Wiesner reflects on four years as president

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To understand the teaching process and the changes MIT has undergone, one might set options for students. There have been constraints.

The efforts to attract more women and minority students have continued and have come close to success. We are not entirely satisfied with the results and plan to examine how we might do better. I believe the same statement could apply to the entire equal opportunity area. One can see programs but do it in such a way as not to be.

The period I’ve been president has also been a period of rethinking in many ways. During the whole time there’s been a tightening of budgets - it began before my appointment but it’s been one of the major problems as we’ve had imposed on us that didn’t exist as a major issue before. Federal research expenditures have leveled off, and in fact in real dollars MIT faculty members probably have less money for research today, even though the dollars look larger, than they did a few years ago. The same thing is true in general of administrative and academic budgets. There’s been an effort, a major need - to assess what we’re doing and to weed out those things which are marginal. I’ve been concerned that in the process some educational innovations that were more than marginal have been lost as well, for one reason or another - that some things we’ve gone back to traditional ways of doing things in the press of inflation and money shortage.

But, some of the exciting developments have come on the MIT-Harvard Joint Program (in Health Sciences and Technology), the Center for Cancer, the Center for Studies and Research in Education, the Center for Peace and International Action, and so on. They’re all very exciting. They’re all, in some sense, institutional responses to the general questions I’ve outlined before.

The Tech: What progress or changes do you see on the educational front, areas of concern to students more narrowly?

I believe we’ve had a period of large-scale experimentation. As I thought it offered a lot of opportunity, but it also raised a lot of questions. Some of the exciting developments, in particular, are Health Sciences and Technology, have become fully accepted. I think there is now a greater awareness of the needs, particularly the interdisciplinary needs, and a lot of talk now in the School of Engineering about interdepartmental undergraduate programs which look interesting, but which still must, I’d say, be worked out. There are many interesting things being explored in the Educational Division also have long-term potential. The new studies that are growing up between linguistics and the humanities, I think, are particularly promising. There’s a fantastic flux of things which is hard to judge and put all together in a simple

The Tech: In the last four years, the student mood seems to have changed quite a bit, especially in comparison to the four or five years just before that.

JBW: Yes, the student mood has changed. I wouldn’t say the student is out of apathy. It may be one of more realism, in a sense - I think students are still very concerned about the world, they’re concerned about a lot of things. They may be more pragmatic, and I certainly have reason to know their concerns about the things the MIT administration does. But they also, I think, have a realistic view of their own needs - educational needs, and for personal development and they try to balance those, I suppose.

You see, you can’t characterize the MIT mood of the past in any simple way. That’s why I think the 1960s and 1970s were really a reflection of a national mood, not only of students, who had the courage to articulate how they felt, but of people, generally. In this country, it was the Vietnam War. Adults like myself were much disturbed about the Vietnam War and the students - sometimes we didn’t protest as hard, and sometimes we were criticized for not doing it.

I believe that when adults drew back it frequently was done out of a sense of responsibility for - not personal responsibility, not responsibility to themselves, but to the things, the organization, around them. I certainly got myself into a lot of trouble, for the protest, and even got MIT into a certain amount of trouble too. As I’m sure you know, at one stage President Nixon tried to cut MIT research funds. I’ve clearly become aware that I just do not have what I’ve been president of MIT partially because I see things in a certain way. In my perception of what is responsible, I feel I have responsibility to a large community of people, to MIT, to the public, the joy, of protest that’s unproductive, if not productive, for the good of MIT. On almost any issue, there are a group of people, faculty or students, who feel very strongly about the problem and want to get MIT involved. But there are also very few people who feel clearly that there was a mistake in the past.

On the whole, who the people who wanted to change the social system really weren’t communicating very much with the people who were just interested in the Vietnam War, even though they thought they were. Many adult observers listening to the dialogue also thought there was a deeper coherence to some of this than what was infounded by the war. In fact, we were sometimes told that all the campus problems were stimulated by foreign agents. I looked pretty hard for those foreign agents, and I could not find them.

Certainly many students, and many older people, are still very concerned about the other side of the problems in our society. But I’m also pretty much concerned with student anxiety, war, and depressions, when I was young I thought the place was going to end, the dogs. Unfortunately, some problems have become worse; some things are difficult, but we have to face the world.

I suppose national anxieties are likely personal anxieties - if you have some thing to do worrying about it, and a certain amount of tension, anxiety, is essential for creativity, and this is probably

true for improving a society. We have plenty of opportunities to improve this society, and try to convince myself that we see, the tensions and representatives, represent real recognition of opportunities, the feedback necessary to stabilize corrective measures.

Many of these opportunities - just on your campus, and at MIT - are opportunities to use technology to do something useful, to do a job better than it was done before. For example, to make more efficient automobiles or less polluting automobiles, or more efficient energy sources or more efficient gadgets that use energy and so conserve energy, to protect the environment - the list could go on forever. There are fantastic opportunities ahead if we choose to do the right thing, and at the same time do them in a way that gives some satisfaction to the people, who are involved. That, I think, is one of the first basic problems that we have to come to grips with.

The Tech: One last question. I’ve been talking to you about the Vietnam War. I could believe that in the near future - one is the budgetary thing, and the other is the public attitude restraint. What effects do you see this having on MIT’s future in leading science and technology?

JBW: Well, I suppose in a sense those are both the same constraint, to the degree that we are dependent on public support for MIT. I believe that the situation will change - will turn around - although I think one has to realize that the public support for science and technology in the United States has been, on the whole, quite strong. But it will be more by fear than by enthusiasm. Primarily fear of the Soviet Union. The space race and the technological development which came with them were the result of the fear of the Soviet Union, and to some extent the misreadings of their technical capabilities. Excessive and perhaps unnecessary spending made for a short period of time - not long enough by - the Office of Education in educational research. There have been others - probably the most dramatic example, the one we always forget about, is the long-term federal support of agricultural research in land-grant colleges.

As we sort out our priorities in the essence of the cold war mindset, we’ll see that the most important problems that we face is the ability to manage a complex society without resorting to public ownership or totalitarianism. More and more people are talking about and they’re getting nearer to finding ways to be or to be attractive. It is a war.

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