

THE MISSION OF MIT¹

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I still remember very clearly the key reason behind my decision to attend MIT about a decade ago. It was a statement that set MIT apart from the other top schools. On one of the MIT webpages, I read that an MIT education is a calling, it is not about building a career but about following one's passion and understanding nature. Throughout my time at MIT, both as an undergrad and as a postdoc, I have seen many examples supporting this mission statement that has always made MIT special for me.

Recently, however, I have been hearing more voices of an alternative culture that puts career first and science second. I sometimes hear my colleagues being more concerned about “spinning” and “selling” a paper rather than about understanding nature. I hear MIT students and postdocs for whom the “impact factor” (IF) of the magazine/journal in which they publish is more important than the substance of what they publish. This worship of the IF, computed and published by the Thomson corporation, is particularly odd for scientists given the methods of computing the IF (Rossner *et al*, 2007), and particularly out of place at MIT. I still believe that MIT is a special place; I have met too many students and faculty passionate about science to think otherwise. Yet, I also think that we as a community should make a concerted effort to counteract the cancerous spread of the IF worship and preserve what makes MIT special. The personal example of the senior members of the community who put science first can be a particularly effective and inspiring part of such an effort. I know from personal experience because I have benefited tremendously from the example of my mentors (Botstein, 2010; Slavov and Botstein, 2010).

The emphasis on the IF can be seen as a particular example of the general trend of decoupling merit from social reward. Such decoupling is rather widespread in all realms of life, whether actively fostered by specious advertising or passively allowed by hiring and promotional committees focusing excessively on the IF. The decoupling is perhaps more common in business than in science, perhaps more common at other academic institutions than at MIT. Yet, I find it particularly unacceptable in science and completely incongruous with MIT's culture and mission.

References

- Botstein D (2010) It's the Data! *Molecular Biology of the Cell* **21**: 4–6
- Rossner M, Van Epps H, Hill E (2007) Show me the data. *The Journal of Cell Biology* **179**: 1091–1092
- Slavov N, Botstein D (2010) *Universality, specificity and regulation of S. cerevisiae growth rate response in different carbon sources and nutrient limitations*. Ph.D. thesis, Princeton University

¹The published version of this letter to the editor of the MIT Tech can be found here: <http://tech.mit.edu/V132/N1/letters.html>