Statement on An Act relative to sexual violence on higher education campuses

S.2081, entitled An Act relative to sexual violence on higher education campuses, was reported out of the Joint Committee on Higher Education on June 8th, 2017, and it largely builds off of S.706 and H.632, which were introduced in the Massachusetts Senate by Sen. Michael Moore and the Massachusetts House of Representatives by Rep. Tricia Farley-Bouvier and Rep. Daniel Donahue on Jan. 19, 2017. It requires that degree-granting post-secondary institutions adopt a policy regarding dating violence, domestic violence, sexual assault, and stalking, and make it available to all students, faculty, and staff. Furthermore, it adds requirements that aim to reduce instances of sexual violence through training of students, faculty, and staff; make it easier, safer, and more private to report instances of sexual violence; and provide a clear pathway to resolution of reported instances.

The MIT Graduate Student Council (GSC) represents the 6,900 graduate students of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in all matters concerning their welfare, academic opportunities, and overall health. We support all measures that effectively prevent sexual harassment and assault, provide resources and support for survivors, and result in fair and timely investigations with appropriate consequences for perpetrators. Therefore, we strongly support S.2081, An Act relative to sexual violence on higher education campuses.

Sexual misconduct is an important issue nationwide. Nationally, 18% of female students and 4% of male students have experienced nonconsensual sexual contact on campus.1 These concerning trends must be addressed in order to create a safe campus environment for all students and promote equal access to education, both of which are essential for maximizing the potential of young people. S.2081’s requirement that post-secondary institutions adopt a sexual violence policy is a good first step.

Furthermore, although 63% of MIT students who indicated they had an unwanted sexual experience at MIT told someone else about the incident, fewer than 5% reported the experience(s) to someone in an official capacity.2 This indicates a significant barrier to report to authorities. S.2081, with its requirements for post-secondary institutions to establish anonymous and off-campus reporting alternatives along with protections for witnesses who help with an investigation, is a step towards reducing that barrier.

We urge the Massachusetts General Court to pass S.2081. The passage of this legislation would contribute to a decrease in sexual violence on college campuses by clarifying institutional policies on sexual violence, requiring training on sexual violence, and lowering the barriers for reporting. This would result in a safer graduate student experience, more support for women in underrepresented fields, and overall higher quality of life and productivity for the graduate student body. Furthermore, with the federal Department of Education rescinding its Title IX guidance on how colleges should handle such cases, a bill like S.2081 is needed to help ensure that important progress made on sexual violence on college campuses is not lost. We thank the sponsors of S.2081 for their attention to this issue and urge all members of the legislature to support this bill.

Prepared by the External Affairs Board on behalf of the MIT Graduate Student Council, October 2017

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1 “Report on the AAU Campus Climate Survey on Sexual Assault and Sexual Misconduct”, Westat, xiv (2015)
2 “Survey Results: 2014 Community Attitudes on Sexual Assault”, MIT Office of the Chancellor, 6 (2014)