

Dear Students:

I am writing to you about an important matter—protecting our Celebrated traditions while taking full responsibility for our actions. As members of the MIT community, we must be committed to both. Events over the last year and trends over the last few years have raised legitimate concerns, and it has become clear that we need to reaffirm core principles and sharpen our commitment to our obligations.

In this letter, I want to address two areas of concern. The first is hacking and the second is integrity. Hacking is the design and execution of harmless pranks, tricks, explorations, and creative inventions that demonstrate ingenuity and cleverness. Hacking is an MIT tradition that has figured in the presentation of MIT to the outside world and within our community, it has been an opportunity for friendly competition and community building.

Historically, hacks have been creatively and thoughtfully executed without injury, destruction of property, or public notoriety for the hackers or MIT. The true hacking tradition embraces a "code" that requires hackers to identify themselves and to leave instructions explaining what was done and how restoration can be completed. True hackers quickly identify themselves when they encounter the police, and they do not confront or evade the police. Hackers do not create public hazards. Ultimately, individuals are responsible for their actions and any intentional or unintentional consequences.

If this is our history, you might be asking: what is new and why I am concerned now? There are three shifts that I will highlight. First, this letter is prompted by numerous events over the past couple years that have revealed a need to re-emphasize safety, responsibility, and integrity. The incidents that give us pause come with a concerning frequency. Hackers or want-to-be-hackers have suffered serious injury and narrowly escaped much worse in recent years. Other incidents have put students (and MIT) in awkward positions in relation to law enforcement agencies or brought notoriety to the Institute. This is unacceptable.

Second, times have changed. Let me give a few examples. Parents have complained about the tradition of "showering," which has been viewed as harmless in the past but now looks like a form of hazing, which is against the law in Massachusetts. Post 9/11, new security and safety regulations and standards assign new responsibilities to the institute for access to certain locations on campus and how particular materials and equipment are secured. We cannot deny the fact that what was tolerated in the past, and may even have been celebrated, is now viewed differently. We have little control over these shifts. Dangerous or illegal behavior labeled as hacks is a risk for us all and threatens our ability to be as open as we have been in the past. As part of a larger community, we must respect laws and expectations and we must exercise

self-discipline in order to protect the freedom and openness we cherish.

In response to these challenges, I have two requests. First, we have to re-embrace the true hacking tradition. In our community, we must hold ourselves to it. Those who violate the tradition, by endangering themselves or others, by breaking the law or other departures from the "hacking code of conduct" cannot seek protection from responsibility, and they will be held accountable for their actions. We will soon add to the student handbook language that frames student responsibility in this area. This language has been developed over the last several months with input from students, faculty, and administration. The survival of a great MIT tradition depends on the willingness of the members of the community to protect it. I am asking your individual and group support and cooperation.

The second matter I want to address is integrity. There are two worrying trends. First, the faculty has growing concerns about academic dishonesty—plagiarism, inadequate documentation, etc. Second, despite efforts over the last three years to remind students that downloading copyrighted material violates MIT policy and is illegal, this activity persists. MIT and offending individuals have been under growing legal pressure. While new technologies enable new behaviors, the development of new ways to gather music or videos does not change the standard embodied in the law or our obligations. Integrity and respect for laws are fundamental elements to our credibility. I appreciate that this is new territory. I hope that you will seek advice and assistance rather than ignore the law.

I ask you to consider seriously our traditions and our responsibilities. Hacks that violate traditions make us appear thoughtless and reckless. Behavior that suggests we do not apply the standard of integrity to new technologies undermines our credibility. I hope you will appreciate that an erosion of confidence in MIT's self-discipline undermines our ability to serve the world.

While our disciplinary system can and will hold students accountable, our pride and discipline are a far more reliable means to preserve and advance our community. I ask for your cooperation and support in celebrating and protecting our traditions, taking responsibility, and upholding integrity. I welcome suggestions for how we can make the response to these challenges a community project with students taking a leadership role. Doing that will model the leadership we all want our students to claim and will be the source of great pride.

Phillip L. Clay
Chancellor