

Report of the President year ended June 30, 2023, President Sally Kornbluth

First days on campus

In October 2022, when I was offered the opportunity to lead the Institute, I had spent about 30 years at Duke University, the final eight as provost. I was happy there, and I was not looking for another job. But when MIT made me an offer, I knew right away I had to take it. If you want to make a positive impact in the world, there's just no place like MIT. When I arrived on campus, I was struck by the deep reverence for science and technology, and for all kinds of knowledge, and by the instinctive passion for discovery and invention, design and problem solving.

I began my term on January 1, 2023, and immediately embarked on a [listening tour](#) – to get to know the community, and allow the community to get to know me. I learned what people think is working well at MIT and where we can do better—in many cases, opinions contradicted each other, but in conversations across departments, labs, and centers, the people of MIT offered thoughtful advice for how to bring our community together.

The discussions I've had with students, staff, and faculty touched on everything related to MIT life, from academic priorities to housing and dining to support for mental health. But one thing I heard over and over again, from nearly everyone, was a desire for the MIT community to come together and make a real difference in the climate crisis. I had already been focused on the importance of moving the needle on climate, and I began to think about how best to organize this brilliant community in ways that would allow us to make the greatest impact.

Inauguration: Big ideas at MIT

On May 1, I was [inaugurated](#) as MIT's 18th president. In the address I gave that day, I outlined what I hoped the Institute would accomplish in the next decade, informed by what I had learned on my listening tour:

- Help humanity come to grips with the tectonic forces of artificial intelligence, containing its risks and harnessing its power for good.
- Forge new links between engineering and life science, and help invent the future of biomedicine.
- Create new spaces to encourage education, innovation and research in music, making, and design.
- Use the power of entrepreneurship to propel profound solutions out to communities around the world, from preventing pandemics to cleaning up plastic waste.
- And lead a powerful cross-sector coalition to dramatically accelerate progress against climate change.

MIT has a responsibility to lead in all of these areas, and the talent and resources to make game-changing discoveries that will benefit the world.

Curiosity Unbounded: A new podcast

My first week on the job included reviewing young faculty who were up for promotion. It was three long, intense days, and I was dazzled by the creativity, rigor, and boldness of every single presenter. It got me thinking—if I was inspired, everyone else at MIT would be, too. So in April, I began sitting down to chat with recently tenured faculty, and anyone interested was invited to listen in. This became the [Curiosity Unbounded](#) podcast.

My first guest was Desirée Plata, associate professor in civil and environmental engineering. Her work focuses on making industrial processes more environmentally friendly and removing methane, a key factor in global warming, from the air. We talked about her research, her family, and her experience as an MIT student, and I really got a sense of her as a whole person, beyond “brilliant MIT professor.”

The following month, my guest was the equally brilliant Mai Hassan, associate professor of political science and faculty co-director of MIT-Africa. Her work looks at bureaucracy, public administration, and the state in Africa, and more recently, how people mobilize against repressive dictatorships. We talked about everything from the power of the African people to the challenges of balancing work and caring for a newborn.

The conversations were fascinating and fun, and the podcast was well-received. I look forward to continuing it next fall with new faculty guests.

A commitment to freedom of expression

From my earliest days at MIT, I've stated that I'm a firm advocate of freedom of expression. In February, I shared with the community a letter strongly endorsing the [MIT Statement on Freedom of Expression and Academic Freedom](#).

As I wrote, the world counts on MIT for pathbreaking intellectual inquiry and problem-solving – and we just can't live up to that standard unless we not only permit but encourage open, honest disagreement, debate, and dissent. What's more, as an educational institution, it's our responsibility to develop broad-minded, rigorous thinkers who can hear ideas or information from all corners.

I expressed my hope that all of us can find ways to express our views without negating the right of others to express theirs. And I stated directly that the right to free expression does not license bullying or harassment.

Supreme Court ruling

On June 7, as the US Supreme Court was about to rule on two cases testing the legality of race-conscious admissions in higher education, I wrote to the community. I stated that MIT would follow the law, but I also wanted to articulate clearly and unambiguously my commitment to building on MIT's decades-long efforts to welcome a student body that is both unparalleled in its academic excellence and vibrantly diverse.

I reaffirmed my belief that MIT's diversity as a community is essential to our mission, to our intellectual and creative excellence, and to preparing all our students for the world they will help to lead.

On June 29, the Supreme Court ruled to significantly limit the consideration of race, ethnicity, and national origin in college admissions.

Closing out the academic year

In May I had the honor of presiding over my first MIT [Commencement](#), along with YouTube engineer and educator Mark Rober, who delivered a rousing speech and flew a drone over the assembled students and families. At Tech Reunion events, I met countless MIT alumni, from recent grads to Cardinal and Gray members in their bright red coats.

It was a fantastic close to my first semester at the Institute, and I look forward to all the MIT community will accomplish together in the coming years.

Sally Kornbluth
President, MIT

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