Address to the Carroll L. Wilson Reunion
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I am honored to have the opportunity to celebrate with you both Carroll Wilson’s work, and the work of those who widened the trail that he blazed. MIT was truly fortunate to have had such a dedicated architect of international programming.

Over the years, Carroll Wilson’s passion for applying science, engineering, economics, and political analysis to important global problems has found many like minds at MIT. In the room today, we have no fewer than eighteen former Fellows in Africa, Wilson’s first international program; we have Wilson awardees spanning two decades; we have participants of the World Coal Study coming together with MIT faculty; and alumni of the Workshop on Alternative Energy Strategies sitting beside current MIT staff. But more than this, we know that there are others outside this room who have been touched by his legacy and are with us today in spirit, ranging from MIT’s D-Lab and the MIT Public Service Center, to far-flung regions of Tanzania, Colombia, and Burma. We all share the vision of bringing our countries closer together; we all strive to strengthen the citizenry of those countries, whether through better energy solutions, or more sustainable practices, or alternative economic models.

It should be no surprise that Carroll Wilson’s broad-ranging interests and humanitarian focus has found fertile ground at MIT. As President Susan Hockfield has said,

“MIT’s mission has always driven us to advance knowledge and educate students in service to the world, and today, many of the most important intellectual problems address humanity’s most pressing, shared challenges. These are challenges on a global scale with global consequences, from energy to water, from poverty to pandemic disease, from megacities to climate change.” [1]
The spirit of innovation of MIT’s students, faculty and staff rise to meet these challenges, supported by their expertise in interdisciplinary problem-solving. Here is just one example of many:

In 2004, energy was an increasingly burning topic on the minds of some of our graduate students, particularly those enrolled in Prof. Jeff Tester’s “Sustainable Energy” course. Spurred by their enthusiasm for the topic, they started to meet outside of class to hold their own extra recitations. Running a bit short on conversation after exchanging their own perspectives, they began to reach out to other resources to fuel their appetite for discussion. They soon founded the MIT Energy Club, and made it their mission “to bring together and educate the MIT energy science, technology, policy and business communities through initiatives focused on understanding the global energy challenge through fact-based analysis and education.” Having grown exponentially from its humble beginnings, the Club offers a lecture series, a discussion series, tours to local energy facilities, a mentorship program, and a continuing tradition of happy hours. The Club also hosts an annual conference that brings together an energy community from MIT’s campus and beyond, featuring keynote speeches by prominent leaders in the field, as well as a showcase of current research and entrepreneurship ventures. Collectively, this group of innovators is helping to push the boundaries of our knowledge of, and solutions for, this pressing issue.

At MIT, passion often leads to innovation and discovery. Our students have the academic background, the motivation, and the collaborative orientation needed to forge tools for global stewardship. But as we address the needs of developing countries, passion and mental acuity are not all that are needed to put their skills into play. For in order to truly understand their chosen topic with depth and perspective, a student must be able to engage directly with the subject matter. Long-distance observation will not suffice. To be physically present is the only way to apply mens et manus; mind and hand. How can a graduate student get to Nicaragua to study the feasibility of charcoal as a fuel source? Or to China to explore
sustainable housing?

The Carroll L Wilson Awards is a critical program at MIT that empowers community-minded students to carry out their projects internationally. The awards provide a clearer path for students to develop their ideas, and to make a positive impact. In addition, they take part in a life-changing experience that greatly enhances their education by giving them a deep appreciation of their discipline in a broad political and socio-economic context. The funding, in fact, does a world of good. This year, five outstanding individuals will use the awards to deepen their understanding of issues in Nicaragua, China, Turkey, and Africa.

It is clear that the same topics on which Carroll Wilson expended much of his effort deserve our continuing attention now more than ever: energy, sustainability. These complex problems demand that many disciplines intersect in order to understand them and to build solutions. This year’s awardees come from backgrounds in Mechanical Engineering, Architecture, Political Science, the Sloan School of Management, and the Engineering Systems Division. This diversity of academic disciplines is also reflected in the knowledge of the energy and sustainability experts with us today, and in the alumni of the various Carroll Wilson programs. Today, we have the opportunity to hear from and speak with leaders in the fields of international affairs and conflict resolution; in financial services; in alternative fuels; in energy and environment; and in energy economics and science. We have thought-provoking panelists speaking from the perspectives of socio-economics, political science, international consulting and social entrepreneurship. The breadth of this disciplinary diversity is directly correlated to the strength and flexibility of the solutions it produces. We anticipate a truly stimulating program.

And tomorrow, there will be a morning session on future planning, to discuss how we can insure that the ingenuity and drive of MIT students can continue to find an international outlet. Please bring your own perspective to the discussion. Working together, I know that we can implement a sustainable highway where Carroll Wilson once blazed a trail.