergraduate student body. Through researching past interactions between undergraduates and administrators, speaking with administrators about practices and experiences, and soliciting feedback from students and student leaders, SAC created a document outlining an expected minimum level of, and method for, maintaining transparency and communication between undergraduates and administrators.

The UA felt that many of the recent large-scale decisions made affecting student life were done so with poor, little, or no collaboration and communication with students. Thus, there currently is a high level of distrust and frustration from the students toward the administrators. With the recommendations in this report, SAC believes that communication and collaboration, can be improved such that mutual trust can be re-established between students and administrators.

## 1.2 Background Research

Past actions related to residential life (e.g., dining, orientation, RLADs), athletics (e.g., review of varsity sports programs), and academics (e.g., updates to 2A, creation of 6-7 major, creation of 7.01x) were researched, along with various efforts to improve student-administrator collaboration over the past 15 years. This exploration helped identify varying ways in which the communication and collaboration process succeeded, failed, and could be improved.

This research is available at ua.scripts.mit.edu/wiki/sac/research.pdf.

From this background, along with the aforementioned feedback from students, student leaders, and administrators, SAC has created a number of suggested principles for student-administrator communication and collaboration.

# 2 Executive Summary

## 2.1. Principles for Communication from Administrators to Students

### i. Before the Decision-Making Process

- Work with student leaders to determine best practices for soliciting student input on the specific issue.

### ii. During the Decision-Making Process

- Specify what information should be shared publicly.
- Ensure communication to the broader student body.
- Document the decision-making process as it unfolds.

### iii. After the Decision Has Been Made

- Identify where student input was considered.
- Map the decision-making process.
- List methods used to gather student input.
- Promote institutional memory.

### iv. Information Sharing

- Maximize the amount of information that is shared with students in order to create an optimal and transparent decision making process.

## 2.2. Principles for Communication from Students to Administrators

### i. Steps for Students

- Have a full background on the issue.
- Communicate with the administrator who has a large focus on the issue.
- Believe that it is worth speaking with administrators.

### ii. Steps for Administrators

- Make widely available information about who to talk to and how to contact them.
- Respond to student emails with all relevant information.

SAC identified various drawbacks among surveys, focus groups, town hall discussions, and other types of engagement. It is therefore recommended that at least two distinct feedback mechanisms are used for any given issue. Additionally, SAC focus groups also indicated that many students value in-person discussions or events.

## 2.3. Strategy for Communicating Information to the Student Body

### i. Getting Student Attention

- Always communicate through (at least) email.

- Keep emails short, but provide places where students can go to retrieve additional information.
- Make sure that valuable resources, like whatsonyourmind@mit.edu, are well publicised. Furthermore, it is helpful for students to know who receives the emails sent to this address, and for what purpose they are used.

**ii. Sharing Information Quickly**

- Send timely, well-worded emails that explain motivation and reasoning.

**iii. Up the Tree, Down the Tree**

- Information sent up the tree should come back down the tree.
- Administrators should encourage their colleagues to pass on information about how decisions were made – and how input was considered – back down the tree, and student organizations and leaders should do the same.

**iv. Providing a Channel for Follow-Up**

- Create a clear channel for feedback and follow-up questions.
- Points of contact can also be provided at the end of surveys, focus groups, and in-person meetings.

### 2.4. Example Timeline for Issues Affecting Students

While every issue comes with its own demands and time constraints, it is important to give students as much of an opportunity as possible to provide input for decisions and to be involved with the process, especially when students will be largely affected by the outcome. An example timeline is provided in 3.4.

### 2.5. Actions to Improve Student Understanding of MIT Policy, Decision-Making, and Organization

**i. Student Leadership**

- Hold transition meetings.
- Train representatives to Institute Committees.

**ii. Student Body**

- The UA should develop a site that includes a transparent overview of MIT policy, decision-making, and organization.
- The UA should implement a student-administrator dinner program.

### 2.6. Actions to Improve Institutional Memory

**i. UA SAC as a Standing Committee**

- Create a standing committee of the UA entitled the UA Committee on Student-Administrator Collaboration (SAC).

ii. **Transitions**

- Create transitionary documents to guide new student government officers.
- Provide a window of time sufficient for training of for new officers.

iii. **Website**

- Create a page on the UA website that contains the histories of various issues, to be updated as needed.

iv. **Reports**

- Provide a brief summary or synthesis of the history of the issue to serve as context for the report as a whole.

# 3 Recommendations

## 3.1 Principles for Communication from Administrators to Students

Surrounding an important decision, students are concerned about the amount of student input in the decision-making process and transparency regarding who made a decision and on what basis or rationale it was made. Thus, we recommend that the following steps be taken:

i. **Before the Decision-Making Process**

   Work with student leaders to develop best practices for soliciting student input on the issue. On a given issue, whether it is related to housing or academics, students will have great, valuable ideas on how to best reach out to their peers for feedback.

ii. **During the Decision-Making Process**

   Specify what information should be shared publicly. If a student leader is expected to communicate information back to their constituents, that must be expressed by administrators. Student leaders must avoid communicating confidential information while simultaneously sharing critical public information; administrators and students should identify communication items at the end of all meetings.

   Ensure communication to the broader student body. While it is important to keep relevant student leaders in the decision-making loop, information must also be communicated to a larger subset of the student population in a timely manner when possible, helping to prevent hearsay.

   Whenever possible, document the decision-making process in a public place as it unfolds. Important decisions often span several years, and having such records creates more transparency and helps to prevent knowledge shared early on from being lost by the time a policy change is implemented much later.

iii. **After the Decision Has Been Made**

   Identify where student input was considered. When explaining the process through which a decision was made, it is important to be able to identify where student feedback was considered and communicate this to the student body. Students are often upset not because of the decision, but rather because they do not know who made that decision, do not know why it was made, or do not believe that their input was considered.

   Map the decision-making process. When a large decision and accompanying announcement are made, a map explaining who was involved in what portions of the decision-making process could be provided. The membership of committees need not be specified; rather simply mentioning the number of undergraduate students, graduate students, faculty members, and administrators would help students understand the decision-making process.

List methods used to gather student input. Demonstrating the opportunities that were available for individuals to contribute to the decision-making process serves as a reminder for those who may have forgotten emails about surveys, focus groups, or forums. The dates are critical to include, due to shifts in student leadership and the student body over relatively short time periods.

Promote institutional memory. Faculty members and administrators can help by sharing key issues with new student leaders as they are elected. The student body must also make an effort to improve the passage of information from old students to new students.

## iv. Information Sharing

Throughout a decision-making process, there are times where information is considered confidential, often for very important reasons. However, maximizing the amount of information that is shared with students is critical for an optimal and transparent decision-making process. It can also lead to more informed opinions, as well as increased trust.

It is difficult for students or student leaders on committees to give complete, informed input when some of the information (e.g., financial data) is withheld. Similarly, it is hard for the student body as a whole to understand a decision-making process if key data is withheld (e.g., engineering reports in the case of the shutdown of Bexley Hall). Mutual trust can only be realized if students are given the relevant information to make informed decisions.

It may be impossible to share certain information; however, decision-makers ought to ask themselves, "Must we keep this from students?" rather than "Lets be safe and keep this confidential." Students deeply value transparency, and part of understanding a decision-making process is having as much relevant information as possible.

## 3.2 Principles for Communication from Students to Administrators

Encouraging the student body to communicate regularly with administrators through the proper channels will help inform decision-making and give more students a voice in the proposed policy changes.

**i. Steps for Students**

Have a full background on the issue. It is critical that students do background research to understand a complex issue. This will help students give highly informed input, and be better able to suggest viable alternatives to a system or policy if needed.

Communicate with the administrator whose job focuses most strongly on the issue at hand. Students often communicate with the highest-level administrator working on a specific issue. However, it can be very helpful to communicate with lower-level administrators who focus more strongly on the topic at hand and have more time to devote to discussing student input and ensuring that student opinions are considered.

Believe that it is worth speaking with administrators. Many students decide not to communicate with an administrator for one reason or another. Students should feel that it is worthwhile to communicate that opinion or question to an administrator who can help. At worst, the administrator will thank the student for their input and explain why they are unable to incorporate it into the policy being discussed. At best, that opinion will help inform a critical policy change.

**ii. Steps for Administrators**

Make widely available information about who to talk to and how to contact them. An interactive organizational chart explaining who works on which issues, along with placing the contact information for all administrators in one central location, would allow students to easily identify how to express their opinion.

Respond to student emails with all relevant information. There is a feeling among some students that administrators ignore student input. Whenever possible, responding to student emails and including relevant information (i.e., not just sending a generic response) helps show students that their opinion is being considered. Administrators should be clear about how their input will be used or why it cannot be used, and should attempt to follow up with the student after any decision has been made (see also: "After the Decision Has Been Made" under 3.1).

Overall, there are many ways for students to communicate to administrators. SAC identified various drawbacks with using just one type of feedback mechanism, e.g., surveys, focus groups, town hall discussions, and other types of engagement. It is therefore recommended that at least two distinct feedback mechanisms are used for any given issue. Additionally, SAC focus groups also indicated that many students value in-person discussions and events over emails and surveys.

## 3.3 Strategy for Communicating Information to the Student Body

Communicating information with the large, varied, and passionate student body at MIT can be exceedingly difficult. Being careful to share information in ways that will best garner students' attention will encourage healthy two-way communication and help prevent rumors. Following the four principles outlined here will help encourage positive student interest and engagement.

i. **Getting Student Attention**

   Students at MIT may have different amounts of interest in various issues, as well as different preferences in mediums of communication. That being said, to reach the most students possible, administrators and students should:

   <u>Always communicate through email.</u> It is the most often used and most thoroughly read medium for communication with students. While other digital mediums and in-person events may be necessary and helpful, do not rely completely on these other options. Always share key information, at the very least, via email.

   <u>Keep emails short, but provide places where students can go to retrieve additional information.</u> For the greatest read-rate, an email should be short and to-the-point, but provide detailed information for those interested in the topic. If possible, keep the body of the email down to just a paragraph or two and provide a link to additional information, whether on a webpage or in an attached document. A good example of this type of email is the monthly Chancellor's digest that is sent to the student body. However, that email should have the important hot topic news stories and questions/answers at the top so that students are not expected to scroll down through introductory text, since many students simply delete emails with such text-heavy openings.

   Another avenue to explore is Facebook, which is becoming increasingly popular among the newer classes. While students are very unlikely to follow any pages or groups made by administrators, they do use their class pages quite frequently. Although administrators should not be given admin access to these pages, administrators should work with those who maintain the page and the Class Council to share important news stories in this venue.

ii. **Share Information Quickly**

   Timely emails prevent the spread of false information and help improve student engagement and satisfaction. A well-worded email sent while a topic is fresh in the students' minds, explaining motivations and reasoning, will reach the most eyes and prevent the most speculation.

iii. **"Up the Tree, Down the Tree"**

   Information sent up the tree should come back down the tree. In order to share information in a timely manner, it is often appropriate for administrators to send a single mass email explaining a decision. However, students who shared their personal opinion will better understand the decision made – and how their input was incorporated – when it is communicated back down the tree.

Administrators should encourage their colleagues to pass information about decisions back down the tree and student organizations and leaders should do the same. Students will be more likely to engage with an email from a familiar name.

### iv. Providing a Channel for Follow-Up

A clear channel should be created for feedback and follow-up questions. When sharing information with the student body, provide a point of contact and clear instructions for feedback, questions, and concerns. This makes it exceedingly easy for a student to ask a knowledgeable administrator a question rather than expressing a concern to a friend and accidentally starting a rumor. Points of contact can also be provided at the end of surveys, focus groups, and in-person meetings.

While there are already valuable channels for student commentary in place, like whatsonyourmind@mit.edu, many students do not know of their existence, which limits their usefulness. The recommendation of the SAC is to publicize these lists much more extensively and to make the purpose of these channels clear. Specifically, once students are informed about these channels, they should also be told which administrators receive the emails, and how or if the student should expect a response. If students know that only the Division of Student Life reads an email list, and the administration only uses the responses to get a pulse of student life, students would know not to expect a direct response and to field their questions about, say, academics, to another email list.

## 3.4 Example Timeline for Issues Affecting Students

While every issue comes with its own demands and time constraints, it is important to give students as much of an opportunity as possible to provide input for decisions and to be involved with the process, especially when students will be largely affected by the outcome. It should be noted that some issues do not require institute-wide discussion; in cases where an issue affects only a subset of the student body, the process should focus on actively engaging those specific students. The following outlines a potentially appropriate timeline for issues affecting students:

i. **More Than 6 Months Before Implementation**

   When committees are formed or early ideas are being formulated, students should be alerted to this process. Even if it is too early for formal or large-scale conversations, it is important for students – especially student leaders – to begin gathering thoughts about the issues.

ii. **2-6 Academic Months Prior to Implementation**

   Students should be involved in discussions; for instance, student forums, focus groups, and surveys can be utilized during these stages. Furthermore, the discussions should be dynamic; we recommend that adminstrators keep students informed while a decision is being made, especially with regard to how their input is being utilized. Additionally, for long-term processes, we recommend more student input be sought as the plans change and progress.

iii. **About 2 Academic Months Prior to Implementation**

   Close-to-final potential changes should be communicated to the student body or, at the very least, those students directly affected by the decision. This allows students enough time to gather their thoughts, ask questions, and provide any further feedback they have on the issue, with the understanding that they will most likely not have the power to drastically alter decision at this point.

iv. **2 or Fewer Academic Months Prior to Implementation**

   Additional student feedback should be gathered from the group used above, and changes should be considered, if necessary.

v. **Within 2 Weeks After a Final Decision is Made, or Prior to Implementation, Whichever is Earlier**

   All students affected by significant changes should have access to documents explaining the coming changes within two weeks of an official decision to implement them.

vi. **Less Than 3 Months After Implementation:**

Administrators should actively solicit feedback from affected students via appropriate venues, such as surveys and focus groups, and address concerns with appropriate alterations to policy and relevant justifications for policy changes and implementations.

## 3.5 Actions to Improve Student Understanding of MIT Policy, Decision-Making, and Organization

A critical component of student-administrator relations, communication, and collaboration is trust. One aspect that has led to anger and distrust is a misunderstanding or distortion of MIT policies. That is, students sometimes do not understand the reasons that certain decisions were made or even how the MIT administration is organized. To help with these issues, we offer the following suggestions.

### i Student Leadership

Transition Meetings. At the beginning of each academic year or each semester, MIT administrators should meet with student leaders (possibly in an informal mixer setting) and present about their roles in the Institute, including how they have interacted with students in the past. Given that outgoing leaders presumably have good working relationships with administrators and are transitioning the new leaders, they could attend as well to help this transition.

Clear expectations for student leaders. A few expectations need to be made clear to all student leaders when they gain their leadership position. In general, leaders should not hinder the implementation of decisions they disagree with. In most situations, blocking implementation does more harm than good. Student leaders must also commit to keeping confidential information private. Finally, it is critical that student leaders fully commit to their roles (e.g., attending committee meetings, responding promptly to administrators and students, and actively soliciting broad student input). These and any other expectations should be relayed during transition meetings.

Representatives to Institute Committees. Student leaders also include those who are selected by the UA to serve on Institute committees. These students should have a clear understanding of their roles and responsibilities. It is recommended that the UA run seminars or training sessions, similar to the Chancellor's Leadership Summit and the seminar Understanding MIT (11S.941), that explain MITs organizational structure and decision-making methods.

### ii Student Body

In order to increase understanding of these issues for the entire student body, we suggest that the UA develop a site that includes a transparent overview of MIT policy, decision-making processes, and organizational structure. This platform can allow students to comment on relevant school-wide issues, keep track of what is happening with Institute policies, and follow what their peers are saying about said policies and issues.

Furthermore, SAC recommends that the UA explore the program of student-administrator dinners, similar to the student-faculty dinners that the UA Committee on Education already runs. Students who have advocated for this program believe that having these more informal dinners will allow both students and administrators to understand each other better. Some of these dinners could be held in living groups, offering administrators the opportunity to witness student residential life and culture. Some administrators like the Chancellor and the Dean for Housing and Dining already hold such dinners with students across campus, but additional living groups who have not set up a dinner may want to host these administrators as well. Moreover, the majority of other administrators do not yet participate in such programs.

## 3.6 Actions to Improve Institutional Memory

In addition to the SAC report serving as a set of guidelines for communication and collaboration between and among students and administrators, we suggest the following best practices for improving institutional memory within both the student body and various student governments.

i. **UA SAC as a Standing Committee**

   We recommend the creation of a standing committee of the UA entitled the UA Ad Hoc Committee on Student-Administrator Collaboration (SAC). SAC should assess the collaboration between students and administrators, and offer ideas and best practices for decision-making processes. Furthermore, SAC should be charged with ensuring that the actions and guidelines laid out in this document are upheld and updated as needed.

   Whenever decisions are made by administrators or reports are issued, SAC should be tasked with reading over the relevant documents and performing the relevant research with regard to the issues at hand. Then, SAC should be responsible for determining whether or not those who had made the given decision or published the given report had sufficiently solicited student input. If SAC determines that a process did not meet the standards outlined in this statement, SAC should contact the relevant individuals to ask for reasoning behind the process, and to offer ideas and best practices so that more student input and involvement are sought in the future.

ii. **Transitions**

   One of the most prominent areas where institutional memory is lost is through transition times for student leaders, including but not limited to those within student governments.

   For the UA in particular, we propose that transitional documents be created to guide new officers and members in fulfilling their responsibilities. These documents must be dynamic, as roles and responsibilities often change over time. In general, we suggest that there be a window of time sufficient for training between when the person-elect is chosen and when the person-elect takes the office or role.

iii. **Website**

   We recommend the creation of a page on the UA website that contains the histories of various issues, to be updated as needed.

iv. **Reports**

   We expect that in all reports, where reasonable and applicable, whether published by student government organizations or any given administrator, there is a brief summary or synthesis of the history of the issue to serve as context for the report as a whole. For those issues that have a great deal of history, we would expect the report to point to some places where people can go to get more information, such as past Tech articles or MIT reports.