

# Contentious UA debate follows budget dispute

*On the ballot are three tickets: Abdelbarr-Garfi, Jones-Barnett, and Lipkowitz-Donagan*

By Jada Ogueh, Grace Zhang  
and Malakhi Beyah  
EDITORS

On March 16, the Undergraduate Association (UA) Elections Commission held a debate for UA Presidential and Vice Presidential candidates Mariam Abdelbarr '27 and Francesca Garfi '29 (Abdelbarr-Garfi), Johnnie Jones VI '27 and Matthew Barnett '27 (Jones-Barnett), and Rivka Lipkowitz '29 and Anthony Donegan '28 (Lipkowitz-Donagan) in Room 4-231 and over Zoom.

On March 12, Lipkowitz resigned from the election via dormspam, but remained on the ticket to allow Donegan to run. If their ticket were to win, Lipkowitz said she would "probably resign," but expressed interest in staying

involved with the UA as Vice President or Treasurer.

Concourse Program Assistant Director Sasha Rickard '19 moderated the debate. Following the recent UA budget controversy, around 40-50 people attended the debate in person, while the Zoom livestream hovered around 56 viewers.

Abdelbarr, the current UA Vice President, stated that she would continue the work of the current UA administration while committing to increased transparency and fresh perspectives. Meanwhile, Jones-Barnett and Lipkowitz-Donagan voiced frustration with the current UA administration. Jones-Barnett emphasized the detailed plans they've already developed to enact reform and empower students. Lipkowitz-Donagan, on the

other hand, proposed restructuring the UA into a direct democracy.

### On the UA's purpose

Lipkowitz-Donagan asserted that the UA should represent the student

body and its issues to the MIT administration in a direct democracy format. He said that he would not "claim to know what the average MIT undergrad wants," but emphasized

his desire to take note of every individual issue. He even stated he would walk to President Sally Kornbluth's office and present student concerns directly.

While Jones-Barnett agreed with the need to promote student advocacy, they took a more moderate approach. Instead of "taking voices directly up" to Kornbluth, Jones would prioritize input from the entire student body to "create the change that students want to see."

Meanwhile, Abdelbarr-Garfi noted that the UA's responsibilities go beyond funding. "[The UA is] also about advocacy, building community, and making sure students feel heard and supported," Garfi said.



LEVY LE—THE TECH

UA Presidential and Vice Presidential candidates sit in front of a room of spectators for the debate in 4-231 on Monday, March 16, 2026.

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# UA President Hall clarifies "UA Files" dormspam

*Hall: "I want to make sure that we don't fall into what the greater nation has fallen into"*

By Jada Ogueh  
NEWS EDITOR

On Feb. 21, Anthony Donegan '28 sent a dormspam email titled "THE UA FILES," which voiced concerns about the Undergraduate Association (UA)'s budget and incited student debates about the organization's purpose, funding, and structure.

The initial email questioned budgeted line items, such as \$6,300 for an admin-organized retreat. It also called out the UA's large budget, which, according to financial records, is \$332,767.40

for 2025-2026. \$145,000 of this year's budget comes from One Fund. According to a statement from Vice Chancellor for Student Life Suzy Nelson, the One Fund combines "several funding streams" to provide more funding to student organizations, and is allocated by the following groups: the Student Group Funding Council (SGFC), UA, Graduate Student Council (GSC), Student Events Board (SEB), and class councils. The other part of the allotted funds come from the UA's reserves, which, according to the spreadsheet, is \$400,000.

The dormspam thread also pointed out missing budgets and unclear reporting. The formatting of the UA's annual budget report has been inconsistent, ranging from line-by-line in 2008 to sum totals from 2023-2024, with the 2024-2025 budget missing entirely. In a statement to *The Tech*, UA Treasurer George Obongo '27 stated the 2024-2025 budget was not posted due to a "transition in internal budgeting processes and funding structures," referring to the addition of the SGFC. For 2025-2026, the SGFC replaced the UA Financial Board. In previous years,

the UA Financial Board funded clubs directly, which is why the organization was allocated \$400,232 last year from the One Fund.

When it comes to preparing the budget, Nelson explained that the UA first prepares a budget with their advisors, then sends it to the Vice Chancellor for Student Life and Graduate and Undergraduate Education for review and approval.

Assistant Director of Residential Life/Area Direct Connor Perez was the former advisor to the UA. Now, Associate Dean and Director of Stu-

dent Organizations, Leadership, and Engagement (SOLE) Paul Murphy and Assistant Director of SOLE Elaina Emery interface with the UA. However, UA President Alice Hall '26 noted that neither of them support the UA as Perez did.

While students in the dormspam thread also questioned the purpose of the UA entirely, Nelson offered a different view. Citing the UA Constitution for MIT's vision on how the UA should serve the community, Nelson

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# Paula Hammond, Dean of Engineering, talks AI at MIT

*Hammond: "This is the place that gave so much to me, and now I get to give some of that back"*

By Eric Wang and Vivian Hir  
EDITORS

On March 5, *The Tech* interviewed Paula Hammond '84 PhD '93 regarding her recent appointment as Dean of Engineering. Previously, Hammond was the Executive Vice Provost and Vice Provost for Faculty from January 2024 to January 2026. She also was

the Department Head of Chemical Engineering from 2015 to 2023. Also an Institute Professor, Hammond conducts research on polymer nanomaterials for drug delivery.

Hammond expressed great excitement about taking on the new role. The School of Engineering is the place where "the heart is beating so deeply" at MIT, according to Hammond. Holding a S.B. and PhD in chemical engineering from MIT before joining the faculty in 1995, Hammond considers the School of Engineering her "home."

"This is the place that gave so much to me, and now I get to give some of that back," she said.

Hammond owes her quick adjustment to her new responsibilities as Dean to her experience as the former Department Head of Chemical Engineering. As Department Head, Hammond held conversations with the student body for feedback on the department, changes to undergraduate curriculum, and improvements to graduate student life. Hammond looks forward to collaborating with the Student Advisory Group in Engineering (SAGE) and its graduate counterpart, GradSAGE, on education and research in engineering.

Although Hammond acknowledged ongoing federal pressure on higher education, she sees this as an opportunity to reshape engineering educa-

tion and research, expressing a desire to build new initiatives that foster collaboration between other schools and departments. "Engineering really is something that touches all of these different areas," she said. Besides new initiatives, Hammond would like to expand experiential learning opportunities for students by building partnerships with industry and national labs.

As the new Dean of Engineering, Hammond will also need to address the rise of generative AI in engineering classes at MIT. She believes increased use of AI in the engineering landscape is something that MIT needs to prepare their undergraduate body for, referencing the recent proposal by the MIT Task Force on the Undergraduate Academic Program (TFUAP).

"We've been on that very slow and steady rate of change in our educational approach," Hammond admitted, "but I think [we should have] deeper conversations about what the 21st-century educated engineer needs to know about AI tools when they are relevant [and] when they are not relevant."

However, she acknowledged that the increased integration of AI into the curriculum in turn requires more "guardrails" to ensure that students have an understanding of fundamental topics in classes.

Hammond also emphasized increasing the number of interdisciplinary courses at MIT, with some courses combining AI and engineering already taught by instructors from both the College of Engineering and the College of Computing.

She believes these classes not only help broaden perspectives of MIT engineers, but also are becoming increa-

earth scientist. We need to be able to make connections between the thermodynamics of a system and how that impacts not only the climate, but [also] the entire ecosystem," Hammond said. Unfortunately, this interdisciplinary focus does not include plans for new majors in said areas.

Despite the challenges ahead of her, Hammond feels confident taking



PHOTO COURTESY OF GRETCHEN ERTL

Institute Professor Paula Hammond '84 PhD '93 is the new Dean of Engineering.

singly necessary in today's workplace. Citing climate change as an example, Hammond explained that modern engineers require a sort of "Renaissance" capability to tackle the world's largest problems.

"We need to be able to have a conversation with someone who is an

up the mantle. In a final word to the MIT student body, Hammond said, "I am really excited to engage with students as we get started, and I'm really looking forward to engaging with our student advisory groups and hearing the ideas that are coming from our students."

## 3/19 IN SHORT

UA Election voting closes Saturday, March 21 at 5 p.m.

Spring break begins Monday, March 23.

First day of classes for second half-term subjects begin Monday, March 30.

Fourth quarter Physical Education & Wellness classes begin Wednesday, April 1.

Interested in joining *The Tech*? Email [tt-join@mit.edu](mailto:tt-join@mit.edu)

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## WELCOME CLASS OF 2030

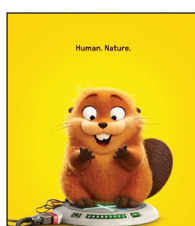
Data on the recently admitted MIT class. NEWS, p. 12

## A CHARITY ALBUM

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WEATHER WEATHER WEATHER WEATHER

**Today**  
Partly cloudy.



**43°F**  
6°C

Wind Speed: 5-10 mph.  
Gusts: 15 mph.  
Direction: S.


**Tonight**  
Cloudy.



**31°F**  
-1°C

Wind Speed: 5-10 mph.  
Gusts: 20 mph.  
Direction: SW.

**Friday**  
Sunny.



**53°F 41°**  
12°C | 5°C

Wind Speed: 10-15 mph.  
Gusts: 40 mph.  
Direction: SW.


**Saturday**  
Cloudy.



**52°F 39°**  
11°C | 4°C

Wind Speed: 5-10 mph.  
Gusts: 10 mph.  
Direction: E.

**Sunday**  
Cloudy.



**52°F 33°**  
11°C | 1°C

Wind Speed: 10-15 mph.  
Gusts: 35 mph.  
Direction: W.

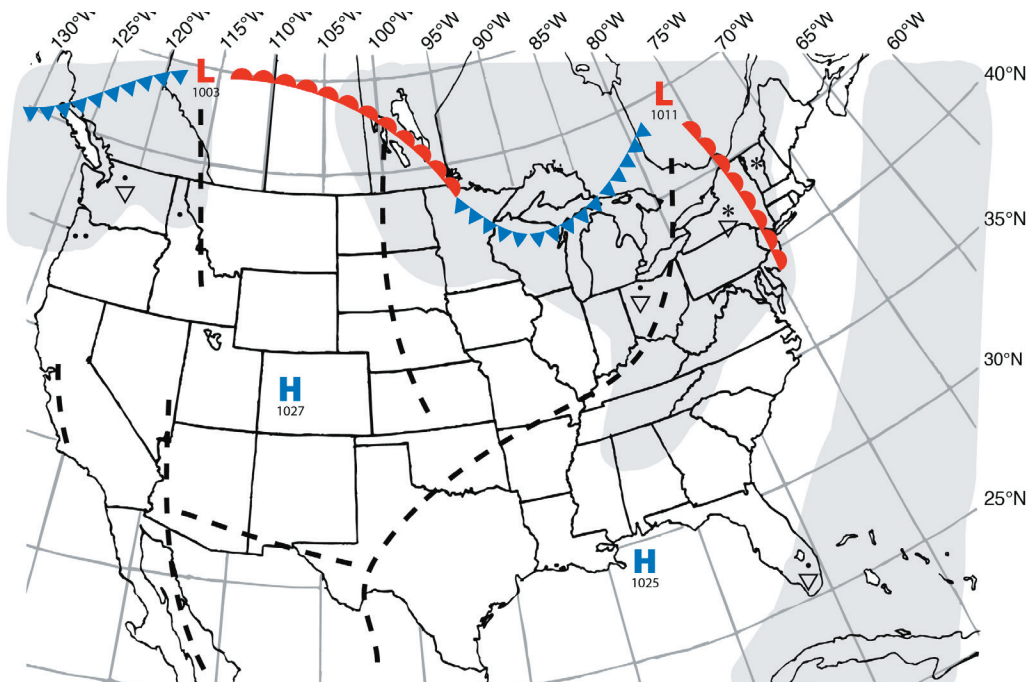
## Milder weekend ahead but below average temperatures for spring break

By Conrad Straden  
CHIEF METEOROLOGIST

High pressure has been dominating this week, keeping it sunny and dry. This will change on Friday night as a weak clipper system swings through the Northeast. Light rain will break out late on Friday and continue overnight, but will dry up quickly on Saturday. High temperatures this weekend will be in the low 50s, but it will stay fairly cloudy. Another weak clipper system will move through on Sunday, bringing more rain Sunday night, but nothing cra-

zy. Sunshine will return next week for spring break; however, temperatures will recede back into the 30s and 40s. There is a slight chance for some snow on Monday or Tuesday, but it is still early, so details will be pinned down closer to the weekend.

Last week, ice on the Charles River finally melted after a spectacular warm stretch, culminating with a record high of 75°F last Tuesday. It will be a while before we see temperatures that warm again, and the rest of the month looks below average. Also, starting Monday next week, sunsets will be later than 7 p.m.



Weather Systems	Weather Fronts	Precipitation Symbols	Other Symbols
<b>H</b> High Pressure	--- Trough	Snow: *	☁ Fog
<b>L</b> Low Pressure	🔴 Warm Front	Shower: ▽	⚡ Thunderstorm
🌀 Hurricane	🔵 Cold Front	Light: *	∞ Haze
	🔵 Stationary Front	Moderate: **	
		Heavy: ***	
			Compiled by MIT Meteorology Staff and The Tech

# Snow removal crews brave February's blizzard

Workers cleared roughly three million cubic feet of snow on campus across several days

By Samuel Yuan  
NEWS EDITOR

Howling winds and a strengthening blizzard at 11 p.m. on Sunday, Feb. 22 meant most of Cambridge hunkered down indoors. But for Maria Petrosillo, an overnight foreman in MIT's custodial services, it was time to head outside and clock in for a long night at work.

When heavy snowstorms, like February's blizzard that blanketed MIT with nearly two feet of snow, hit campus, the Institute's facilities team quickly mobilizes to clear snow as fast as possible. In addition to ground crews, workers from other departments like custodial services and housing are tapped to assist with snow removal, according to Director of Campus Services Marty O'Brien.

Petrosillo and her colleagues were among those who answered the call to work as snow shovelers overnight through the blizzard despite the biting cold.

"We work from 11 p.m. to 7 a.m. and it's a difficult shift," Petrosillo said. "The overnight shift takes on the majority of everyday work, since not too many people are on campus, so more work can be done without interruption."

O'Brien said that while some institutions can wait until the storm's end to begin snow

removal, MIT's "residential community requires continuous snow management during a storm."

"Students need to travel safely to dining halls during the storm, and we must keep emergency routes clear," O'Brien said.

Still, working through the storm means that conditions can get brutal. One worker shared that white-out conditions meant that they "couldn't even see a couple feet in front" of them at times; another expressed that February's storm was as bad as the "Blizzard of '78," during which Boston received a record-breaking 27.1 inches of snow.

O'Brien estimated that the snow removal teams, with the help of plows and front-end loaders, cleared roughly 3 million cubic feet of snow from 55 acres of hardscape on campus over the course of the storm. Yet, despite their best efforts, the blizzard ultimately resulted in the cancellation of two school days.

Grounds Services Supervisor Sogna Scott praised the mechanics for "handling breakdowns" of equipment caused by the "heavy wet snow" and also expressed gratitude for the work of operators and shovelers.

"Our operators and shovelers work tirelessly clearing doorways, ramps, stairs, and keeping emergency exits and paths clear," Scott said.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MARIA PETROSILLO

MIT facilities staff work through the night to clear snow from the blizzard on Monday, Feb. 23, 2026.

"They are amazing and understand the urgency of their work, even when it's repetitive."

On March 3, Harvard's custodial union, Services Employment International Union 32BJ, reached a tentative deal on a new contract after five months of negotiations. That same union covers many of the individuals who perform snow removal and other work at MIT. In an email statement, Communications Director for

Campus Services Monica Lee confirmed that MIT anticipates to "bargain in good faith" with the union later this spring.

On working the night shift, Petrosillo added that "our hard work sometimes goes unnoticed because we don't get to see too many people," but that "when we do get to interact with people, we will always get the 'thank you' that makes all the night shift hours we work worth it."

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*The Tech* (ISSN 0148-9607) is published periodically on Thursdays during the academic year (except during MIT vacations) and monthly during the summer by *The Tech*, Room W20-483, 84 Massachusetts Avenue, Cambridge, Mass. 02139. **POSTMASTER:** Please send all address changes to our mailing address: *The Tech*, P.O. Box 391529, Cambridge, Mass. 02139-7029. **TELEPHONE:** Editorial: (617) 253-1541. Business: (617) 258-8324. Facsimile: (617) 258-8226. **EMAIL:** [tt-general@mit.edu](mailto:tt-general@mit.edu) (general), [tt-ads@mit.edu](mailto:tt-ads@mit.edu) (advertising). *Advertising, subscription, and typesetting rates available.* Entire contents © 2026 *The Tech*. Printed by Graphic Developments, Inc.

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THE KNIGHT SCIENCE JOURNALISM PROGRAM @ MIT

# The UA was allocated \$160,000 from the One Fund

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believes the UA serves a “critical” role in improving education, providing services, expressing student perspectives, and fairly allocating resources.

The Tech interviewed Hall to get her insights into the recent discourse.

Answers have been edited for length and clarity.

**The Tech:** According to George, each UA administration inherits the organization from scratch. He also mentioned less continuity due to the UA losing its SOL direct administrative advisor. Is there a push to establish better continuity between administrations, since that is kind of what happened with the budget not being posted as well? And could you explain more about losing the SOLE advisor, if you know about that?

Hall: A huge thing that I’ve been thinking about all year is connecting administrations, because it is such a problem. We used to have a SOLE person who was continuous between years, but over the summer, they got another job, and because of budget cuts and the hiring freeze, SOLE and the Division of Student Life (DSL) weren’t able to hire a new person.

When we transition in May, there’s an outgoing officer team that’s still around. This year, we weren’t able to get most of those officers to connect with us at all. So number one, I’m learning my new job, but everyone on my team is also learning a new job without anyone helping them.

As far as the budget issue goes, I would say that was just a genuine mistake. We hired a webmaster, and then our student engagement officer quit. We really wanted to prioritize student engagement, so we put the webmaster in his role. We didn’t vet every page of the website, so we didn’t notice that we didn’t post those budgets.

There’s a lot happening in May; we have to hire the officer team, teach them everything, and create the budget in multiple meetings and get it approved. That’s how it just slips. I definitely intend to work with the new president to get the new officer team onboarded, especially because I had a lot of advisor help that won’t exist anymore.

**TT:** Would you prefer it so that each year’s president will work to onboard the officer team or were you hoping to make something more concrete, like an onboarding guide that’s passed on?

Hall: Something that we had to do ourselves was create clear roles and responsibilities for each officer. I definitely am going to add items, such as making the treasurer put the budget on the website, to these roles and responsibilities.

**TT:** There has been a lot of student discourse about how to allocate unused funds; in general, could you explain why there seems to be thousands of dollars unspent in each fiscal year? What do you have to say to students saying to invest that money into student organizations, UROPs, food security, etc.?

Hall: The actual allocated budget is over \$300,000, but we got \$145,000 of funding from the student life fee. Then, as part of the budgeting process, the UA Council approves us to take some of that from unused funds from the past years. I also want to clarify that, in my email, I said the officer team only spent \$21,000. That wasn’t including almost \$60,000 in travel grants and all the spending of our different committees, and also other allocations that happen throughout the year. Council throughout the year votes on giving money from reserves.

The most frustrating thing to me about this is that anytime a student has come up to us asking for help with club funding, we’ve done something to help make it happen. Directly-funded UROPs pull from \$7.6 million; we get \$145,000. That’s such a small change to the UROP budget.

I get it: I’ve had my funding rejected for UROPs too; I’ve had my club struggle with funding. I totally understand that sentiment, and it’s very frustrating, but we did also ensure that clubs got an extra \$100,000 this year. Last year, the UA got \$160,000. This year, we got a little bit less, and club funding increased significantly because we were talking with the people that were splitting up the student life fee and trying to make sure that club funding allocation happened.

The UA is getting the smallest cut of the student life fee. I just don’t think that money is going to make the difference that people think it would make.

It’s important to have student government. If we were to say we want to give all of our money to UROPs, and we don’t want to have the UA anymore, that’s not what would happen. Admin would start splitting up the student life fee differently. The student life fee goes to the Department of Athletics, Physical Educa-

tion and Recreation (DAPER), MIT Health, GSC, SEB, and SGFC. We can’t just decide that it’s going to one place long term. That’s why I think we should work with what we have, use the money that we’re getting, and build the community that we’re supposed to build with it.

**TT:** There is a thought the UA should become more of a “direct democracy” in that students can directly vote on budget items, student events, or discretionary fund spending, perhaps in a town hall at the start and end of every semester or emails or Zooms. What’s your opinion on that?

Hall: It’s a fantastic idea. I just don’t think anybody would use their right to vote as much as we think they would. You have representatives because that makes the process more efficient. If direct democracy is what the students want to have, though, I’m all for it. But we already have participatory budgeting, and that’s exactly what we’re trying to do on a smaller scale. We put \$50,000 out of the \$300,000 that we get access to on the ballot. People voted, and we really tried to get votes this year, but not everybody was voting.

I ran for this position because I wanted people to start realizing the UA has a lot of power, and we should pay attention to that. I’m very grateful that people are doing that. I wish that this increase in attention was based on facts. If people want to vote, they should. The first step is to come to Council; Council is essentially a town hall. Anybody can come to Council and propose that we give \$100,000 to the UROP fund. That is how we already operate. It’s just that people aren’t really taking advantage of it. I’m planning to publicize that more, just to make it clearer to students. But it does kind of exist already.

**TT:** The UA has its own opinion about what the budget should be spent on. How does administration opinion shape all the things that eventually end up on the budget? Do you often find that there’s a mismatch between what admin wants to do and what the UA wants to do?

Hall: I don’t think admin shapes that much of it; they just make sure that we’re not embezzling — the retreat is an admin-organized thing. Something that’s true is that we don’t question their decisions. If all the students told me that they didn’t want a retreat anymore, then I would argue.

Admin gives us the perspective of having seen what’s worked, what hasn’t, what’s cost more or less mo-

ney, etc. The biggest input that they really have is when they allocate us that money. They decide within themselves, “we’re not funding X, Y and Z” when they only give us \$145,000. But that doesn’t really matter, because Council decides how we can spend the \$145,000 once we get it.

**TT:** A brief clarification, about \$400,000 is included in the UA’s revenue because of the One Fund. Is that yearly revenue or in total?

Hall: We were allocated \$400,000 last year from the One Fund. Because of the change in going from separate funding boards to having the SGFC, we got significantly less this year. If you take out how much they planned to give for club funding last year, then they had \$160,000. That’s why I compare \$160,000 to the \$145,000 from last year. To further clarify, the reason that our reserves grew so much is because clubs very rarely spend all the money that was allocated to them. The UA also doesn’t spend all the money all the time, but we want to do that.

**TT:** There are some controversial lines in the budget, such as \$5,000 for internal UA bonding. George mentioned how these estimates are based on previous budgets. My question is, does the UA intend to better explain (in the budget) the internal pieces contributing to this overall cost? Line-by-line reporting is a thought, but that may not be feasible.

Hall: If people said they want us to report line by line, then we would do it. The time constraints we’re under to finish the budget are a lot. I know I’m not going to embezzle, so when I’m trying to get the budget in, I’m not going to put the pressure on myself to explain other things in writing. We do have to explain a lot in all these budget meetings. So putting more in writing; if that’s what students want to see, I want to do it.

I want students to notice and feel the UA in a positive way, and putting all my time into super thoroughly explaining the budget when nobody even noticed that the budget wasn’t posted last year doesn’t feel like an effective use of my time. I love when we get follow up questions on the budget, but a lot of representatives honestly aren’t that active, and in the past, people didn’t seem to care.

**TT:** Do you guys post what you’ve actually spent at the end of the year?

Hall: I don’t know that we do, but we will this year. A week before the email came out, I sat down with

George and had a serious conversation about how granular we’re going to be with our reporting this year because in years past, it was more of a summary. We have 12 cost objects in the UA for all the committees showing how much each committee spent in total. But this year, we sat down and we went through RFPs in order to get to those numbers for the officer team that you already have in the spending. So we’re gonna try to be that specific, and we will post that.

The stuff we’ve spent the \$21,000 on is a lot of events. For example, we couldn’t do that party in Barker Library because Sally Kornbluth had to approve it — and that idea came out of student input. We still want to have parties, but we want to make sure the line items are clear. We’re not just going to take \$2,500 from a party in Barker and put it into something else. So then we had the UA discretionary fund go towards the Super Bowl party, Halloween costume contest, Family Feud, things like that.

I didn’t mean to say that we have never spent from the student life fee. What I meant to say is that no personal spending has ever come from the student life fee. By that, I was talking about the Bush Fund. Formerly, the Bush Fund had no maximum spending, so presidents would use it like crazy. Now there’s a \$5,000 cap. Anything bought from the Bush Fund doesn’t affect students at all. It’s not coming from the student life fee at all; it’s coming from a completely separate, direct fund that wants to support presidents personally.

That’s where the Gucci suits that were purchased a couple years back came from, and that’s where people talk a lot about investment. And I agree, I don’t think a Gucci suit is a responsible purchase. Obviously, I haven’t bought a Gucci suit. There’s now a cap; you can’t spend more than \$600 on clothing.

I really hope we can clarify everything. Overall, I want to make sure that we don’t fall into what the greater nation has fallen into, in terms of letting misinformation steer things too much. We do have power as undergraduates, and I don’t want us to squander it. The budget and the money is great, but we’re also in monthly meetings with the chancellor team, with the DSL, etc. talking about a lot of things. It’s a big advocacy effort, having a student government together so that we can respond to things like the proposed federal compact. If we don’t have the UA, then we lose all of that important representation.

**Do you have a question for President Kornbluth?**

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**Are you a tetris ninja?**

Use your powers for good!

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**The button works in theory. Reality has other plans.** Tensions between the United States and Iran have escalated, but what was expected to be a swift show of force has turned into a complex and risky standoff. With the Strait of Hormuz—a critical artery for global oil—under constant threat, any move toward escalation carries consequences far beyond the battlefield.

LATYR NIANG—THE TECH

# Vice Mayor Azeem on state senate campaign

The MIT alumnus spoke about safety, sustainability, and affordability

By Kiro Moussa and Jaden Chizuruoke May

On Dec. 9, 2025, longtime State Senator Patricia Jehlen announced she would not be running for reelection in 2026. Her seat as State Senator of Massachusetts's Second Middlesex district has been occupied for two decades, and, in a state where incumbency is prevalent, an empty senate seat in such a high-profile area is rare.

Burhan Azeem '19, Cambridge Vice Mayor and the youngest member in the Cambridge City Council at the time of his election, is running to fill her seat. Despite his relatively recent debut into local politics shortly after graduating from MIT in 2019, Azeem's impact has already been felt throughout the city; he expanded zoning, reduced parking minimums, and established universal pre-K for Cambridge residents.

On March 8, 2026, *The Tech* interviewed Azeem to discuss his campaign plans as well as the promises he plans to deliver on if elected. Having accomplished his goals as vice mayor, Azeem is eyeing larger challenges in the state capitol, as he wants to "do more" as state senator.

## On the cost of living

One of the most highlighted points of Azeem's campaign centers around Massachusetts' affordability crisis. "Massachusetts is the richest state in the richest country in the world, yet most people here don't feel rich," Azeem said.

Echoing ideas found on his platform, Azeem named the rising costs of housing, utilities, public transportation, and childcare as significant contributors to Massachusetts's economic challenges. Azeem likened childcare to a "second mortgage,"

and that "finding a way to get universal pre-K and childcare" would help address this issue.

Azeem has addressed similar issues; during his first term as Cambridge City Councilor in 2022, he played a critical role in establishing the universal Cambridge preschool program. When asked about the possibility of extending the pillars of this program beyond Cambridge as state senator, Azeem was optimistic. "I don't think there's a reason we can't do it for the state," he said. "It's been a little while since we expanded educational access, but I think that it's critical."

Azeem then addressed Massachusetts housing shortages, asking why there seems to be a lack of innovation regarding this issue. "We keep on having digital software innovation. All the biggest companies are software companies. There is no big physical infrastructure company, and I think that fundamentally, our rules were meant to stop construction," he said.

Citing the rapid expansion of highway construction during the 1950s and 1960s, Azeem referenced the subsequent restriction of housing development as an important reason for the expensive condition of the housing market. "When Eisenhower passed this big highway act, people started putting highways in cities, then cities pushed back and it became a huge fight," Azeem explained. He said that the resulting legislation prevented housing development without tons of approval, which "slowed everything to a halt."

"If you want someone to build something, you have to create rules and guidelines that allow them to do so. [But] so much of 1970s [and] 1980s politics was about stopping the bad stuff

that we also made it illegal to build the good stuff," Azeem said. "That's the politics I'm trying to fix."

## On clean energy

Aside from improving the general affordability of Massachusetts, Azeem's campaign also focuses on creating a more ecologically sustainable state.

During Azeem's time at MIT, he studied materials science and engineering (Course 3-A). Initially, he believed material science was at the root of many issues facing the world.

However, as Azeem engaged with politics during the 2016 election, his perspective shifted. "I realized that policy is a much bigger part of it. Battery technology allows for efficient electric cars already. We already have solutions to plastic pollution. But there's just all these things that are in the way of that"

Azeem then discussed the untapped potential of clean energy in Massachusetts, emphasizing the need for a change in perspective. "We frame climate action as sacrifice instead of building a clean energy system that is more affordable and reliable than what came before," Azeem argued.

He opposed the current administration's move to halt all offshore wind projects in the United States and stated that Massachusetts is one of the best places in the world to build offshore wind. "It is a deep source of energy that we could then use to bring down both emissions and costs per resident," Azeem said.

However, he suggested that the White House isn't entirely to blame for the present neglect of this potential energy source. "The reason Trump was able to do that was also kind of our fault," Azeem said. "It took us 10 years to permit offshore wind."

## On immigration and technology

Following recent anti-ICE demonstrations in the Boston area, Azeem plans to introduce legislation that will "ensure ICE is following the law" in the form of bills similar to the recently proposed "No Secret Police Act" in California, which bans ICE officers from wearing masks and requires them to wear identifiable badges.

In this new wave of technological advancements, Azeem pointed to digital privacy, security, and safety as increasingly important priorities. According to Pew Research Center, 71% of Americans are concerned about how the government handles their data. "I think you have to find a line of being able to actually close cases, solve crimes, but also be very, very careful about what this information can be used for," Azeem said. He also emphasized that safety should not come at any unnecessary cost to privacy.

Azeem shared an experience where a suspect for a shooting in his neighborhood was only caught with

a security camera. He stated that the security camera was the only way that police officers could find the suspect. Thus, he cited warrants as an effective means of ensuring safety, as long as they are reasonable, apply to specified conditions, and are not shared with any other department or administration for unrelated purposes.

## Advice for MIT students

As the interview was brought to a close, Azeem acknowledged the impact that MIT, alongside its innovations, has had on his own understanding of the Cambridge-Boston area as well as the greater community.

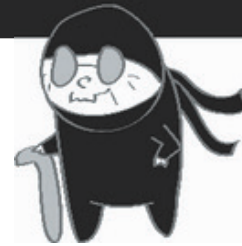
Azeem emphasized that while politics can be incredibly difficult to get into, it's something where individuals can "make a huge difference." He encouraged people who also want to make an impact on their community to "run for something" and focus on local problems first.

"You should make sure that you feel like you can belong, you have something to contribute, and are part of the community," Azeem advised. "If you are, the sky's the limit."

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# Candidates debated approaches to UA structure

UA Debate, from Page 1

## On concrete plans

The Jones-Barnett ticket asked if any of the other candidates had put out a "specific, concrete plan for their administration." As of time of publication, they are the only candidates to have posted their plans in writing.

Donegan responded that he had not been able to publish a detailed platform, as the UA Election Commission had banned him from campaigning for the Lipkovitz-Donegan ticket due to premature campaigning. Despite his lack of a formal platform, Donegan stated he would fight for the people of MIT and the issues they care about.

Abdelbarr reiterated her plan to publicize town halls and increase student participation to draft the UA budget, as well as continue interfacing with administration.

## On interactions with the MIT administration

Jones-Barnett plans to build a relationship with MIT's faculty leadership, stating that a healthy dynamic has always been key to policy change at the Institute.

Lipkovitz-Donegan reasserted their desire to reference primarily student input when meeting with MIT administration. "There are issues that students are very passionate about," Donegan said, "and I believe that I can be the loudest voice in the room."

Abdelbarr-Garfi affirmed the importance of student input, but Abdelbarr noted the infeasibility of bringing every issue to Kornbluth. She instead highlighted previous surveys and canvassing efforts. One example is the UA's Participatory Budgeting initiative in December.

## On the UA's budget

Abdelbarr-Garfi was the first to answer the major question concerning the annual UA budget. Abdelbarr hopes to open the budget drafting process to any interested students and increase transparency around the people voting for the UA's budget.

Jones-Barnett seeks to promote budget transparency by simplifying and publicizing it, as well as creating a "UA treasury" responsible for keeping the budget updated and balanced.

Lipkovitz-Donegan echoed the other candidates' proposals, highlighting their plan to publicize every step of the process; Donegan expressed his desire to "make sure that the money goes back to the people."

Lipkovitz brought up the Harvard UA's (HUA) budget, noting it is roughly one-fifth the size of MIT's, and questioned the need for such a large UA allocation. For the 2024-2025 fiscal year, HUA was allocated \$541,171.33, with \$457,380.59 for clubs. For 2025-2026, MIT UA's budget is \$332,767.40, with \$145,000 of this year's budget coming from the One Fund and the rest coming from reserves. However, the UAs are structured differently and allocate their money to different areas on a line-by-line basis.

Abdelbarr pointed out that the UA gets a small cut of the student life fee — three percent. As a first step, Abdelbarr said she would educate students about the budget and encourage them to offer input at council meetings. However, she would also consider reallocating the funds if needed.

Jones believes the UA does not require its current budget, but cited student programming, support for food insecurity, and resources for students traveling as justifications for how those funds could be used. He would prefer to maintain, and even increase, the current budget if the UA starts doing "really good work that serves students." Barnett added that comparisons between Harvard and MIT are unfair, as they are two different universities operating in different contexts.

In response to Lipkovitz's claim that the UA does not fund clubs, UA President Alice Hall '26 stated that the UA has allocated thousands of dollars this year, such as through the Community and Diversity Fund.

Cayetano "Guy" Sanchez IV '27 asked the candidates to commit or not commit to a spending cap on retreats and internal bonding, and for how long if so.

Donegan emphatically stated zero dollars. Jones stated no more than five thousand.

Abdelbarr said it would be difficult for students to make every decision without planning beforehand, adding that the retreat helps train UA members and support committee retention. Nonetheless, she is willing to accept any spending cap that students vote on.

## On student input

Donegan believes the UA should directly ask students what they want the money to be spent on instead of asking students to come to them. Abdelbarr countered that such an approach could be biased toward certain voices and proposed that it would be better to strengthen the bond between students and their representatives, while further publicizing council meetings. She added that Donegan's plan is great in theory and "completely infeasible" in actuality.

Rinoa Oliver '28 asked Abdelbarr how people would have time to show up to council meetings, citing Abdelbarr's previous statement about students being busy with psets.

Abdelbarr said interfacing with students is great when they are available, but that ultimate decision making is "more effectively" done by representatives. She also explained that helping students connect with their representatives will ensure their ideas are presented in council without having to show up themselves. "The representatives help dilute the fact that not every single student has to show up to everything," she concluded.

## On promoting civility

UA History Co-Chair Geoffrey Enwere '26 asked how each candidate would create a positive working environment in the UA.

Abdelbarr would make sure the blame does not fall on a "centralized power" and pointed to current sys-

tems in place for students to share their concerns.

Jones stated his ticket would cooperate with student leaders and restructure the UA's interactions with organizations to serve people the way they want. "The way that happens is through good relationships," he said.

"I'm happy to work with any student government leaders that are happy to work with me," Donegan said. He reiterated that none of the things he or his friends said on dormspam were personal attacks, which he strongly condemns.

## On restructuring the UA's finances

Former UA President Enoch Ellis '26 asked whether the candidates would create a solicitor general position within the UA to audit its finances. All candidates expressed support; Jones-Barnett had already proposed such a role, Abdelbarr called it "very appropriate," and Donegan said he would "gladly" do it himself or appoint someone else.

Abdelbarr was asked why she did not pursue reforms if she believed the transparency around UA finances were inadequate when she entered office. She was also asked why students should trust her to deliver on her campaign promises for financial transparency and to navigate future conflicts.

As vice president, Abdelbarr said her priorities were advocacy and working with admin; however, she acknowledged that UA finances were not fully transparent and accepted accountability for the lack of clarity. She added that she wants to continue listening to both administrators and students to make improvements.

## On leadership and delivering on promises

With just a few minutes left, the candidates were asked why students should trust them to deliver on their plans and about their leadership experience.

Donegan is the president of Student House and speaker of the living group council; in the past, he was

DormCon REX/CPW Chair and briefly on the Student Group Funding Council.

Jones has been a part of FPPOP leadership and helped develop Project Interphase; Barnett is the head alter server for the MIT Tech Catholic Community, the vice president of New Vassar, and the Chief Operating Officer of MIT Model UN.

Abdelbarr is the vice president of the UA and volunteers at hospitals and elementary schools; Garfi is involved with Camp Kesem.

Each ticket also received a specific question: for Abdelbarr, how many coffee chats the UA went on and the administration's effectiveness following the revocation of spending IAP flex dollars outside the Student Center; for Jones, how his proposal would avoid more bureaucracy; for Donegan, if he previously raised concerns to UA leadership.

Donegan said he did not discuss the budget beforehand; rather, he "immediately publicized" it upon receiving it from an unspecified UA member. He asserted that his commitment despite the "all the controversy" demonstrates he will stick by his promises.

Jones-Barnett has already started gauging their proposal's feasibility by talking to various sources, including the UA's former advisor.

Abdelbarr estimated the UA went on "hundreds" of coffee chats and clarified that restrictions on IAP flex dollars came from admin decisions. She added that the UA has been working on this issue and hopes for change next year.

## Moving forward

Voting is now open and will close at 5 p.m. on Saturday, March 21. Results will be announced by 10 p.m. on Sunday, March 22.

Matthew Barnett '27, a UA Election candidate, is the Sports Editor of *The Tech*. Geoffrey Enwere '26, who participated in the debate as an audience member, is a Senior Editor of *The Tech*. Neither was involved in the reporting or editing of this article.

## ALBUM REVIEW

# War Child Records's 'HELP(2)' does good, sounds great

Indie's best and brightest come together for charity album

★★★★☆

*Help(2)*

Various Artists

War Child Records

March 6, 2026

By Sabine Chu  
SENIOR EDITOR

The contributors to *HELP(2)*, War Child Records's newest charity compilation album, include some of the biggest names in alt rock and indie — Damon Albarn, Big Thief, beabadoobee. Almost all of them go above and beyond. Still, reflecting on the album's purpose, I kept thinking of a song by a band that is (to my knowledge) totally uninvolved with the project: "Caring is Creepy," a song off The Shins's 2001 record *Oh Inverted World*.

Is caring creepy? Mainstream music seems to think so. On the opening song of *Brat*, arguably the cultural event of 2024, Charli XCX sneers, "I don't fucking

care what you think." Later tracks lionize avoidant "mean girls" and revel in the feeling of being "number one." In *Brat*'s more emotional moments, Charli focuses only on herself. Although she movingly describes a tense relationship with her parents and her worries over starting a family, she makes no effort to empathize with those struggling with similar issues. However excellent her music — and I'd be the first to assert her talent — Charli XCX's is an insular, self-absorbed mode of fame.

It's thus especially refreshing to see so many artists work towards a worthy cause, especially one whose beneficiaries they are unlikely to meet. Like its predecessor, 1995's *The Help Album*, proceeds from *HELP(2)* support children living through war globally through the nongovernmental organization War Child UK.

A few tracks, like Pulp's punk-infused "Begging for Change," explicitly respond to this mission. That sometimes comes at the expense of artistry: a characteristically literal lyric from Depeche Mode's bouncy "Universal Soldier" goes, "And he's killing for Canada, he's killing for France / He's killing for the U.S.A." Fontaines D.C., who chose to contribute a cover instead of an original song, fare better with a pared-

down rendition of Sinead O'Connor's "Black Boys on Mopeds."

Of the songs that mention politics, I most liked Arctic Monkeys's appropriately-named "Opening Night," which kicks off the album with a reference to "popular slogans and buckets of paint." This track draws on all the band's best assets, including pretentious lyrics in the second person ("You're a lonely little hall of famer"), a bassline at once sensual and anxiety-inducing, and Alex Turner's unusual ability to make any vowel both smoother and three times longer than you'd expect. The result can hold its own beside anything from *AM* or *Favourite Worst Nightmare*.

Another standout, "Strangers" by Black Country, New Road, takes a quieter route to success. Although this song is initially more muted than, say, "Chaos Space Marine," it's still very BCNR, and thus still special. Plinking pizzicati combine with mellifluous vocals to illuminate highly specific, slightly nonsensical lyrics like "Pick a fight with a hard-kicking dandy / His roundhouse monk shoes shine in the light." The last minute, in which the band erupts into twanging maximalism, is particularly delightful.

My last two favorite tracks are both covers. Accompanied by ghostly instru-

mentals, Portishead's Beth Gibbons brings new life to the Velvet Underground's classic "Sunday Morning." When she warns the listener to "Watch out, the world's behind you," we remember the context of the album's creation.

But the best track on *HELP(2)*, in my opinion, is Olivia Rodrigo's lovely rendition of The Magnetic Fields's "The Book of Love." Rodrigo's voice — full-bodied and youthful but highly controlled — perfectly suits Stephin Merritt's alternately deadpan and heartfelt lyrics. Rodrigo and the strings section expertly waltz through assertions that "the book of love is long and boring." With its slowed-down tempo (this version is 4:08 minutes, compared to the 2:42 original), I'm sure that "The Book of Love" will soundtrack at least a few wedding processions.

None of these songs, or the people who made them, are faultless. To quote "The Book of Love," "Some of it is just transcendental. Some of it is just really dumb." Still, *HELP(2)*'s willingness to put its heart on its sleeve, and its money where its mouth is, gives me hope. Somehow, in this embattled, inverted, heart-breaking world, these artists have reached far beyond themselves. I'll try to find ways to do the same.

# Fredrik Backman's new novel 'My Friends' is heartfelt, funny, and beautiful

A young runaway artist finds hope while hearing the story of a group of four best friends who lived 25 years ago

★★★★★

*My Friends*

Fredrik Backman

Translated by Neil Smith

Atria Books

May 6, 2025

By Rebecca Showalter Enamorado

*My Friends* is Fredrik Backman's newest novel, translated into English by Neil Smith. It begins with an epigraph from Anton Ego: "The world is often unkind to new talent, new creations. The new needs friends," and tells the story of two young artists and the people who believe in them

through Backman's characteristic heartwarming and poignant writing.

Louisa is a 17-year-old girl in foster care who has almost nothing to her name but a postcard of a painting, *The One of the Sea* by C. Jat. That is, until she is unexpectedly gifted the original painting.

*The One of the Sea* is not just Louisa's favorite painting. It is her lifeline after her closest friend, Fish, dies. The autopsy report shows that Fish died from a drug overdose, but Louisa knows the truth; Fish was "murdered by reality."

The painting is of three teenagers sitting at the edge of a long pier that stretches into the sea. Louisa has spent years imagining those three teenagers, and she feels closer to them than anyone else living. So, she runs away from her foster home to the auction where the painting is being sold.

Through a series of unexpected events, Louisa finds herself the new owner of *The One of the Sea*. This begins Louisa's journey to discover who the teenagers in the

painting were and who they have become, in which she discovers the three teenagers were C. Jat's three best friends who forged their own family amidst the violence and uncertainty they grew up in.

Louisa learns about the origin of C. Jat, who was once a young artist like her, and how "the world is full of miracles, but none greater than how far a young person can be carried by someone else's belief in them."

In *My Friends*, Backman continues writing about the themes of love, grief, and family that he has explored in his previous novels, but still manages to create a new and wholly unique story. *My Friends* is an ode to young artists who are unsure of themselves and courageous teenagers who refuse to give up on their friends.

*The Beartown* trilogy revealed Backman's remarkable gift for depicting deep childhood friendships, and in *My Friends* Backman hones in on this strength. Backman has a true understanding of the unparalleled love between young people who

find in each other the friendship and safety that they have not found in their own homes. C. Jat's friends (indomitable Joar, enthusiastic Ali, and steadfast Ted) come alive in the pages of *My Friends*. These characters are as endearing and real as readers have come to expect of Backman's work.

After the *Beartown* trilogy, Backman has returned to a lighter tone, but he still does not shy away from writing about suffering. The ending of *My Friends* is the one of the strongest parts of the novel, and shows that Backman will only keep on surprising readers.

Like the rest of Backman's body of work, *My Friends* unflinchingly depicts heartbreak and suffering while ultimately being courageously hopeful and life-affirming. *My Friends* is an essential comfort to any young artist, a reminder that "there are others like you, people who stand in front of white walls and blank paper and only see magical things."

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MOVIE REVIEW

# 'Hoppers': A lighthearted movie with plenty of pep in its step

Daniel Chong brings his signature charm from 'We Bare Bears' to an absurd adventure with relevant themes

★★★★☆  
**Hoppers**  
 Directed by Daniel Chong  
 Screenplay by Jesse Andrews  
 Starring Piper Curda, Bobby Moynihan, and Jon Hamm  
 Rated PG. Now playing in theaters.

By Grace Zhang  
 EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

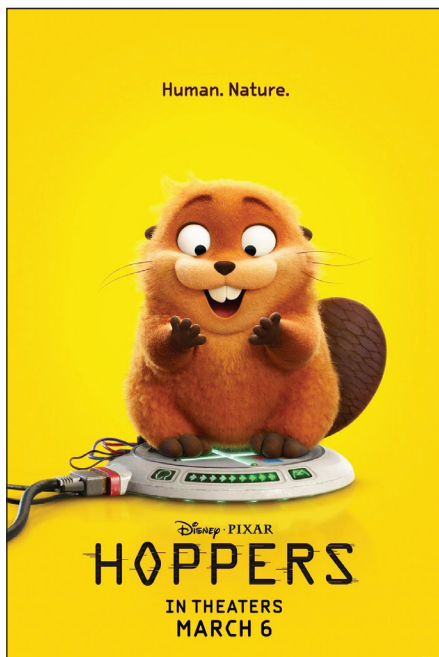


PHOTO COURTESY OF DISNEY/PIXAR  
 Promotional poster for Pixar's animated film 'Hoppers.'

On Thursday, Feb. 26, the MIT Lecture Series Committee (LSC), in collaboration with Disney and Pixar, held an advance screening of Pixar's *Hoppers* in room 26-100. Directed by Daniel Chong, the creator of popular TV series *We Bare Bears*, this movie brings his signature charm to an absurdly wacky adventure with themes that feel especially relevant today.

The movie follows Beaverton University student Mabel Tanaka (Piper Curda) as she embarks on a mission to save her beloved childhood forest glade from destruction at the hands of mayor Jerry Generazzo (Jon Hamm), her archnemesis, who plans to build a massive freeway in its place. During her journey, Mabel stumbles across "Hoppers," the grand (and ethically questionable) research project belonging to her college professor Dr. Samantha "Sam" Fairfax (Kathy Najimi) that utilizes technologically advanced robotic animals that can be consciously inhabited by humans to research the wildlife they mimic. Mabel "hops" into a beaver, finds herself in "the pond" — a refuge for displaced animals led by the beaver King George (Bobby Moynihan) — and inspires the animals to take back the glade and rise up against the humans.

However, things don't quite go Mabel's way. Her bitterness towards Jerry ignites the fury of the other animal royalty — the Council — who, against her wishes, make plans to execute the mayor. What follows is a series of twists and turns that finds Mabel and King George exiled from the pond and forced into an uneasy alliance with Jerry to save not only his life, but also the lives of the people of Beaverton too.

Although I was initially fearful that the 3D animation would be another example of Pixar's infamous "bean mouth" syndrome, I was proved wrong by Mabel's sharp features. The animation's art style also strikes a nice balance between simplicity and detail. I especially enjoyed the adorable animals (can we get Tim the Beaver merch in this style?!) and the vividly colorful landscapes, which helped reinforce Mabel's love of nature. I also appreciated the expressive voice acting from the entire cast, but especially Curda and Hamm. As Mabel, Curda conveyed everything from righteous rage to touching sorrow, the latter of which even brought a few tears to my eyes. Meanwhile, Hamm excelled in his role as Mayor Jerry, fully bringing out the character's smug and pompous nature and elevating his performance with manic energy near the end of the film.

The humor is another highlight. From the very beginning, I was laughing at Mabel's comically persistent rivalry with Jerry as well as her failed campaigning efforts for the glade. The comedy rarely lets up, even as tension continues to build through action-packed chaos and ever-increasing stakes. Just when I thought I knew what was coming, *Hoppers* would throw a curveball and catch me completely off guard, causing me to double over with laughter again — including a very relevant joke about getting a job at the very end of the movie. (Aside: everything was funnier in a unified audience of 400-450 people. Not sure if it would've been the same watching it alone.)

In terms of plot, I spent the first half of the movie enjoying everything with a simple sense of pleasure. Mabel's motive is simple: to save the glade. However, things take a darker turn once she accidentally convinces the Council to execute Jerry, as a violent rage from the other animals becomes vividly palpable. (Seriously, how did they dox the poor guy's car so easily?) About two thirds of the way through, I realized that the simple premise had escalated into a matter of life and death, with all-out war from the animals and threats of world-domination from a certain insane caterpillar. The absurdity of it all briefly left me bewildered, wondering what exactly I was watching. It had been a long time since I'd engaged with material this strange. All I could think about was that this felt like a premise straight from my fourth-grade creative writing summer camp.

Another slight critique I had was the dynamic between Mabel and her late grandmother. Although we initially see how she inspires Mabel's love of nature, the rest of their relationship exists only through Mabel's somewhat rose-tinted memories. I didn't find these wispy recollections particularly moving, to be honest. When Mabel loses the last physical reminder of her grandmother, I felt vaguely sad, but then quickly grew frustrated at her dramatic hesitation in the face of obvious danger. Maybe I'm just getting old and grumpy.

The central theme — finding common ground with unlikely candidates — is quite beat-you-over-the-head obvious. Even

though Jerry is presented as an antagonist, the film foreshadows his eventual cooperation with Mabel: he only constructs the freeway after all the wildlife have left the glade, and he greets her protests with a casual indifference that lacks any real animosity. King George's pond rules further push this idea: "We're all in this together!" Yes. We know. Still, regardless of how heavy-handed it may be, this messaging feels particularly relevant to our divided world today.

While I initially had to take time to process the movie itself, I couldn't deny that the energy of LSC's screening was something special. The room was packed, and even though I didn't come with any friends, I felt truly united with the MIT community during those two hours. As Andy Xu '28 put it, it was "one of the greatest things MIT's done." Audience reactions were overwhelmingly positive, and everyone left the lecture hall chatting about the experience.

LSC members were also thrilled about the event. "It seemed like everyone was really excited to be there, which is a great energy to see from an audience," LSC Lecture Director Kai Beasley '28 said. "Overall, it was really nice to see 26-100 so full for an LSC screening."

Overall, *Hoppers* is a movie everyone can enjoy, regardless of age. Whether you're searching for entertainment, trying to find a little hope in the world, or just looking for a reason to meet up with a friend, it's hard not to leave the theater feeling just a little lighter than when you arrived.



PHOTO PROVIDED BY KAI BEASLEY  
 MIT community members gather in 26-100 for an advance screening of 'Hoppers' hosted by the MIT Lecture Series Committee on Thursday, Feb. 26, 2026.

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CONCERT REVIEW

# A heartwarming night at the Fiddler's House

Itzhak Perlman's vivacious performance shared a resounding message

**Itzhak Perlman's *In the Fiddler's House***

**Vivo Performing Arts**

**Conducted by Hankus Netsky**

**Featuring Itzhak Perlman on violin**

**Boston Symphony Hall**

**Feb. 15, 2026**

By Felice Li

On Feb. 15, Itzhak Perlman performed in the Fiddler's House at Boston Symphony Hall. As one of the best contemporary virtuoso violinists in the world, Perlman has played at impressive venues such as Barack

Obama's inauguration and the State Dinner for Queen Elizabeth II and Prince Philip; he has also played with impressive musicians such as Yo-Yo Ma and Isaac Stern.

Initially, while trudging to the venue through some mildly disgusting snow, I imagined a traditional classical concert — full symphonies, suit and ties, a conductor on a podium. However, I was soon proven wrong. When the Klezmer Conservatory Band opened the concert with the lively “Bukharester Bulgar,” an unmistakable joy and vitality flowed through the hall. The audience started clapping along — a departure from traditional classical concert norms — and the noise seemingly clouded the music.

However, piece after piece, it became very clear that this was not a typical concert. Music Director Hankus Netsky made many light-hearted jokes and allusions to Jewish culture, setting the scene at Shabbat and a Jewish wedding where the “ceremony manager must make the bride cry and then make everyone dance.” Furthermore, at many points of the concert, Netsky encouraged the audience to clap their hands, stomp

their feet, and express the vivacity of the music through their bodies. Any initial hesitation in the audience evaporated, and many joined in on the cheerful celebration.

Witnessing Perlman at work was a privilege, as his technical prowess is unparalleled. The long, winding music never felt stale, despite a general constancy in rhythm. It could have been monotonous or worse, boring, but Perlman and his counterparts kept the music dynamic and engaging. The ensemble — namely Andy Statman on clarinet and mandolin, Frank London on trumpet, and Judy Bressler on vocals — blended seamlessly and created an atmosphere of unmatched jubilation.

The most poignant part of the concert was not the dazzling finale, but rather the “Wedding Medley.” Here, the audience was encouraged to stand up, hold hands, and dance with each other, as one would at an actual wedding. Within five minutes, boundaries shattered and everyone in the concert hall came together. It was a beautiful moment of unity, of connection, of playfulness — qualities that our

world seems to lack right now. Perlman and the Klezmer Conservatory paid stunning homage to their Jewish roots while simultaneously reminding us of the beauty of music, joy as resistance, and triumph in celebration and love.

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CONCERT REVIEW

# Brahms at his loneliest

Herbert Blomstedt guest conducts the BSO with an all-Brahms programme

**Brahms's *Schicksalslied*, Op. 54, *Nänie*, Op. 82, *Symphony No. 4 in E minor*, Op. 98**

**Boston Symphony Orchestra**

**Conducted by Herbert Blomstedt**

**Featuring the Tanglewood Festival Chorus**

**Boston Symphony Hall**

**March 7, 2026**

By Luke Kim  
ARTS STAFF WRITER

Looking across the career of Johannes Brahms, one sees him first firmly and confidently establishing himself as a force to be reckoned with. As the years went by, he grew more meditative and autumnal. The works on this program present Brahms at his most introspective. The music is unmistakably his: a brusque, middle-aged German *bürger*, smelling of cigars and dressed in tweed, walking through the streets of Vienna on a cold, cloudy day. Blomstedt clearly wanted the audience to fully immerse themselves in Brahms's soliloquy. The Boston Symphony Orchestra's (BSO) performance on March 7 was by no means the most precise; however, the emotional delivery of the program ultimately made the evening compelling.

The night opened with *Schicksalslied*. Blomstedt drew out the full potential of the orchestral prelude, with the drums appropriately balanced as if one were gazing toward the great adventures lying ahead. Despite a few muddled entrances, the orchestra soon recovered and adequately portrayed the serene, heavenly breeze described in Hölderlin's poem, playing with tenderness. Then came the storm: a sense of panic, as the fear of being forsaken drove the music forward. Despite Blomstedt's minimal conducting gestures, the orchestra and choir responded with clarity. As the orchestral prelude returned, this time in an even purer C major, the apotheosis felt complete, with Blomstedt almost preaching from the podium. The finesse of the dynamics was on point, with excellent contrast between the first two sections and a discernible difference in calmness between the two orchestral passages.

The lesser-known *Nänie* is more direct in its theme, being an elegy for Brahms's friend Anselm Feuerbach. In the stanza

describing how every beauty must die, the main theme is hauntingly beautiful. (It reminds me of Bach's chorale *Alle Menschen müssen sterben* (BWV 262), which shares the same key.) Blomstedt brought out this theme, especially the high notes, to the fullest. The balance of the chorus was excellent, with the imitative sections performed with well-judged dynamics. The Thetis theme was delivered with passion, achieving a natural sense of storytelling that conveyed the profound sadness Brahms must have felt. The piece ends on the penultimate line, that a lament on the lips of loved ones is glorious, sung with the utmost grace and consolation, moving anyone who listens to it.

Despite somewhat imprecise German diction and issues with the supertitles, the Tanglewood Festival Chorus, prepared by Lisa Wong, performed admirably. Less admirable was the ill-judged clapping that occurred throughout the night. Eventually, Blomstedt had to hush the audience to prevent applause between movements in the second half of the concert.

Brahms's last symphony is uniquely dark among his symphonic output, and it was surprising that Blomstedt began the first movement at a more relaxed tempo than in his recordings. The orchestra was still not at its most precise, with the first violins coming in just a little too early at times, alongside intonation errors in exposed sections from the trumpets. However, Blomstedt's interpretation ultimately redeemed the performance. Starting from such a relaxed tempo, could the tension at the end of the movement still be convincing? Blomstedt's solution was a modest increase in tempo at the climax. The music then sounded like a tragic march toward an unstoppable force of destiny, foreshadowing the terrible fate that awaits.

The second movement gives us a brief, though uneasy, respite from the struggles we have witnessed. Blomstedt chose to emphasize the tension this time, giving particular weight to the minor-key sections. The beautiful second theme was a delight to hear. It reminded me of a hero, wounded but finding solace, slowly regaining strength to continue his adventures: a signal of hope, though not without uncertainty. The orchestra played the triumphant

Blomstedt's interpretation suggested an assertion that the struggle could be won, especially toward the end.

And finally, tragedy fully strikes. The Passacaglia theme in the winds and brass was initially controlled, which made the message even clearer, further accentuated as the variations unfolded. The flute solo and the woodwind and horn melodies that followed were particularly beautiful, with Blomstedt offering us a glimpse of the se-



PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL J. LUTCH AND THE BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA  
**Herbert Blomstedt conducting *Nänie* with the Boston Symphony Orchestra on Saturday, March 7, 2026.**

third movement with vigor and excitement and was noticeably sharper than before. It did not feel like a bacchanal, as many interpret it, given the *giocoso* description Brahms assigned. Rather than a festival,

renewal we had heard in the first half of the night. Perhaps the hero could still prevail and return in glory. Alas, that was not what fate had planned. As the E minor theme returned, the tension built gradually until the timpani roared in, though it remained measured. Blomstedt also chose not to raise the tempo too much. The tragic outburst and the full release of the music's potential comes only when we reach the coda. The hero is lost, vanquished, and in despair. It is remarkable that Blomstedt achieved this music-drama not through overt expression, but through great restraint. One additional comment concerns Blomstedt's use of “traditional” seating, with the violins placed antiphonally. This allowed the counterpoint to emerge more vividly.

After the concert, a sense of uneasiness lingered. One wonders why Blomstedt chose such an unrelentingly tragic program — surely not because he plans to retire (a brief look at his calendar would suggest otherwise). At least to this reviewer, the evening offered a deeper sympathy for Brahms as a person. Beneath the immense craftsmanship and brilliant music lies the true Brahms: an immensely successful yet profoundly lonely man, who stoically concealed his inner struggles and chose to endure them in solitude.



PHOTO COURTESY OF MICHAEL J. LUTCH AND THE BOSTON SYMPHONY ORCHESTRA  
**The Boston Symphony Orchestra and the Tanglewood Festival Chorus play *Nänie* on Saturday, March 7, 2026.**

# Cysteine may be the secret to repairing gut damage

A new MIT study finds that the amino acid initiates the regeneration of the intestinal lining by activating intestinal stem cells

By Chelsy Goodwill  
SCIENCE STAFF WRITER

When we eat anything, from nutritious vegetables to our favorite junk foods, the gastrointestinal (GI) tract is responsible for absorbing nutrients from our diet. Its lesser known function, however, is immunity.

The GI tract is lined with immune and stem cells. Stem cells are unspecialized cells that can develop into indefinitely more cells of the same type, which work together with immune cells to inform nearby cells of intestinal injury and respond by initiating tissue repair. Injury to these tissues is a common side effect of many infectious diseases and cancer treatments, including radiation and chemotherapy. Given the GI tract's dual functions, researchers and doctors alike have previously suspected that diets could be modified to affect intestinal repair, but they didn't quite know how.

New research from MIT's Yilmaz Lab has demonstrated that a single amino acid, cysteine, initiates intestinal repair by inter-

**"The cysteine-rich diet didn't have any effect on those mice, which directly pushed me to think about immune cell contribution," Chi recalled with a smile. "So this link really opened a new door in this project."**

acting with immune and stem cells in the gut.

Cysteine is one of the twenty amino acids — the building blocks of proteins. Amino acids are often classified as micronutrients. As the name suggests, micronutrients are both small in size and required in "micro" amounts for various bodily functions. In contrast, macronutrients (e.g., proteins, carbohydrates, and fats) are needed in large amounts.

In the past, Associate Professor of Biology Ömer H. Yilmaz had focused his research on how different macronutrient-based diets, like keto and low-calorie diets, impact health and disease. The problem was that very little was known about the mechanisms by which micronutrients, like individual amino acids, impact those same biological processes.

Dr. Fangtao Chi, a researcher in the Yilmaz Lab, recognized this knowledge gap and sought to address it during his postdoctoral fellowship: "Fangtao became very interested in moving the lab in a new direction," Yilmaz said.

Chi began by feeding diets rich in each amino acid to mice and noticed that a cysteine-rich diet caused increased levels of HMGCS2, a key protein associated with intestinal stem cells. He knew that this amino acid had to be explored further.

One day, a lab member approached Chi, trying to get rid of a surplus of immune-cell-deficient mice. When he fed those mice a cysteine-rich diet, he was shocked by the result: "The cysteine-rich diet didn't have any effect on those mice, which directly pushed me to think about immune cell contribution," Chi recalled with a smile. "So this link really opened a new door in this project."

In the end, Chi's experiments revealed that immune cells are a major intermediate in the

intestinal stem cell pathway. The study identified a pathway that begins with the conversion of cysteine to coenzyme A (CoA), an essential protein for metabolism. High levels of CoA stimulate the activity of immune cells called CD8+ T cells. These T cells release signaling molecules known as IL-22 cytokines, which tell intestinal stem cells that it's time to get working.

Yilmaz and Chi found an answer to their questions regarding the importance of micronutrients: cysteine repairs gut damage by activating intestinal stem cells.

For Dr. Christopher Duggan, this finding could be invaluable for his patients. As the senior gastroenterologist at Boston Children's Hospital and medical director of the Center for Advanced Intestinal Rehabilitation, Duggan specializes in developing nutrition interventions for children with chronic gastrointestinal diseases. Though this research seems promising for treating such diseases, Chi and Duggan agree that this finding cannot yet be used as justification for recommending cysteine-rich diets to human patients. Instead, Duggan suggested that the next steps would be to test the diet in bioengineered human intestine models (called enteroids) and then eventually in clinical trials.

For Yilmaz, the study answered two main questions from his own postdoctoral fellowship — how stem cells sense their environment and how they adapt to different dietary conditions. While this finding reveals new information about how stem cells react to other biological products, there is still much to be discovered about these cells, which are believed to give rise to both specialized cells and cancer cells. "After 25 years of research, we have a much better understanding of

what makes a stem cell different from a non-stem cell at the molecular level," Yilmaz said. "What we know a lot less about is how stem cells incorporate cues from their microenvironment and from the overall physiology of an organism to regulate tissue homeostasis. Diet is one part of that."

Because of their restorative ability, understanding stem cells opens doors to new ways of healing the body by using its own functions. "[An] area of biological research that's going to be critical is regenerative medicine: our ability to repair damaged organs, engineer tissues, and transplant those engineered tissues back into patients. The building block for that is going to be a comprehensive understanding of stem cells, and how stem cells interact with their environment," Yilmaz said. Now director of the MIT Stem Cell Initiative, Yilmaz leads a group of principal investigators who seek to understand stem cell biology in a variety of different tissues. He hopes that their combined research will enable innovations in treatments from tissue repair to cancer metastasis suppression.

As a health researcher, Chi is skeptical of the diets that influencers tout as "good for you," encouraging people to ask how the diets are beneficial and compared to what benchmarks. It's this mindset that led him to unearth a complex biological pathway that couples coenzyme biosynthesis, immune cell signaling, and intestinal stem cells, all initiated by a single micronutrient — cysteine. There is still much more to discover about micronutrient effects and stem cell function, but Yilmaz and Chi's research has shed a much-needed light on gastrointestinal injury, unlocking the possibility of a clinically simple treatment for a biologically complex problem.

## Major new NIH investment in women's health science arrives at MIT

A new \$3 million-a-year grant from the National Institutes of Health will fund a Technology Development Center for women's health

By Katelyn Howard

*Disclosure: The author conducts undergraduate research associated with Linda Griffith at MIT and has collaborated with Griffith on women's health outreach initiatives. Griffith does not fund the author's research position.*

Women's health diseases are not uncommon. For example, endometriosis — a disease in which tissue similar to the uterine lining forms painful lesions outside of the uterus — affects roughly one in ten women worldwide. Yet, key aspects of how endometriosis and other female-skewed diseases develop and progress remain difficult to study, and research in the area receives comparatively limited funding.

With a new \$3-million-per-year grant from the National Institutes of Health (NIH), Professor Linda Griffith aims to address these challenges through a new Technology Development Center for women's health at MIT.

Using Griffith's work on endometriosis and background in tissue engineering, the Center will develop new experimental platforms, including "organ-on-chip" systems, that could reshape how scientists investigate a wide range of female-skewed diseases.

### A persistent gap in biomedical research

Researchers still lack reliable laboratory models that capture how endometriosis develops in the human body. Without robust knowledge of the molecular mechanisms behind it, however, it is difficult to identify targets for new pharmaceuticals or even explain why the disease begins. As a result, patients often wait years for a diagnosis only to learn that there is still no cure.

Endometrial lesions often cause severe pain, chronic inflammation, and infertility. For many women with endometriosis, treatment is a tangle of side effects from hormonal drugs that may alleviate some of these symptoms, but don't stop the disease. Surgery can be used to remove lesions and rescue fertility, but such procedures cannot address any underlying cause.

And oftentimes, the lesions regrow. In the worst cases, a patient's only option is a hysterectomy to completely remove the uterus.

For Griffith, these challenges reflect a bigger problem in biomedical research: diseases associated with women's reproductive health have historically received less attention and fewer technological resources.

In coverage by the *New York Times*, Griffith described her goal as shifting the conversation about endometriosis "from one of women's pain to one of biomarkers, genetics, and molecular networks."

The new Technology Development Center seeks to accelerate that shift by creating technologies capable of modeling these diseases in unprecedented detail.

### Engineering human biology in the lab

Central to the effort will be microphysiological systems, often called "organs-on-chips." These engineered devices use living human cells arranged in three-dimensional structures to mimic the behavior of real tissues — a technique that could resolve major gaps in current methods.

For instance, traditional mouse models cannot give researchers a full picture of endometriosis because mice do not menstruate, and their immune systems are too different from ours. But by incorporating

microfluidic channels that control the flow of nutrients, drugs, and signaling molecules in these organs-on-chips, these platforms can reproduce aspects of human physiology that experiments with existing animal models cannot.

For diseases like endometriosis in which hormones, immune responses, and inflammatory agents interact dynamically over long periods, such complexity is essential for accurate modeling and investigation. Griffith plans for researchers at the center to continue developing methods similar to these organs-on-chips to study endometrial lesions and other female-skewed diseases in a physiologically relevant environment. This could allow scientists to study disease progression and test new therapies in ways that have previously been considered impossible.

The work builds on decades of advances in tissue engineering, both through Griffith's own work at MIT and in the larger biomedical field. Griffith, a pioneer of engineered organ systems, helped develop some of the earliest organ-on-chip technologies, including liver models designed to improve drug testing.

### A changing landscape for women's health

The new Technology Development Center begins its work during a period of broader uncertainty around federal research funding for many corners of basic and translational research science, as well as ongoing national debates about reproductive health policy.

Against this backdrop, NIH investment in Griffith's research at MIT represents a

significant national interest in building scientific infrastructure for studying women's health. While Griffith and others have been pioneering innovation in this field for decades, initiatives like the Technology Development Center suggest the field may be entering a new period of large-scale visibility and investment.

At MIT, the grant also signals that endometriosis and other female-skewed diseases are emerging as research areas that students here may increasingly have the opportunity to pursue. In this way, the center could shape not only how researchers address questions in women's health, but also who gets to be a part of its next generation.

MIT could become an even stronger hub for engineering-driven, interdisciplinary approaches to female-skewed disease — uniquely positioning the Institute at the crest of a wave toward a future where healthcare reflects far greater prioritization of women.

And while the Center's explicit mission focuses on women's health, Griffith believes its technologies will have much broader applications across chronic inflammatory disease, autoimmune disorders, and metabolic conditions.

By developing new technologies to study complex biological systems, Griffith hopes innovation driven by urgency around women's health can advance biomedical science broadly — and in doing so, demonstrate the importance of devoting resources to women's health research. As she often puts it, "a rising tide lifts all boats."

*Elizabeth LaCroix contributed to fact-checking this article.*

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# Science journalist Matt Kaplan presents historical cases of pushback against scientific breakthroughs, from Galileo to Karikó

Kaplan: "Science is an engine of discovery: it does great things, but it is a clunky engine"

By Vivian Hir  
SENIOR EDITOR

It's easy to assume that when scientists first discovered modern fundamental concepts like DNA and antibiotics, those findings received immediate widespread support. In reality, scientific breakthroughs have been met with significant pushback, even from experts, because they challenged established theories — an example being Charles Darwin's theory of evolution. Although some scientists ultimately received support for their work, others faded into obscurity, never enjoying the credit they deserved for their potentially groundbreaking research.

The *Economist* Science Correspondent Matt Kaplan explores these past and present scientific cases in his book *I Told You So!: Scientists Who Were Ridiculed, Exiled, and Imprisoned for Being Right*. From Galileo Galilei to Katalin Karikó, Kaplan shows how the scientific community can be resistant to new ideas, even when these ideas are supported by facts and evidence. He uses the stories to argue for better collaboration in academia and research to enable faster progress in science.

Although Kaplan has written about science for a number of years, it wasn't until the COVID-19 pandemic that he seriously considered devoting a book to "dysfunction in the scientific community."

In 2020, Kaplan focused on covering the pandemic, asking scientists for their ideas about how to solve the global problem. Many of those who shared their thoughts asked Kaplan not to publish their ideas because they were concerned about being wrong and harming their career and reputation.

These negative responses surprised Kaplan, influencing him to do research on the history of resistance in science and write *I Told You So!*.

"Science is an engine of discovery: it does great things, but it is a clunky engine," Kaplan said. "The more I looked, the more I realized the engine has been in need of a tune up for quite some time, and that tune up is becoming more and more urgent."

## Correct but discredited

On Wednesday, March 11, Kaplan discussed scientific cases from his book at the Broad Institute. The event was part of the Broad Discovery Series, an educational program open to the public. He also gave a book talk at MIT on March 10 and at Harvard on March 12.

Throughout the talk, Kaplan discussed historical cases of scientists who made important discoveries but received little support from other scientists in their field, as they lacked significant connections or had ideas that did not conform to established scientific theories at that time.

After opening with the story of Galileo being punished for defending heliocentrism, Kaplan presented the faces of two unfamiliar scientists on the screen: Henri Toussaint and Pierre Gatlier. Toussaint

created the anthrax vaccine and Gatlier developed the rabies vaccine. However, Louis Pasteur took credit for both of their works. The irony was that Pasteur initially discredited their work and did not believe their methods worked until he performed the experiments on animals and humans.

"I don't like to think [that] the biographers of Louis Pasteur, who ultimately found his notebooks in the early 2000s, say, 'You have to appreciate the high pressure environment of French academic life in the late 1800s to understand how he operated,'" Kaplan said.

Although the story of Pasteur happened more than a hundred years ago, Kaplan connected this example to a modern case of scientific misconduct: the alarm-

While we would like to think that the treatment Semmelweis received is a thing of the past, Kaplan argued otherwise, using Nobel laureate Katalin Karikó as a recent example. Karikó received the Nobel Prize in Medicine in 2023 for her contributions to mRNA technology, which were pivotal for developing the mRNA vaccine against COVID-19. Before this recognition, however, her research was dismissed by most of her colleagues.

In the 1990s, Karikó struggled to make progress on her mRNA research project, and she failed to get funding for her research due to lack of results. Other researchers at the University of Pennsylvania were skeptical about the potential of mRNA research, and she got demoted

funding process by using a lottery system for top grants like the Austrian Science Fund, since he believes that human bias is a contributing factor in grant selection. He cited studies that found that grants were more likely to be awarded to native English speakers or researchers from prestigious universities.

Besides implementing a partially randomized procedure for selecting grants, Kaplan believes that the current research environment should be more accepting of research that may fail. He compared the National Science Foundation (NSF) and National Institutes of Health (NIH) to the Howard Hughes Medical Institute (HHMI) and Arc Institute, stating that the NSF and NIH tend to fund research that is "incremental success" and "validation of something else." On the other hand, HHMI and Arc support long-term and high-risk projects that, in his opinion, can result in a "giant leap forward."

Kaplan then called for providing scientists with job protection, allowing them to challenge established ideas and not face repercussions in their career. Kaplan criticized the current hierarchy and power dynamics in academia, stating that PhD students are not necessarily safe if they disagree with their professor's research methods or point out suspected fraud.

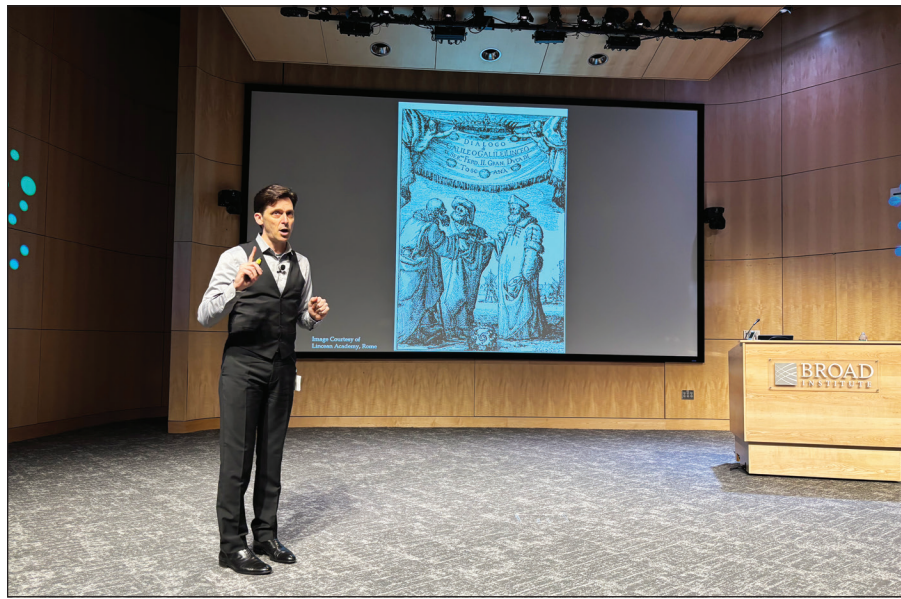
"The university has sided with the researcher bringing in hundreds of thousands of dollars a year, and not the PhD student who brings in very little," Kaplan asserted. In addition to community efforts to promote inclusivity in academia, some universities are also addressing the harms caused by power dynamics.

Kaplan also argued for protecting scientists who are considered outsiders in a field. As a paleontologist by training, Kaplan recalled chemists involved in geology research who questioned the geologists' methods, ultimately causing the chemists to leave because of the geologists' disrespect. While they were not experts in the field, the chemists from Kaplan's personal experience underscored the importance of outsiders for offering different perspectives in science.

In addition, Kaplan recommended that the government should establish laws for "robust punishment" of academic fraud and dishonesty. Although Kaplan believes that creating incentives to award ethical behavior is better than creating punishment, he thinks that the finances to fund incentives would be expensive and impractical.

Kaplan concluded the talk by calling for greater discussion about the scientific method in science journalism. One critique Kaplan had about science articles in newspapers is that they tend to focus on the successes and results, leading to "simple narratives" that do not go into detail about the experiments and methods that often fail initially.

"We need to be writing about how science actually works much more often, so that the public understands," Kaplan said.



VIVIAN HIR—THE TECH

Science journalist Matt Kaplan talks about his new book, *I Told You So!*, at the Broad Institute on Wednesday, March 11, 2026.

ing increase in the number of retractions in the biomedical field. According to a 2024 study, the retraction rate for European biomedical science papers quadrupled between 2000 and 2001. "We are pushing the envelope," Kaplan said. "Most of these [retractions] are because of suspected fraud, because of outright fraud, error in contamination."

Kaplan then presented the story of Ignaz Semmelweis, a Hungarian physician who identified the cause of childbed fever and advocated for hand washing as an antiseptic practice in the hospital. Although Semmelweis was correct, other physicians were doubtful of his recommendations, and he ultimately died alone in an insane asylum at age 47.

Despite the strong evidence, the reason that physicians did not believe in his findings was that Semmelweis was a "quintessential non-politician" who was not tactful and "said all the wrong things," Kaplan explained. As a result, Semmelweis was fired and exiled. "It was a sad end, and his work never picked up anywhere else because of all these political faux pas," he said.

four times. Despite the setbacks, Karikó persisted and was given the opportunity to collaborate with immunologist Drew Weissman on the project, where they ultimately succeeded in mRNA technology before it was picked up by biotechnology company BioNTech. In 2020, BioNTech partnered with Pfizer to make an mRNA vaccine for COVID-19.

Kaplan commended Karikó's persistence in spite of the discouragement, stating that her work helped end the pandemic. However, Kaplan raised an important question: "Did she really have to go through 25 years of horrid pain to be able to get where she did? We're really lucky she stuck with it, because I hate to think where it would be if she had been eventually thrown out."

## Calling for change

After presenting historical cases from his book, Kaplan proposed structural and cultural changes in the scientific community that would lead to greater acceptance of novel and risky ideas, rather than letting established ideas and fixed mindsets dominate the conversation. First, Kaplan suggested "democratizing" the grant

## What's in a number?

A quick look at the math behind the number 2026

By Neha Sane

2026 is not just a year; it's a highly fascinating number! Here are some mathematical features that are interesting about the number 2026.

The first is that it's **composite**. A composite number is a positive integer greater than 1 that is divisible by more than two numbers. 2026 in particular is divisible by 1, 2, 1013, and 2026. Composite numbers are especially important in encryption: to create encrypted systems, two prime numbers are multiplied together to create a composite number. Multiplying numbers is an easy process, but finding the factors of a number — especially

large ones — is a much more difficult task. Modern encryption systems take advantage of this fact by using 2048-bit numbers to create an encryption key. Because breaking the encryption would require factoring the encryption key — a process that would take modern computers nearly 2,700 years to complete — this system can securely protect sensitive information such as online banking and private messages.

2026 is also **evil**. A number is considered "evil" if it has an even number of 1s in its binary expansion. The term comes from a playful naming convention in mathematics: numbers with an even number of 1s are called "evil," while those with an odd number of 1s are called "odious." The binary

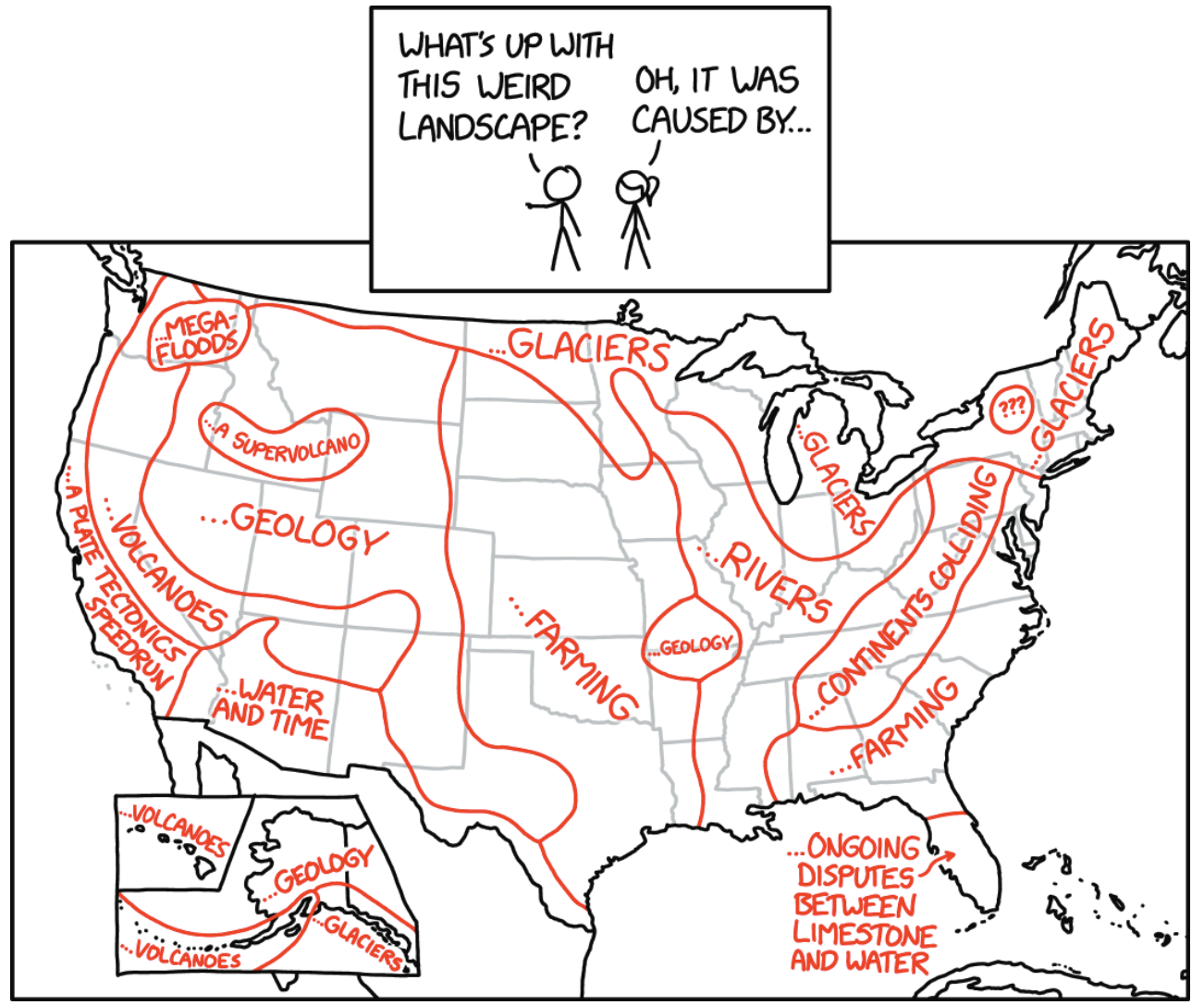
expansion of 2026 is 1111101010, which has eight 1s. This fact is used in detecting errors in transmission of data. Sometimes, during the transmission of data, due to electrical noise, bits of information flip from 0 to 1, or vice versa. For example, the number 10110 could turn into 11110. To detect whether information has been modified or not, an extra bit called a parity bit is added to the end. The parity bit is 1 if the number of 1s in the number is odd, and 0 otherwise. For example, the number 10110 would be sent as 101101, since there are three 1s in the number. When the data is received, the system checks the number of 1s again. If the parity does not match the expected value, the system knows the data was likely corrupted

and can request that it be resent. Of course, this method is not foolproof; for example, if two bits were flipped, the parity would remain the same and the error wouldn't be detected. Nonetheless, this method is still a simple and efficient first step for detecting transmission errors.

The number 2026 reveals interesting numerical properties that are used in modern encryption systems and to detect errors in data transmission. Together, these examples demonstrate that numbers are more than symbols or a figure in the corner of our screens; they play a critical role in the technology and systems we rely on daily.

This article was inspired by Dr. Tanya Khovanova and her website, *Number Gossip*.

### [3221] Landscape Features

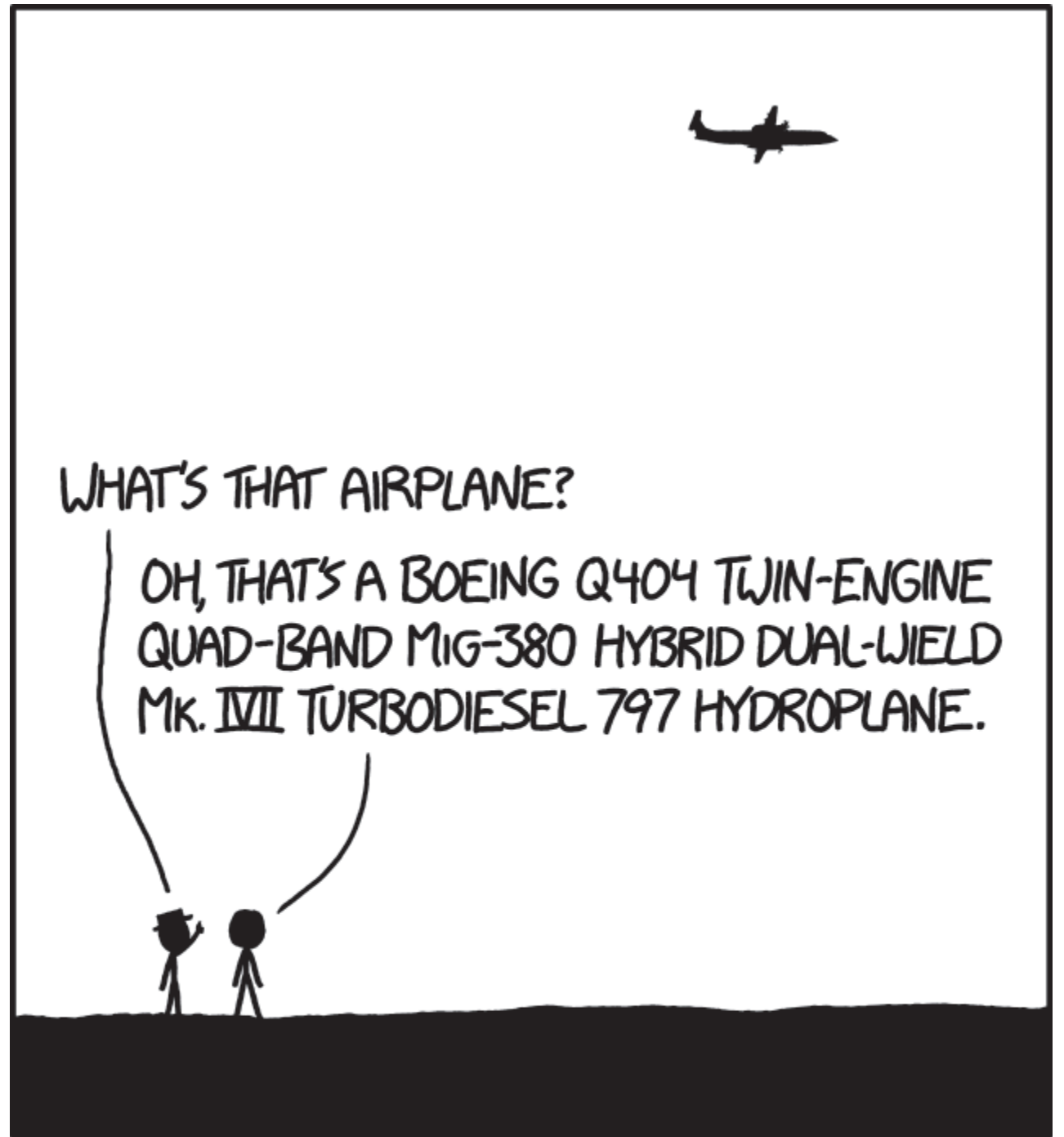


'Well, there's speculation that it's due to a mantle hotspot.' -a geologist who's trying to cover up the fact that they didn't hear your question

### [1669] Planespotting



by Randall Munroe



I'VE ALWAYS ASSUMED I'M ONE OF THOSE PEOPLE WHO KNOWS A LOT ABOUT PLANES, BUT I'VE NEVER ACTUALLY CHECKED.

No, a hydroplane doesn't land on water—that's an aquaplane. A hydroplane is a plane that gets electric power from an onboard water reservoir with a tiny dam and turbines.

# Fighting for fellows: MIT works because we do, too

*MIT grads have made it clear — we want equal protections for equal work*

**Nadia Zaragoza**

I started graduate school in the Department of Materials Science and Engineering, excited about my funding security with a Graduate Research Fellowship Program (GRFP) with the National Science Foundation (NSF). In my lab, I've been working on a project making mucus-inspired polymer hydrogels, hoping to apply them to studies for the vaginal microbiome. I've continued this project over my entire MIT career, even after my three years of NSF funding ended. It's hard to tell what I do just from my appointment letters — I've since been funded by the MIT Energy Initiative, the Tata Center, seed funds, the Center for Advancing Sustainable and Distributed Fertilizer Production (CASFER), along with a whole hodgepodge of grant and funding sources — but my day-to-day work has never changed. Throughout my time at MIT, I've always attended group meetings, mentored undergraduates, performed laboratory work, written papers, written grant proposals, done journal reviews, and attended conferences — things that almost every graduate student does at MIT, regardless of funding source.

When graduate workers held an election to form a union at MIT, we petitioned the National Labor Relations Board (NLRB) to include fellows in the bargaining unit, or the set of workers represented by our union. However, they ultimately denied this, siding with MIT and claiming that fellows "don't perform work in exchange for compensation." But the NSF GRFP explicitly states that NSF is not my employer. Every day I perform the work described previously, generating publications and intellectual property under the ownership of MIT and my principal investigator (PI), in exchange for a stipend that pays my rent, utilities, food, and livelihood. A stipend that is set by MIT, specifically by my department. How is it that I don't perform work in exchange for compensation from MIT, and therefore don't have access to the same rights and benefits as all other employees?

When we ratified our first contract in 2023, we were still waiting for the decision from the NLRB, but we ratified the terms with the understanding that MIT would extend the same economic benefits to fellows. This includes things like the dental subsidy and the T-Pass (note to NSF fellows: yes,

you too are eligible for the dental subsidy!). It was clear that MIT was using the classic union-busting tactic: divide and conquer. By creating a two-tier system, they want to convince fellows that they are better off without a union.

We've seen over the past few years that MIT has not held to this promise. In fact, fellows are left much more vulnerable to being underpaid, being denied benefits, and being denied access to fundamental rights and protections. We first saw this when MIT made a sweeping change, department by department, to reclassify as many teaching assistants (TAs) as possible to "teaching fellows." If your department has a teaching requirement to graduate, your teaching work is now considered "academic" and you're put on a teaching fellowship while completing that requirement. Despite the fact that you're doing the exact same work as a TA, you are denied the hard-won rights and protections in the contract for TAs, including workload and appointment clarity, classroom tools and resources, and the doctoral TA stipend (which is \$100 more per month than the doctoral RA stipend). If you are overworked or denied materials needed to perform your teaching fellow duties, you cannot file a grievance through our union's grievance procedure to hold MIT accountable.

After this change, we saw one of the first examples of MIT cutting back on economic benefits: in the Math department, fellows are now paid over \$100 less than their RA/TA counterparts per month for the exact same work. If you're a research fellow doing the same work as an RA or a teaching fellow doing the same work as a TA, you receive less compensation with no explanation.

We also saw that MIT has removed bonuses for fellows in several departments, including Biological Engineering and Chemical Engineering. These bonuses previously rewarded fellows thousands of dollars per year as an incentive for bringing in additional grant money to MIT, but were removed without student input or advanced notice. If fellows were protected by a union contract, MIT would not be able to unilaterally remove benefits without our say — they would have to negotiate with workers and honor the economic benefits that were agreed upon in the union contract.

MIT has found other ways to undermine our contract — when administering the T-

Pass subsidy, if you go to the Atlas center in-person but are on fellowship, you are suddenly only eligible for the 50% subsidy, not the 70% subsidy as stipulated in the contract. Because you are a fellow, you are unable to file a grievance to get the full subsidy (or file a grievance about anything else for that matter), preventing you from successfully grieving and enforcing our contract article, as we did previously when MIT tried penny-pinching on the T-pass subsidy.

MIT's messaging has reinforced the idea that fellows don't do work and don't receive benefits, as per the OGE fellowships newsletter: "Extra financial support can also free up your time! Unlike research and teaching assistantships, fellowships have no work requirement." The MIT administration even said in guidance on vacation and leave that "if you are fully supported on fellowship awards, you do not receive vacation days," leaving fellows vulnerable to abuse by their PIs, who can deny them vacation and punish them for taking vacation with no options for recourse.

Beyond the penny-pinching and corner-cutting on economic benefits, the lack of noneconomic benefits has had real consequences for graduate worker fellows. Fellows are denied access to Weingarten rights, meaning they are not allowed to have a union steward advise them during disciplinary meetings. Fellows can be disciplined or fired by their PIs at will — they don't have the option to file a grievance under our unjust discipline and discharge article. Meanwhile, our union has been able to use the grievance procedure to win RA/TA workers their jobs back, including international workers who've been threatened with losing their job along with their visa status. Furthermore, fellows experiencing harassment and discrimination face a roadblock in the IDHR process: IDHR often denies them formal investigations, even in cases of clear discrimination or sexual harassment on the job, and fellows do not have the option to grieve the outcome of their IDHR case. In short, without the protections of a union contract, any promise that MIT makes to fellows is just words, with no way to actually guarantee that they will follow through.

Some may think that including fellows in the bargaining unit is radical, but it is actually the industry standard. United Auto Workers (UAW) 4811, the grad union that

represents student researchers at all the University of California (UC) schools, includes fellows in their recognition article, and recently won a settlement to clarify the inclusion of workers on internal fellowships who perform work during their lab rotations in their first year. UC fellows now have access to the same rights, benefits, and protections as other employees. This is also the standard at many other United Electrical, Radio and Machine Workers of America (UE) local unions which represent grad workers: Dartmouth University (UE 261), Johns Hopkins University (UE 197), and New Mexico State University (UE 1598) all have Teaching and Research Fellows included in their bargaining unit. Stanford University (UE 1043) and University of Chicago (UE 1103) also include Teaching Fellows in their bargaining unit. Most recently, Graduate Employees Together - University of Pennsylvania (GETUP-UAW), which represents graduate workers at University of Pennsylvania, just secured a tentative agreement that includes research and teaching fellows. Why is it acceptable that I could access contract rights and benefits as an NSF Fellow at Dartmouth, but not at MIT? This two-tier system implemented by MIT is simply a strategy to divide graduate workers who do the same work into arbitrary categories.

We've seen, from the almost 2000 responses across the board on our bargaining survey, that grad workers are done with this two-tier system. We want fellows included in the bargaining unit! We've collected dozens of testimonials from fellows expressing that they do the same work as RAs and TAs, and therefore should be covered by our union contract.

With our second contract bargaining coming up fast, MIT has the opportunity to make this right. They can agree to grant fellows the same compensation and protections given to every other grad worker. Everyone deserves the same rights, regardless of their funding source. If you are on fellowship, sign the petition for fellows inclusion and become a union member today!

*Nadia Zaragoza (they/them) is a 5th year graduate worker in the Department of Materials Science and Engineering. They have been an organizer with the MIT Graduate Student Union UE 256 for four years and is currently the Vice President of Membership.*

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# Social psychologist Haidt speaks at Compton

Haidt: “Things divide us and make it very, very hard for us to ever have common facts”

By Vivian Hir, Rebecca Showalter Enamorado, Neha Sane

On March 4, social psychologist Jonathan Haidt delivered “Life After Babel: Democracy and Human Development in the Fractured, Lonely World that Technology Gave Us,” a talk about the negative effects of social media and smartphones on teenagers, cognitive abilities, and democracy at the 2026 Karl Taylor Compton Lecture. The event, which was organized by the MIT Institute Events Office and held in room 10-250, received over 400 attendees. President Sally Kornbluth introduced Haidt and held a Q&A discussion with him after the talk.

Haidt is a professor at New York University’s (NYU) Stern School of Business, and a researcher on moral psychology. Before NYU, he taught psychology at the University of Virginia for 16 years. He is the author of several bestselling books, including *The Anxious Generation* and *The Coddling of the American Mind*.

Haidt believes that the “best metaphor” to describe the issue at hand is the biblical story of the Tower of Babel, which inspired the title of the talk. In the story, the descendants of Noah wanted to build a tower that reached the heavens. However, God viewed the tower as an act of hubris and punished the humans by confounding their languages so they wouldn’t understand one another.

Haidt regards this story as a metaphor for the devastating effects of digital technology on society. “It was supposed to connect us, but instead it is broken,” he said. “Things divide us and make it very, very hard for us to ever have common facts.”

## The detrimental effects of social media on Gen Z

Haidt outlined the “great re-wiring” of childhood in two parts: a play-based childhood that gradually declined from 1980 to 2010, followed by a phone-based childhood that started around 2010 to 2015. He called 2012 the “turning-point year” because of the iPhone’s rising popularity and Facebook’s acquisition of Instagram. Unlike earlier phones, smartphones had a lot more capabilities besides calling and texting, which led to people becoming “fodder for the attention economy.”

Because of the introduction of smartphones, Haidt considers childhood nowadays to be “very solitary,” stating that girls spend time on social media, whereas boys play video games. Using data from the National College Health Assessment, he presented a graph that showed a significant rise in mental health diagnoses among teenagers and young adults

during the 2010s, especially for anxiety and depression. In the same period, statistics from the CDC showed a drastic increase in youth self-harm cases that required emergency room visits.

Furthermore, Haidt pointed out that the U-shaped curve for happiness has started to disappear for people in their late teens and 20s, meaning that young people have been reporting greater unhappiness on average. “You used to be happier than the middle-aged people, and in the span of five or ten years, that’s gone to be even or below,” he said.

Although critics have argued that the data does not provide evidence for causation, Haidt maintained that there is substantial evidence for a direct link between social media and worsened mental health. In his research, Haidt came across many studies that support his claim, including an internal study from Meta that found that users who did not use Facebook for a week felt less depressed and anxious.

Haidt then discussed the negative effects of social media on attention, which has hurt education outcomes. “If you imagine humanity with 10 to 50% of its attentional ability sucked out of it, there’s not much left,” he said.

Haidt also cited articles that found declines in test scores since the early 2010s — not only in the U.S., but also around the world. While COVID contributed to loss in learning, recent test scores have not shown a post-COVID recovery. “Nobody commented about the fact that the downturn didn’t start in 2021 — it started in 2012,” Haidt pointed out.

Haidt stated that the downward trend in test scores in Gen Z comes from their inability to concentrate, which comes from social media usage and other digital distractions. He criticized the idea of introducing computers and iPads for learning at school because of these devices’ many distractions, calling it the “most costly mistake” in education. He also lamented the decline in reading comprehension, stating that teenagers and adults nowadays cannot focus when reading.

In addition to a decrease in test scores and attention spans, Haidt discussed the negative effects on Gen Z’s communication and interpersonal skills. Compared to older generations, many Gen Z respondents reported lower agreement with statements such as “I persevere until a task is done” or “I make plans and follow through,” which has reduced young people’s ability to focus, to be patient and develop in-person relationship skills.

Haidt also pointed to a rise in Gen Z of what he called “spiritual degra-

ation.” Ever since the invention of social media, teenagers are much more likely to say their lives feel meaningless and useless. “If all you’re doing is consuming content, if all you’re doing is watching short videos and liking people’s posts, you’re not adding any value to anyone,” he said.

## Social media and democratic decline

After defending these claims, Haidt transitioned into the second part of his talk, in which he argued that the rise of social media has contributed to a decline in the quality of democracy in the U.S. and the world. He began by pointing out that James Madison’s greatest fear for American democracy — factions becoming “more disposed to vex and oppress each other than to co-operate for their common good” — has become the reality of American politics.

Haidt believes that the introduction of the like button and the retweet function in 2009 gave Twitter (now X) an enhanced virality that fostered a culture of intense public shaming, arguing that it created a poisonous environment for the democratic conversation and brought upon a disaster for the left which contributed to the growing support for Donald Trump in the years preceding the 2016 election.

Haidt asserted that social media platforms have enabled people to take “words out of context [and] put them on social media” to damage a person’s reputation. As a result, this has led many people to feel like they need to “walk on eggshells,” especially for faculty in large institutions who fear retaliation from their students.

He compared people’s ability to criticize others freely on social media to giving everyone a license to shoot. “How would people carry on with research? How would you disagree with someone?” Haidt asked. He said that this ultimately reduces the quality of democracy since social media encourages polarization, discourages open debate, and makes discussions and democratic discourse more hostile.

Furthermore, these platforms encourage outrage and conflict. According to Haidt, the far right often targets moderate conservatives while the far left targets moderate liberals, pushing both sides to extremes. More broadly, social media has promoted mistrust and misinformation, contributing to events such as the 2021 U.S. Capitol Attack.

Haidt then presented data that showed that the number and quality of democracies has fallen since 1990, arguing that this metric relates to how social media exacerbates Madison’s nightmare and enables authoritarian governments.

To explain why he believes social media has led to this effect, Haidt



PHOTO COURTESY OF JAKE BELCHER

2026 MIT Compton Lecture speaker Jonathan Haidt gives a talk in 10-250 on Wednesday, March 4, 2026.

discussed the history of U.S. democracy, quoting Alexis de Tocqueville’s *Democracy in America*. In the book, Tocqueville wrote that the greatest advantage of democracy in the U.S. is the ability of democratic citizens to associate. The ability to associate refers to the ability to come together, compromise, and create solutions for the greater good. Haidt argued that social media has degraded this ability to associate by moving the democratic conversation to X, where quantity pushes out quality, convenience pushes out depth, and extremes are amplified.

Haidt ended the second part on democracy with a note on AI. He began with a quote from Frederick Douglass’s description of Sophia Auld, his enslaver. Of her Douglass said, “Alas! This kind heart had but a short time to remain such. The fatal poison of irresponsible power was already in her hands, and gradually commenced its infernal work... Thus is slavery the enemy of both the slave and the slaveholder.”

This “fatal poison of irresponsible power” is what Haidt believes will infect humanity with unrestrained power over AI and without any consequences for what you do to and with AI. He argued that it is already happening with the appearance of AI sex companions and AI-generated child pornography.

## A call for action to limit social media usage

Despite his pessimistic outlook on social media and technology on society, Haidt went on to offer solutions to these problems. “I suggest that we start seeing social technology as being much more like the Frankenstein monster, something created out of bizarre science,” he said.

Haidt recommended adopting four norms: no social media, no smartphones before high school, no social media until age 16, and independent free play. He highlighted

recent actions people have taken to reduce social media and screen time for teenagers, such as mothers who have banned phones in schools and countries like Australia banning social media for children under age 16.

Although Haidt believes that most of Gen Z has suffered childhood damage that may be irreversible, he asserted that there’s still hope: “If you change your habits, if you regain your attention, you’re going to get good results.” Drawing from his experience at NYU, he said that students who reduced or removed social media from their phones often found significant improvements in their lives: they were able to focus for longer periods of time, regain several hours of time a day, and feel less overwhelmed.

Haidt believes that a world where social technology is no longer wreaking havoc would be a world where social networks require authentication and possess reputational consequences to prevent the harm that comes from the mask of anonymity.

Additionally, Haidt believes that four requirements must be met before social tech stands the chance of better serving the U.S. and the world. First, tech creators must view social tech with either ambivalence or negativity. Second, tech companies must not be allowed to interfere with children and childhood development; age thresholds must be required and stringently enforced. Third, tech companies and developers must hire and work with psychologists and sociologists who can predict and prevent the harm technologies may cause society. Finally, social tech companies must be liable for the damage and loss of life they have caused. Only then will a positive impact from social technology be possible.

“So if you can change the discourse around this, change the way you’re thinking about it, stop the speeding train going over a cliff, then there really is hope,” Haidt concluded.



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# MIT admits 644 Regular Action for Class of 2030

1,299 total offers out of 28,349 applicants yielded an acceptance rate of 4.6%

By Grace Zhang  
EDITOR-IN-CHIEF

On Saturday, March 14, at 1:59 p.m., MIT released Regular Action decisions for the Class of 2030. 644 applicants were accepted this round — taking both Early and Regular Action into account, the Institute offered admission to 1,299 out of 28,349

applicants. This yielded a highly competitive acceptance rate of 4.6%, a slight increase from 4.5% from the Class of 2029’s admissions cycle. The Admissions Office did not release waitlist data.

According to a blog post by Director of Communications & Special Projects for Admissions Chris Peterson SM ’13, the admitted students

come from 58 countries and all 50 states.

“Though their interests and aptitudes range widely — epidemiology and embroidery, tennis and taxidermy, birding and ballet — they are united by a shared standard of rigorous academics, high character, and a strong match with MIT’s mission to use science, technology, and other

areas of scholarship to work wisely, creatively, and effectively for the betterment of humankind,” Peterson wrote.

In a statement to *The Tech*, Dean of Admissions and Student Financial Services Stu Schmill ’86 wrote, “We had a typically outstanding group of applicants to read through, and the decisions were as difficult as ever.

The newly admitted students are exceptional as students and as people and community members.”

Sophia Chen, a recent admit from New York, cried into her brother’s arms when she found out she got in.

“Afterward, I felt really relieved since now I know I’ll spend my undergrad at an institution I will love,” she said.