Dear Members of the MIT Physics Community,

March 5th, 2020. That’s when life as we knew it at MIT changed. Perhaps forever. The day before, we were planning numerous events that our Department holds in the spring—the Graduate Student Open House in April, a 20th-Year Celebration of our distinguished Pappalardo Fellowships program in May, new faculty offers, the approaching end of the semester, graduation, and much more.

We had heard of Covid-19 for the past few weeks. Initially, it was some cases in China, then some in Italy and Iran. A case or two in the United States. Departmental leadership had discussed it, but mainly in terms of hoping for the best, but planning for the “just in case.”

But everything changed on Thursday, March 5th. That was the day MIT’s President Reif sent a note to the campus that called for all events over 150 people to be postponed, and for all international travel to stop. What happened next was a cascade of meetings, plans, cancellations and surprises that developed at a speed nobody ever anticipated, considered or expected. In just nine days we had:

**Friday, March 6th**  Cancellation of Graduate Open House.

**Monday, March 9th**  All classes with 150 or more students moved to “virtual.” Cancelled the Pappalardo Fellowships Symposium and 20th-Year Anniversary event.

**Tuesday, March 10th**  MIT announces classes are cancelled the following week and that all students will need to leave campus by March 17th.

**Wednesday, March 11th**  MIT announces students must now leave campus by March 15th.

**Friday, March 13th**  MIT announces that all employees should transition to working from home, all research labs should be shut down, and that by March 19th, no employees, students or faculty should be on campus, unless for an emergency situation.

Nine days—that’s how fast it all changed. In that short period, we were dealing with meetings where what was true in the morning was no longer accurate in the afternoon. We did this while all of us were worried about the health of our families and friends, and
with a virus that was growing exponentially throughout the country and world.

Now, as we look back, March 2020 seems like forever ago, but also feels like yesterday. We have seen our faculty and staff perform at heroic levels, be it performing an Open House virtually, or teaching TEAL courses remotely on the fly. We learned how to work from home, how to set up an office using couches and pillows. All of us incorporated Zoom into our lexicon as both a noun and a verb (on March 5th, neither of us had ever heard the term before). We created a virtual graduation for our seniors and PhD recipients.

Through hundreds of hours of meetings, planning and strategizing, we now have a system at MIT where over 4,000 people are tested on a daily basis, where the Senior class is on campus and almost all courses are being taught on-line. We’ve assigned dozens of mentors to help with class work and to build a sense of community while students are away from campus. It has been difficult. But the dedication and creativity of the people at MIT is beyond measure. Each day we are impressed by the skills of those around us. We’ve always been proud to work at MIT, but today we feel both fortunate and awed by the experience.

The future is uncertain. The virus is still out there and we don’t know what the spring will bring, let alone next month. But what we do know is that MIT will come through this as a community and do what we always have done—endure, educate, innovate and succeed.

We wish each of you well, and hope that your families remain safe and healthy.

With best regards,

Peter Fisher
Head, Department of Physics

Matt Cubstead
Administrative Officer