

September 5, 2002

To: FSILG Presidents

I am writing to share with you some of my thoughts about the issues facing fraternities, sororities, and independent living groups at MIT. This letter comes on the eve of a period of major transition when FSILGs will face the challenge of coping with various campus changes, the shifting and uncertain interests of future students, and your own views about the future of your groups.

While this is a time of maximum challenge, it is also an important opportunity for MIT to reaffirm its commitment to our fraternities and independent living groups, which will be most affected by these changes. Your groups have provided housing and a sense of community to MIT students for several generations. You are the custodians of important housing resources. You are an important link to generations of alumni who care deeply about their houses at MIT and the Institute in general. We also want to reaffirm our support for sororities. While most do not have houses and as a result do not face some of the issues raised below, they do, nevertheless, provide a valuable sense of community for their members and as such have a stake in the future of FSILGs.

As FSILG leaders, you are caretakers of a deep well of community spirit, connection, and "home." We in the MIT administration are committed to working with you to ensure a successful transition through this period of change. While the administration is committed to an active and supportive role in the coming years, we cannot overemphasize the importance of your initiative and leadership in shaping the vision of your independent houses, and together in your councils, your leadership in advancing and preserving the system.

There are a host of national shifts that will shape your near-term future. I outline below what I see are the issues FSILGs face.

### **External Changes**

There are several shifts that are external to your organizations and the FSILG community. The first is a shift of interest in fraternity membership. Nationally, there was a boom in fraternity membership in the 1980's and early 1990's, following major declines in membership during the preceding two decades. However, due to risk management issues, negative public relations, and more options for students to get involved in campus activities, among other reasons, fewer students seem interested in rushing fraternities. Significantly, the Cooperative Institute Research Program found that 21% of incoming students in 1990 thought there was a "very good" chance that

they would join a Greek organization. In 2000, only 10.2% responded, "very good" to the same question. Although we pride ourselves in our uniqueness, we rarely are unaffected by national attitudinal trends.

Today, about 34% of MIT's undergraduates are members of FSILGs—a number that has declined for two years in a row. Of the 305 freshmen who joined an FSILG last year (about 30% of the class), about 30 de-affiliated and moved out of the chapter houses because of what they report as poor living conditions, a lack of focus on academics, or a generally distracting environment. While these comments do not apply to most houses and reflect certain personal tastes, they deserve thoughtful attention.

Another major development is the decision to have all first-year students live in campus residence halls. While these students will still be able to affiliate and have a social presence in fraternities during most of their first year, the fact that they do not live in the houses means there will be financial changes as well as other changes in the way your groups operate.

Another development that may affect FSILGs is MIT's investment in on-campus housing—starting five years ago with the refurbishing of Senior House, then Baker House, and now the opening of Simmons Hall this fall. The smaller residence hall renovation projects, and the upgrades to the dining hall are complete. Some fraternities and independent living groups have made or are making improvements as well. These enhanced environments increasingly may be contrasted with houses where this upgrading has not occurred. There will be more such investments in the coming years—both on campus and in some FSILGs. While many of these improvements are intended for all students and will benefit all students, in the first instance they may be perceived as enhancements only for those who live on campus.

The growing proportion of women on campus is another shift and a good one. It is also not new. Women have been more than 40% of the class for five years and the number of women has been growing steadily for more than fifteen years. While other schools, less dominated by science and engineering, have had a comparable proportion of women for some time, the shift at MIT is more recent. The correspondingly smaller numbers of males, given a stable class size, creates a smaller pool from which fraternities can draw members. This is a permanent feature of our community.

### **Internal Changes**

There are in each of your organizations other developments and shifts that affect your future prospects. As I see it, there are three types of challenges that stand out. There may be others as well as issues specific to your organization.

First, in recent years, several groups either could not attract the number of desired new members, or the number has been unstable—raising concerns about what the future will bring. Other groups have not had this problem.

Second, some groups have found that their houses have become less attractive, either because of hassles associated with the location, or because of structural or deferred maintenance problems. On the other hand, some groups have not had this problem or have recently invested in their houses.

Third, in our society, cities, and campus communities, there is less tolerance for particular behaviors and conditions that have come to light in recent years. Incidents of bad behavior on the part of some houses serve as convenient “proof” to some people that fraternities might have outlived their usefulness. While I do not share this conclusion, there are many others who do—including some parents of prospective students and some of your alumni brothers. On this point, the burden you carry is associated with the sector and may have little to do with your house.

These pressures and shifts are not new. When shifts have occurred in the past, many fraternities here and elsewhere have met the challenges and have come out stronger. The energy, leadership, and creativity that have been so helpful in the past need to be summoned again.

In fact, a number of your houses at MIT have taken thoughtful steps to address the current changing conditions. This gives me great hope that others will be inspired to follow you and that your efforts will bear fruit. I am very concerned, however, that some of your groups will not be sufficiently attentive to their challenges, thoughtful and timely in their approach, or consistent in the follow-through that will be required for the next three to five years. If this happens, I fear we will lose groups and with them a valuable sense of community as well as leadership and service opportunities for our students. That would be an awful outcome and an unnecessary one.

I believe that the loyalty and leadership found in our FSILGs are strong assets to be tapped to meet the challenges of these changing times. Some groups have already met the challenges, have stabilized, and are looking forward to benefiting from capital investment and increasing support from their alumni members as well as the leadership of active members. Other groups, however, have not yet taken these steps. They represent a major concern within MIT and to concerned alumni. These groups need quickly to acknowledge the challenges and to work to address them.

We can achieve our goals for a smooth transition over the next three years. I believe that the assistance available from MIT as well as from your own initiative and leadership can make the transition successful.

I want to be clear about what MIT support will include. First, we will continue to work with your groups on a day-to-day basis. The increased staffing in the last two years will represent the core of that day-to-day support. Additionally, we will look

forward to providing even greater support in resource development, as well as alumni and parent outreach. We also look forward to integrating FSILGs into our increased programming and support for student life and campus activities.

We have already committed more than a \$1 million in transitional support to groups over the next three years to meet the financial challenge posed by the housing of all first-year students on campus. While this support is significant, it is really only transitional and requires and assumes that fraternities will work diligently to develop a sustainable operational base. Without such effort by each house, these resources will not protect the houses from problematic transitional forces nor will it ensure that they will be able to survive when these funds are exhausted. In order to succeed, we believe each group will need to engage in a serious strategic planning exercise to frame how it presents and manages itself in the future.

You will need to clarify your goals and vision in order to attract future members, as well as engage the support of alumni members and other stakeholders, many who I know are willing to help you achieve your vision. At the same time, they will be skeptical of a solicitation that is not accompanied by evidence that they are contributing to a sustainable operation.

This process needs to occur in each organization and in each of the councils. The process should involve current members, alumni, and national organizations (where relevant). The process should start soon and become complete by spring 2003. We stand ready to support your initiative to take this important step.

How you present and position your group will be your own decision. MIT cannot make a case for your group even though we will redouble our efforts to support constructive initiatives you start and advocate for the benefits of independent living. Presenting yourselves is not the same as recruitment. Presenting, as I refer to it, means describing your group in a way that is consistent with your values and traditions and attractive to the interests and passions of future students. This will require each group to answer questions about what it expects your house to be like in say, five years, and what steps it will take for you to succeed in reaching that goal. As leaders, you have a critical role to play and the power to influence the outcomes.

Once you have established your vision, it will be important to take some steps to achieve it. There will likely be no “magic bullet.” While there may be some common efforts and approaches, each house will need multiple approaches and perhaps different combinations of activities over the next three years. Below is an illustrative (not an exhaustive) list of activities that may help you achieve your goals.

- Recruiting and Marketing – This is a crucial approach. It is first necessary to identify what vision of your house will be compelling to new students while staying consistent with the core values and culture of the existing group. Recruiting will need to be multifaceted, active, and extended over time, but never, desperate, or incoherent.

No one wants to be “hustled.” I want to congratulate those of you who worked so hard to produce the new FSILG brochures and CD Rom that were prepared for new students this past spring. These efforts reflect a coming together of the FSILG community to show the individuality of each of your groups, and the special features that they all share. I encourage this spirit in other initiatives.

- Re-size – Fraternities must consider what should be their appropriate size and whether they can establish a size that is sustainable and consistent with the population they want to target.
- New Classes of Membership - You may want to consider the mix of resident members and nonresident members or create other types of affiliation. In considering this, you will want to understand the interests of students and the ways there might be benefit for affiliation in nontraditional ways.
- Graduate Students - New graduate students who were members of fraternities may be looking for some type of affiliation with their group, and you may find a way to provide housing and affiliation that serve the needs of these students as well as undergraduate members. In this same vein, there are also a growing number of fifth-year and professional students who were undergraduates at MIT and may want to continue to affiliate, though with a different arrangement.
- Physical Changes – Fraternities might consider making physical changes to the house, in order to address new goals and missions, or to sustain or change their group size. You may discover excess capacity and new and creative ways to use it, including the possibility of leasing excess property. Some of your groups may need to consider whether the living arrangements offer an attractive proposition to students who have a growing number of good quality choices.
- Fund-raising – Some alumni have indicated a willingness to help with fund-raising, provided there is a strategy to ensure that funds raised will move the house to a sustainable fiscal position. The administration will share our concerns as well as our hopes with alumni leaders. We are prepared to be advocates to them for your plans for the future.
- Cost Adjustment – Both on-campus housing and FSILG housing have been under priced in recent years. This has produced some deferred maintenance on campus and in FSILGs. MIT is already starting to upgrade older dormitories and some fraternities have done so as well. In both cases, improving the quality of housing may require more aggressive pricing in the future.

- Consolidation – While groups are independent and may not be able to consider a merger or consolidation in the traditional sense, they may create options of reducing cost by taking advantage of the benefits of scale. This may include more use of shared staff, bulk buying, and joint contracting.
- Campus Profile of Current Members - While fraternities may make physical changes in their housing or come up with new schemes for recruitment, the strongest selling point will be the profiles of the fraternities, sororities, and independent living groups and their members. These profiles are created by the reputation of FSILGs as organizations as well as by the model and examples set by members who are active on campus. To the extent that you are widely viewed as positive and attractive role models and active on the community, this bodes well for long-term viability.

I want to convey again my belief that the next three years represent a time of maximum challenge that must be addressed cooperatively, creatively, and consistently by the FSILGs if they are to have a viable future. If we are successful in our efforts over this period, I believe FSILGs will be able to continue to play the critical role in our community that they have played over the years. The administration looks forward to being a partner in that activity, and I am sure other stakeholders will join in helping you realize your vision for the new century.

Sincerely,

Phillip L. Clay  
Chancellor

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cc: Alumni and Stakeholder Groups