Professor Keyser Steps Down as Associate Provost

By Daniel C. Stevenson

The former Department of Linguistics at MIT, Samuel Jay Keyser stepped down as associate provost for educational policies and programs in 1985. His title changed following President Charles M. Vest's inauguration in 1990, "when I became more concerned with issues having to do with quality of life and conflict resolution," Keyser said.

Keyser will return to being a professor in the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy, and will continue holding the Peirce-DelForce '38 Chair for Phonetics Professorship, which was created to encourage humor in the learning process. He will teach a graduate linguistics course in the spring.

"I worried about some parts of the Institute that came into conflict with one another," Keyser said of his job. To that end, he played a large part in the production of "The Dealing with Harassment at MIT" handbook. Keyser also initiated what he calls "random faculty dinners" eight years ago. Each month, he invites about 40 randomly chosen faculty members to a dinner in the Grier Rooms in Building 34. The dinners provide a place for the Faculty to "meet people they might otherwise never meet" and to "talk about what they are worried about." Keyser said. Between 2,500 and 3,000 faculty have come to the dinners over the past eight years, he said.

Keyser also worked to reintroduce the convocation given by the president to the freshman class during Residence and Orientation Week. While this and other achievements are not widely publicized, Keyser said that "there is no end to the good you can do provided you are willing to take on the task.

"Live a different life."

"The hardest thing in the world is to stop doing something," Keyser said of leaving the position of associate provost. "The secret is to start something new."

"I've decided that I want to retire early," Keyser said. "I want to live a different life." When he retired in a few years, Keyser said he is going "to try to make a new life writing poetry, playing jazz, and traveling."

Keyser has recently traveled to Indonesia and Bali, and wrote a piece about a visit to Jakarta that he plans to turning into a book next year. He has also recently written a book - "The Poetry Gene" - which tries to explain what makes poetry, poetry, he said.

"Complaint handling seminars will continue to be organized by Keyser. "My goal over the next two years is to try to train 80 percent of the faculty," Keyser said. The faculty dinners will also continue, he said.

Additionally, Keyser will "help the provost in cases of conflict that can be mediated" and "continue to interact with people who have complaint handling responsibilities," he said.

Proud of hacking

During his tenure as associate provost, Keyser said he was proud of the upsurge of clever hacks. "I've been extolling the value of hacks for years," he said, and hopefully his support has been "in a small way responsible" for the quality of recent hacks.

Hacks are useful for students because they provide "a way of cutting the Institute down to size," Keyser said. "I consider 'hacking' to be one of MIT students' most enduring characteristics."

Keyser fondly remembers one particular hack - when the Kregge Auditorium was rigged to play "Pop Goes the Weasel" during a convocation by then-President Paul E. Gray '54. "One of my proudest moments was for a brief instant when Paul Gray thought I might have been responsible for it," Keyser said.

Keyser first worked at MIT in 1964-65 and 1965-66 as research staff member in theoretical and historical linguistics in the Research Laboratory of Electronics. After teaching at Brandeis University, Keyser headed the department of linguistics at the University of Massachusetts, Amherst. He returned to MIT in 1977 to head the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy. He also served as a housemaster at Senior House for seven years.

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