East Campus Offers a Unique Undergrad Environment

Guest Column by Erik S. Balsley

I am writing this column to address the issue of moving all undergraduates to the west side of campus that has recently become an area of concern to many students.

As a resident of East Campus, I am opposed to any such move. However, I feel that I am in a unique position to express my concerns over such a plan because I have lived in west campus dormitories during my first two years here at MIT, and have experienced the differences between undergraduate life on both sides of the campus. By explaining some of the reasons behind my decision to move and some of my observations, I hope a fuller picture of the impacts of such a move can be developed.

There were many personal reasons that had a large factor in influencing my decision to move, but there were also a large number of general reasons as well. When I was living on west campus I was always disturbed by the compartmentalization of life there. The way the dorms are arranged in a line along Memorial Drive makes it very difficult for someone who lives in Barton-Conner House, for instance, to meet someone from a dorm farther down Amherst Allee, such as Next House. The person will not go beyond their dorm unless they have a specific reason to do so. This is especially true in the winter when the "MacGregor Wind Tunnel," or the funneling of high winds along the base of the MacGregor tower, make one less prone to walk through that area without some cause.

This tendency for people to remain in their dorms leads each dorm to take on a character of its own. Social interactions remain within one's individual dorm. While this is not in itself a bad thing, if there is poor communication between other dorms, each dorm remains a separate from the others. People are less likely to have chance meetings with each other and greet each other when they do.

That's one of the reasons I chose to move to East Campus. Most people I meet there are more prone to be friendly and social when their paths do cross. The design of East Campus facilitates people meeting. The two parallel buildings mean people face each other and greet each other when they do. The long hallways make it so that movements through the building require you to pass by many doors and thus people. As a result you will be more likely to meet people and be more friendly, or at least that is my experience. This means that people will be more likely to stop you and actually get into conversations.

On a daily basis EC is more social than other west campus dorms. The location of the dorm itself (between various academic buildings) enhances the qualities that I have mentioned. One is also prone to meet people from outside EC as well, increasing communication between people and enhancing the sociability of the place. I believe this is keeping in line with the overall design of the Institute's plan that has buildings interconnected to facilitate communication between the various areas of study. Don't students have things to communicate as well? Why shouldn't they be allowed to stay where they are and add to the fabric of MIT?

This is what is missing in the design of dorms on west campus — connections between people. The dorms on the east side feel more related than those on the west side, even though the same pressures of classes and such are present. I feel the relaxed atmosphere helps me study more effectively than when I was living on west campus, as I am not concentrating so much on how much stress I face.

To be fair the dorms on the east side of campus have their faults and may not be ideal places for everyone. It can be too noisy at times, and there are roaches and mice. The buildings themselves, as the renovations imply, are not in the best physical condition. However, for many the benefits outweigh the problems, and for them it is the best place in which to live. Often times these benefits cannot be expressed using statistical data about costs or composition of student life. The benefits are subtle and can only be fully appreciated by experiencing them, either by living there or visiting.

Because many of these benefits can only be appreciated by experiencing the dorms, student input into the future of the residences must be considered. I can understand how the Institute believes that moving all undergraduates to the west side of campus would create a greater sense of community. All undergraduates would be in closer relation to another another and could presumably communicate more.

However, from experiencing the dorms on that side of campus, I feel that would not be the case. Moving all undergraduates to one side of campus would destroy the good things about the east campus design, while accentuating the deficiencies in the west campus design. East Campus was and is the best environment for me. I would hate to see undergraduates lose the chance of experiencing east campus, and losing their choice to live there.

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