



Campus police: 617-253-1212
MIT Medical's COVID-19 hotline at 617-253-4865
EAPS/MIT message archive: <https://eapsweb.mit.edu/news/2020/covid-19-eaps-updates>
MIT COVID-19 updates: <https://covid19.mit.edu>

Friday 4/17/2020

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To all members of the EAPS Community:

“For tonight, the National Weather Service has issued a winter weather advisory. Some parts of Massachusetts may see up to 4–6 inches of snow.” (Boston Globe, 10:10am, 17 April 2020). Strange times, indeed ... But the more troubling storm raging across New England is, of course, COVID-19, and I hope you are all staying safe and well in these challenging circumstances.

The last two weeks were relatively calm as we—as an Institute, as a department, and as individuals—had already transitioned in a short time from a thriving campus environment to virtually complete remote operation. Hard decisions had to be made, but we knew what had to be done, and we did it. In general, EAPS moved through this change without major problems, which I view in large part as a testament to the wonderful department we have, including fantastic staff. Indeed, the sense of community that we have built over the years—with mutual respect and the trust that despite differences and occasional clashes we are all working together to achieve academic excellence with a healthy, diverse community of people who look after one another—maps to a level of resilience that is serving us well in these difficult times.

But, as I mentioned in my previous communication to the EAPS community, [on April 9](#), there is no time for complacency, nor time to get used to a new steady state (as there is none yet). The first weeks focused on operational aspects associated with de-densifying

home, yet). The first weeks focused on operational aspects associated with de-accelerating campus with the objective of slowing the spread of COVID-19 while keeping as much of our mission going as possible: relocating students, halting much of the on-campus research that requires in-person presence, and—of course—moving to fully online teaching. With most of these emergency measures in place, we are now trying to come to grips with the complex mix of direct implications (for exams, commencement, plans for the summer and beyond, finances of the Institute and its people) and questions about how long this will last and when and how we can reverse directions and move back to campus (both for research and for teaching).

Perhaps even more so than the first couple of weeks, this new phase is fraught with uncertainty. There are many (known) unknowns, which makes decision making difficult, and nobody has a crystal ball. Yet we need to move forward, and in the weeks ahead you will hear more about how to deal with the direct (financial and other) impacts and about when and how to ramp up on-campus activities.

You are all receiving regular, often daily, updates from the Institute and the School of Science, and last Monday President Reif eloquently but somberly laid out many of the challenges and realities that we are facing. High-frequency messaging from me would merely add to sensory overload, but I do want to call attention to a few things that we, as a department, need to work on or (at least) be aware of.

Staff: I often mention how blessed we are with our admin and support staff. They are trouper, and more than ever, they deserve and need our appreciation and support. While emergency policies and accommodations have been drafted for students and junior faculty, staff continue to support groups and the department without change in expectations, often under difficult circumstances, and often with more uncertainty and stress than we may realize. Like many of us, staff also face challenges of working from home (for instance, balancing work for MIT with homeschooling and care for children), and despite the Institute's sincere intentions and care there is concern about job stability and finances. Furthermore, I know that our admin staff miss daily interactions with members of their groups. Including the simple "you look distracted today, what's up?" and similar such interactions that connect them with (and support) our groups in ways not always appreciated by others. Please be considerate of their situations and stay connected and look out for them. Some groups include admin staff in their Zoom meetings, which is very much appreciated.

Students/Postdocs: Our Education Office has done a fantastic job in crafting and communicating [guidelines for remote general exams and thesis defenses](#), and further updates will be communicated if and when needed. A big "Thank you" to our education team: Taylor, Megan, Rick, Paul, Amanda, Brandon, and Jane). Here, I want to highlight another issue. From recent communications with students, faculty, and department heads across the Institute, it is clear that there is emerging anxiety among students (and postdocs) about summer plans and job prospects in the near and farther term. To students and postdocs, I can assure you that your supervisors have your backs – many have contacted me to express concern, and while there is much that we do not and cannot

contacted me to express concern, and while there is much that we do not and cannot know, together we will find the best ways forward.

For students graduating this term: Good news! Details are still being worked out, and will be shared with you as soon as we have them, but I am pleased to inform you that MIT is working on an employment category that will allow you to continue your relationship (for a reasonable period of time) with MIT after submitting your thesis. Why is this important? It is quite common for graduate students to be appointed as postdocs after handing in their thesis so that they can wrap up research or manuscripts before moving to a next stage in their lives, often a postdoc elsewhere. Since MIT has put staff appointments on hold this is not possible this year. Hanging on to a thesis until the September degree list could be a solution for some, but many other institutions have similar measures so that start dates (or even appointments) elsewhere are uncertain. I fully understand how stressful this situation is, and I am very pleased that MIT is working on a solution.

Alternative summer plans: With internships, summer programs, fieldwork, and other typical summer activities cancelled or on hold, most students' summer plans have evaporated. Please check in with your students and advisees to make sure they are OK and help them navigate through the options for the summer. Across MIT, we expect much more interest in the Undergraduate Research Opportunity Program (UROP). The MIT Office of Graduate Education will not host the MIT Summer Research Program (MSRP) this summer, but if there are students interested in EAPS we will try to accommodate them. The Education Office will soon provide more information, but I encourage our faculty and researchers to think about UROP or other opportunities for our wonderful undergraduates. Intellectual engagement is key, but compensation is always welcome and even if we have to make budget cuts, see below, I will try to make extra department funding available for UROPs and alternatives to MSRP. (Stop the press: Dean Sipser just shared with me that he will make extra School of Science funds available for this purpose.)

Postdocs: Similar to the uncertainty faced by students graduating this year, the uncertain future can cause stress for our postdocs, in particular those getting close to the end of their term. I expect that, contingent on funding and visa issues, contracts can be extended, but please check in with your postdocs and let Karen Fosher know of any concerns.

Graduate student admissions: I am pleased to report that 14 students accepted the offer to join our graduate program this fall (for a yield of 61%). I am very grateful for the hard work of the Admissions Committee (thanks, Dan Rothman, Andrew Babbin, Sara Seager, and Shuhei Ono), the Education Office, and everybody else who helped with the process. A special thanks also to everybody who made the open house a success—this no doubt helped increase the yield. With the uncertainty surrounding re-opening the Institute and how we will teach this fall, we should not be surprised to see a number of students deferring to a later date. Megan and Brandon are in contact with the new students and will work their magic to find solutions even for the most complex situations.

Financial impact: As I mentioned last week ([4/9/2020](#)), and as spelled out in more detail by President Reif earlier this week ([1/12/2020](#)), the COVID-19 crisis has serious financial

PRESIDENT REIF EARLIER THIS WEEK (4/13/2020), THE COVID-19 CRISIS HAS SERIOUS FINANCIAL implications for MIT and, thus, for departments. The budget for Fiscal Year 21 (FY21, from 1 July 2020 – 30 June 2021) is currently being revised. In addition to salary freezes for faculty and staff (with the exception of increments associated with promotion), departments have been asked to cut their general department budgets by 3%. I will work with Michael Richard and Natalie Liang and make a plan for some belt tightening, but we are guardedly optimistic that we can absorb the financial hit without drastic measures.

Inasmuch as the Provost asks Deans, and Deans ask Department Heads to help close financial gaps, I ask all of you (and especially those who can afford it, for instance, faculty and more senior researchers with healthy balances on discretionary accounts) to help by requesting support from the general budget only for essential things and only if there are no reasonable alternative sources. By distributing the cost across multiple sources, I am sure we will meet this challenge without much interruption.

Building and construction. Another mitigation measure announced by President Reif relates to budgetary funding for physical space improvements. This refers to the FY21 budget, and support for current projects remains intact. As I mentioned before, as a consequence of a moratorium on construction, the construction of labs on the 4th floor of Building 4 and the work on deferred maintenance of Building 54 are incurring delays. We hope that this work will resume as soon as the City of Cambridge decides that it is safe to do so.

But, good news: the design of the “Earth and Environment Pavilion” has continued, and the architect and sustainability team are on track to present so-called concept designs to President Reif later this or early next month. These designs focus on the external appearance, which I think is beautiful and inspiring, and once the design is chosen the team will work with us to finalize plans for the interior. And, of course, Angela and I will continue to work hard to close the funding gap so that we can start the construction without delay after approval of designs and available funds by the Executive Committee (hopefully later this year). You can imagine that this is not an easy time for philanthropy, but we remain optimistic that we will get it done.

When can we all go back to campus? We all ask ourselves this question, perhaps several times a day. But there are no simple answers as there is much we do not know. Working with other institutions in the region and nation, MIT is working night and day to explore a range of scenarios for re-opening campus and plans for the fall. We are closely monitoring the rapidly developing COVID-19 situation—including the understanding of the virus; the capabilities, availability, and strategies for testing (for virus and antibodies); and the timelines for vaccine development—and as soon as I know more about plans for returning to campus (provided they can be shared publicly) I will let you know.

That’s it for now – the ski-rental is closing at 8:30pm, so I have to hurry 🙄

As always, please do not hesitate to contact us if you have any questions or comments –

wherever you are, we love to hear from you!

I wish you all the best in these are difficult times, and I hope that after another long weekend on Zoom you will have as good a weekend as the circumstances allow. Stay safe and well, we will get through this together.

Rob

Head, EAPS

Contacts:

Rob van der Hilst, for faculty and general matters

Taylor Perron and Megan Jordan, for matters related to education/teaching

Michael Richard, for all matters related to staff and general building issues

Jen Fentress, for all matters related to communication and online teaching