Larry Benedict
and the Challenge of Student Life

Through Dean for Student Life Larry Benedict has spent less time here than the senior class, he has been a quick student of MIT culture. We glorified him exhaustively on Orientation 2000, the future of dorm rush, and student-administrator communication, and he related every issue back to the underlying facts and ideas. This interview showed us Dean Benedict’s instinct and talent for understanding students’ perspectives, as well as his appreciation for the MIT culture of autonomy and self-government.

Prometheus: I’d like to start by just asking you about your background and what brought you to MIT.

Larry Benedict: This is my 32nd year in student affairs and higher education. In my last year of graduate school, my funding ran out. I was working at UMass Amherst on research methods, evaluation methods, stats, that kind of stuff. I needed money to get through the last year of graduate school. The dean of students at that time was advertising for a research assistant to develop a telephone polling system on campus. So the last year of graduate school was actually the first year of the job that kept me there eighteen years.

PM: One of the major topics we’d like to talk about is communication and interaction between students and administrators. There’s been some controversy in the recent year and it seems like there have also been some improvements, and we’d like to see that those gains don’t get lost. Can you tell me generally what are some fruitful ways for students to communicate with administrators?

LR: I am smiling because that’s an incredibly complicated question, especially for MIT. In most places I’ve worked, the lines of communication are pretty clear. A student government is usually the first year of the job that kept me there eighteen years.

I think the obstacles are what I communicate with the constituency. We have the UA. We have 4 class councils, which for all intents and purposes are separate student governments. We have DormCon, the ASA, the OSC, and others. I try to meet with those groups as often as possible, to let them know what we’re working on and to find out what they’re working on. I meet every two or three weeks with the President and Vice President of the UA, the DormCon President, OSC officers, and the IFC Chair, and very irregularly with the class council presidents.

You never seem to have met with the right constituency. For example, The Tech criticized the UA last year for not communicating well with all of its constituencies. I think again, this year, the UA could have done a better job. The same problem happens with the IFC. The IFC Chair goes back and talks to the presidents, but the presidents forget to go back and talk to their houses. So there’s always communication gaps along the way.

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How to improve that is an issue. We tried town meetings, but you can only get people to show up if they have an interest in the particular meeting issue, so you don’t have a chance to discuss broad things. E-mail letters are treated as spam, you might as well toss that off.

PM: I’m particularly interested in housing and orientation. DormCon has to have a decent level of success in communicating their needs for FSILO rush. DormCon and ILTIP are doing better in recent months. What’s your impression of what works and what doesn’t work? What are the fundamental obstacles to be overcome?
Bacow demanded in a campus email that these efforts not go through, that every decision the committee had made under Amendment liberties that, as a matter of right and courtesy, students were bound to respect. Nonetheless, a few protesters sneaked into the talk, and on cue blew whistles, held up a banner and an upside down Ty, starkly marked with duct tape, and chanted antiwar slogans until security removed them, flipping Bush off as they walked out.

Bacow never apologized for his actions. But neither did he act as a toady to Bush. Of course, the publicity would have been beneficial as far as the Clinton talk, students submitted their questions in writing. But Bacow read them to Bush. He picked hard questions, about Bush's handling of the terrorist negotiations. They failed - the administration was equally shocked by the news. But neither did he act as a toady to Bush. A Q&A directly from the audience is the right and courtesy, students were bound to respect. It was agreed by all that these efforts not go through, that every decision the committee had made under Amendment liberties that, as a matter of right and courtesy, students were bound to respect. Nonetheless, a few protesters sneaked into the talk, and on cue blew whistles, held up a banner and an upside down Ty, starkly marked with duct tape, and chanted antiwar slogans until security removed them, flipping Bush off as they walked out.

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The Use and Abuse of Rhetoric
By Sheeva Azma

With over 400,000 words, the sizeable vocabulary of the English language should be accustomed to exploitation in the name of artistic license by now. Books keep being written and rewritten about things like love and politics, but they recycle the same sentiments in a wide variety of words and phrases. So why don’t people stop saying the same things in different ways? Societies have dynamic vocabularies that adapt to include new concepts or revamp words that societies don’t like any more. So people get creative and start re-working their old words.

The English language automatically adapts to verbal restlessness in many ways. Slang eventually seeps into our everyday lives, regardless of who we are. Even while thoroughly hosed and tooting on apets, we may find ourselves dropping MITingo into zephyrs amidst bount of puntins. This is one example of linguistic experimentation induced by MITculture.

But the main engine of language proliferation is rhetoric, where the desire for effective speech fuels preoccupation with alternate expressions of a single idea. Rhetoric’s power stems mainly from its malleable nature: People can use rhetoric to isotopic and confuse an idea while dehumanizing or avoiding unfavorable overtones. For example, in preparation to formally begin the war on Iraq, the Bush administration took great care to call the effort a “plan to disarm” the country. In his ultimatum, he rarely used the word “war” itself. The decision to eliminate the word from his speeches allows him to dehumanize the Bush administration’s actions, which is passionate and direct, and the connotations will eventually catch up with the meaning. On the other hand, neutral words are periodically replaced with euphemized words that may sound awkward or silly: “freedom fries” come to mind.

Replacing a word charged with negative connotations associates with loaded words come from external forces, not something inherent to the words themselves. Consequently, these connotations are often difficult to destroy. For example, words infused with racial content, such as “black” and “white,” evolve into new words that multiply when they become as racially charged as the old ones. Replacing a word charged with negative connotations is difficult because the connotations will eventually catch up with the meaning. On the other hand, neutral words are periodically replaced with euphemized words that may sound awkward or silly: “freedom fries” come to mind. This sneaky business of linguistic switcheroos can aid rhetoric greatly. Ambiguity and vague connotations give speakers and writers the benefit of the doubt when trying to appease many audiences. In this way, rhetoric can develop positive connotations, as people extract the meanings most pleasing to themselves. The word “community,” a favorite of the MIT administration, is one such abstraction. Though this concept may have started out as a concrete plan to bring togetherness to the school, it now represents an ethical bond that justifies almost any policy regarding student life.

Of course, the danger of vague communication is developing buzzwords. Buzzwords are hazards to communication because they are so broadly defined that they are meaningless. Words like “democracy” and “liberty” evoke positive mental images, but their concrete definitions are debatable and, since they’re so broadly interpreted, may even contradict each other. Those are examples of real words gone stale, but even worse are the artificial ones, the barely meaningful sounds used as placeholders for vivid language: “pro-active,” “para-digm shift,” “sea change,” and hundreds of others. Buzzwords are spawned when rhetoric goes too far and ends up contributing to the problem it is supposed to solve.

If language is so maddled and contains so many insinuations and cliches, how does anyone know what’s true or false any more? Indeed, people use rhetoric to put a convincing spin on the truth, and although rhetoric can be a powerful tool for honest communication, it can also be abused by those who deliberately lie or deceive. To know what someone is really saying, you have to pay attention to not only what she is saying, but also how she says it. At that point, you have the ability to distinguish between the use and abuse of rhetoric—and as long as verbal shenanigans abound, you’re going to need it.

Sheeva Azma ’05 (sheeva@mit.edu) writes good

MIT Buzzword Bingo

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Your comments go here

Dear Prometheus,

I was wondering if you thought of writing about this whole “community” thing and how it doesn’t really mean anything. I don’t have any ideas right now, but can I join your discussion list?

I was interested in what you guys are doing. I don’t have any ideas right now, but can I join your discussion list?

Sincerely,

Sheeva Azma

Dear Prometheus,

I enjoyed reading the first issue of your publication. I am glad to see that someone is finally covering these issues with an eye to the underlying ideas. Keep up the good work.

Sincerely,

Transparent Stooge

prometheus - please include a notice about our compute meetings on your back page

“What the hell is going on?” section... it’s not for everyone but some students might like it.

“Poppycock.”

Hey! I want to write about Go and how it’s like physics:

“I make everything as simple as possible, and no simpler.”

You said you’dake anything well-written, so...

E-mail fire@mit.edu

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1 Kendall Square, Building 300
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Whose democracy?

By Aram Harrow

“O people of Baghdad, remember that for 26 generations you have suffered under slavery, and that slavery continued even after one Arab house against another. This policy is different, for we have found a solution that is different. We have called it an Arab “mandate” and have described it as an “Arab Arab rule and administration under British guidance and control by a native Moslem and, as far as possible, by an Arab staff.” They wrote a constitution, installed the pro-British King Faisal, and immediately signed treaties with Faisal reconstituting most of the terms of the Mandate and Mesopotamia. By this arrangement the British were able to get pieces of the Iraqi oil market, until it was eventually shared by British, French, Dutch and American companies. Iraq unrest continued, until the British granted “independence” in 1932, while keeping King Faisal in power along with a treaty granting them two air bases and the right to unilateral intervention. Even then the British could not leave Iraq, and in 1933, they were interested in the predicament of the region. On the other hand, if democracy fails in Iraq, then we risk a further destabilization of the Middle East, and the British should consider how we got into this situation in the first place. Although our problems with the Arab-Israeli conflict are current phenomena often have we heard that 9/11 “changed everything?”3), many of them have their roots in the early 20th century at runnings of the late 1930’s so he could stay in power, the British soon realized that they were to “guide” them until they were capable of self-rule in 1920, a popular rebellion erupted which was brutally suppressed. The British soon realized that they needed to rule from a distance, setting up their policy of “going native” and presidential elections. If the economic and strategic power of oil are the carrots that encourage those in power, what are the sticks that the Bush administration is using? A quagmire for the US defense budget high on the list. Being stuck in Iraq for years, with the attendant deaths and embarrassment, would a new Iraq govern-

Democracy in Iraq has been a much hotter topic in the Bush adminis- tration ever since its case for stopping Iraqi weapons of mass destruction began to unravel. For this reason. Even though Iraq’s economy and infrastructure are currently in ruins, their oil reserves and security has meant that less attention has been paid to the fact that a strong Iraqi democracy has the poten- tial for cultural, economic and political leadership in the region. On the other hand, if democracy fails in Iraq, then we risk a further destabilization of the Middle East, and the British should consider how we got into this situation in the first place. Although our problems with the Arab-Israeli conflict are current phenomena often have we heard that 9/11 “changed everything?”3), many of them have their roots in the early 20th century at runnings of the late 1930’s so he could stay in power, the British soon realized that they were to “guide” them until they were capable of self-rule in 1920, a popular rebellion erupted which was brutally suppressed. The British soon realized that they needed to rule from a distance, setting up their policy of “going native” and presidential elections. If the economic and strategic power of oil are the carrots that encourage those in power, what are the sticks that the Bush administration is using? A quagmire for the US defense budget high on the list. Being stuck in Iraq for years, with the attendant deaths and embarrassment, would a new Iraq govern-
By Scott Schneider

As American troops fought their way into Baghdad, the world was already feverishly debating the governance that would replace Hussein’s regime. President Bush pledged, “We will stand with the new government of Iraq as it establishes a government of, by, and for the Iraqi people.” Skeptics said that America should let the Iraqi people choose their government, free of American influence. Despite their differences, everyone agreed that Iraq must have a democracy, and pronto.

Yet amidst all the talk about how to see democracy flourish in Iraq, no one has questioned whether this ought to be our primary goal. Perhaps forming a stable, legitimate government that protects Iraqis’ rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness should not merely be instrumental to creating a democracy, but should be our essential goal. By focusing on democracy as an end rather than a means, we lose sight of what is truly important.

Nonetheless, the debate about Iraqi democracy goes on. If we truly do not keep one has questioned whether this ought to be our primary goal. Perhaps forming a stable, legitimate government that protects Iraqis’ rights to life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness should not merely be instrumental to creating a democracy, but should be our essential goal. By focusing on democracy as an end rather than a means, we lose sight of what is truly important.

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PM: Do you think people should adopt similar strategies in future issues, or do you think that some effort should be made to reorganize existing governing bodies to be more effective?

LB: (pause) That's a very interesting question. I'm not going to answer it quite that way because I'd prefer to see a governance body that can play this role. Otherwise, every time an issue comes up, you generate a different group with whom we work, sometimes more successfully, sometimes less successfully. And you have all these ad hoc groups coming and going and they represent many of the larger groups, or maybe only twenty people, but you don't know. One of the things we've gotten in trouble with here is that I've met with certain one-issue or two-issue groups, only to find out after we've had negotiations and discussions and come up with a compromise that that compromise is not acceptable to the next group down the way. And so I end up like Henry Kissinger, running around all the countries in the Middle East. You end up caught in the middle, and it's a very uncomfortable position for me or any dean to be in.

It would be really helpful to us, and it would really help communication, if there was a clear governing structure on campus. But that's not the MIT way. I see that across the board. I think faculty are in a similar situation. You go to a faculty meeting and maybe thirty faculty come out of what, nine hundred faculty? I don't think those thirty faculty speak for all nine hundred faculty, and so when something actually happens there is bound to be faculty who say, "Wait a minute! I didn't agree to that. What's the crisis new policy they're putting up here?" You're always behind the eight ball on the communication front.

PM: Why do you think that happens at MIT?

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It would be really helpful to us, and it would really help communication, if there was a clear governing structure on campus. But that's not the MIT way. I see that across the board. I think faculty are in a similar situation. You go to a faculty meeting and maybe thirty faculty come out of what, nine hundred faculty? I don't think those thirty faculty speak for all nine hundred faculty, and so when something actually happens there is bound to be faculty who say, "Wait a minute! I didn't agree to that. What's the crisis new policy they're putting up here?" You're always behind the eight ball on the communication front.

PM: Why do you think that happens at MIT?

LB: (pause) I have no clue. I get here two and a half years ago... that's just the way it is. You guys have been here longer than I have and probably have a better sense of what is going on here.

The semester is hectic. It's usually busy, but this spring there was a very narrow focus, and was very artificial about it.

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You're going to learn as much outside the classroom as you are in the classroom.

The biggest pressures I get come from some of the athletic alumni, saying that was probably the most important thing that ever happened to them. So you have to be sensitive to that, and you have to be careful not to let things like that come into play. You can't just let it go absolutely, but you probably would step in and assign consequences as an administration process. I don't know of any cases where we've seen that kind of thing, but that would be a real shock if this happens. I'm looking to the Student Life and Learning board to make recommendations.

Another example has come up: one of the anticipated outcomes of FOC and Senior Segue and opening Student House will all at the same time be the disproportionate number of fresh in Fresh House. I talked with Next House students for two days in the spring, and they're looking for help. I basically said, "Look, it's your house. You talk about this, and you can always be the leader of the people you work with, and it doesn't mean that we'll always have policies that students like."

There are, for example, some safety concerns, where we've got to play a little bit heavier hand than we might otherwise. Just before I got here a number of procedural policy changes were made with heavy participation with the administration again for health and safety reasons. Now from one point of view you might think it's a tradeoff. Stree Road is a good example. About the flaming toilet paper to light the fire — the fire department has some concerns about that. Well, they worked with the students, and they've got some new contraption and it's working just fine. So the evening is still there, the students still run it, and I think everyone is relatively satisfied. We're not 100% successful. I'll be honest with you. But we're also not 100% successful, I think there are two other kinds of things that need to happen.

There are some problems with this entire system, don't get me wrong. I've had student leaders tell me that last year when we worked the system, it's been acting for the parent. We don't do things to combat that. When we spoke to Dean Van-Sel, they're months early, but from our point of view, they're months early, but from our point of view, they're months early, but from our point of view, we've got more time for REX. It'll always be the "It's your house. You talk about this, and you can always be the leader of the people you work with, and it doesn't mean that we'll always have policies that students like."

Whatever team you might have been on, whatever you're going to do, there are problems with this system. There's a lot of rhetoric going on about how the Freshmen rush works pretty well. I wasn't convinced of that this first year here.

When we spoke to Dean Van-Sel, they were very active concerning the dining board, with student input. I know attendance was up and down, but the fact of the matter is that we had many more people there.

I think the in-house rush works well. I wasn't convinced of that this first year here.

Somewhere we've got to come up with a system that meets many goals, some of which are counterproductive. We have to be very active concerning the dining board, with student input. I know attendance was up and down, but the fact of the matter is that we had many more people there. I think we're slowly coming up with a system that meets many goals, some of which are counterproductive. We have to be very active concerning the dining board, with student input.

We talked to one of the fraternities the other day, and they said, "You know, it's kind of a waste of time, but we think many of you think the administration is picking on you." Every hand went up. I said, "How many think that the administration has a secret plan, that we're trying to get you?" Every hand went up. "You there. It's not too early to start. If we do this right, it can work and we can work with this early on, that would be terrific. I would encourage them to do that.

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