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President, Provost Forum focuses on core IIT issues

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Hosted by Student Government Association (SGA) just once per semester, the President and Provost Forum has long served as a barometer of student satisfaction at Illinois Institute of Technology and continues to inform major policy decisions made at the top level of university administration today. The forum brings together perhaps the most diverse group of students, faculty, and staff of any IIT event, engaging in open and frank discussion about topics ranging from the effectiveness of the school's marketing to the physical condition of its facilities. In addition to being a major source of direct student input without the hindrance of intermediate bureaucratic steps, the President and Provost Forum also serves a role in communications going the opposite direction, helping top officials at the school explain the rationale behind their decisions directly to those who care the most about the impacts of those decisions. Beyond all of that, the level of turnout at the Forum serves as an essential marker for student engagement in general, demonstrating whether the actions of SGA have effectively catalyzed student interest in improving their school over the preceding semester.

Last Thursday, during the shared campus-wide lunch hour, SGA President Rahul Wadhwani introduced University President Alan Cramb and Provost Frances Bronet to a crowd of about 60 in the MTCC Ballroom, which soon swelled to a room-filling two hundred or so, approximately half made up of students and half of various professional units of the university. Both Cramb and Bronet are newcomers to their current positions at IIT, though the former is no stranger to the President and Provost Forum, having served as Provost for the last seven years under former University President John Anderson. Bronet, on the other hand, is a new face at the school, but her engaging personality has already solidified her presence in student minds through appearances at events like the Sophomore Leadership Retreat sessions held throughout the fall semester. She carries a considerable reputation with her as a proponent for interdisciplinary programs and policy, having worked herself in architecture (including time as a Dean of Architecture at Rensselaer Polytechnic), dance (with a particular focus on mixed-abilities dance companies and incorporation of visual electronic arts into dance mediums), and in the academic realm as Provost of the University of Oregon up until her appointment here at IIT.

After a few joking introductions (a reassurance that nobody up on stage would bite, etc.), Wadhwani got down to business with a small set of questions submitted online prior to the event. First up was an issue that has been quite contentious recently among student life and academic leaders of IIT: the formulation of the President's Student Advisory Council (PSAC). While practically nobody has been critical of the general PSAC concept (not in public, at least), there have been a number of questions raised in recent weeks regarding the criteria used to determine representation and the lack of transparency in the application process for the group. In particular, many students and faculty alike have lamented the choice to focus the group on student life rather than academic factions of IIT, raising fears that the group would have too indirect a focus

when it came to improving the university. President Cramb, after initially passing off the question to Wadhwani himself for some explanation (SGA was the group responsible for PSAC delegate selection), discussed some of the steps that had been taken to ensure the Council's representativeness of the student body as a whole, clarifying that each delegate was selected based on their potential to lobby for the interests of different groups such as housing or media organizations, not on the strength of their own personal policy opinions. Additionally, Cramb discussed the inclusion of five at-large members who did not represent any particular facet of the student body, and mentioned that each college tends to have its own advisory group, attempting to dispel criticisms that PSAC's focus is too weak when it comes to academics.

Next up, another online submission posed the question of whether IIT's top-level administration had considered or would possibly consider establishing a "student venture fund" in a framework meant to foster startup-style creativity with the administrative protections of the university behind it. The direct answer to that question was no, but Provost Bronet was quick to expand upon

the availability of venture funding and advising already through the Knapp Center, which coordinates work with students and with businesses active in the Tech Park just west of IIT Tower. She stressed that students interested in entrepreneurial endeavors could use the Knapp Center's services for business consulting and trademark advising, and that the Idea Shop and the upcoming Kaplan Center for Innovation would serve as the sort of free entrepreneurial space that the question's author was hoping for. While she did not indicate that there were any plans for those two institutions to establish any university-level venture fund, Bronet did indicate that the Knapp Center was looking into partnering with more external companies for funding of student-led projects and businesses.

Moving on from online submissions to live questions posed by audience members, the first group to speak was perhaps the most vocal of the event. Approximately six members of the UMII (United Minds Inspiring Innovation) Scholarship Initiative, a group

which seeks to establish a financial aid outlet for undocumented students attending IIT, stood at once, small flyers in hand reading "I Support the UMII Scholarship Initiative." An individual among them spoke at length about the lack of current scholarship opportunities for undocumented migrant students, and the group's overall goal of convincing the university to change that reality. She also touched upon hate speech directed toward the group recently on the semi-anonymous social media platform Yik Yak, drawing comparisons to threats made on the same application at the University of Missouri and elsewhere.

President Cramb's response to the group was initially strong, emphasizing that UMII had not presented any specific proposal for their aims, and stating that he could potentially support the initiative if he knew exactly how the group intended to implement the scholarship fund. However, Cramb stumbled somewhat following the first section of his comments on UMII, drawing ire from the assembled representatives of the initiative for using the word "alien" to describe his own status for a number of years in the United States. He quickly backtracked, clarifying that he used that word to demonstrate how others saw him

rather than how he classified himself, but his use of the word still increased tension between UMII and himself. Cramb also responded unsatisfactorily in the eyes of UMII's members when pressed about allegations that the school had axed an IIT Magazine story about the group back in 2012, saying he could have been part of the group that made that decision, but was unaware of it today. He gained back some ground by emphasizing that such a decision should have only been made in the case that it could have hurt somebody's privacy or reputation unnecessarily, saying that at times there were articles in TechNews, as well, that he wished would not have been published for such considerations.

When asked whether Cramb or Bronet would be present at a UMII-hosted forum this Wednesday on the topic of potentially codifying the scholarship more specifically, neither could immediately respond in the affirmative, citing their busy schedules.

The next question from a student involved something that's more of a

Photo by Soren Spicknall

universal experience for those at IIT: student engagement and general campus energy. A participant in the Forum spoke to the fact that, after orientation, the level of direct student engagement from OCL and other professional offices drops off significantly, with student orgs expected mostly to take up the slack on their own. Acknowledging that this dropoff is a significant issue facing IIT, Provost Bronet called upon three individuals in the audience, including Dean of Students Katherine Stetz, to provide some insight. Their answers on the topic covered similar territory to each other, touching on the fact that SGA, professional staff, and non-SGA student orgs are often quite disconnected from each other when it comes to brainstorming and promoting events, as well as the fact that the school hasn't adequately connected Welcome Week activities to recurring events throughout the academic year. While there were few specific proposed actions put on the table (aside from focusing even more on what's currently working well, and increasing communication between SGA and administration), all individuals speaking seemed to agree that the University could be doing more on that front. Provost Bronet re-entered the conversation on a more philosophical note, talking of improving student happiness on campus by what she called "making the invisible visible". That is, finding ways to celebrate the daily triumphs of academic life at an institution whose students are mostly focused on being part of a school rather than a social center. Drawing from her history in architecture, she spoke of reorganizing spaces both physical and institutional to make the mere act of attending at IIT an exciting, novel experience for students.

Following that broad, perpetual question of student happiness was a much more specific query from the audience, regarding the university's current income shortfall, which was announced in the October 23 President's Update email sent to all IIT students. An individual in the crowd (full disclosure: this writer) asked President Cramb for some specific information about what actions had been taken in anticipation of and in response to the unexpected financial news. Cramb went into some detail about policies that the school had adopted over the last half decade, such as the practice of holding 2.5% of each academic unit's budget in reserve annually in case of emergency, and the consistent maintenance of a $1 million cash fund to make up for shortfalls. In addition, he discussed an extra $1 million that was marked as non-essential in the school's budget each year in case cutbacks needed to be made. Cramb said that no actual cutbacks had been made yet, but the school was forced to invoke all of the aforementioned contingencies to make up for this year's profit fall.

The next few questions of the President and Provost Forum, while unquestionably important, were better suited for department officials than for Cramb or Bronet. First, a student in the Architecture program asked about the potential for a number of changes to be made to their lab fee policy and printing practices, in the hopes of alleviating the constant cost of printing for students of that major. Ophir Trigalo and Robert Krawczyk, the department's CIO and Associate Dean of Academic Affairs, respectively, both spoke to the possibility of making some changes if the question was