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Subject: EAPS Community update, COVID-19 (9 April 2020)
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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>

Thursday 4/9/2020

To all members of the EAPS Community:

It has been a while since I last wrote to you, mainly because I wanted to be careful not to add to the overload of information that is already being shared, daily, by the Institute. But it is important to stay connected, as a community, and there are some developments that I want to make sure we are all aware of.

Four weeks ago, in my first of what became near-weekly EAPS community updates, I wrote about the early stages of MIT's response to the spread of COVID-19. That feels like ages ago. It is truly impressive how in such a short time MIT transformed from a densely packed campus buzzing with human activity, with some of us choosing to work from home once in a while, to mostly empty physical units and a distributed network of students, staff, and faculty working remotely, connected through the cloud. Yet, MIT is not deserted—far from it—and in some ways we are more connected and united than ever before.

Now, ten days into the second half of the semester, we seem to have transitioned quite well to online teaching and remote oversight of research, with our fantastic HQ and admin staff working hard in these challenging times to provide continued support to us all. By sticking together, with our groups, as a community, we have come far. Yet, the transition was hard. It was so sad to see students leave campus and to realize that those in final years cannot present their projects, defend their theses, or celebrate their graduation in person; it was painful to put so much of our cutting-edge laboratory research into hibernation; it was very frustrating to see physical construction be put on hold until further notice. And, of course, we all – no exceptions – have to cope with doing what we do in circumstances that are far from ideal.

But the current situation is not a new normal that we should get used to, and there is no time for complacency. Indeed, however difficult it was to get to where we are now, we

have to be mentally prepared for the inevitable fact that in many ways the hardest is yet to come. For starters, in the weeks ahead we will see how the COVID-19 tsunami will continue to sweep through New England, and we should all continue to do what is needed in the best interest of public health. Please stay at home and stay safe! And please make sure that you know what to do and whom to contact in case you are aware of a person with (possible) exposure or think or know that you are exposed yourself. See, for instance, [guidance from MIT Medical](#).

The next weeks will also reveal the depth of the financial impact for MIT, along with a basket of mitigating measures and policies that will be painful in the near-term but necessary to move through this challenging time. The hit is on multiple fronts, including the direct cost of the response itself, the effects on the endowment, and the anticipated decrease of revenue (for instance, through slower resource development from philanthropy, renegotiations of sponsored research contracts, and deferred tuition income). MIT is re-budgeting FY21, and all DLCs (Departments, Labs, Centers), including EAPS, will be asked to be fiscally prudent and see where belt-tightening is possible. I expect to know in one or two weeks what the implications for our budget will be. Just like in the financial crisis of 2008, merit (salary) raises for faculty are likely to be affected, and while new staff appointments are closely examined and, generally, put on hold, the Institute will do what it can to avoid lay-offs. We can all help by being considerate with requests that we might have, by being respectful and patient, and by realizing that while these measures are inconvenient in the near term they will help ensure sustainability in the long run.

We do not know how long it will take before we can go back to business as normal, if there even is such a thing. Indeed, it is likely that the dramatic events, and what we did to address them, will have profound implications for how we do things. Yet, MIT leadership is cautiously beginning to prepare for the time that we all hope will come sooner than later, that is, the time to reverse de-densification and come back to campus. This is likely to be a step-by-step process, and we have to be prepared that for many of us our activities will remain disturbed for quite some time to come. We will try to re-open labs as soon as we can (under guidance from medical experts), but please do not expect that this will happen swiftly and soon.

These are challenging times, and I realize that uncertainty and lack of detail is frustrating and unsettling. But I think it is good to know what is on the horizon, even if there are still many unknowns. I will share specifics as soon as they become available and connect separately with pertinent stakeholder groups, if and when needed. And please be assured that we have your interest in mind with all that we do.

There is also cheerful news to share, for example:

Administrative Professional Day. EAPS is very fortunate to have a fantastic and dedicated group of administrative professionals, and on Wednesday April 22 we will take the opportunity to thank them for all their hard work, not just during these difficult times, but throughout the entire year. At this time, we do not know when we will be back on campus

to enjoy our annual administrative outing, but please be sure we will celebrate upon our return to campus.

The Earth and Environment Pavilion. I am happy to inform you that even in these trying times, the design phase of the pavilion is alive and well and progressing on schedule. Over the past months we have met several times with the architect firm (Anmahian Winton—AW) and their team to get updates on concept designs and sustainability and LEED certification goals, and the process is on target for concept design approval (by MIT President Reif) by the end of April. The design ideas and sustainability goals are inspiring, and I have no doubt that the Pavilion will bring the programmatic and aesthetic transformation that we are hoping for.

Senior Thesis presentations. Our senior undergraduate students have been working (remotely, of course) with their research supervisors and with Jane Abbot on their theses, and our current plan is to have (online) senior thesis presentations spread over two days soon after the last day of class (which, this year, is May 12). Wrapping up their projects under these circumstances has been a challenge, and I for one am looking forward to seeing their work. I hope that there will be a great turnout for the online presentations, so please stay tuned for further details.

Campus Preview Week. Next week, April 16-18, prospective undergraduate students will “visit” EAPS, and while we will miss hosting in-person events we will have an online presence. If you have ideas for online content or activities that we could add to our list, please contact Megan Jordan. Updates on graduate admissions will be given soon.

Online teaching/education. We are gathering more complete feedback, but from what I have been hearing so far I have the impression that the transition to online teaching has, in general, been quite smooth. Despite some snags, students have many positive things to say and appreciate the efforts instructors have been making to ensure continued high-quality teaching. In turn, faculty, TAs, and lecturers tell me that the interaction is often more direct, with broader engagement and more questions. An unintended but, in my opinion, welcome consequence is that there is more emphasis on teaching and learning, and less on getting a grade, and I encourage instructors to consider alternative ways of assessing academic progress than traditional examination. Some students have flagged concerns about Zoom, which MIT is using (with special licensing and security) for online teaching and meetings, and Jen Fentress will send best practices for the use of this online platform.

Taskforce 2023. Finally, I want to reassure everybody that we have not forgotten about the recommendations from Taskforce 2023 as discussed and refined during the department wide retreat last January 2020. We had already begun the process of converting the recommendations in to an action plan, with low hanging fruit already being picked, when we were hit by the pandemic. But with most of the emergency measures in place we have begun to refocus on the plans ahead, and I hope we can present a plan for action before long.

That's it for now. Please stay safe, healthy, and fit, and please look after one another—always, but especially during the COVID-19 peak in the weeks ahead. I hear from Michael Richard, Scott Wade, and Brian Smith that buildings 54 & E25 are vacant for the most part, and I thank you all sincerely for your cooperation. I can't stress enough how important this is and will remain to be for some time to come. We will get together again on campus, and we will celebrate and reflect appropriately, but for now it is important to continue the safety measures, from personal hygiene to physical separation.

Best to all, and don't hesitate to contact me/us with concerns, questions, or any other comment. I am proud of EAPS, deeply grateful for all you are doing, and convinced that we will get through this crisis together. Stay safe, and stay connected!!

Rob van der Hilst
Head, EAPS

Contacts:

Rob van der Hilst, for general and faculty matters

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

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

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