

Report of the Indigenous Working Group

December 2022

Introduction

In an [April 2022 letter to the community](#), President Reif detailed the steps the Institute will take to advance Indigenous scholarship and support its Indigenous community. In that letter, he asked Chancellor Melissa Nobles and Institute Community and Equity Officer (ICEO) John Dozier to co-chair an ad hoc working group of faculty, staff, and students to advise him on:

- A specific use for the funds MIT will allocate to Indigenous issues, for maximum impact;
- Whether MIT should develop an official land acknowledgement statement or a statement of relationship with its internal and external Indigenous communities, and, if so, what the process for developing such a statement should entail;
- And the best way to ensure that, going forward, the MIT administration maintains open, regular communication with Native American communities on and around campus.

Over the course of fall 2022, Chancellor Nobles and ICEO Dozier convened faculty, staff, and Indigenous student leaders to consider these issues and formulate recommendations to the president. To engage broadly with members of MIT's Indigenous community, the group invited all MIT students and employees who identify at least in part as American Indian, Alaska Native, or Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander to attend a [forum](#) to discuss President Reif's charge and gather input.

This report addresses each of the points President Reif asked us to consider, but first we wish to emphasize an overarching theme that emerged from our discussions.

Beginning of a sustained relationship

President Reif ended his April letter by writing, "These actions are also an acknowledgement that we have work to do and reflect a lasting commitment to move forward in ongoing dialogue and partnership with Native communities at MIT and beyond." MIT's commitments to Indigenous communities, people, and Nations are in their early stages. The steps President Reif outlined in the spring of 2022 signal a desire to build new relationships centered on mutual respect and understanding. We welcome those steps, but they are only a start. The working group's discussions laid bare the need for focused attention to MIT's Indigenous community, in particular its students. We share President Reif's belief that the Institute has important work to do and are eager to partner with MIT leadership and offices across campus to advance these efforts.

Question 1: How should MIT use the funds it has allocated for maximum impact?

In addition to the funding MIT makes available to its Indigenous student community and the funding required to fulfill MIT's April 2022 commitments, President Reif dedicated a one-time

investment of \$50,000 and an ongoing annual commitment of \$3,650 to Indigenous efforts. He explained in his April letter that payments Massachusetts made to the Institute as a result of the Morrill Act of 1862, which established MIT as a land grant university, ended in 2008, writing, “...we will channel an equivalent sum each year to Indigenous efforts on campus, jumpstarted with a one-time allocation of \$50,000.”

We considered a number of uses for this funding: dividing it between MIT’s two recognized Indigenous student groups—the American Indian Science and Engineering Society (AISES) and the Native American Student Association (NASA)—investing it, dedicating it to undergraduate scholarships, and using it to bolster staff support for Indigenous students. Each use has its strengths and weaknesses.

The leaders of AISES and NASA expressed a reluctance to accept the funds without further context and a deeper understanding of the impact and legacy of the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890. Although President Reif’s letter tied the funding to the Morrill Act of 1862, we ask that, in sharing our recommendation, he describe the funding as an investment in MIT’s Indigenous community and a signal that MIT is committed to strengthening its relationships with Indigenous people, communities, and Nations, and not as a payment in lieu of that critical work.

Ultimately, we agreed to recommend that MIT deposit the funds into an account—to be stewarded by the Student Organizations, Leadership, and Engagement Office (SOLE)—that will be shared by AISES and NASA. The funds will be available to the two student groups to use in ways that advance their mission and that are consistent with SOLE policies. Examples of appropriate use include attending conferences, enhancing the Indigenous community space in Building W31, organizing events, and hosting campus visitors. We request that SOLE leadership meet with NASA and AISES leaders to discuss ways to ensure that the account is managed fairly and with the interests of both student groups front of mind.

In addition, we recommend that Chancellor Nobles work with the relevant administrative offices to review MIT’s reimbursement processes for student groups, a pain point the student members of the working group identified. We understand Chancellor Nobles has begun to explore this issue.

Question 2: Should MIT develop an official land acknowledgement statement or a statement of relationship with our internal and external Indigenous communities?

In 2019, members of MIT’s Indigenous community, working with officials from local tribal organizations and Institute staff, drafted a [land acknowledgment statement](#). Shortly after publication in 2020, MIT became aware of ongoing discussions between local Indigenous Nations about historical land relationships in what is now known as Cambridge and the surrounding area. Since then, MIT has continued to publish the statement on the ICEO website but has been careful not to refer to it as an official Institute statement.

We advise against developing an Institute-wide, official land acknowledgement statement or a permanent statement of relationship, at least for now.

An Institute-wide statement would be premature since the hard work of relationship building, in particular with the Massachusetts and Wampanoag Nations, is in a nascent stage. Instead, we suggest leaving the current land acknowledgement text on the ICEO website but revising the framing to encourage an active, rather than passive, commitment to Indigenous people, communities, and Nations. We also suggest that the ICEO regularly revisit the question of an official land acknowledgement statement and a more permanent statement of relationship as MIT's relationship with Indigenous communities and Nations takes shape.

With that in mind, we recommend deleting the following text from the land acknowledgement framing on the ICEO site:

“Based on feedback MIT has received since this statement was released, including disagreements among Native American tribes regarding historical land claims in Cambridge and surrounding areas, the Institute is initiating a formal process to develop a new statement. This statement will build on the initial work and further engage with subject-area experts and other stakeholders. For more information on this acknowledgement and the effort to develop and adopt a formal MIT land acknowledgement statement, please contact iceo@mit.edu.”

In its place, we suggest the following:

“This is not an official MIT land acknowledgement statement. Shortly after the statement's publication in 2020, the Institute became aware of ongoing discussions between local Indigenous Nations about historical land relationships in what is now known as Cambridge and the surrounding area. In fall 2022, a working group of students, staff, and faculty considered, and ultimately advised against, an official land acknowledgement statement. The working group suggested that MIT first take meaningful action and commit to strengthening its relationships with its Indigenous community and with leaders of local Indigenous Nations—including the Massachusetts and Wampanoag—and Nations more broadly, including those affected by the Morrill Acts. MIT is committed to this work.

MIT offices and community groups may continue to refer to this statement. However, we encourage colleagues and students to express their own commitments to relationship building centered on understanding, respect, responsibility, and representation with Indigenous people, communities, and Nations. For further information, please contact iceo@mit.edu.”

Question 3: How should the MIT administration maintain open, regular communication with Native American communities on and around campus?

Working group members identified staff support and leadership focused on Indigenous issues as the primary resource needed to help facilitate open, regular communication among MIT's administration; our Indigenous students, faculty, staff, and alumni; and Indigenous communities beyond our campus. Additional human resources would also help take some of the administrative pressure off of the Indigenous students, who described the challenges they face navigating the Institute as they endeavor to foster a sense of community and belonging.

With a transition in leadership upcoming, we recommend that President-elect Kornbluth gather in the Indigenous community space on campus with members of MIT's Indigenous community in spring 2023. The only way MIT will make meaningful, lasting progress in building relationships with Indigenous people, communities, and Nations is through continued, consistent, and open Indigenous-led dialogue. We are eager to partner with Dr. Kornbluth in this critical work.

While we await Dr. Kornbluth's arrival, we have one immediate recommendation. Indigenous members of the working group described a feeling of invisibility on campus, a challenge whose remedy will require dedicated, coordinated, and sustained effort. For now, we recommend that President Reif ask the executive director of Arts Initiatives and the director of Libraries to identify an appropriate space for a temporary exhibit of Indigenous art at MIT. Longer term, working group members expressed a desire to include works from Indigenous artists in MIT's public art collection. We understand that the forthcoming report of the Ad Hoc Committee on Arts, Culture, and DEI will address the Institute's public art collection, and encourage leadership to take special care to ensure Indigenous representation in implementation.

Finally, working group members articulated a number of aspirations during our deliberations and asked to record them in this report. They include:

1. Establish an office and role for a vice president for Indigenous affairs—reporting directly to MIT's president—to oversee and advise MIT's efforts around relationship building with Indigenous people, communities, and Nations.
2. Establish a Council of Indigenous Elders to advise the Office of the President and the vice president for Indigenous affairs on all aspects of Indigenous relationship building, research, commitments, operations, and student affairs.
3. Establish and support a tribal/Indigenous liaison staff position to focus on building relationships with local Indigenous Nations, the 82 Nations affected by the MIT-Morrill Act connection, and Indigenous Nations throughout the world.
4. Commit to continuing to learn, as an institution and a community, about Indigenous sovereignty, Indigenous science, Indigenous research methodologies and methods, and Indigenous knowledge systems in respectful, intentional, and reciprocal ways through growing funding, opportunities, and support for MIT-Indigenous relationships.

Respectfully submitted,

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