Smith Advises Freshmen on Choices, Consequences

Dean for Undergraduate Education and Student Affairs Arthur C. Smith advises freshmen yesterday at the President’s Convocation in Memorial Auditorium. The following transcript has been edited slightly.

I have a couple of words to say first about choices and consequences. One of the things we try to do at MIT is to give you lots of choices. Some of them are obvious to you. For example you’re going to start very shortly an important choice on where you’re going to live. You may have noticed if you talked to your friends from high school that this is not the way the university they go to does it. At least that’s generally true. All the students I know who are going else where knew in the middle of the year that they were going to live in Room 215 in Adams Hall with someone who’s name they knew – but that’s all they knew.

We decided quite some time ago that this was not really the way we wanted to start MIT students out on their academic careers. We want you to choose. We want you to think about it. What the choice is and what its consequences are. It’s not a choice that’s going to be quite simple. It’s going to be much more complicated than you might have thought. And this is where I am going to talk to you about Room 215.

I am not going to tell you which room you are going to live in, and I am not going to tell you who your roommate is going to be. That’s something that you are going to have to find out for yourself, and I have some advice about ways in which to do that.

Let me move from choices and consequences to a few quick words on what I call real life. People often refer to the non-academic world outside the boundaries of MIT as the real world. That has some virtues, I suppose, but it has some implications which say that while you are at MIT it’s not real. I just want to be sure you remember that a lot of real life goes on.

If you choose to cross Mass. Ave. against the light, you may find yourself facing some consequences you didn’t intend. Since I expect to see 95 percent of you on that morning that Chuck alluded to in Killian Court, I hope you won’t.

Also, my office looks out on the crossing of Mass. Ave. Avenue against the light, you may find yourself facing some consequences you didn’t intend. Since I expect to see 95 percent of you on that morning that Chuck alluded to in Killian Court, I hope you won’t.

Let me move to talk about some choices you are going to have to make about your roommates.

You have some other choices to make academically. You get to choose your major. You get to choose how many units you take — after the first year. You can choose to do your assignements or punt them. You can choose whether to go to class. You can choose whether to stay awake or fall asleep. All of those choices have some consequences. Use good sense and you’ll do alright.

You have some choices in lifestyle. No one is going to tell you when to get up. No one is going to tell you when to go to sleep. No one else will clean your room. No one will tell you in time to eat, or what did you have for dinner tonight.

Don’t get me wrong. I give you good advice about what other substances you might ingest and in what amounts. All of those decisions, all those choices have consequences. Use good sense and you’ll do alright.

I hope everyone gets to choose a lifestyle that involves some exercise. MIT has a lot of opportunities for that and I know that it’s kept me sane for over 35 years to play squash three mornings a week. You can find your own way of doing it, but I recommend it highly in this particular environment.

I also recommend activities with others. Quite often your education is limiting you to a somewhat solitary and perhaps even selfish activity. There are lots of opportunities to do things with other people. We have rendezvoused with you in this room probably the most impressive collection of people you will ever be together with for four years. Take advantage of them, do things with them and for them.

There will always be tough hours for somebody. Life goes on outside of MIT. Life goes on inside MIT. Be prepared for that and look for help.

And that brings me to the next line, which is not of a commercial for the Dean’s Office: We’re there to help — in lots of different ways. My via is that I have a word that I haven’t quite figured out how to give to you in the five minutes allotted to me. So I condensed it all into one short phrase: Be a doer. Don’t just sit and listen. You can take your classes at MIT and think you have done well, by sitting and listening, reproducing on the problem sets and so forth. Be a doer. You know that means, just do it.

Dean Arthur C. Smith advises freshmen yesterday.

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In case you’re interested, the Dean’s Office met yesterday to discuss how to handle the address book that department heads gave to them after they read aloud the names and addresses of students they knew in the middle of last year. They came back from Christmas, and I said, "How did it go?" She said, "My parents are just waiting for me to go to college." That was a tough hour too.