



An Update from Bob Ferrara '67, Director of FSILG Alumni Relations

January 17, 2007

Hello FSILG alums,

This is the latest installment in a series of messages spanning the last two years. Every six months I have been writing all of you with updates on developments regarding the Fraternity, Sorority, and Independent Living Group (FSILG) community here at MIT. Almost every one of us deeply values our undergraduate experience, and wishes to see this legacy passed on to future generations of MIT students. In a rapidly changing world, I believe we are succeeding.

Today's situation

Thanks to the sustained efforts of so many, we have a much more stable and positive situation than at any recent time. Most chapters are much healthier – both in membership and finances - than a few years ago, and not a single chapter has been lost since 2000. The picture is hardly uniform, however; some are still struggling financially and/or going through one of the periodic troughs that can affect any organization. In any event, all the groups are now being offered more alumni and MIT support. And as the FSILG community continues to adapt to an ever-evolving landscape, we are seeing several interesting new experiments in Greek and cooperative living.

This past fall's fraternity and ILG rush was the best in five years, as more than 50 per cent of the freshman males pledged. For each of the past four years, the rush period has been moved earlier in the fall semester schedule, now allowing upperclassmen to focus on this crucial activity before the start of fall classes. It shows in the results, as the number who have joined has increased every year for the past five - to the point where this fall 299 young men joined one of the twenty seven fraternities. Contrary to what some alumni have understood, freshmen do pledge fraternities – most still within the first few weeks of arriving in Cambridge. They participate in chapter activities as freshman but do not actually move in until sophomore year.

And the sororities are flourishing, aided by superb organization, strong leadership, and positive demographics. These groups have a fundamentally different model for recruitment, and the timing also varies. For the past 3 years MIT sorority women have not affiliated until a late January recruitment period. In the fall of 2007, sororities will join the fraternities and ILGs in holding recruitment immediately following the late August Orientation. For the upcoming recruitment, more than 200 women have already signed up, more than 15% ahead of all previous years at this phase of the process. Last year, for the very first time, 100 per cent of the women offered bids accepted them.

The five Independent Living Groups (ILGs) continue to hold their own as each continues to develop its special personality within the larger MIT community. For example, Fenway House, has been developing an “arts house” theme, appealing to this small but vibrant segment of the MIT community and capitalizing on their location near the Museum of Fine Arts and other Boston cultural resources. Fenway House takes its name from its location at 34 The Fenway. It has been so known since 1974 when the old Sigma Alpha Mu chapter became coeducational and broke from the national. The “SAMmies” have, however, contributed mightily to the Institute's leadership, and today more are members of the MIT Corporation than any other living group.

Current Efforts

Students, alumni like us, and MIT administrators have spent the better part of the past few years implementing the recommendations of the FSILG Task Force (see the [Aurora web site](#) for the full text of the report). We were called on to work together and each make our special contributions to the FSILG community.

For their part, the students have succeeded in assembling more targeted “marketing” to attract new members. They have adapted to and are succeeding in an environment where there are many more demands on a student's time and, frankly, more issues to address. For example, parents are today more deeply involved in students' lives and decisions. The IFC and Panhellenic responded by reaching out directly to parents, to reassure them of the character and support provided in MIT's FSILGs. This past August over three hundred parents were welcomed – on campus – at a special parent's brunch in the Student Center. (Yes, that was over 300 hundred parents who came to MIT to bring a son to daughter to MIT; quite unlike bygone eras when they goodbye at a distant train

station or airport). The entire event was scripted by FSILG students, and every parent received personal attention from one or more of them. With collective efforts like these, and the solid efforts of each of the individual chapter, the numbers of FSILG-affiliated undergraduate students continues to increase every year.

In particular, the consistent growth of the sororities solidifies the Panhellenic organization's position as the largest undergraduate women's group on campus. And increasingly they are organizing events open to all MIT women, such as Women's Leadership Week in the late fall. The Panhellenic group also initiated a very successful alumna-student career networking event, "Women's Professional Day". This all-day event, held on the Sunday after the Alumni Leadership Conference, opened with a rousing keynote address by Katy Brown '93, Alpha Chi Omega national Vice-President. Another milestone was Sigma Kappa sorority's winning of the prestigious D. Reid Weedon '41 Award for Alumni Relations this year--the second time an undergraduate sorority chapter has done so since the award was created two decades ago.

Just like the students, FSILG alumni - people just like us - are continuing to assume more responsibility for the overall success of the FSILG community. In my view, the most significant alumni-run initiative grew out of a request from Dean for Student Life Larry Benedict. He asked the alumni to take on the primary role in recommending MIT "recognition" for FSILGs, essentially assuring to the larger community that each MIT chapter was providing a healthy, well-managed environment for its members. The [Association of Independent Living Groups](#) (AILG) responded with the Accreditation process. Pioneered by Jim Bueche '62 and now run by Herman Marshall '78, this process, similar to academic visiting committees, has really matured and 29 of 36 living groups have now been through it. These sessions, and the preparation for them, are proving to be very constructive learning experiences for everyone involved. Under Jim and Herman's leadership, a large number of local alums now participate, and the logistics have been greatly simplified. This term the Accreditation process was adapted to meet the highly evolved sorority governance structure and a two year review cycle put in place. This cornerstone activity will reap benefits for years to come.

The AILG's Facilities Committee has been very active this year. Under the guidance of Tom Holtey '62 and Steve Summit '84, a Safety, Licensing, and Inspection program was implemented a little over year ago. The goal is to ensure that all FSILGs meet today's exceedingly more stringent regulatory environments. Frankly, we - MIT, the chapters, the regulatory authorities - have never been as on top of the situation like now - ever. Each and every house has a lodging licenses and inspection certificates, with not a single abatement outstanding. Further, each stakeholder has access to a computer "dashboard" of documentation and status. The Building Safety Facilitator, hired with funds from the AILG and MIT, keeps this machinery running, working with each chapter and the several municipal authorities who have jurisdiction in this area.

This January MIT alums are again offering an array of FSILG-focused courses for undergrads during MIT's Independent Activities Period (IAP). All told, close to hundred actives and alums are involved. One seminar covers financial operations, another house management, and a third alumni affairs. A brand new offering, co-developed with MIT's Information Services & Technology Department, reviews options and best practices for installing and supporting an electronic infrastructure - wired & wireless networks, cable TV, telephones, and getting the most out of the new high-bandwidth fiber optic connections which MIT has installed to each and every FSILG.

The alumni community is also showing its maturity with leadership transitions and the inclusion of more women. The AILG Board was rechartered in 2000 and re-energized in 2004 by Chair Dan Geer '72. Dan was succeeded in 2005 by the very capable Susan Woodmansee '97, who forged a bond with our new MIT President Susan Hockfield. In October of 2006, Susan passed the AILG leadership on to Steve Baker '84, an activist alum who has just completed a two year-term as Theta Xi National President. Also, sorority alumna Lisa Tattersen '99 was recently elected to the Board. The FSILG Cooperative, Inc also saw a leadership transition from its first Executive Director, Chris Rezek '99, to Lehigh grad Scott Klemm. In a few short years, this purchasing and service cooperative, owned by 36 member FSILGs, has become the third largest such coop in the country. Because of its effective client relations and business expertise, MIT is now taking steps to transfer responsibility for administration of FSILG insurance operations to the coop.

MIT Staff Activities

As alumni take on more responsibility and do it so effectively, this also frees up MIT staff to concentrate their efforts on tasks they can do particularly well. For example, the three-person professional staff of the FSILG Office, who are all trained in modern student affairs and advising, have increasingly turned their focus to chapter counseling and leadership activities. As I learned as a member of a recent search committee, MIT is considered a great place to be if you aspire to a career in this field. When one position opened up three months ago, MIT was flooded with high quality applications. Ryan Henne was the unanimous choice of students, alumni, and staff. Late last year Ryan relocated from the west coast, joining Assistant Dean David Rogers and Kaya Miller. This coming weekend this trio is orchestrating a retreat for all the new FSILG undergraduate leaders.

These developments have also involved Dean Steve Immerman HM, a 25 year MIT veteran who has had overall responsibility for MIT's FSILGs. He is expanding his scope of activities where he can bring his special vision and knowledge of MIT. Steve has been asked by senior administration to assume leadership and raise funds for a major upcoming initiative on Student Life. You will hear more in coming months. Parts of this initiative are already in place, thanks to especially generous gifts of FSILG alums, like Mike Warren '69, Alex Dreyfoos '54, and Clay Struve '80. They and the many others who know Steve appreciate his unique talent in bringing out the best in everybody. And in the meantime, Steve is also pursuing a Ph.D. in Educational Administration, where his thesis documents the leading-edge work here at MIT. Not bad for the fellow who came to MIT as our first Dean of Fraternities over two decades ago.

In the meantime, the Alumni Association has been steadily increasing its FSILG staff support. The Association has developed a series of communication, event planning, and fundraising items and assembled them into an "FSILG toolkit", portions of which are now employed by virtually every chapter. At this September's Alumni Leadership Conference, the Association, in collaboration with the AILG, offered the first-ever workshops focused around FSILG issues. The house corporations and advisory boards are telling us what they want and need to spread the work and get more people productively involved.

In word and now in action, President Susan Hockfield has shown she values our community. For example, she has insisted on the inclusion of FSILGs in any long-term campus housing plans. Several chapters want to have the option of relocating to on-or-near-campus locations. Over 50 alums reviewed preliminary locations ideas and were asked for input at an October 25 presentation by Julia Nugent '86, who has been hired MIT Facilities to project manage this effort. It is important to note that, even if several chapters maintained this interest, any construction would not begin for several years. And there are other significant housing developments. Karen Nilsson, who now heads all of Student Residential Life, is actively looking for better ways to accommodate FSILG needs in MIT-owned-or-leased properties and this directly affects 10 of our current chapters. MIT is strongly considering an increase class size (from 1000 to 1100 in each class year) and this can only benefit the FSILG community. The key is that, in all the above, FSILG interests are now being integrally considered in the overall housing plan.

Finally, we should mention Executive Vice President Sherwin Greenblatt '62, who will be handing over his position soon. In his tenure he has been a friend and advocate for the FSILG community. He personally took charge of negotiations which successfully and amicably resolved a mortgage issue with the alumni of an important FSILG. At the request of alumni, Sherwin also has directed that the policies of the Independent Residence Development Fund be reviewed and extended so that MIT can provide additional means of MIT support for FSILGs. During the past few months, the operations of the IRDF have been moved to the Controller's Office and MIT's lawyers now understand much more fully the mutually beneficial and productive relationships that have been forged with FSILGs.

How to help

Sustained alumni involvement was key to revitalizing the FSILG community, just as it is now in moving us to the next level. As noted in the last message, all of us can do something in at least one of these four areas:

Connect. Please stay connected with your own chapter's alumni and actives. Pretty much every chapter has a newsletter that you should be receiving. If not, the new directory on the [Alumni Association web site](#) makes it easy to correct your contact information and to look up any MIT alum. You are welcome to attend an Alumni Weekend, Founders' Day, or one of the MIT-based events that brings people together, like Reunions or the annual Alumni Leadership Conference. If you are coming to a Reunion this coming June, you are welcome to stop by the FSILG Reception on Saturday afternoon.

Advocate. Continue to let people, inside MIT and out, know you value the FSILG community. Hold the MIT administration, the AILG, and even more your own house corporations and active undergraduate members accountable for providing excellent living and learning environments.

Contribute. FSILG alumni have been steadily increasing contributions to the [Independent Residence Development Fund](#) (IRDF) and unrestricted giving has reached its highest level ever. Thanks! This really helps as the IRDF is now doing more than ever. In the past calendar year, over one million dollars were directed to individual chapters in the three core programs--loans, constructions grants, and annual educational operating grants. With IRDF help, a number of chapters have installed well-equipped study rooms, many especially used by freshman. And now the IRDF is also gearing up to fund a system-wide response to new Carbon Monoxide monitoring mandates, better insurance coverage, and support of the SLI program mentioned above. The IRDF fund is truly a great resource.

Volunteer. This activity has its own rewards. Almost every house corporation could use help. Many chapters have or are establishing Advisory Boards as well, and these in particular need young alumni talent. The AILG and the Alumni Association will continue to offer more and better workshops to address volunteer needs.

Our collective goal is to ensure that MIT has one of the very best college residence communities in the nation. We have what it takes: an existing system with many strengths and talented alumni and staff committed to making this work--and the irrepressible spirit of invention that defines MIT, and that spawned the distinctive FSILG system in the first place. We can all help to see this promise is realized.

Thank you,

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