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MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY GRADUATE STUDENT COUNCIL

Graduate Advising

Memo to: Corporation Joint Advisory Committee (CJAC)

March 6th 2003

Background:

- ❑ In early 2001, the Graduate Student Council (GSC) and the Corporation Joint Advisory Council (CJAC) prepared a series of recommendations to augment the status of graduate student advising at MIT
- ❑ Based on the overwhelming sentiment of graduate students recommendations were made to improve advising focused primarily around 1) funding problems, 2) thesis issues, and 3) mentoring.
- ❑ The goal of the initiative was to spark changes and reduce the inter-laboratory, inter-department and inter-institution disparities.
- ❑ Two years subsequent to the proposal, the progress of each department needs to be assessed to determine what has worked, what needs to be improved, and how best to move forward.

Summary of Funding Recommendations:

- ❑ The minimum goal of the GSC in the 2001 proposal was to obtain confirmation of funding status from the advisor in writing.
- ❑ The proposal further sought to guarantee funding for the first year, as is the case for several departments including Chemical Engineering and Biological Engineering,
- ❑ Furthermore a semester of funding should be available should an advisor change become necessary, (currently available in only a handful of departments, such as Physics).
- ❑ Other issues raised included 1) a reserve fund for unforeseen circumstances, 2) loans for international students in particular, and 3) short-term interest free loans to all graduate students. All of these are offered by select peer institutions.
- ❑ Most importantly however, the proposal sought the implementation of a required once-per-semester student-advisor meeting (currently only in certain depts. eg. Mat. Sci. & Eng., Aero/Astro), which allows for a clear establishment of funding for the upcoming term.

Summary of "Thesis Issues" Recommendations:

- ❑ Semesterly meetings would additionally facilitate the early identification and resolution of potential thesis-related issues.
- ❑ Similar goals were to have required once-per-semester meetings with the thesis committee, and a firm set of requirements (from the committee) to enable project completion.

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Summary of “Mentorship Issues” Recommendations:

- ❑ Both the GSC and CJAC sought to improve general mentorship for graduate students.
- ❑ The initiative sought to enable third-party advising (a separate faculty member and/or older students) to serve advisory and ombudsperson roles. This is followed in some departments, preliminarily by requiring the thesis committee chair to be distinct from the advisor.
- ❑ Implicit in these goals is the understanding that conflicts do occur, and therefore plans to aid their resolution, such as identifying common problems, instituting discussion forums, and publicizing routes students can take, provide an optimal mechanism to both address and prevent future issues.
- ❑ In addition to preventing problems, an enhancement of mentorship was sought. The goals to achieve this included encouraging career mentorship, awarding top mentors, introduce mentorship training, and engaging alumni.

Follow through:

The results of visiting committee meetings over the past two years will help identify 1) successful programs, 2) the efforts made by various departments, and 3) department-specific issues that may not have been addressed by the original initiative.

In order to proceed forward:

- ❑ Departments that have implemented solutions should be identified.
- ❑ Problems departments have encountered (funding disparities, thesis committee size, etc.) should be addressed to help research new approaches.
- ❑ Solutions that have worked well (such as the big buddy program in HST, or Women in Physics) should be identified and advertised broadly.