

Demands Section 4: Advance Funding Equity at MIT

Demand 4A - Guarantee 12-month funding for all PhD programs offered at MIT

Demand 4B - Establish non-competitive internal dissertation completion fellowships

Demand 4C - Guarantee a minimum annual cost-of-living adjustment for all graduate stipends

Why change is needed

Unique among research universities, MIT's founding more than 150 years ago emphasized equitable education for practical application. This fundamental commitment is captured in its motto: *Mens et Manus*, Mind and Hand. As the [MIT Admissions FAQ webpage](#) states, "This motto reflects the educational ideals of MIT's founders who were promoting, above all, education for practical application." But MIT's current funding policies undercut its founding aims.

At this time of MIT's founding, Harvard and other Boston schools limited admission to male elites, recruiting from expensive preparatory schools and requiring erudite qualifications for entry (Harvard, for example, required Latin and Greek fluency). MIT broke this mold with the implementation of a "polytechnic" curriculum and with its recruitment of promising working-class students, women, and international students. In 1871, [Ellen Swallow Richards](#) was the first woman admitted to MIT; she would graduate in 1873 and become its first female instructor that same year. Harvard did not begin to admit women into its graduate education school until 1920, a trend in gender discrimination that was followed by most other peer schools. In the 1910s, MIT President Richard Maclaurin began his tenure with MIT's historic move to Cambridge and a trailblazing commitment to the accessibility of education. For example, Maclaurin brought an influx of [international students](#) to the Institute in an effort to "build a better understanding between countries." Since MIT's establishment, *Mens et Manus*, Mind and Hand, in theory reflects MIT's commitment to attract all students with extraordinary talents and to counteract inequities that would prevent students' thriving at MIT.

We discuss the failure of applying these aspirations in the case of URM graduate students in section 1 of our demands, but we focus here on how MIT's unequal funding structures also undercut those commitments. In practice today, structural disparities in MIT's funded degree programs—particularly partial appointments and unfunded years of degree—pose serious barriers to ensuring all graduate programs meet these goals. It is no surprise, then, that while MIT lauds its early support for [Ellen S. Richards](#), it rarely mentions that it refused to pay her for her work as a pathbreaking instructor.

We build and maintain a community and culture that celebrates and values diverse backgrounds, identities, and perspectives. – Office of the Vice Chancellor, [Mission & Values](#)

Throughout many MIT value and mission statements—on admissions pages, faculty letters, Office of the Vice Chancellor (OVC) materials—the Institute proclaims its commitment to not just bringing in and supporting all of its students, but to diversifying its student body. And many

of us have seen, in our time at MIT, successive DEI projects focused on recruiting underrepresented students to MIT. But *far* fewer projects have focused on, or even considered, retention and support for those students. It's hardly surprising, then, that since the 2010 [“Report for the Initiative for Faculty Race and Diversity”](#) and the 2015 Black Graduate Student Association (BGSA) [“Recommendations for Addressing Racial Bias at MIT,”](#) MIT has failed to improve retention of underrepresented students and faculty. Although MIT was founded with the promise to remove barriers to education and foster a supportive, inclusive environment for research, the principles of this 150-year-old mission are conspicuously missing from the MIT we experience in 2020. Any successful effort for a diverse and accessible education therefore *must* include equitable funding to ensure all students thrive at MIT after being recruited to the Institute.

We support the teaching, learning, academic success, personal growth, and well-being of the whole student and all students. – Office of the Vice Chancellor, Mission & Values

Graduate students are some of MIT's lowest-paid workers. Stipends largely do not support “teaching, learning, academic success, personal growth, and well-being” for individual students; financial stress and uncertainty create fraught situations for students with families, medical needs, and any other financial burden. Categorically, MIT graduate student stipends *at their best* are not sufficient to reasonably cover rent in the immediate areas surrounding MIT or in MIT's own student housing without graduate students being severely rent burdened ([as defined by the US Department of Housing and Urban Development](#)). At their worst? The stipends are unlivable. Some programs at MIT can only offer partial funding packages that fail to pay living wages for the Boston metro (see Table 2). This comes with some embarrassing irony: the Department of Urban Studies and Planning, which publishes the most widely-used U.S. living wage model, does not guarantee its PhD students a stipend that meets its own “survival wage” criteria.

These funding issues have been worsened by the COVID-19 pandemic. Just as COVID-19 made clear the endemic failings of an unsupported health care system, the cruel precarity of millions of people's finances and lives, and the jarring failures of federal response, it has also made clear MIT's own failures to remove exclusionary barriers to education and to sufficiently address the financial precarity it creates for its students. Despite students' significantly delayed research, loss of external fellowships, increased caregiving obligations, and resultant heightened precarity, MIT has refused to respond with adequate funding guarantees or any meaningful structural change. Instead, it has single-mindedly focused on securing budget cuts from departments, labs, centers, and programs - exacerbating the funding problems it previously created.

We actively work to create a caring, compassionate, healthy, and safe environment that enables all community members to thrive. – Office of the Vice Chancellor, Mission & Values

Eight departments at MIT *do not* provide their doctoral students with 12-month funding, with deleterious effects on impacted students. MIT’s own 2019 Enrolled Student Survey (ESS) reveals a correlation between stipend funding and sources of stress. In response to the question “The extent to which cost of living is currently a source of stress for you,” 20% of respondents on partial appointments (“underfunded students”) answered with “very stressful”, compared to 12.7% of respondents on full appointments. To the question “The extent to which cost of living has been an obstacle to your academic success”, 24.2% of underfunded students responded with “a major obstacle”, as compared to 14.9% of students on full appointments. Finally, to the question “The extent to which work/financial commitments have been an obstacle to your academic progress”, 12.4% of underfunded students who responded did so with “a major obstacle”, compared to 6.8% of those on full appointments. While these data alone are not enough to establish causation, it would take an exceptional exercise of imagination to fail to see how the lack of guaranteed 12-month funding significantly contributes to the stress and academic difficulties doctoral students face. This is only exacerbated if a doctoral student should dare to start a family, have any medical condition, or not be personally and independently affluent enough to afford to live in the greater Boston area while at MIT.

| | Sub-12-Month-Funded Doctoral Students | 12-Month-Funded Doctoral Students | Sub-12-Month Funding Departments |
|--|---------------------------------------|-----------------------------------|----------------------------------|
| The extent to which cost of living is currently a source of stress for you | | | Architecture |
| Very stressful | 20.00% | 12.73% | DUSP |
| Moderately stressful | 27.57% | 26.69% | Economics |
| Slightly stressful | 26.49% | 33.37% | Humanities Combined |
| Not a source of stress | 25.95% | 27.21% | LingPhil |
| Total number of respondents | 185 | 974 | Math |
| | | | PoliSci |
| | | | STS |
| The extent to which cost of living has been an obstacle to your academic progress | | | |
| A major obstacle | 24.18% | 14.93% | |
| A moderate obstacle | 21.98% | 25.56% | |
| A minor obstacle | 28.57% | 26.48% | |
| Not an obstacle | 25.27% | 33.03% | |
| Total number of respondents | 182 | 978 | |
| The extent to which work/financial commitments have been an obstacle to your academic progress | | | |
| A major obstacle | 12.36% | 6.79% | |
| A moderate obstacle | 22.47% | 15.38% | |
| A minor obstacle | 17.98% | 23.33% | |
| Not an obstacle | 47.19% | 54.51% | |
| Total number of respondents | 178 | 943 | |
| <i>Note: The presented data compare the extent to which various factors are considered obstacles or sources of stress between doctoral student respondents in departments that provide 12-month guaranteed stipend funding and those that provide less than 12-month guaranteed stipend funding. While these data may demonstrate a correlation between stipend funding and sources of stress, these data alone are not enough to prove a causal relationship.</i> | | | |

Table 1: Cost of Living as Source of Stress, Broken Down by Funding Status
Source: 2019 Enrolled Student Survey; Graduate Student Council Diversity, Equity and Inclusion Committee

We are committed to creative, flexible, and generous ways of building bridges, working together, and communicating openly. - Office of Vice Chancellor, Mission & Values

In addition to significant stress once students matriculate at MIT, the lack of financial security that MIT imposes on its students in underfunded departments also acts as an exclusionary barrier to entry for these academic disciplines, driving away talented candidates from poor and working-class backgrounds, as well as those with families. For example, a [report](#) sponsored by the National Science Foundation (NSF) and Survey of Earned Doctorates (SED) revealed that doctorate recipients are more likely to incur debt at institutions that are more likely to refuse financial support. Furthermore, although Black doctorate recipients are equally likely as white doctorate recipients to graduate with debt in natural sciences and engineering, Black doctorate recipients in humanities and social sciences are more likely to graduate with debt and with a higher mean debt. In one of MIT's social science programs, Science, Technology, and Society (STS), a November 2019 survey of enrolled students showed that 100% of respondents would *not* recommend the program to URM students with admission offers from other schools. To counteract such detrimental impacts for recruitment and retention, it is up to MIT to support these vital areas of study.

The departments that MIT considers less deserving of support and funding--the disciplines and knowledge that the Institute devalues--are Architecture, Urban Studies & Planning (DUSP), Economics, Linguistics and Philosophy, Math, Political Science, and STS . MIT's consistent devaluation of intellectually marginalized departments and disciplines, predominantly in the humanities, social sciences, arts and architecture, is by no means a new phenomenon. MIT's School of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (SHASS), School of Architecture and Planning (SAP), and Sloan only came into being in the mid-20th century and only flourished under MIT Presidents committed to more humanistic study. These programs and disciplines have always been marginal at MIT, despite producing top-ranked scholarship. And as COVID-19 reworks the Institute, these programs' marginality is even more clear. For example, significant effort has focused on ramping up lab work, but the umbrella "SHASS-SAP-Sloan-Libraries 'Thunder' Committee" has, at this writing, not issued any guidance for restarting human-subjects research, ethnographic fieldwork, archival research, or library access. While lab students can count on a serious plan for returning to cutting-edge research, their social science and humanities colleagues cannot do the same. In fact, MIT's numerous libraries, the "lab" for many social sciences, have remained closed while lab sciences have received far greater attention. At the very moment that social scientific analysis is paramount for understanding our times of crisis, MIT's social science students are hindered by a "research lockdown" of MIT's own creation.

It is very troubling that MIT does not adequately value disciplines and departments explicitly concerned with critical thought and analysis of social systems, history, culture, and the social

implications of science and technology. But this is a trend reflected nation-wide, especially under the current administration. The [Trump Administration](#) [has](#) repeatedly attempted to close the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), while the NSF's social, behavioral, and economic sciences (SBE) directorate has been disproportionately targeted throughout the years despite only constituting ~3% of the [NSF's 2019 annual](#) budget. Indeed, MIT has been doing much the same to its own educational programs for years; at "best," devaluing those disciplines it finds less financially profitable, with little regard for the critical role such knowledge and wisdom play in academia and society, and at worst intentionally repressing departments specifically concerned with the criticism and study of the very things that MIT profits from. That programs devoted to social analysis are consistently underfunded shows what areas of study and types of knowledge MIT values most. As MIT as a whole confronts a world scarred by pandemic disease and endemic racism, it is essential that we not only speak with anti-oppressive rhetoric, but that we materially and equitably support programs furthering anti-oppressive research and education at MIT.

We engage in creative risk-taking to build a more agile organization that in turn affects transformative change at the Institute, and in the world. – Office of the Vice Chancellor, Mission & Values

For all that MIT founded itself on principles of eliminating barriers to education, funding inequity is a glaring contradiction to this vision. Funding inequity across departments at MIT does much immediate damage to its community, and not just in the dangerous implications it carries about how the administration devalues those underfunded disciplines. It results in significant burdens on students in these underfunded programs who must do additional work to find funding sources and endure significant financial uncertainty, which seriously impacts mental health and ability to focus on academic work.

We strive to be transparent, respectful, honest, and accountable to ourselves and others; integrity fosters trust and trust builds the bonds of community. – Office of the Vice Chancellor, Mission & Values

There is no respect in underfunding—devaluing—departments and students. There is no integrity in failing to support critical disciplines and in suppressing the ability to engage in certain kinds of academic criticism and analysis that fail to be “profitable” by MIT’s corporate standards. **There is no trust when swaths of the community are in financial precarity due to funding inequity, or outright excluded from the community by financial barriers.** Yet many members of the MIT community, at all levels of employment, have been dedicated to removing barriers to education and to creating a more equitable MIT, all while Institute support for their efforts failed. We thus find the story of Ellen S. Richards instructive: staunch feminist and

trailblazing chemist, denied an MIT advanced degree and fair salary for her gender. MIT trumpets its history for graduating a woman in 1873, and fails to remember its refusal to materially support her.

If MIT's dedication is truly as is suggested by their mission and value statements, if the Institute leadership is truly committed to eradicating the racism and sexism that permeate our campus, there must be a commitment to material support in the form of funding equity. So far, Institute solutions do not address the structural nature of funding inequity at MIT. The programs that struggle most are the same programs which draw most of their funding from the Institute, rather than external grants or fellowships. In other words, funding inequity is a problem of MIT's own creation - a problem only amplified by its individualized approach to solving endemic, *structural* financial stress. **In order to ensure a level playing field for students of all identities and disciplines, MIT must make all necessary structural changes to rectify the grievous funding disparities it has imposed on its community: guarantee 12-month stipends; establish internal completion fellowships; and guarantee a cost-of-living increase.**

We engage in creative risk-taking to build a more agile organization that in turn affects transformative change at the Institute, and in the world. – Office of the Vice Chancellor, Mission & Values

Demand 4A - Guarantee 12-month funding for all PhD programs offered at MIT

The demand

1. Guarantee 12-month stipends for all doctoral students.
 - a. This must be implemented as a school- or department-level guarantee. Students should not have to rely on case-by-case, means-tested financial aid for stipend funds.
 - b. Opt-out basis: if a student secures a fellowship or research grant, they can elect not to take a summer stipend. This money could then be rerouted to other program/DLC needs.
 - c. These changes should not come at the expense of decreasing the number of admitted students or other negative impacts to the current program. Rather they should be proportional increases to program allocations granted from the Provost.

Background and motivation

The GSC Stipend Working Group (SWG) has been pushing on this issue for some time now, as have independent programs and Visiting Committees. In 2019, the GSC SWG recommended targeted programs to alleviate financial stress for students on 9-month stipends and non-resident status. Unfortunately, those programs have translated to individualized and invasive means-tested financial aid programs like the Long-term Financial Hardship Fund and the new non-resident application process. MIT's graduate community as a whole has accepted minimal stipend increases in order to support these targeted programs; it is incumbent on MIT to drastically alter its approach to solving financial precarity.

In Spring 2020, the Stipend Working Group showed that means-tested individual aid increases individual stress amid financial uncertainty; increases administrative costs; increases time to degree; reduces peer competitiveness; reduces internal funding parity; and fails to bring all students to a guaranteed minimum living wage. Given these failures, we advocate **full 12-month stipends for all doctoral students**.

MIT's current policies and procedures

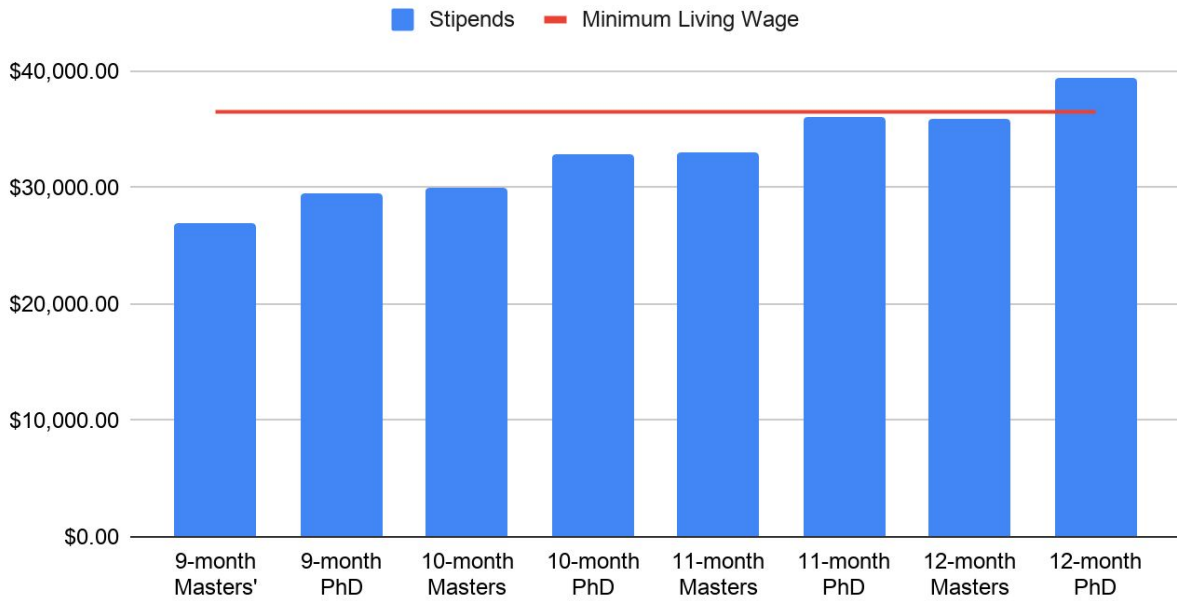
Currently, departments which cannot or do not pay PhD students 12-months include Architecture, DUSP, Economics, Linguistics and Philosophy, Math, Political Science, and STS.

Every spring, students in these programs must apply for funds to cover their summer living expenses or upcoming research. Such support might come from external grants, faculty discretionary accounts, or internal MIT programs like MISTI. If students do not secure funding, they are forced to sublease their apartments, move back home for the summer, live off savings, or take temporary jobs — emergency responses which are not available to all and which are increasingly slim in a world turned upside-down by COVID-19. This translates to extraordinary amounts of time dedicated to securing summer support - time which could have otherwise been spent making significant degree progress. It also translates to endemic stress and uncertainty, repeated every year, as students stare down a summer with no funding. Significantly, means-tested aid *cannot address* this kind of endemic stress: only guaranteed stipend levels can.

Indeed, successive Visiting Committees to impacted programs have, for the past 10 years, also recommended increases in summer funding to avert a financial crisis. But even when these recommendations are implemented, it is on a probationary or temporary basis - leading programs to relitigate their need for full-year funding every time summer funding allocations run out. Thus, maintaining sub-12 month stipends wastes students' *and* program administrators' time. Students' own financial uncertainty is scaled up to program-wide uncertainty: for everyone involved, financial precarity is always, inescapably on the horizon. A guaranteed 12-month stipend would significantly reduce programs' own cyclical, existential concerns, allowing all involved to better thrive in their educational missions.

A guaranteed 12-month stipend would also significantly signal equal standing for all MIT doctoral students. It is a yearly punch to the gut to realize that a Nuclear Science PhD student can depend on a wage throughout the year, while an STS student must scramble for grants to pay the bills. We are not "One MIT" until graduate students are guaranteed a fair stipend regardless of department or discipline.

The 2020 Graduate Student Council Stipend Working Group found that, in addition to these stressors, MIT's current sub-12-month stipends fall significantly short of a Boston-area living wage. Working from the premise that a minimum living wage should be guaranteed to all of MIT's doctoral students, universal 12-month stipends are the only solution.



Stipends Levels

Table 2: Only 12-month stipends achieve a Boston-area minimum living wage.

Source: 2020 Graduate Student Council Stipend Working Group.

What are other universities doing?

[Stanford University](#) has recently announced their permanent commitment for the Provost to allot funding to ensure that all doctoral students will have guaranteed funding for five years of study covering a full 12 months of the year. This commitment comes amidst the COVID pandemic in recognition of how funding inequities between programs are heightened by increased uncertainty and crisis-induced need.

The University of Chicago also [guarantees](#) 12-month stipends until degree completion, a move announced in 2018.

Demand 4B - Establish non-competitive internal dissertation completion fellowships

The demand

1. Create a central fund for internal dissertation completion fellowships.
 - a. Provide a final year of funding through a non-competitive application process, in line with our peer institutions.
 - b. These changes should not come at the expense of decreasing the number of admitted students or any other cutbacks to program expenses; rather, they should be granted by the Provost.
 - c. This fund must be made available to all students, regardless of program or department.
 - d. With funding inequities exacerbated by the current economic and pandemic crisis, this program must be implemented by the start of Spring 2021.

MIT's current policies and procedures

The lack of funding equity across departments at MIT, concentrated in the underfunding of programs in SHASS and SAP, has far-reaching consequences for the Institute and is upheld by Institute policy. Unlike many other programs at MIT, SHASS and SAP students often define their own projects and carry out their own research independently—including applying for research permits, ethical review, and grants, as well as conducting fieldwork or archival research—mostly without structural support from MIT or their advisors, unlike more lab-based disciplines. There are pockets of money at MIT that might be used to fund students, but they are often difficult to access, obscured, and limited. Without the structural support afforded by a lab structure or by full-year funding, underfunded students are left to apply to external grants often while immersed in intensive research in foreign countries, on insufficient fellowships. Indeed,

among its peer institutions, MIT is the only school to not offer internal dissertation completion fellowships.

A quick case study of the challenges facing the History/Anthropology/Science, Technology and Society PhD program (HASTS) illustrates the deleterious effects of limited internal funding. HASTS students receive 5-year funding packages, though degree completion often takes 6 or 7 years. This is a quicker time-to-degree than the national average (8-10 years for History and Anthropology) and that of MIT's other schools.¹ Moreover, despite limited support afforded by MIT, HASTS shows remarkable alumni placement for post-docs and tenure-track positions in highly competitive programs at institutions such as Harvard, MIT, Columbia, John Hopkins, Cornell, and Yale -- all while students in the program are forced to spend a large portion of their 5th year applying for final year funding. This takes away months of time that could be spent writing dissertations, applying for positions, or otherwise furthering studies or careers. Additionally, most of these fellowships often have 5-10% acceptance rates. While HASTS students have been successful in securing this funding, the uncertainty and lack of full institutional funding support leads many to accept fellowships that are not in line with their interests for fear of not getting any fellowship at all. Furthermore, HASTS professors cannot sponsor a student in an advanced year of their PhD, and internal fellowships at MIT are few and specific, seldom applying to topics and modes of research that are conducted by students in SHASS.

Despite accolades to the program, the lack of guaranteed full-year and final-year funding has simply made HASTS less competitive: applicants regularly choose peer institutions that instead offer funding guarantees for summer term and degree completion. In a Fall 2019 survey of HASTS students, which had a 73% response rate, all respondents had reservations about recommending HASTS to prospective students because of funding limitations. Half of students have encouraged or would encourage an applicant to accept other offers because of HASTS funding limitations. This is a situation which MIT's regular reliance on its "reputation" cannot solve.

What are other universities doing?

Compared to MIT's peer institutions, MIT is the only institution which does not provide a non-competitive dissertation completion fund for students in the social sciences. Schools that do provide this superior funding package include University of Chicago (which guarantees funding

¹ According to data from Institutional Research, in AY2017, 28% (451 out of 1574) of students in the School of Engineering were in their 6+ year. In comparison, only 6% (15 out of 249 students) in SHASS were in their 6+ years. In HASTS, there were 8 students enrolled for the full AY2019 who were in their 6+ year.

through completion), Harvard, Princeton, Yale, Stanford, Brown, Columbia, University of Pennsylvania, New York University, and UC Berkeley. MIT is clearly lagging behind our peers in these fields. The cost of this failure is our ability to recruit talented students, and our ability to support those who do matriculate.

Demand 4C - Guarantee a minimum annual cost-of-living adjustment for all graduate stipends

The demand

1. Guarantee an annual cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) for all graduate student stipends. In yearly Stipend Working Group recommendations, COLA adjustments must be a nonnegotiable baseline.

MIT's current policies and procedures

The GSC Stipend Working Group (SWG) makes a recommendation each year to the Deans' Group for a cost-of-living adjustment for graduate student stipends. This recommendation takes into account increasing costs of basic goods, as well as effects of MIT stipend rates on peer competitiveness and community equity. As some of the lowest-paid employees of MIT, graduate students cannot afford to fall behind the escalating costs of living near MIT.

This negotiation is often a high-water-mark for student/administration collaboration, in which students offer ways to keep MIT competitive and their peers financially secure. But while frequently revisiting wage structure is advantageous to all, students are harmed when administrators see all their recommendations as discretionary. Simply put, students should not need to defend COLA adjustments. Asking whether MIT's lowest-paid workers deserve to maintain financial security debases MIT's most basic commitments to equity.

A history of failure mars progress on this issue. In three of the last ten budget cycles, MIT did not adjust stipends to fully capture local cost-of-living increases. These failures reappear in lean budget cycles. As MIT enters another period of potential cutbacks as it navigates COVID-19, students rightfully fear that austerity will be imposed on those with the least ability to absorb it. When glossy building finishes and donor galas are less discretionary than student financial security, MIT makes a mockery of its values. But failing to keep up with Cambridge's cost-of-living, or MIT's own on-campus rent increases, puts more students farther behind. We should never compromise on students' financial security.