Guest Column/Allen Lee

The language of bureaucracy

Four years ago, upon entering MIT, I moved into Tang Hall, and the physical dilapidation of my apartment shocked me. I faithfully specified all the damage on the appropriate form. I handed it to the Tang Hall supervisor and expected him to share my outrage at the previous torn carpet. He took the form, read it, looked up at me, and said: "Thank you.

Now, on the brink of finishing my doctoral dissertation, I am seeking information on post doc programs so that I may publish my dissertation in the form of an article. I looked up the book, Harvard. In the back of the book, "If Harvard, I am told, has two post doc programs I might be interested in."

At the office, I knocked at the door. The door opens. A woman appears. "There's no one here," she says.

"I would like some information on your post doc program," I say. "The secretary is out." "When I called before, I was told to come in today." "There's no one here," she says.

Eventually a friend at Harvard obtains the information for me. At the office of the other post doc program, I encounter a receptionist. "Is anyone here?" I ask. "Who do you think I am?" she snarls. "I would like some information on your post doc program." "We have no post doc program." "Are you sure?" "As sure as I'm sitting here." Eventually, one of my professors obtains the information for me.

MIT is not to be outdone by Harvard. Braising myself, I say to the faceless person sitting behind the desk, "I would like some information on your post doc program." Actually she is friendly, "Hmm," she says, "the post oc program. I'm not familiar with the post oc program. Let me go find out from someone."

As she rises from the desk and walks away, I stop her and inquire, "No, no! Post doc, not post oc. Post doc, as in post doctoral! I would like some information on your post doctoral program." "Oh, of course," she says, smiling, "I would like some information on your post oc program.""We have no post doc program."

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