Sheridan discusses discipline policy

By Kyle Richardson

(El note: Professor Thomas Sheridan will chair the MIT Committee on Discipline this year. In an interview with The Tech, Prof. Sheridan discusses the procedures and proper attitudes of the Discipline Committee's hearing process.)

The Tech: Professor Sheridan, what do you see as the role of the Discipline Committee as compared to what it has been in the past?

Prof. Sheridan: The MIT Commission has a task force which is looking into judicial procedures Institute-wide and some are going to be students; that some people are going to be permanent salaried employees and some are going to be temporary.

Procedures

The Tech: What, basically, are the procedures followed in the hearing of a case?

Sheridan: The Discipline Committee acts with power in cases of adjudicament, a letter of warning which doesn't go on the permanent record, and in cases of probation, which do go on the permanent record. In cases of recommendation for dismissal, this is a recommendation that you can have a completely new set of procedures. I have tried this in the past, in cases where the student requested it. It didn't work. The reason it didn't work was that some of the audience made a circus of the hearing, with smoke bombs, music, drum beating, and all the rest. You can have a conversation in such an atmosphere. We've tried it on two occasions, I think, and decided that it wasn't going to work.

The Tech: Is a physical setting whereby, if the accused desires it, he can play a tape recording of the hearing for any bona-fide member of the community, and in some cases we'll make a videotape recording. In cases where the accused didn't want the hearing made public, that's fine. But as of now we will not let any other than the accused, the aggrieved, and their witnesses into the hearing room, because we want to keep the signal-to-noise level low enough to communicate.

Political motivation

The Tech: How would the committee consider political motivation in cases in which discipline measures are required because of it? The reasoning is that motivated actions of a student sometimes are considered political motivation as an important kind of motivation. Clearly, political motivation, where it's altruistic, would be to the benefit of the accused as compared to selfish motivation. However, I don't think that the committee now feels that one can make a clear separation of political cases from other kinds of cases, and that for politically motivated actions requires a completely new set of procedures. I think we could get ourselves into trouble if we made this arbitrary separation.

Committee's role

The Tech: Do you have any opinions of your own concerning the function of the Discipline Committee?

Sheridan: I think it's the committee's business to hear charges that are brought before it. It's not the committee's business to review other faculty decisions. It has in the past gone after charges. Of the statements made about it notwithstanding. The committee is a group of employees and faculty. It doesn't have any job until somebody brings some charges, and those charges can come from students, faculty, or staff members, as the case may be. The job of the committee is to understand the positions of all members of the community.

Committee action

I'm not satisfied with the way the committee has acted in the past. I think the committee has been fair, except for the question of enlarging the procedures to include charges brought against non-student members of the community. It's not clear to me that that would necessitate that the whole committee structure be redefined. Don't see any major changes necessary in the way charges are brought and the hearing is conducted.

Complaints

The Tech: What complaints against the committee have you had?

Sheridan: As I said before, one of the complaints voiced last year was that the committee was out to get students. This was based, I guess, on the fact that the students who were finally charged, except for a few, were all members of one or the other of the SDS organizations, which makes it look as if we were out to get the radical students. But the committee didn't make the charges. The administration did. The administration claimed that it brought charges against only those students who could be identified. I think the committee felt that that was in fact what they did do, but we can't insulate their heads. The plain fact of life is that as students become more active on campus they are more easily identified. There were charges that the committee members were lackeys of the administration. On the other hand, some members of the community have been very unhappy with the decisions the committee has made. We haven't been as harsh, perhaps, as some administrators would have liked. The point is that we're quite independent of the administration. We do have one administrator on the committee, the Dean for Student Affairs.

On the other hand, we talk to the administration because we deal with the administration in teaching and research. We talk more easily, perhaps, with the administration than we talk with the students. That's unfortunate. I don't think it need be that way, because we could, as a committee, have more dialogue with the students who are not accused but are troubled by our actions or our procedures. I think some people perceive that the Committee spends lots of time whispering in the administra- tion's ears and having them whisper in our ears untruly.

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