



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

June 29, 2007

Hello FSILG alums,

This is the latest installment in a series of messages sent to you every six months on developments regarding MIT's Fraternity, Sorority, and Independent Living Group (FSILG) community. Like you, I really appreciated the special character that cooperative living brought to my undergraduate life, and wish to see this legacy passed on to future generations of MIT students. Thanks to the efforts of so many of you, we are succeeding.

### **The View on the Ground Today**

As mentioned in my last message, the general feeling on campus is that FSILG environment is improving and thus much better than at any time in the recent past. Now that position is supported by real data. Every few years, MIT and all peer schools participate in the Educational Benchmarking Institute's comprehensive student survey. Among the FSILGs, a substantial percentage participated so the results can be generalized to the larger population. The recent findings included:

- strong satisfaction (90+ %) with roommates, safety, personal growth opportunities
- almost all categories improved from the 2004 survey (except on food!)
- a large majority were satisfied with the involvement and support of alumni
- students join FSILGs to form close friendship, for social events, and for leadership opportunities

This last finding seems especially familiar, and no doubt describes why many of us affiliated and why this was such an important core experience during our MIT undergraduate years.

What is new, however, is the emphasis MIT students place today on the leadership opportunities these organizations afford; over 55% of them mentioned this is an important factor in their selection of a fraternity, sorority, or independent living group. This is one advantage FSILGs can offer in today's very competitive environment. And since this is MIT, academic performance and scholarship remain essential priorities. This past semester, the top Grade Point Average (GPA) on campus was achieved by a fraternity; and the five Panhellenic Association sororities were well above average.

As parents of college age children well know, today's students are different than previous generations. We've seen that here also. The current MIT undergrads are generally busier, study even harder (if that's possible), have a strong community service focus, and are more comfortable around adults. Also remember the MIT undergrad student body, still about 1000 per class, today numbers about 45% women. The campus itself – dormitories and all – continues to be upgraded, so to stay competitive – and flourish – in today's environment, the FSILG community - students, alumni, and administrators - has to continually adapt to new circumstances.

### **Current Initiatives and Achievements**

For example, the sororities have concluded that their prior recruitment effort during the winter IAP (Independent Activities Period) break is no longer adequate. So in the early fall of 2007, the Panhellenic Association will be holding its recruitment period right after Orientation and before the start of classes, just as the Intrafraternity Conference (IFC) does. The independent living groups generally follow this schedule as well. This means all incoming freshman, men and women, now have the opportunity to learn about and affiliate with an FSILG very early in their freshman year.

The IFC and Panhellenic Association also collaborate on outreach directly to parents. Thanks to cell phones and air travel, parents are much more involved in the lives of away-from-home sons and daughters and so need to understand the special character of MIT's FSILGs. These groups will again be hosting a special parent's brunch in the Student Center. Last year's over 300 hundred parents visited, and every one received personal attention from at least one current FSILG member.

The FSILGs provide solid undergraduate leadership to their own community-wide organizations (like IFC), to the campus (e.g. Martin Holmes '08 of Phi Delta Theta is the UA President), and most of all to their own chapters. Permit me to cite just a few examples. Danny Eads '08 became IFC President early in 2007 during a very tense period, one marked by incidents with a unit of the Boston Police. Danny worked with MIT Police, administrators, and the community to educate all and bring the situation back into balance. Danny, Panhellenic President Annika

Larson '08 and the other officers also play an important role in educating alumni and parents about today's campus environment. They regularly participate in panels at events like the alumni workshops for FSILG Volunteers, the Alumni Risk Management Program, and Campus Preview Weekend. And they appreciate the alumni involvement in their mission and say so. This past May, nine very active alumni were honored at the FSILG Awards dinner.

Speaking of awards for leadership, the [Association of Independent Living Groups](#) (AILG) was just selected to receive the highest award given to MIT volunteer groups, the Presidential Citation, at the upcoming [Alumni Leadership Conference](#) on September 28-29, 2007. The AILG represents the Alumni House Corporations and Advisory Boards of the FSILGs. According to the award announcement, this group "has played a vital role in focusing MIT attention to the needs of this FSILG community, in devising and implementing solutions to new problems, in reinforcing the responsibility of its members, and in promoting the health and well-being of all its members". The AILG certainly has taken on a lot, often in concert with the Division of Student Life. Their web site at <http://www.mitailg.com/> gives a sense of the range of their activities, but I would especially emphasize two ground breaking programs implemented by the current board.

The Safety Licensing & Inspection Program was initiated two years ago, and has been a tremendous success in promoting safety in the FSILGs and ensuring all municipal authorities receive prompt and professional responses in the conduct of their duties. Thanks to a new computer system (these are MIT people after all!), for the first time in history all FSILG chapters have current licenses and complete access to every relevant document. Regular reminders, consultations, and preinspections by a contractor hired by the alums are all features of the current SLI program. Now the chapters and MIT have better information than at any time, which is critical in these times of very stringent municipal scrutiny.

The AILG-run Accreditation Program is unmatched in scope and process on any college campus in America. This is a peer-review program created in response to a request from the Dean of Student Life. In the first two years of the program, thorough reviews of all aspects of FSILG operations have been held for all but three of the 37 active FSILG chapters. The process is designed so that alumni house corporations and undergraduate chapters assess themselves and discuss issues with experienced peers. It has helped chapters identify problems with financial, governance, member development, and behavior issues. It also provides an outstanding opportunity to share lessons learned and best practices among the FSILG community.

The AILG board members are elected to three year terms. The current members are Steve Baker, (Theta Xi) '84, Jim Bueche (Chi Phi) '62, Susan Woodmansee (Women's Independent Living Group) '97, Chris Rezek (Alpha Delta Phi) '99, and Lisa Tatterson (Alpha Chi Omega) '99. This past June, Ernie Sabine '66 (Student House) was elected to replace Herman Marshall (Beta Theta Pi) '78, who finished his three years and was a major force in implementing the Accreditation program.

This group and other involved local alums understand the critical importance of the academic mission of the FSILGs in educating MIT students. And in today's learning environment, that means ubiquitous computer access. This past year has seen a boom in installing modern high speed wired and wireless computer networks as well as dedicated study rooms, especially for freshmen, in many of the chapter houses. This work is enabled by the generosity of alums who donate to the Independent Residence Development Fund (IRDF) and MIT's establishment of a fiber optic links to every FSILG. Not only is the new fiber network much faster, but it has also proved extremely reliable. In fact, the system has seen but one significant outage. That single mishap occurred when a November fire under the Longfellow Bridge knocked out power to the fiber optic repeaters. Reliable computer connectivity must be the norm today. With MIT's help, a survey of the condition of the data wiring in every FSILG is being conducted this summer by the AILG's Information Technology Committee.

Next to academics MIT values its traditions, to which the FSILGs contribute mightily. In fact, MIT's oldest continuous fraternity, Sigma Chi, celebrated their [125<sup>th</sup> anniversary](#) during a festive April weekend. The Saturday night ball was attended by 300+ Sigma Chis and friends, including MIT President Susan Hockfield. Another two of MIT's distinguished fraternities at MIT no longer have active chapters, but both are finding ways to maintain their traditions. Phi Gamma Delta maintains its practice of annual gatherings at 28 the Fenway, which is now rented to the Sigma Nu chapter. Sigma Alpha Epsilon founded the 484 Foundation which supports charities at and around MIT. The alumni brothers also developed an alumni web site, hosted by the Alumni Association, and for the past two years have hosted a Saturday dinner during MIT Reunion and Commencement weekend.

Ollie Smoot '62 is the icon of another treasured MIT tradition. After retiring as head of the National Bureau of Standards (really!), Ollie came back to MIT this June for his 45<sup>th</sup> reunion, where he was asked to officiate at the 15<sup>th</sup> annual Reunion Challenge Games, a spirited competition between the reunion classes. His own Lambda Chi

brothers, plus large numbers of undergrads, are now getting pumped up about an appropriate way to commemorate a year hence the 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the original Smoot marks on the Mass Ave bridge. During his recent visit, Ollie modestly explained that, back on the fateful night in October 1958, he was the shortest of the 14 Lambda Chi pledges available. Thus he was selected on that basis alone. He laid down dutifully a few hundred times that night, until he got so tired that his brothers picked him up and carried him a Smoot-length at a time, finishing the bridge calibration work all the way to the Cambridge shore...and the rest is history.

## MIT Staff Activities

At the beginning of this calendar year, Dean of Student Life Larry Benedict initiated a staff reorganization designed to improve the synergy between and among the graduate and undergraduate components of residential life here at MIT. Karen Nilsson was appointed Dean for Residential Life, with oversight of the expanding graduate dormitories, the undergraduate dormitories, and the FSILGs. She also has responsibility for campus dining and all programming and staff in the residence halls. Karen has been eagerly engaging the FSILG community; in May alone I visited at a half-dozen FSILGs with her.

Karen has over 22 years of operational student housing experience, and has taken a keen interest in including FSILGs in all long-term campus housing plans. Also, she has been pushing for better terms for the eight FSILGs who reside in MIT-owned-or-leased properties. Another interest which may now bear fruit is the beautification of Amherst Alley. This street, rather than Memorial Drive which it parallels, has become the "front door" to many Cambridge dormitories and FSILGs which line the Charles River bank. This is the first landing place for many new MIT parents and students, so we need to do a better job with issues like trash disposal and recreation space along this right of way.

There has also been turnover in the staff of the FSILG Office, which works directly with all the undergraduate chapters. Six year MIT veteran David Rogers and newcomer Ryan Henne, both of whom had really connected well with FSILG students, are moving to new jobs outside of MIT. Kaya Miller is assuming overall direction of the office, joined by Lauren Wojtkun who will be working with the sororities and the independent living groups. A job search is underway for a fraternities coordinator to replace Ryan. If you know a talented person who would like to apply, please ask them to apply on-line or drop me a line. Knowledge of MIT is a plus, but experience in student affairs and advising is even more critical.

The MIT Alumni Association continues to support the FSILG community in a variety of ways. The Association's [FSILG Toolkit](#) continues to be improved. Many chapters have now begun to use the "[Alumni Site Builder](#)" web site hosting service. An FSILG Reception has now been incorporated as a regular fixture during June's Reunion weekend. Alumni Association staffer Katie Casey works with many affiliated undergraduates to plan events and she also the coordinator of the annual D. Reid Weedon '41 Award process. Substantial monetary prizes are given to the undergraduate chapter which "demonstrates the greatest effort in alumni relations in the current academic year". This year's winner was Kappa Sigma, which has done a terrific job energizing its alumni base with a variety of new and traditional methods. Sigma Chi was also cited, for its always solid alumni relations program plus a spectacular 125<sup>th</sup> Anniversary celebration.

## How You Can Help

As mentioned in each of these messages, sustained and intelligent alumni involvement is essential to the health of this great MIT FSILG community. Every one of us can do something in at least one of these four areas:

**Connect.** Read your chapter newsletter and let them know how you are doing. The directory on the [Alumni Association web site](#) makes it easy to find contact information for other alums since you can search by living group and year. Also make sure your contact information is current. Please come to an Alumni Weekend, Founders' Day, or one of the MIT-based events that brings people together, like Reunions or the annual Alumni Leadership Conference.

**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.** Almost every chapter depends on direct contributions and these are very much needed and deeply appreciated. But giving through MIT also helps the cause. FSILG alumni have been steadily increasing contributions to the [Independent Residence Development Fund](#) (IRDF). The IRDF continues to do more every year. Thanks to an alumni-requested review, the important educational area percentages of each chapter house's operations have been revised upward. This year IRDF funds helped many chapters install state-of-the-art

networks and well-equipped study rooms. Also, the IRDF is now funding Carbon Monoxide monitoring systems required by new state laws. So every contribution helps. Our community has also been blessed with generous gifts to a new FSILG Leadership and Education Fund from Mike Schoen '87, Clay Struve '80, and Mike Warren '69. Thanks to each and every one of them and to the many more who give back in this way.

**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 continue to offer more and better workshops to address volunteer training and orientation requests. In fact, volunteering in any MIT-related activity is useful, as you build your own personal network and participate in the extended MIT community.

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, which spawned this distinctive FSILG system in the first place. We all have a part in seeing that this promise is realized.

Thank you,

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NB: All prior e-mails in this series, plus other FSILG-related alumni communications, can be found on the Aurora web site at this address: <http://web.mit.edu/dsl/aurora/community-reports.htm>