Saturday 5 September 2020

To all members of the EAPS Community:

I hope this message finds you all well.

The past weeks whisked by. Time is keeping its normal pace, but under the current circumstances I feel that I fall behind even more quickly than before. The past months were quite different from normal summers, in which we are able wrap up loose ends from the preceding academic year, do fieldwork in all corners of the globe, and take well deserved breaks and recharge batteries for the new semester. This year the activities continued well beyond Memorial Day, and the new semester crept up on us and began even before Labor Day. I recognize that many of you start the semester more tired than usual, and with substantial anxiety about the year ahead. Therefore, please continue to look after yourself and after each other, and please continue to engage with our community. While we have gotten used to some aspects of life during a pandemic, there is no new normal yet, and the going continues to be tough for many in the community. Please be gentle and understanding.

The extraordinary times daunted on me – again – last week when I sat down to update to the EAPS Visiting Committee. For full transparency I share this update after this brief update to the department. It contains many topics that I included in the EAPS Community Updates that I sent over the summer, and which I will not repeat here.

Instead I just want to wish you an enjoyable Labor Day weekend – if you are in New England, I hope you can pause a bit and enjoy the beautiful weather – and to share with you the main topics on my agenda for the department this fall.

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Building on Taskforce 2023 and the events of the past summer, we will devote considerable time and attention to the ongoing effort to build a better department:

First is community and culture: Over the past years, and in particular this summer, it became more and more clear to me that we must put the effort of improving departmental culture more central to our activities and mission. To that effect, I have – with enthusiastic permission from our new Dean, Professor Nergis Mavalvala – taken the step to appoint the chair of the new DEI Committee (the successor of the Diversity Council) as a second Associate Department Head of EAPS. I am very pleased that David McGee has accepted this responsibility – see recent announcement – and I look forward to working with him on this important task. We are in the process of populating the new Committee, and over the course of this month we will finalize the committee’s charge and the agenda for the year ahead. Stay tuned for announcements, and please join me in thanking Wiki Royden for chairing the previous committee and in congratulating David with this appointment. Going forward, with Associate Heads for DEI (McGee) and for Education (Perron) EAPS will have a robust structure to address the many challenges that we face.

Second is faculty renewal: As I mention in my previous update (7/27/2020), the search in ‘climate science’ (writ large) yielded several superb candidates, and we are trying to make multiple appointments. It is still too early to provide details, but please stay tuned for updates and for announcements of special seminars (for all) and meetings (for faculty) to present and discuss candidates. Furthermore, we have started a new search in the broad field of “Planetary Sciences”. We are mindful of the financial uncertainties due to COVID-19, but through the search we will be in prime position to identify and, hopefully, recruit new talent. We also hope to conclude the multi-year effort to fill the Stone professorship that was so generously donated to EAPS by Professors Peter H Stone and Paola Rizzoli.

Third is the physical environment: Several building projects are underway: 1) the climate labs on the 4th floor of building 4 are being constructed as we speak; 2) major construction in the Green Building (Building 54), which means that there are many contract workers in the building and that several facilities are temporarily out of order (e.g., bathrooms) – fortunately, those working from home will hardly notice; and 3) the Earth and Environment Pavilion, since a few weeks ago a.k.a. Building 55. The latter is progressing well, and we are facing several important milestones (and fundraising deadlines) in the weeks and months ahead.

This is an important and exciting period for our department, and I will—of course – keep you informed about these major topic as well as other relevant activities and developments.

I am proud of our community, all of you, and together we will not only get through this but also come out stronger than before. Please stay safe and healthy and continue to head the advice from MIT Medical about public health (incl. wearing masks, washing hands, keeping distance, and testing for those with access to campus).
Dear Ken and Members of the EAPS Visiting Committee,

I hope that you have been staying safe and well in these challenging times.

With the fall semester creeping up on us, I pause to reflect on recent months. So much has happened in the five months since my last general message to you. I wished I could say that we are easing into a new normal, but there are still many uncertainties and with the health of the MIT and broader community in mind we must adapt to evolving circumstances and realities.

This update is rather long, but I hope you will appreciate hearing about the many things that happened in this extraordinary year.

Before zooming in on a few topics, let me say how proud I am of the EAPS community. There have been unprecedented demands upon faculty, students and staff, but it has been inspiring to see how people stepped up to the plate and how the department came and stuck together to pull through even in the most testy and eventful moments. To name but a few: in March we oversaw the relocation of on-campus students and pivoted on a dime to change to all online learning and to mothball most on-campus research; in April we addressed a 3% budget cut; in May we held 100% virtual thesis presentations and graduation ceremonies; in June we responded to the killing of George Floyd and others and took action in #ShutDownSTEM; in July we ran the naming contest for 54-100 (see
and took action in ShutDownSTEM. In July, we ran the naming contest for 51-200 (see attached email for further info). And over the entire summer we provided unique research opportunities to well over 90 UROPs, continued implementation of Taskforce 2023 recommendations, had conversations about departmental culture and DEI issues (in particular), supported several related initiatives by our students, gradually ramped up our on-campus research activities, and continued to work hard on the various building projects and their funding. All-in-all it was a far cry from a normal summer break, but EAPS has proved strong and resilient, and we are ready for the semester that starts tomorrow.

1) FY21 budget cut: In the spring all units were asked to reduce their base budget by 3%. For EAPS this amounts to a 50% (approximately $250k) reduction of the non-salary component. We achieved this by a combination of cutting non-essentials (incl. catered events) and temporarily charging some staff salary to suitable fund accounts. In order to retain our ability to respond to unforeseen circumstances and ensure support for ongoing and new student or community initiatives, I asked faculty with endowed chairs and strong balances to consider sharing a portion of their annual scholarly allowances with the department. Their generosity yielded about $100k. We hope to raise more funds, however, for new DEI initiatives, in addition to ongoing departmental priorities such as fellowships.

2) #ShutDownSTEM + DEI Action Plan: The killing of George Floyd enhanced awareness of systemic racism and triggered a turbulent time of activism focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and underrepresentation in STEM fields, in general, and in the geosciences, in particular. Along with many US academic institutions, on 10 June we paused to reflect on broad issues through well-attended (online) events organized by MIT, our students and some faculty advisors. Later that month, EAPS student leaders presented a 12 point EAPS DEI Action Plan. On July 8, I met with the students to give my first response to the plan, and in order to ensure faculty agency and buy-in we are currently devoting a series of faculty meetings to discuss the proposals made by the students. The plan includes “low-hanging fruit” (some of which is already underway, such as reinvigorating the EAPS Diversity Council, introduction of training for search committees and incoming faculty), more ambitious plans that require resources and, thus, prioritization (such as summer programs and appointment of dedicated DEI staff), and issues that are out of our immediate control (such as guidelines for tenure).

We are now finalizing plans for a new EAPS Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Committee (the inaugural Diversity Council started in 2017, but became dysfunctional late 2019). In addition to repopulating and recharging a DEI Committee, I want to make its activities more visible and central to EAPS mission, and its leadership more accountable. To that effect, I intend to appoint the DEI chair as (a second) Associate Department Head, and create a structure that is similar to what we have for education, another part of the core mission of EAPS. For now the DEI committee will be supported by existing staff, but we hope to get permission to appoint a part-time staff person with pertinent DEI experience. The office of the Associate Department Head for DEI will form an umbrella for the growing number of activities that all work toward the goal of improving the EAPS culture and community, such as WiXII and TIDE (Towards Increasing Diversity in EAPS). The composition of and charge to the new committee will be finalized in September, after a few DEI events, including a department-wide Town Hall with department leadership and ICEO John Dozier and
3) 360° Surveys: As one of many efforts to improve the EAPS community, in June we launched so-called 360° surveys as a leadership development opportunity for faculty members and staff leaders. The roll-out was slowed down a bit because of the turbulent summer events, but eight faculty and two admin staff participated in a pilot, and the hope is that the majority of our faculty will participate. We work with an external consultant, and the cost per 10 faculty is approximately $11k.

4) EAPS UROP Summerfest: This summer we had almost 95 undergraduate students doing research in EAPS. This total includes UROP, MSRP, and a few students not affiliated with either program. The summer UROP team (Ellen Lalk, Meghana Ranganathan, Julia Wilcots, and Amanda Bosh) set up slack channels for students and mentors, and arranged a number of opportunities for the students to get to know others in the department. These included weekly social hours (e.g., a Trivia Night; a Share Your Pet Night), and the twice-weekly Summer Seminar Series (S^3). EAPS S^3 has hosted speakers on topics from rivers on Titan, to science journalism, to library resources. The S^3 talks were available online. The team also held a mentor training session. We encouraged collaboration across departments by making our S^3 series open to the ~20 students (+staff) at Haystack Observatory. In turn, they invited us to their summer seminar series. The organization of this historic EAPS Summerfest, which was made possible with support from the UROP office and from Dean Sipser, School of Science, provides a template for future summer student programs.

5) Faculty renewal: We currently have three active faculty searches. First, we have identified a superb candidate for the Stone Professorship, the endowed chair so generously donated to EAPS by professor emeritus Peter H. Stone and Professor Paola Rizzoli. We are in the final stages of collecting letters, and the case is scheduled to be presented to Science Council in November. The candidate is an atmospheric chemist, and she would be appointed to the rank of full professor. Second, the search in ‘climate science’ (writ large) yielded three top candidates, and as they are all women (including women of color) we are exploring the possibility of making multiple hires in order to move the dial in gender diversity. Third, we just launched a new search, in the broad field of ‘planetary science’. Recruitment is, of course, affected by uncertainty about the financial situation, but given the age and diversity profile of the department, renewal represent important opportunities.

6) Faculty Honors: This summer we congratulated Wiki Royden and Kristin Bergmann with their appointment as Cecil and Ida Green Professor and D. Reid Weedon, Jr. ‘41 Career Development Professor, respectively. Furthermore, professors Kristen Bergmann, Colette Heald, and Kerri Cahoy were honored for their commitment to caring in 2020-2021. The “Committed to Caring” (C2C) program is administered by MIT’s Office of Graduate Education (OGE) and recognizes outstanding mentors and promotes thoughtful, engaged mentorship throughout the Institute. I am also delighted to share with you that Professor Susan Solomon has won this year’s James R. Killian Jr. Faculty Achievement Award and will be named the 2020-21 Killian Lecturer.
7) Staff honors: Finally, I was delighted that the entire EAPS Headquarters team was selected as COVID-19 Heroes, a School of Science initiative. This award was given in recognition of the extraordinary efforts they made in the School during the COVID-19 crisis making the transition easier for our colleagues and work groups. I nominated them as a team because singling out a ‘hero’ would not only fail to recognize the critical contributions of others, but also do injustice to the collective spirit and effort that was needed to get through this as a community and which has become so emblematic of the EAPS community. I am glad the election committee agreed.

8) Building projects: As you know, EAPS is involved in three major capital projects: (1) new Climate Labs in building 4; (2) Deferred maintenance and prioritized renewal of building; and (3) the Earth and Environment Pavilion, now known as ‘building 55’.

1. The construction of the “Rasmussen Laboratory” in building 4 is underway and the move/occupancy is anticipated early summer 2021.

2. The silver lining of the pandemic is that much infrastructure renewal can be done with low occupancy of building 54, and this is now underway.

3. Re. the Pavilion: as already reported, $26M has now been raised, thanks to a new $10M commitment, and we have ‘only’ $5M to go! We are deeply indebted to many of you for getting us to this point. The pressure is on: we need to have a further $5M committed in gifts or pledges for the Pavilion by mid-October in order to get the green light at the 6 Nov meeting of the Executive Committee of the Corporation. This approval is needed to continue to construction when design is done, without incurring cost escalation due to delays. Occupancy is then anticipated for early 2023. We are, therefore, at a truly critical moment for the Earth and Environment Pavilion Project, and we are hoping to discuss the project with many of you to seek your advice and support in the next few weeks. If you are able to help, please be in touch a.s.a.p.

On behalf of the department I thank you for everything you are doing for us and wish you all well. Please stay safe, healthy, and fit, and please contact me with any questions or comments you might have.

Sincerely

Rob van der Hilst