MIT Needs Reform to Better Comply with the ADA

The ADA also requires a self-evaluation of a public entity's "current services, policies, and practices to examine the extent to which they do not conform to the requirements of the ADA," according to a release from the state attorney general's office. MIT recently completed such an evaluation, but the results have not yet been made public, Tsao said.

"There's a broad range of needs [regarding providing access for the disabled] but far and away exceed our ability to fund them," said Director of Special Services Stephen D. Immerman. "We've put in place a mechanism that allows us to put at a much higher priority ADA-related expenses."

MIT is pursuing "an incremental but systematic ongoing program to address accessibility and other ADA-related issues," Immerman added. "We were committed to accessibility long before ADA. It should be underscored that the funding mechanisms that have been put in place will ensure that within a reasonable length of time we will be able to comply."

Difficulties accessing campus
"I've had my difficulties" accessing the campus, wrote Adams Skwersky '94, a deaf student, in an electronic mail message. Skwersky prefers to be called a deaf person rather than deaf. "A deaf person must understand the culture of the deaf population," Skwersky wrote. "I am Deaf, because I have grown to understand and share the experiences of being deaf." Skwersky is unable to hear most things without the use of hearing aids and he requires sign language interpreters for all of his classes. "There were a few instances in which I was stuck without an interpreter," Skwersky wrote. "Just this semester I did not have an interpreter for a class for three weeks. I finally found one but I feel it's too late to recoup the lost experience."

"It seems that there is so much confusion around this issue and sometimes I worry about not being able to find an interpreter for my next semesters," Skwersky wrote.

Stronger role for coordinator
One of the principal requirements of the ADA is the creation of a Section 504 coordinator, a person "intended by the federal government to be a central person that could aid disabled students and personnel via counseling, referrals, and advocacy," Tsao said.

While such a coordinator does exist, "MIT has not pursued the spirit and the intent of having this position," Tsao said. The Section 504 coordinator, Michael Owu of the planning office, has "a rather low profile (close to nonexistent) on campus," Tsao wrote in her letter.

"I had no idea who Mike Owu was and when I was referred to him once, I did not get very positive replies from him," Skwersky wrote. "I stated my needs and he said he would work on them but I have seen nothing yet, much less have I been informed about any central resource person."

"There should be a central office," said Associate Dean for Student Affairs Beanie Walters, one of several MIT officials who currently assists disabled students. "All of us who work with learning and physically disabled students would like to see a central office."

"It was very pleased to see Anne Tsao's letter because maybe the student push will get something done," Walters said.

Coordinator as intermediary
To satisfy the ADA requirements, major institutions are appointing Section 504 coordinators to specialize in disability-related service issues, Enman said. "They're identifying a person who's close to the chief executive officer of the institution" to serve as coordinator.

For example, at Harvard University the coordinator is "working with the highest authority to undertake educational campaigns, to conduct self-evaluations with each portion of the institute, and to examine employment practices, admissions criteria" and other issues, Enman said.

The ADA is "such a specialized law that it is real useful for the institute to have someone that has expertise in it," Enman said. It is "very useful to have someone as coordinator "who has a strong background" in disability issues, Enman said.

Additionally, the Section 504 coordinator "can serve as an intermediary between either students or faculty or members of the general public in the institute around disability issues," Enman said.

By serving as an intermediary, the coordinator is useful "in avoiding the need to go to a grievance procedure" or any formal kind of action, Enman said. "All that's needed [to comply with the ADA] is a change in policy in how we enable people to participate in a way that doesn't exclude participation by people with disabilities," Enman said.

"There is no provision in the law for your lack of knowledge," Enman said. Large institutions like MIT are especially vulnerable to investigation by the federal government because they are "looking for places of high visibility to use as an example" for other institutions, Enman said.

Disabilities not only physical
Disabilities covered under the ADA include both physical and mental disabilities. "An individual with a disability is a person who has a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity," according to the law.

"Under the provisions with this law, equal access is not just physical accessibility into your buildings," Enman said. "It's also for access for people with learning disabilities to the same services."

"There's a narrow band of thinking in terms of what access requires," Enman said. The major threats about disability access "are not in terms of physical access," Enman said. Many of the more than 1,000 lawsuits filed every month with the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission are related to non-physical disabilities, including HIV, AIDS, heart disease, and cancer.

SENIORS:

Let your voice be heard!

What was YOUR MIT experience like?

Tell us on the SENIOR SURVEY!

Undergraduate Academic Affairs, x-8604
senior-survey@mit.edu