November 9, 2012

Dear Class of 1960,

I am pleased to share with you an update on the Class of 1960 Endowment Fund for Innovation in Education (EFIE). Provost Chris A. Kaiser announced during the summer that Chancellor W. Eric Grimson is the recipient of this year's EFIE award, in support of the Institute’s commitment to online learning through MITx. I trust you will share in the enthusiasm of this appointment and will be proud to see your fund associated with such educational innovation the likes of which we have not seen before.

President Reif repeatedly referred to the new landscape of higher education during his inaugural address, and innovation in education has never been more transformative. MITx is a component of the new Initiative (edX) that will enable a range of MIT subjects to be offered online to both enrolled students at the Institute as well as knowledge seekers around the globe. Although still in the experimental stage, MIT envisions offering a range of opportunities, from full semester long subjects, to coherent portions of subjects, to modules developed specifically to cover individual topics of use in many subjects. During a recent meeting with Class of 1960 officers, the Chancellor used the metaphor that edX is like the printing press, and MITx is the book—the content—that will be produced and delivered through this new platform.

To give you some background, MIT announced MITx in December of 2011, and launched its first subject in early 2012 with the offering of 6.002x (Circuits and Electronics) in an experimental prototype form. Within a few weeks, enrollment in the course topped 90,000. The course was open for nearly three months and when all was said and done, 155,000 students from 160 countries had registered and only 7,157 passed the course.

In May of 2012, MIT and Harvard established an agreement to partner together on this new way of delivering education, officially forming edX, which would later add UC Berkeley and the University of Texas system to the community. As edX has evolved, MIT focuses on preparing and offering its challenging coursework in its entirety (lectures, readings, p-sets, lab work and tests) as well as a forum for students to ask questions of—and provide guidance to—one another.

Naturally, the technology necessary to develop and produce interactive online courses does not come without significant cost. Both financial resources and a significant time commitment on the part of faculty to translate their curriculum into online and interactive delivery are the biggest challenge to meet the need for more course offerings.
From the start, the edX platform was envisioned not only as a means of delivering course content, but also as a test bed for educational experiments. Chancellor Grimson is taking on the challenge of identifying ways to utilize this new platform to benefit current MIT students through enhancing their residential experience. Following are a few of his projects that are being funded through the generosity of the Class of 1960:

With this new technology, it quickly became apparent that MIT had an unparalleled opportunity to capture one of MIT’s most beloved professors, Walter Lewin, giving his famous physics lectures that were thought to be finished with his recent retirement. Walter cheerfully agreed to re-create these lectures and in-class demonstrations, which will be recorded on video for the online version of 8.02x. MITx hopes to launch the first version of this online subject in Spring 2013.

A second opportunity that arose recently involves the idea of crowdsourcing (the technique for farming out labor-intensive tasks over the internet by splitting them into small parts that countless individuals complete on their own computers). This could bring greater efficiency and cost effectiveness to many applications, and Chancellor Grimson sees the advantage to investing in experiments in this area, using MIT students and faculty. Already several online subjects are using peer critiquing as a means of providing feedback. And there are several MIT faculty members with deep research experience in crowdsourcing that have ideas about how to extend these concepts to deal with interaction involving our own students and learners around the world. Fostering these experiments will help us plan out future enhancements to online subjects that scale to deal with very large global enrolments.

A third initial plan for this award is to involve current MIT students in the development and evolution of MITx. The Chancellor envisions an advisory board of students (both undergraduate and graduate) working together to contribute to the strategy and possibility that exists through online course delivery. This new frontier presents an opportunity to utilize technology to enhance their (and future generations of students’) residential experience at MIT. This has many implications that have already been identified, but the administration understands that today’s students have valuable knowledge, experience and ideas to contribute to the discussion. In development is the concept of a student competition, in which groups of students propose enhancements to the MITx experience, with small amounts of funding available to support prototype development of these ideas.

I trust you will share in the sense of pride with which MIT continues to be forward thinking and innovate in this new realm of online learning. The Class of 1960 Endowment Fund for Innovation in Education has made possible countless experiments, avenues of research and creative solutions for radical concepts. Online learning is clearly today’s great challenge for higher education, and the Institute is grateful for the support of such progressive alumni who would effectively bet on the success of MIT to lead the way in this new arena.

Thank you for your continued generosity and enthusiasm for helping sustain the next big thing at MIT!

All the best,

Beth McGonagle
Director, Donor Relations & Stewardship