This year, the MIT Graduate Student Council (GSC) has been able to make steady progress in a number of different areas:

- External Advocacy
- Communications with Grad Students
- Professional Development
- Orientation
- Grad Housing
- Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion
- Financial Distress & Grad Students with Families

The first section will detail the progress made this year on these topics. The next section will explore the outlook for the upcoming year, including some new areas of focus for the GSC.

Of course, none of this would have been possible without our dedicated team of contributors, from the four Officers, to the Committee and Subcommittee Chairs, to the tireless volunteers with no official position. The GSC cannot thank you all enough for all that you have put towards making graduate life better here at MIT.

Highlights from 2018-2019

External Advocacy

The GSC’s External Affairs Board (EAB) is focused on advocacy and outreach outside of MIT, particularly with governments at the local, state, and federal levels. Every year, the EAB conducts 3 trips to Washington DC to advocate on Capitol Hill and 2 trips to the Massachusetts State House to advocate at the State level (unless it is an election year when the legislative session ends early). Those trips continue to build out the relationship network that the GSC has at both the Federal and State level.

In addition to the above, there are also several exciting new developments from this year related to external advocacy.

The first is that the GSC helped found the Boston Federation of Graduate Student Governments, which is composed of the graduate student governments of the following 9 Boston area schools: MIT, Boston College, Boston University, Babson, Tufts, Brandeis, University of Massachusetts Boston, Northeastern, and Bentley. These schools came together to both share best practices and improve communication among the graduate student
governments, along with forming a coalition of schools to advocate together for issues at the Massachusetts State House. This greatly increases our immediate reach and impact on State legislators in the Boston area since the schools within the federation cover significantly more districts and are composed of a larger fraction of the population within those districts.

Another big development this past year has been the increase in collaborations and interactions with the Cambridge City Council. Ever since the voter registration efforts that the GSC conducted (along with the then newly-formed MITvote) during 2017 for the most recent Cambridge City Council elections and the advocacy efforts of the GSC related to graduate housing and the Volpe site rezoning, the GSC has been intensely interested in collaborating more with the City on issues relevant to graduate students, including zoning (which affects housing and the availability of retail, especially groceries) and transportation (especially bike lane improvements near MIT). The Cambridge City Council has also expressed increased interest in getting more graduate students involved in local policy making, leading to direct outreach and conversations with several city councillors and an interest in the City Council to potentially create some sort of Young Adult Commission that will give graduate students a direct seat at the table.

The GSC has also helped get 3 articles about research done by graduate students at MIT published in their local hometown newspapers! This has been an initiative of the EAB’s Public Outreach subcommittee, with the goal of exposing more people to the work being done by graduate students at MIT and to the students themselves. You can find links to these articles towards the bottom of the EAB website: gsc.mit.edu/committees/external/

Communications with Grad Students

The GSC has seen many instances where grad students have suffered unnecessarily because they did not know about the resources available to them or the ways they could give their feedback to improve the grad student experience at MIT. One of the primary causes of this is poor communications. Therefore, one major focus of the GSC this past year has been revamping our and the administration’s communications with the graduate student body.

On the GSC’s end, we’ve reorganized our email communications with the graduate student body to make it more clear what the purpose of each email is, and therefore make it easier for students to determine whether they should pay attention or not to any given email coming from the GSC and to search for it later if they need to come back. Therefore, GSC emails have been grouped into 3 categories:

- The Anno newsletter - A weekly compilation of events and happenings relevant to grad students.
- The Resource Roundup newsletter - A monthly email focused on a new topic every month, detailing the resources available to all grad students on that topic.
• The GSC Presidential Memo - Ad hoc emails that highlight news/updates that are extremely relevant to all grad students, and that we believe all grad students should read.

The Anno is a long-running GSC tradition, and is a great way for grad students to discover the events and other goings on that are happening around campus for the next few weeks. The first three pilot Resource Roundup newsletters were sent in February, March, and April 2019, covering three different professional development related resources: the Career Advising and Professional Development Office, the Alumni Advisors Hub, and the Teaching and Learning Lab. Both of these newsletters have similar open rates around 40% (which is the rate at which the Anno has been opened for years), indicating that a reasonable fraction of students are indeed aware of them and the information they provide. The GSC Presidential Memos that have been sent out have often solicited direct responses from students, indicating engagement with the actual subject matter of those emails. Because of the limited run of the Resource Roundups and the GSC Presidential Memos so far, we do not have sufficient data to reach definitive conclusions about this system’s success, but the results so far are encouraging.

On the administration’s end, the GSC has been meeting monthly with the communications teams of the major administrative offices (Chancellor, Vice Chancellor, Division of Student Life, and Office of Graduate Education) so that not only is everyone on the same page with regards to what is being communicated to grad students, but the administration also hears feedback on what they are trying to communicate and how. These meetings have often resulted in the GSC Officer team giving direct feedback on the content of important announcements and even on the timing of the emails, which helps with coordination among the different offices and the GSC. The administration has also heard a lot of feedback (not just from the GSC!) that graduate students would like more communication and information from the administration, so the Office of Graduate Education and the Vice Chancellor have launched a quarterly letter to graduate students (titled the “Grad Student Update”).

Professional Development

The GSC has been working on improving professional development resources for grad students for years, and we’ve been making steady progress every year. This year, the GSC supported the renamed Career Advising and Professional Development (CAPD) office as it revamped its programming, with more focus on programming and communications specifically for grad students. The GSC also piloted a new Graduate Student Networking event the evening after the Fall Career Fair, where 30+ companies mixed and mingled with 200+ grad students. Given the extremely positive feedback from both companies and students, we plan on repeating this event this upcoming year.

The GSC has also greatly increased its collaboration with the MIT Alumni Association to bring more graduate alumni knowledge and perspectives back to the current graduate student body. Part of that has been related to communications and helping the Alumni Association promote their existing resources that graduate students might find useful (like the Alumni Advisors Hub).
Another part has been hosting events and panels that bring alumni back to campus to talk directly with students about their experiences. This includes hosting four different alumni career panels during the Alumni Leadership Conference (which was the same weekend as Career Fair), bringing some alumni back for Alumni-on-tap events at the Muddy, and hosting other panels focused on academia, postdocs, entrepreneurship, and industry throughout the year.

Orientation

Every year, the GSC welcomes all incoming grad students to campus in the fall before the semester kicks off through Grad Orientation. This year, the GSC began the process of completely revamping the way that we think about Orientation, and therefore, the events and other related information sharing that happens around welcoming new grad students to campus. The biggest change this year was the piloting of the GSC Orientation Bulletins, which were emails sent out during the summer outlining resources and important information around one or two central organizing topics per email. We heard a lot of very positive feedback about these bulletins, with students thanking us not just for the helpful information, but also the fact that they were receiving consistent communications at all from MIT before they arrived on campus. The bulletins also enabled us to cut back on the amount of information that needs to be given to students via events during Orientation week. We had heard a lot of feedback that the previous versions of the informational events/panels just weren’t that helpful because it was too much information in such a short timeframe. The Bulletins not only gave the information earlier, but also spread it out and gave students a written thing that they could reference later when needed.

Grad Housing

On-campus graduate student housing is currently undergoing a lot of changes as a result of the work being done by the Graduate Housing Implementation Team (which came out of the work done last year on Graduate Housing and the Volpe rezoning). This year, the major changes to the graduate housing system were:

- Groups of students were allowed to enter the housing lottery together as a group of roommates in several of the grad dorms. This is significantly different from the way the system previously worked, which had only allowed students to select roommates after they all gone through the lottery individually and been assigned to the same type of room.
- Graduate student couples were allowed to live in some of the larger efficiencies in the single dorms. This meant that more graduate students could get on-campus housing since it meant that two students could be put into a room that previously only housed one.
- Some single students were allowed to fill unfilled efficiencies in the family dorms. For whatever reason, some of the family efficiencies went unfilled through the lottery, so they were offered to single students who wanted efficiencies.
The biggest takeaway from all of these changes, and the changes in the pipeline, is that MIT Housing is becoming significantly more flexible with the way that they fill graduate student housing. This flexibility has enabled more students to be housed on campus than previously possible, and also enabled MIT to better fill the available rooms. The GSC has been collaborating with MIT Housing every step of the way to help ensure that the changes continue to benefit graduate students.

Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion

At the end of last year, we placed the chair of the Diversity and Inclusion Subcommittee (DIS) on the GSC Executive Committee as a message that diversity, equity, and inclusion is extremely important for the GSC to pay attention to going forward. This year, we have further stepped up our efforts.

DIS organized and brought together representatives from almost every MIT graduate department to discuss department level diversity, equity, and inclusion efforts and best practices as part of the Department and Classroom Initiative. As part of this effort, DIS has hired a pilot graduate community fellow focused on designing department climate surveys in collaboration with Institute Research (IR) to help departments looking to run such surveys and processing and utilizing the data from them.

DIS also brought together representatives of several diversity-related constituencies on campus: women, underrepresented minorities, LGBTQ grads, religious life, and international students. These representatives provided feedback and updates on their respective communities, giving DIS some insight into the state of the campus with respect to diversity, equity, and inclusion. DIS has also become the primary contact for the administration with respect to diversity related issues, especially during the ICEO search and with all of the work around standing up the College of Computing.

Finally, the Council passed an amendment to the GSC Bylaws that elevated DIS to a full committee under the name “Committee on Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion” (DEI). While this committee won’t technically exist until the start of FY20 for budgeting reasons, this elevation is again sending the message that the GSC continues to find these issues extremely important and is willing to put the resources behind efforts to address them.

Financial Distress & Grad Students with Families

The GSC long been aware of the problems grad students in financial distress face, especially those students with spouses and/or children to also take care of on their graduate stipend. Therefore, building off of the good work done by last year’s Stipend Recommendation team in calculating a living wage for single students, this year’s Stipend Recommendation team focused a lot more on the different demographics of students on campus, with a particular focus on the extra costs incurred by international students and graduate students with families. This new
focus was very well received by the MIT administration and therefore was reflected in MIT’s stipend increase announcement, where all five schools committed to implementing new policies and practices to help reduce financial insecurity among grad students, with an initial focus on doctoral students with 9-month stipends and doctoral students on non-resident status. This represents a significant change in the way that MIT thinks about stipends and the financial situations of grad students, moving away from just looking at the average grad student, and instead recognizing that there are some students who are in particularly challenging financial situations who could benefit from policy changes designed to help them.

The GSC also has a long history of advocating on behalf of grad students with families, who face numerous problems that greatly impact their experience at MIT. In response to GSC’s continued push in this area, and after the announcement of the expanded family leave policy at the end of the Spring 2018 semester, the Office of the Vice Chancellor created the Graduate Families Support Working Group to directly explore ways that MIT could better relieve the problems experienced by grad students with families. The initial work has mostly looked at the resources that MIT already offers and the data that is available on the situations of graduate families. Initial recommendations are expected to be coming in the next few months, but this is definitely a long term project that we expect to be working with the MIT administration on for several years at least.

Outlook for 2019-2020

Previous Projects

The GSC is going to be continuing all of the major projects highlighted above next year, with several of them having very important developments coming down the pipe.

For Professional Development, the Academics, Research, and Careers (ARC) Committee is creating an Alumni Relations Subcommittee that will focus exclusively on helping grad students interact with and get the most out of their relationships with MIT alums. This will help expand the collaborations we already have with the MIT Alumni Association and bring more alums back to campus to give back to the current student body.

For Orientation, the idea this year is to refocus on welcoming students to campus during Orientation. This means that the bulletins will be expanded to cover more information and pre-orientation webinars will be offered to help incoming students get all of the information they need before they even arrive on campus. Once on campus, there will be less events so that students feel less stressed trying to make it to all of the events, but the events that do happen are being tailored so that they create the most welcoming environment possible. We want to create a sense of community here at MIT from the moment that an incoming student steps onto campus.
For Grad Housing, we’re working with MIT Housing to implement a few more changes to the system. The first is that all incoming students will be offered a 2 year lease (implemented as a 1 year + 1 renewable year) instead of just a 1 year, non-renewable lease. This should greatly simplify the housing search for incoming students, especially those just planning on doing their 2-year Master’s here at MIT. Another big change is that all leases will now end on July 31st (the end of a month) instead of August 15th (the middle of a month). This should mean that students can easily avoid paying rent for two places at once if they decide to move off campus and to a lease that starts in August. The final change that is still being worked out technically is a change from a lottery for a room type to a lottery for a spot in a queue that will then allow students to select a specific room to live in. This will make MIT’s housing system much more like the private market, where rooms are directly selected and there is no penalty for just looking but deciding to live somewhere else. This also means that it should be possible to look for both off-campus and on-campus housing at the same time without penalty.

For Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, the new DEI Committee will continue to expand on the programs started by its predecessor subcommittee. One big change that is being contemplated is having DEI-focused positions across all of the GSC’s committees so that DEI initiatives and perspective are present in all of the GSC’s actions.

For Financial Distress and Grad Students with Families, the GSC is continuing to build on the long term projects that have been started with the MIT administration with respect to these issues. The GSC is already in conversations with the Vice Chancellor on how best to get involved with the efforts to fully define the commitment made by all five schools to reduce financial insecurity, and the Graduate Family Support Working Group will continue its work.

**New Projects**

The GSC is also looking to start 2 major new projects: one focusing on improving the advisor-advisee relationship, and the other focusing on student well-being and support.

The advisor-advisee relationship project is going to be spearheaded by a new subcommittee to be created within the Academics, Research, and Careers (ARC) Committee, where they will likely focus on bringing all departments together to share knowledge and best practices and to pool resources and clout for improved advocacy with the MIT administration.

The student well-being and support project is going to be spearheaded by a new subcommittee to be created within the Housing and Community Affairs (HCA) Committee. The current plan is for this committee to centralize peer-to-peer support by giving iREFS (institute Resources for Easing Friction and Stress) a more stable and permanent home within the GSC and providing more resources for all of the REFS programs to advertise more and do more outreach to students. The committee will also focus on collaborating with all of the MIT administrative offices focused well-being and hosting any workshops or other wellness events as needed. The committee will also become the central hub for any of the GSC’s advocacy around well-being.
Overall Outlook

The GSC has been steadily expanding its capabilities to advocate for the grad student body, and this upcoming year is shaping up to be no different. With an increasing emphasis on not just starting new projects, but also building out the necessary structures within the GSC to help those projects continue on year after year, the GSC is poised to continue to be a great resource to the entire MIT graduate student body for years to come.