Social Networking and Technology: Opportunities and Risks
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The following remarks were delivered at the Council for Graduate Schools Summer Workshop.

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It gives me great pleasure to introduce Dr. Sherry Turkle, a fellow faculty member at MIT. Sherry Turkle is the Abby Rockefeller Mauzé Professor of the Social Studies of Science and Technology in the Program in Science, Technology, and Society at MIT. She received a joint doctorate in sociology and personality psychology from Harvard University and is a licensed clinical psychologist. Professor Turkle is the founder and current director of the MIT Initiative on Technology and Self, and has followed computer culture, the internet, and our relationships with them over a distinguished 30-year career.

Dr. Turkle’s recent research described in her book, “Alone Together: Why We Expect More from Technology and Less from Each Other,” is just fascinating. Dr. Turkle explores the role of technology in redefining and degrading the quality of human interactions and relationships. As you will hear from her, her research discusses how we periodically remove ourselves mentally and emotionally from f2f interactions, deep and meaningful conversations are sacrificed, our capacity for self-reflection and solitude is reduced, ultimately making us vulnerable to loneliness and isolation. This topic is critically important to graduate education and higher education as a whole, at a time when we are undergoing transformational changes due to online education, forcing us to reflect on and rethink the value and structure of campus-based residential education. At MIT, deep intellectual discourse is the currency of collaboration, innovation, and knowledge generation. In addition, aside from socialization, professional and transferable skills development, integration of research and classroom activities, and “hands-on” curricular components contribute to the depth and pace of learning and the quality of residential education at MIT, all of which are challenging, if not impossible, at this time to replicate in a fully virtual environment. Hence, one of the goals driving our online initiatives is to develop
mechanisms for how they can be utilized to enhance residential-based education; for example, increasing faculty-student and peer F2F interactions, enabling personalized learning in pace, content and geography, supporting data-informed, dynamic teaching, accommodating different learning styles and levels of preparation, and incentivizing the creation of new “hands-on” and discovery-based research learning experiences in the classroom. We have a number of specific departmental pilots ongoing involving the “modularization” of curricula where content is broken up and moved content into discrete “nuggets” and utilized to enhance classroom activities in a variety of ways.

Closely related to Dr. Turkle’s research, graduate education and our graduate students have been infiltrated by technological tools that affect their educational experience in a myriad of ways; online communication with their thesis advisors, virtual scholarly conferences, online disciplinary discussion groups, international advising and collaboration, nearly instantaneous literature alerts, remote online instrumentation training webinars and experimentation (NanoLab), etc. Hence, graduate education is evolving past the classical apprentice model where graduate students primarily interact with a single faculty (thesis) advisor to a “networked apprentice model” where graduate students are supported by multiple mentors and are rapidly connected to resources, information, their laboratory, their peers, their graduate programs, their university, their scholarly communities, and the world at large. Simultaneously and paradoxically, we have also faced significant challenges in the area of graduate student mental health, work-life balance, with the trends and themes of isolation, disconnection, lack of self-confidence coming to the forefront and representing significant barriers to timely completion, academic success and quality-of-life. I look forward to hearing more about Dr. Turkle’s recommendations, for example regarding the creation of sacred times and spaces for deep thought, listening, and face-to-face interactions, and how we can integrate such concepts in the design of the 21st century campus community and residential education; for example, in the curriculum, physical plant, teaching and learning spaces, co-curricular activities and transferable skills development, mentoring and collaboration.

Please join me in welcoming Dr. Sherry Turkle.
The respondent at this morning's session is Dr. Andrew C. Comrie, Dean of the Graduate College and Associate Vice President for Research at the University of Arizona and also a board member of the Council of Graduate Schools 2008-2012. Professor Comrie is a climatologist specializing in the geographic aspects of atmospheric environmental issues, and has published widely in specialized and interdisciplinary international journals. In the Spring of 2000, he also held a Research Professorship at the Social and Behavioral Sciences Research Institute at the University of Arizona. Please welcome Dr. Andrew Comrie.