



Massachusetts  
Institute of  
Technology

**FGLIWG**

First Generation/Low Income Working Group

FINAL REPORT  
FIRST GENERATION/LOW INCOME  
WORKING GROUP

TO THE OFFICE OF THE VICE CHANCELLOR

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## **Executive Summary**

The First Generation/ Low Income Working Group (FGLIWG)<sup>1</sup> was tasked with determining where support for first generation and/or low income (FGLI) students lies, and where gaps in access and resources fall. In order to ensure that FGLI students were supported across all departments throughout the Institute, we intentionally tapped into specific offices that represent what support currently exists in order to better identify gaps and areas of growth.

The FGLIWG met sixteen times throughout the 2019-2020 academic year (both in person and virtually). Additionally, the tri-chairs met with Mary Markel Murphy to develop agendas, track the progress of the working group, and decide upon next steps. Our work was particularly driven by student input because of their equal membership in the working group, information gleaned from focus groups, and important data gathered from Institute-distributed surveys over the past 5 years.

We began by leveling out the knowledge field. We listened to presentations from groups who support first generation and/or low income (FGLI) students, including the First Generation Program, the QuestBridge Scholars Network (MIT chapter), and the Class Awareness Support and Equality (CASE) student group. We assigned collective readings to better understand the experiences of today's first generation/low income students and held open discussions about the environment for FGLI students at MIT.

The larger working group was divided into four (4) subgroups:

1. Benchmarking - How our peer institutions are supporting FGLI students
2. Resources, Services, and Academic Experiences - Existing resources, services, and support in academic departments
3. Data Collection - Current Institutional data collected that reflects students' experiences
4. Focus Groups - Lived experiences from current MIT students

Recommendations from this working group will include:

1. Securing a physical space for community building
2. Institutionalizing FGLIWG definition for first generation at MIT
3. Increasing full time staff members by 2 people
4. Mitigating invisible costs
5. Rethinking the advising model and how we academically support FGLI students

To successfully implement these recommendations, we required collaboration from both the Office of the Vice Chancellor (OVC) & Division of Student Life (DSL) in order to guarantee that FGLI students have the support to build a sustainable foundation of success through resources and services while at MIT and beyond.

## **Background and Context**

Inspired by the desire to create a sense of community and visibility for First Generation (FG) students at MIT, the First Generation Project, which has since evolved to the First Generation Program (FGP), was launched in the Spring of 2011. The impetus was also a concern for what seemed to be a disproportionate number of FG and low-income students taking leaves from MIT, and an urgency to create a greater sense

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<sup>1</sup> FLI = FGLI

of belonging for this largely overlooked population of students. With its inaugural dinner attended by 50 students as well as President Rafael Reif, the First Generation Project was formalized with a student executive board, a faculty advisor (Physics Professor John Belcher), and administrative advisor (S<sup>3</sup> Assistant Dean Miri Skolnik), and overseen by the Office of Undergraduate Advising and Programming, now known as the Office of the First Year.

The First Generation Project launched a handful of successful annual programs for students during its early years, including luncheons with faculty, dinners with alumni, and a Campus Preview Weekend panel event, and continues to host these programs in present day. FGP has attended the IvyG+ conference every year since 2017: a FGLI student focused event for Ivy League and highly selective institutions, where students enduring a challenging college environment can lean on peers from similar backgrounds. At MIT, we initiated a visibility campaign by creating FGP's own Tim logo; encouraging staff, faculty, and students to display this sticker in high traffic areas to bring visibility to this invisible identity.

Dedicated FGLI students established Class Awareness Support and Equality (CASE) in September 2016 to foster increased support for its low income student community through advocacy concerning socioeconomic class disparities at MIT. CASE's efforts motivated Vice President and Dean for Student Life Suzy Nelson and Chancellor Cynthia Barnhart to assemble the Accessing Resources at MIT (ARM) Coalition in the fall of 2017 as a focused effort to connect students who are financially struggling with campus resources.

In 2018, Staff Associate and Office of the First Year Advisor Taylor Pons was tasked to renovate the newly titled First Generation Program alongside a student board. FGP expanded its programming to explicitly encompass all FGLI self-identified students, notably implementing a FGLI Pre-Orientation Program, FLIPOP. Student organizers within FGP, CASE, and MIT's QuestBridge Scholars Network chapter soon recognized many overlaps between their efforts and united as a coalition, FLI@MIT, in February 2020. Despite the barriers presented by the COVID-19 pandemic, FLI@MIT has since sprouted an unprecedented growth of the FGLI community, involving more than 20 student organizers. FLI@MIT is currently advised by Taylor Pons and is recognized as a member of the Office of Minority Education Student Advisory Council.

In response to MIT students expressing concern that the institute is not focusing enough on the needs of first generation and/or low-income students, Vice Chancellor for Undergraduate and Graduate Education Ian Waitz, Associate Dean and Director of the Office of Minority Education DiOnetta Jones Crayton and Associate Dean & Director, First-Year Advising & Programs Elizabeth Cogliano Young met in the spring of 2019 and decided to further investigate MIT's response to this necessary issue. Associate Deans Crayton and Young head offices that support FGLI students, and, together, they determined that there must be more effective ways to identify where the gaps in institutional support are, and how to appropriately fill those gaps. This prompted the creation of the First Generation/Low Income Working Group (FGLIWG). Senior Associate Dean for Student Support & Wellbeing David Randall was brought on as an additional sponsor of the FGLIWG when it became clear that a collaboration with the Division of Student Life would be necessary to achieve the goals of the working group.

### **Charge and Membership**

The purpose of the First-Generation and Low-Income Working Group (FGLIWG) is to assess MIT's efforts in supporting FGLI students for the primary purpose of enhancing our services to and our support of students from these particular groups. More specifically, this working group will identify what the OVC, DSL, and MIT, more broadly, are currently doing to support students from these particular backgrounds

and identify what MIT can do better. This group will make recommendations to their Sponsors, Vice Chancellor Ian Waitz, Vice President and Dean for Student Life Suzy Nelson, and to the Chancellor/Provost (as appropriate).

### ***Key Responsibilities***

1. To determine what is currently being offered to FGLI students at MIT and where the gaps are.
2. To review currently available data (e.g., Student Quality of Life, Enrolled Student, Senior Survey, etc.) to gain a better understanding of the experiences of first-gen and low-income students at MIT.
3. To review national best/promising practices, with a particular focus on how our peer schools (Ivy-plus) support the success of FGLI students and determine which of these successful best/promising practices are transferable to MIT.
4. To determine what existing resources (e.g., programs, staff, policies, services, etc.) are currently available from within the OVC and across MIT that can be leveraged, optimized, or enhanced to better support this population of students (or special subsets of students within this group, e.g., FGLI students of color, FGLI LBGTQ+ students, etc.) as well as, what additional resources may need to be added in order to better serve and support FGLI students, e.g., a FGLI Center (staff and infrastructure), additional policies and provisions (e.g., financial aid) etc.

### ***Sponsors***

DiOnetta Jones Crayton (OME), David Randall (DSL), and Elizabeth Cogliano Young (OFY)

### ***Committee Members***

Kester Barrow (Tri-chair of Working Group, DSL), Somiya Kalloo (Tri-chair of Working Group, OME), Taylor Pons (Tri-chair of Working Group, OFY), Maura Tierney Murphy (Admissions), Meredith Pepin (CAPD), Nina DeAgrela (SPXCE), John Ross Campbell (Area Director/Res. Life), Miri Skolnik (Student Support Services), Elise Chambers (OFY/Terrascope), Nicole Piper (Student Financial Services), Kiley Clapper (Course 1, Undergraduate Administrator), Jennifer Weisman (Course 5, Undergraduate Administrator), Scott Alessandro (Course 15, Undergraduate Administrator), Brandi Adams (Course 6, Program Manager), Jeba Sania ('20), Giselle Galan ('20), Tanner Bonner ('22), and Yu Jing Chen ('22)

### **Process, Data Collected & Activities**

The First Generation/Low Income Working Group (FGLIWG) met 2-3 times per month from September 2019 to May 2020. We assessed current resources at MIT by hosting presentations from groups that support FGLI students, including the QuestBridge Scholars network, the First Generation Program, Class Awareness Support and Equality (CASE), and the Accessing Resources at MIT (ARM) coalition. Together, all members of the group read *The Privileged Poor: How Elite Colleges Are Failing Disadvantaged Students* by Anthony Abraham Jack to acknowledge and have open discussion regarding the societal barriers that first generation and/or low income students face entering higher education. By assigning readings, the group achieved a deeper understanding of the research that has already been done, and how systemic inequality affects FGLI students in higher education in the United States. Since there is currently no institutional definition of being first generation at MIT, the FGLIWG developed the following definition:

**A student who is First Generation is a student, domestic or international, where neither parent nor guardian has completed a baccalaureate degree (typically a four [4] year college degree), in the United States.**

The FGLIWG began with the colloquial understanding of a First Generation student, someone who is the first in their family to earn a bachelor's degree. We then built upon this understanding to reach the above definition through dialogue amongst the committee members.

Additionally, we determined that the definition we would use to identify a student as low income would be as follows:

**A student who is low income is a student whose parental contribution is \$5,000 or less, as determined by Student Financial Services.**

This definition for low income was adopted from the ARM Coalition. The ARM coalition aims to connect students with campus resources when they are struggling with financial issues.

The FGLIWG then focused on what we felt were overarching areas of research to assess the gaps in access for FGLI students at MIT. In January 2020, we divided into four (4) subgroups:

- Benchmarking
- Focus Groups
- Data Collection
- Resources, Services, and Academic Experiences

### **Benchmarking**

We began by assessing what our peer institutions are doing to support their FGLI communities. We determined that the Consortium on Financing Higher Education (COFHE) network would be best to set our scope of research given that they too are highly selective institutions committed to meeting the full demonstrated financial need of admitted students. We also looked into institutions that closely aligned with MIT that are not on the list of COFHE schools, such as Georgia Tech. The list of COFHE institutions can be found here: <http://web.mit.edu/cofhe/>.

From each institution we collected data on undergraduate student enrollment, percentage of students that were FGLI identified, location (city vs. rural), staff, and faculty training/involvement. We found that many of our peers' websites included a plethora of information and resources, that was streamlined and easy to navigate. These resources included alumni information, financial aid initiatives, and advising information, such as advising models and who is advising (staff, faculty, a combination of both, etc).

What we noticed was that all of our peers have, at minimum, three (3) full time staff members who are dedicated to FGLI student support and initiatives. MIT currently only has 1/3 of one (1) employee's role dedicated to this work. The most prominent difference we noticed was that the vast majority of our peer institutions have a dedicated physical space for FGLI staff and students—a space cohesive to community building.

Overall, we determined that MIT is lacking in FGLI support compared to our COFHE+ peers. These institutions have more staff, more streamlined information, and a dedicated space on campus for FGLI students. We believe that having these resources will help FGLI students feel an increased sense of belonging at MIT.

## Focus Groups

The FGLIWG felt it would be important to gain in person, qualitative, information from students/stakeholders regarding their experience at MIT, specifically the challenges faced in the academic world accessing existing resources and finding community. We facilitated six (6) focus groups, broken down as:

- Two (2) focus groups with students who identified as low income
- Two (2) focus group with students who identified as first generation
- Two (2) focus groups with students who identified as both first generation and low income.

We held three (3) in person sessions, and three (3) Zoom sessions. The Zoom sessions were held in lieu of in person sessions due to COVID-19.

In order to identify participants, an invitation was sent to pre-existing FGLI email listservs as an opt-in & compensated opportunity. We shared the definitions (stated above) as to describe the working group's scope of the FGLI identity, and allowed students to self-identify as first generation, low income, or first generation & low income. The questions protocol we used was created with significant input from MIT's Institutional Research (IR) office. One (1) member of the FGLIWG and one member of IR attended all six (6) focus groups. Each of the sessions were recorded and transcribed. The transcriptions were then coded. The emerging themes that we identified were:

- Academic preparedness
- Career selection support
- Community resources for parents and families
- Community building opportunities
- Navigating MIT and identifying guidance & support

## Data Collection

The FGLIWG identified MIT Institutional Research (IR), MIT Admissions and MIT Student Financial Services as key stakeholders, who possessed relevant data that would benefit the work of our group. Feedback from these groups was gained through in-person meetings and review of three (3) recent, regularly administered institutional surveys. These surveys are used to collect quantitative and qualitative data about the experiences of MIT's undergraduate student population. These include,

- The 2019 Enrolled Student Survey (ESS), administered in the spring of 2019 to all undergraduate students. This survey had a 38% response rate.
- The 2018 Senior Survey, administered in the spring of 2018 to graduating seniors. This survey had a 59% response rate.
- The 2017 Student Quality of Life Survey (QoL), administered to all students, both undergraduate and graduate, in the spring of 2017. This survey had a 45% response rate among undergraduates.

Based upon figures from MIT Admissions Office and MIT Student Financial Services, initial takeaways indicate that for academic year 2019 - 2020 of the approximately 4,500 undergraduate students,

- 25% of undergraduates were low income, defined as having an MIT-determined parent contribution equal to or less than \$5000

- 18% were first generation
- 12% were both first generation and low income

The Working Group identified questions of interest on these three surveys. These questions are relevant to the experience of First Generation, Low Income students. For example, we highlighted questions that touched on themes such as “academic preparedness, ease of access to existing resources, advising/mentoring, housing”. Institutional Research (IR) then collected the responses to these questions from respondents, who fit the working group’s definition of a First Generation and/or Low Income student. Respondents were enrolled in classes, 2012 - 2019.

Other takeaways from this data collection process include,

- 45% of respondents, identified as First Gen or Low Income, to the 2019 Enrolled Student Survey said they had not sought advice from their academic advisor or found it helpful. This aligns with 46% of their peers, who don’t identify as First Gen or Low Income, and also shared that they hadn’t sought advice from their academic advisor
- 53% of respondents, identified as First Gen or Low Income, to the 2019 Enrolled Student Survey couldn’t identify a faculty member at MIT, who they felt had taken a personal interest in their success.
- In the 2018 Senior Survey, 29% of respondents identified as First Gen or Low Income said that they felt dissatisfied with the quality of the advising that they received.
- In the 2019 ESS, 28% of respondents identified as First Gen or Low Income felt that zero faculty members knew them well enough to provide a letter of recommendation.
- In the 2018 Senior Survey, 26% of respondents said that they rarely or never felt like they were part of a community in academic spaces.
- In the 2019 ESS, 53% of respondents identified as First Generation or Low Income said that they were aware of the ARM Coalition.
- In the 2017 QoL, 45% of respondents said that they disagreed with the statement that their major/program is a place where students may comfortably bring up personal and/or family responsibilities.

In general, IR reported that survey results indicate that,

*“the financial situation of first-generation/low-income students impacts their student experience by reducing their opportunities for extra-curricular activities. Specifically, they report having to forego study abroad, community service, and non-paying research or internship opportunities due to a lack of funds at a higher rate than their counterparts. Higher percentages of first-generation/low-income students report having gone to bed hungry due to a lack of money.”*

Furthermore,

*“First-generation/low-income students report less strong community ties, both within and outside of MIT. Within MIT, they report having had a conversation with a faculty member at lower rates than their counterparts. Additionally, they report having fewer faculty of whom they could ask for a letter of recommendation. Compared to their peers they report thinking that others at MIT don’t think they belong at higher rates. Outside of MIT, a lower percentage report having a support network to whom they can go with their problems, as well as seeking career advice from MIT alumni or their parents. Those who do report getting career advice from their parents say that it was less helpful than do non-first-generation, non-low-income students.”*

This finding suggests recommendations to address lack of connectedness must extend to all aspects of a student's life at MIT, including academic, social, living communities, etc. Simply put, first generation and/or low income students need to know that their presence as members of the MIT community is valued.

### **Resources, Services, and Academic Experiences**

The Resources subgroup started by reaching out to all MIT Undergraduate Academic Administrators with a survey evaluating the services and support that they currently provide FGLI students within their departments. The survey included questions such as:

1. Do academic administrators in your department receive resources, or training specific to first gen/low income students?
2. How do undergraduate students in your department get information about their graduation requirements?
3. When an advisor is assigned to an advisee, what information do they receive about their students?
4. Beyond textbooks, are there any additional costs that undergraduate students may have to take on for the classes in their department?

We connected with various support offices at MIT including CAPD, SFS, SDS, S3, and ISO, to assess what support systems were already in place for FGLI students, and what resources they had been given.

Below are the overarching themes we found:

1. Beyond the first-year, MIT does not currently have a system in place that allows students to self-identify as first generation and/or low income.
2. Most advisors only receive information on their advisees via Websis and their first-year folder, such as ASE scores and transfer credit.
3. Departmental advisors are not trained on how to build relationships with their advisees.
4. Within the academic departments, departments do not provide training to advisors or administrators that is specific to how to best support FGLI students.
5. Not many offices have specific programming in place dedicated to the support of FGLI students.

However, there are some offices and OVC departments implementing programming for FGLI students. Outside of the work that is being done by the First Generation Program, offices such as the Office of Minority Education, the International Student's Office, and Student Financial Services coordinate efforts specifically to support and guide our FGLI student population. These offices hold generally separate programming that is based around their functional areas. For example, the Office of the First Year developed training to help faculty advisors better understand how to build relationships with, and create a safe space for, their FGLI students. Additionally, many offices within OVC continue to hold workshops focusing on topics such as applying to graduate school, combating imposter syndrome, and financial literacy, that are available for our students.

Another resource, the ARM Coalition, is an active group dedicated to fostering a more equitable environment at MIT for low income students. The ARM Coalition works towards alleviating some of the financial hardships that students may face, including basic living expenses, books & supplies, and travel.

Overall, after their first-year, FGLI students often feel lost because they do not find sufficient support within their departments, which is largely where they spend their time. By adequately training MIT staff and faculty on the resources, support, and sensitive dialogue usage, they will be better prepared to help students navigate MIT. Furthermore, continuing to grow administrative and student-based initiatives like the ARM Coalition must be a priority for MIT to address existing and future gaps in support.

### **Focus Groups Findings**

From March 2020 to April 2020, the FGLIWG along with IR conducted six (6) focus groups, both in person and via Zoom. As mentioned in the Focus Group subsection, below are the collective themes that emerged from the discussions:

- Academic preparedness
- Career selection support
- Community resources for parents and families
- Community building opportunities
- Navigating MIT and identifying guidance & support

FGLI students expressed feeling inadequately prepared for the academic rigor they would soon face, and how professors often assume that every student entered the class with the same academic background. The following student quotes from the focus groups demonstrate these feelings.

*“But definitely the intro classes, that’s not the case. Not everyone here has taken AP chemistry or chemistry IV or has been able to take classes at their community college. It’s like, well, now I feel like I don’t belong at MIT because I don’t know this simple thing. So I think being more aware of that is definitely necessary.” (Focus group 514-FGLI 3.3.2020)*

*“I think academics for me is also like – especially coming into the first year at MIT, the hardest thing to wrap around is understanding what my background in high school was and how it prepared me for college as well. So I see there was always a disadvantage for me. I felt whenever I went into chemistry and they started talking about ice tables. And the first thing – I was like, what’s an ice table? And they assume there was a lot of known knowledge as well. So at that point, it just made me disheartened to think that I could be able to learn all this. Like, I have to learn even more than everyone else already at that point.” (Focus group 514-FGLI 3.4.2020)*

A few students mentioned how they lacked comparable math skills to their peers, who had access to advanced classes, community college classes, and/or a combination of both. Because of the differences in academic preparedness, one student said that they needed to reshape their definition of success.

*“For me, I felt like I almost had to redefine what success meant because I felt like trying to chase after something that a lot of – you can either try to catch up or you can sort of find a direction that means a lot more to you.” (Focus group 514-FGLI 3.3.2020)*

*“I think I have very different definitions of success than a lot of other people. And it’s a little frustrating sometimes because I’ll hear people with these expectations of themselves, and I just think – you realize if you’re – you’re in the .001% of everyone in the world doing this one specific thing. Because everyone they interacted with before had college degrees, had advanced degrees, had successful businesses and all these things. It’s a really different standard. Because all the*

*people they interacted with were similar people that all got into MIT a lot of the time. But I don't know. The majority of my friends aren't in college.” (Focus group 514-FGLI 3.3.2020)*

Feeling academically unprepared was a common theme. Some students mentioned that their parents or families couldn't help them prepare for their transition to MIT nor guide them during their enrollment because they've never experienced college before.

*“Yeah, I would definitely say my parents didn't really either have the time, have the knowledge to help. And even with that, if my family couldn't help, my second point of contact would be my school, my high school. But even within my high school, there was no knowledge of what does it mean for someone to go to a really good school -- how do we help you? Even the whole college process of applying was just not very helpful for me in my school. So it was very independent for me in terms of like, okay, I need to make sure I take this step by step.” (Focus group 514-FGLI 3.3.2020)*

*“I have a friend who's doing pre-med and her parents are both chemistry professors at some school in North Carolina. She knows how to do med school. She knows what the plan is, from the moment she got into MIT until when the hell she becomes a doctor. For me, my plan was four, maybe five years of school, and job. But even then, that was very vague, and so stuff like that, I think has been pretty lacking across MIT in general. And I think it impacts first-generation students more than others, because we don't have resources, parents, to fill in those spots.” (Focus group 514-FGLI 3.3.2020)*

The intersection between lack of parent/family support and feeling unprepared for college is common amongst the FGLI community. Some FGLI students who lack parental/family support or guidance face difficulties independently navigating academics amongst other financial and social pressures. For example, their parents may be unable to provide useful academic advice, such as encouraging their students to attend office hours for help. Some low income students also are unable to attend office hours for help as they must work to be financially stable. We found that this was, unfortunately, a common pattern.

*“I've been on my own since I got to MIT. And it was a little rough during the first semester or the first year or so because I was living completely off my scholarship. And I didn't really realize this until this year, this semester after talking with people. But I've been working a full part-time job 30 hours a week, and that's probably the only reason that I'm living a lot more comfortably than I would be at home, is because of the income from the part-time job. And this has been going on since sophomore year. So it's also impacted my academics because I've always wondered, why is it that so many people keep going to office hours, or why is it that so many people are able to actually be productive and do p-sets? [...]*

*And it's because oh, not everyone works a 30 hour part-time job to be able to live the life that they want to live, or a life that's more comfortable where you don't necessarily have to worry about your income. It's like, well, which one would I prefer?” (Focus group 514-FGLI 3.4.2020)*

Once our students begin thinking about life post-MIT, specifically speaking to a career, they feel lost; unsure even where to begin. In an off-the-record conversation, one student mentioned how being first generation in college is one obstacle, but being first generation in the “real world” is an entirely different mountain. In a separate conversation, students felt like they needed to declare majors in the courses that promised the highest salaries upon graduation, which discouraged exploration. Many students felt compelled to declare course 6, or other majors that are relatively popular, from their perception of prevalent job opportunities and peer interests.

*“I feel like when I came into MIT, I didn’t really know what my options were in terms of – not in terms of major, but in terms of even post-graduation options. I feel like coming here, the only thing I really remember related to post-graduation stuff was career fair, and that’s just if you’re looking for a job. And most of its course six-heavy. And so, that really doesn’t help much if you’re exploring other options. So mainly – I guess I didn’t know what it would mean to be a premed student here. I didn’t know what it would mean to be someone who wants to do research after. I didn’t know what it meant to really even just want to just get a degree that opens up a lot of job opportunities for you.*

*And I think that was one of the main reasons why I decided to major in course six is because that’s what I saw at career fairs and that’s what I saw would help me financially in the long run. I feel like the option just made more sense to me, most sense. I had zero idea what it meant to be – like if I wanted to be a doctor or something, I had zero idea what it would look like in terms of my academic career here. I didn’t know what classes I would have to take, what extracurriculars are recommended for it, what kind of clubs were to – or MIT resources that were to help me with that process.” (Focus group 514-FGLI 3.4.2020).*

Although MIT provides an incredible number of resources, many FGLI students have not been exposed to a higher education environment. Thus, they often face difficulties navigating support while attempting to find the community of FGLI peers facing similar pressures. The existing Institute FGLI-specific resources are, unfortunately, not well understood nor extensive enough to support this community building for FGLI students.

*“At least in conversations, just talk of a physical space for students to congregate. And if there could be events through that, or things like that to kind of bring together low-income students and first-gen students. I know there’s the first-gen office, but it’s always awkward, because I feel like, if you’re low-income but not first-gen, then you can’t really be part of that. But you also have needs, so if they could just consolidate and provide. And then, even like the kind of FGLI groups, who kind of have a place, a physical space to hold certain things, that would be really nice.” (Focus group 514-FGLI 4.22.2020)*

Overall, FGLI students expressed that having one space dedicated for FGLI support would be immensely helpful during their time at MIT. Having a group of FGLI-focused in one dedicated office space would allow students to seek help efficiently; it would mean that there is a consistent home base for students to go to for assistance and community support.

### **COVID-19 Specific Recommendations**

As a result of COVID-19, we understand that FGLI students are disproportionately affected by the pandemic because of the lack of resources at home/off campus. In a regular academic year, FGLI students benefit from relationships and connections built on campus through various departments (outlets). As a result of Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and Cambridge Public Health Department guidelines, MIT did not allow for a significant amount of the class of 2024 to return to campus for classes, thus they weren’t able to make and benefit from these connections in the traditional way during the Fall 2020 semester. Our intent is to document and highlight the steps taken by the MIT community to achieve connectedness amongst all of the students and support resources available to them. We will also identify those creative recommendations that should continue beyond the immediate impact of the COVID19 pandemic.

## Technology

There is no doubt that technology has evolved in such a way that even while isolating during a pandemic, we can remain connected. When students were sent home from MIT in March 2020, student leaders of the MIT FGLI community came together to compile a Google document consisting of resources MIT provided to support students in their transition home, including WiFi hotspot and tablet distribution by MIT IS&T. However, 9 months into the pandemic, we found that students who rely on internet access & technology to complete school work continue to experience frustrations as a result of their geographical location and access to basic amenities like electricity. MIT IS&T and members of support offices including Student Support Services (S<sup>3</sup>) continue to work with each student on a case-by-case basis to address their unique needs.

## Connectedness and Access to Resources

Staff in OVC and DSL, Taylor Pons & Miri Skolnik held a week-long community check in in March 2020, where students could ask questions in real time, including the emergency grading policy and accessing mental health resources while away. As the conversation grew more comfortable, the overarching theme from students was that living at home/ living off-campus is far more stressful than life at MIT and generally not conducive to learning. For example, one student expressed that they have a parental expectation that they will contribute to house chores, which took time away from schoolwork. Another student shared that while their parents were still physically going in to work, and the daycares were closed, they were still expected to watch over their younger siblings. This, again, took time away from school work, and this first-year student feared about falling behind.

*“I would say again, more family responsibilities and stuff to do at home besides just academics that kind of just wasn’t there I guess when I was at MIT.” (Focus group 514-FGLI 4.23)*

*“Well, I’m borrowing two computers right now. My internet is really bad, so I have to often use my cell phone’s hotspot. I’m looking for a place for the summer because I can’t live at home anymore. I don’t know if other people are also facing these issues, but I feel like they’re specific to me, and it has to do with my first gen, low income identity.” (Focus group 514-FGLI 4.23)*

*“And I feel like this whole evacuation from campus was just very abrupt and there was not a lot of things addressed as it was happening. And so, there’s nothing we can really do about it now since it already happened. But I think having more presence of our community would’ve helped mitigate those issues and kind of guide what the institute should do and how it could’ve been done.” (Focus group 514-FGLI 4.23)*

Transitioning home in March 2020 added an additional layer of stress on MIT students. Many FGLI students, specifically those who identify as low income, did not have adequate tools to work from home. And although MIT worked diligently to provide physical resources to students who were without, students had to ration their hotspot data for classes, and unfortunately had to take a step back from extracurricular activities. This added an additional layer of stress since they could no longer participate in clubs, opportunities to connect with alumni, etc.

In order to support FGLI students during this pandemic who are placed all over the world, the following COVID-19 related recommendations were immediately implemented:

1. Intentional matching from the Student Success Team (SST) coaches with FGLI students. Matching FGLI students with a Student Success Coach (SSC) who have previously worked

- with this community of students and are especially familiar with the new COVID-19 related resources, such as how to apply for an iPad and iPencil.
2. Build upon support group platforms that current FGLI leaders have established, such as Slack or Discord, where students can share helpful tips and resources they've found to be successful. This would also help students find & create networks of their peers who are in similar time zones.
  3. Create a digestible online resource for students and how to navigate MIT resources while at home. For example: if a student is using MIT Mental Health services, how can they continue utilizing that service while at home, and what implications (if any) will they face with their insurance?

Having these readily available and easily accessible resources, students will find it easier to locate what they're looking for and reach out for help, as opposed to having multiple resources located in a wide range of areas. Additionally, having FGLI students in positions where their input is heard in rooms where large decisions are being made will give senior administration the chance to fully consider the hurdles that come with staying at home for a FGLI student.

## **Overall Recommendations & Implications**

### **Institutionalized Definition**

Throughout our research, we found it challenging determining the students who were first generation. The current process is as follows:

During the undergraduate admissions application, students complete parental education history. Depending on how much the students complete, they are then coded as being first generation by Admissions. Around May 1, the compiled list of first generation students is sent over to the Office of the First Year, where outreach begins around June 1.

We found this process to be flawed. The way that the information is interpreted may result in the student not being appropriately identified as being first generation. In the inverse, if a student's parents have received a degree outside of the United States, they may not be coded as first generation, also resulting in not being captured. Although the student's parents have degrees, they may benefit from support navigating the United States higher education process. To set the scope of our research, the FGLIWG created a comprehensive definition to work with:

**A student who is First Generation is a student, domestic or international, where neither parent nor guardian has completed a baccalaureate degree (typically a four [4] year college degree), in the United States, and/or would benefit from support navigating the US education system.**

We concluded that we need to educate incoming students on what it means to be first generation, in order for them to make an informed decision to self-identify and engage with available resources. From there, within the application, an area (a check box, etc.) as well as the institutionalized definition, should be provided. It is then MIT's responsibility to ensure that a network of support is provided to these self-identified first generation students throughout their academic career. This would reduce confusion or misinterpretation, and thus would result in capturing more students to better provide support.

## Office & Space

Students and alumni have consistently highlighted a lack of space (quasi home) dedicated to FGLI students as a major barrier to cultivating community. Providing a community space as well as an office dedicated to FGLI support would give those students a place on campus where they can build community, access resources, and participate in programs that are tailored to their needs. FLI@MIT, a newly formed FGLI student organization, would find comfort in a space such as this one.

Below are the approximate percentages of first-generation undergraduates per graduating class year:

2024- 17%  
2023- 19%  
2022- 17%  
2021- 18%  
2020- 16%

This space would support an estimated 800 students per academic year. Housing this new office within the Office of the Vice Chancellor (OVC) will maintain continuity and ensure a sustained positive impact upon the experience of our FGLI students.

Currently, Taylor Pons serves as the Advisor to the First Generation Program (FGP). The responsibility of supporting the community of first generation students is only 1/3 of Taylor's portfolio. Tasked with supporting approximately 800 students, it is incredibly challenging for one administrator to support such a large population with limited working capacity. Ultimately, much of the work falls upon our FGLI students and their self-advocacy. Focused on meeting and exceeding the academic standards of MIT, while financing their education in some instances, these students are already overburdened. The work shouldn't rest upon their shoulders. MIT should take on the task to listen to these students and then invest into creating spaces and expanded programming that specifically support the FGLI community.

We believe resolving the situation would involve increasing the number of full-time support staff.

Compared to our peers such as Princeton, Yale, and Stanford, we have significantly less full-time staff support. For example:

1. Princeton's FGLI program named the *Scholars Institute Fellows Program (SIFP)* has seven (7) full-time support staff members, including a faculty advisor. Their bandwidth allows them to include initiatives such as health & wellness, a mentor program, and weekly tailored programming.
2. Yale is 18% first generation identified (on par to MIT). Yale has a staff of four (4) full-time employees and their support includes money management, research opportunities, and resources regarding documentation status.
3. Stanford has an office with a staff of four (4) full time employees. The office focuses on four (4) areas: advocacy, mentorship, community and belonging, and resources.

By budgeting for at least 2 additional full-time employees within the next calendar year, MIT can work towards the medium established by our peer institutions. Increasing the staff to student ratio shows the Institute's commitment to FGLI students and their expressed needs. In addition, there will be more available staff to build relationships with campus partners who have significant interaction with FGLI students, specifically faculty, S3, and OME, to name a few.

*“I think [a] more increased budget for all these programs would definitely also help just so we can actually have more events and just try to, again, engage the community further. Definitely an office of some sort, and also there's an office in the minority education to have resources like TSR Squared and stuff like that. Just putting more money into those resources so, again, people have a specific place to go to. They're not hunting for these offices all over the place.” (Focus group 514-FGLI 4.23).*

*“And so, I didn't really know who to talk to. Like, I went to S-cubed a couple of times, but they're very bombarded with other things. And so that didn't really work out too much for me. And so, like [student name redacted] was saying earlier, if we had a designated space, designated staff could be our point people, could be someone we can go to when we have these things that come up that maybe other people may not necessarily go through or experience, I think that's something that would be very helpful.” (Focus group 514-FGLI 4.23.2020)*

In previous years, a faculty member was nominated to serve as an additional advisor to the First Generation Program. We would like to advocate for this position to be reinstated and for it to be closely connected to the newly formed FGLI office. Recommendations from students will be heavily weighed while filling this role.

Roles and responsibilities for this appointment will include advising a cohort of FGLI students, teaching a seminar, and supporting the mentor and pre-orientation programs. This person would be a role model to not only faculty members in their department, but across the Institute as a vocal advocate for marginalized students.

Lastly, this space would hold two (2) prominent programs: the Peer Mentor Program & *FLIPOP*: the first generation and/or low income pre-orientation program. Having the Peer Mentor Program, and any future programming, come out of this space would increase visibility for the FGLI population. Currently, as it sits in the Office of the First Year, a common theme we've heard from students is that once they're no longer a first-year student, they don't feel that they can utilize the First Generation Program as a resource. The creation of this new office would be a neutral space where all class years can take advantage of what's being offered.

To create momentum and enhance community through consistent engagement, we recommend creating a cyclical opportunity, for students who participate in *FLIPOP*, to be mentored by upper level FGLI students in the peer mentor program. The first year participants will then be invited back as peer mentors once they are sophomores. These positions of leadership are influential to first-year first generation and/or low income students as they see their peers in positions of power to create positive change. *FLIPOP* serves as a springboard to launch students into leadership opportunities. This creates a mechanism for MIT to demonstrate its continuous investment in our students, who now have a platform to lead and influence decisions that affect their community.

This formalizes an organic dynamic that MIT is familiar with first-year students seeking mentorship from upper-level students. A space would ensure upper-level students are receiving accurate & updated resources and are trained on these resources and how to navigate & use them. Based on student quotes from all six (6) focus groups, students want to get involved with their community; upper-level students want to give back and volunteer their time. And by providing a space that would cultivate mentorship, we would be helping to positively influence the FGLI student experience.

## Database & First Year Seminar

During the working group's review, it was evident that with access to identifiers, such as income status and first generation status, in the MIT student information system, faculty and administrators are best prepared to tailor support to each student's unique needs. This is a step towards a more positive experience for students as they build relationships with the faculty and state that support them. This allows MIT support resources like Student Support Services and the Office of the First Year (OFY) access to tangible information to inform how they interact with a FGLI student. It would also allow the viewer to get a clearer picture of other support services available to each student. Each student's support plan would then be based in a team approach, where they are able to make referrals when appropriate, and be proactive about navigating instances when a student may feel isolated or separated from the rest of their MIT community.

From conceptualization to implementation, student input on this system function will be sought out. One expected result of this input is every student's ability to manage the personal information that's shared with their support network. At any point, a student can access the system, where they can both give and retract access to information. Furthermore, each student's account will have an audit trail that allows them to monitor who accesses their account and when. This transparency is vital because it encourages students to be an active participant in their support plan.

Through our research it was determined that creating a new First Year Advising Seminar that focuses on a deeper dive into the FGLI identity, as well as guidance on how a student should navigate their transition into MIT, could be a crucial step in enhancing the support for first generation and/or low income students on our campus. When asked about their support networks and community on campus, students stated:

*"I think there's this general feeling of being lost. The definition of first gen I got is that neither of your parents attended American college. So there's this whole idea of that that I as a first generation student have to figure out each of these steps by myself without outside help." (Focus Group 514-FGLI 3.3.2020)*

*"I'm a low income student. [I wonder] who else is facing these problems who wants to talk to me?" (Focus Group 514-FGLI 3.4.2020)*

*"a lot of the work that we [students] do is trying to build the community, trying to spread awareness." (514-FGLI 4.23.2020)*

The seminar would be taught by the 'in-house' faculty advisor who would help students gain a better understanding of resources the institute has to offer, start to explore their strengths and areas of growth as an MIT student, and build the foundation of a strong support network of peers, faculty, and staff. The faculty advisor leading the seminar would be carefully chosen based on their understanding of the first generation and/or low income student experience. The seminar would serve as a framework of the potential productive relationship a student could have with their instructors, TAs, and administrators. Programming implemented through the seminar would work towards breaking down barriers that prevent students from forming connections with MIT faculty and thus allow them to build strong connections at MIT as soon as their first semester begins.

In addition to weekly meetings as a group, students who participate in the advising seminar would meet with their advisor on a bi-weekly basis throughout the first year. MIT programs such as FGP, Interphase EDGE, and Laureates and Leaders have shown us the strength of having a community of peers and administrators as well as hands-on advising. By creating a First Year Advising Seminar for MIT students

who identify as first generation and/or low income we are providing them with a start that will help to ensure they know how to handle any hurdles that they may encounter during their MIT experience.

## Academics

We found that FGLI students felt particularly disadvantaged, compared to their non-FGLI peers, around academics in a variety of ways, including language usage, cost prohibitive opportunities, and academic level upon entry. However, FGLI students who may have attended a private or preparatory high school often feel more equipped to approach their advisors outside the classroom. These students take advantage of office hours and are more comfortable asking questions, requesting a reference, and utilizing resources. Despite privileges associated with attending these high schools, many of these students still face unique challenges posed by their FGLI identities. For FGLI students without the preparation of private or prep high schools, difficulties are even more exacerbated. FGLI students who attended a public and/or under resourced high school, who may have not been provided the tools necessary to self-advocate, are at a disadvantage of accessing their advisors to ask for help. We found that FGLI students often don't ask questions because they aren't even sure what to ask their advisors and/or professors.

*“Well, I do think a lot of MIT undergrads either came from school – like, a lot of students took classes at their local community college in math or local colleges in math, had parents who taught them linear algebra or differential equations just because the parents are qualified enough to teach them and they thought it was important. So usually, students come in with at least some solid grounding in math and math competitions are a big thing. You either do a lot of math things, you take math classes, or you learn from your parents, neither of which I did – none of which.” (Focus group 514-FGLI 3.3.2020)*

We found that it would provide for a much more positive experience if departments, past the first year, were intentional about matching FGLI students to either FGLI identified advisors, or advisors who have been appropriately trained to work with FGLI students. One solution to this issue would be intentionally matching FGLI students to advisors who are trained on FGLI needs. By taking this proactive step, it will begin to create an environment conducive to a healthy advisor/ advisee relationship. The content of the training will include, but not limited to:

1. Language usage, which will reduce academia stigma that if you don't know what something means (for example, the word Registrar, what the Registrar does, etc.) then you don't belong “here.”
2. Being knowledgeable of resources, and the names of folks within that resource. Direct referrals to colleagues in the Office of the First Year, Office of Minority Education, and Student Support and Wellbeing will increase the likelihood of student utilization of that resource.
3. Continuity of care. In our research, we found that students had a much more positive experience being advised by advisors who were physically on campus, and who were able to provide tangible support. Faculty advisors can exercise continuity by connecting their advisees to another faculty advisor or academic administrator in the department who is present, creating a plan with check-in milestones (especially around critical declines such as add/drop date), as well as increasing that students' academic support network.

To create continuity in the first-year, we believe that all first-year students should be advised by the Office of the First Year (OFY). This would ensure that all first-year students, FGLI identified or not, would be provided with the same level of access and academic support. All members of OFY are trained to know the most current and up-to-date policies and milestones and will be able to provide more accurate support. This

helps students build a strong foundation of how to advocate for themselves, which they will be able to take into their MIT career and beyond.

In order to maintain the best parts of the faculty to student relationship, which is the mentorship and the wealth of knowledge in their respective academic fields, faculty members could (and should) continue to teach seminars. Faculty members could definitely advise upper-level students, who may feel more comfortable and secure in their journey at MIT. However, by having all first-year students advised by OFY, we are providing them with the foundation & knowledge to be able to navigate their academic path in the first year.

## **Trainings**

We recommend that MIT expand and evolve the manner and scope of professional training available to our teaching staff, including faculty, TAs, RAs, AAs, etc. The working group's research reminded us that the responsibility sits with MIT to ensure that our teaching staff meets the needs of our students. Many undergraduate FGLI students feel unseen and unaccounted for, even when they are physically present in academic spaces. These students often feel teaching staff at MIT consciously and unconsciously ignore their lived experiences through teaching practices that don't account for their realities as First Generation, Low Income students. The working group offers this recommendation focused on multipronged, continuous training of all teaching staff that accounts for the needs of our students even if those that aren't immediately evident.

1. **Hidden Costs:** Teaching Staff will account for "hidden costs" when assigning work to our students. They will enter the conversation aware that it's an error to presume students have the financial means to purchase tools and resources that they mandate in their syllabi. An informed faculty member is now able to provide alternative means and funding resources to ensure that all MIT students can access the learning. For example, if students are required to read a daily/weekly periodical throughout the semester. The cost of purchasing this periodical may present as a hidden cost/barrier for our Low Income students. Teaching staff can address this barrier by ensuring that students can access copies of the periodical throughout the semester.
2. **Mentorship:** Provide MIT faculty with the training necessary to prioritize mentorship as part of their teaching practice. This would assist in debunking the proverbial barrier between faculty & students.
3. **Inclusive Learning Environment:** Language is a critical tool in a learning environment and unfortunately, Higher Education jargon can lend to overlooking certain students and their needs, especially if those students identify as FGLI and no one in their immediate nucleus attended college. FGLI students find it challenging to skim through a syllabus and decipher what terms, such as 'office hours' are.

*"Because at least in my experience, when I came in, I thought that I was fine for MIT academically because I had done fine in high school. But I realized that office hours were foreign to me, I didn't actually know how to take notes, I didn't really know how to study. And it's taken two and a half years to finally get those habits sort of on par with what is expected here." (Focus group 514-FGLI 4.23)*

By training faculty and staff, especially those who advise students during the academic year, to be more cognizant of differences in students' academic backgrounds, they are better equipped to create a more inclusive learning environment. This sensitivity is particularly important in instances when a student does

not understand how to utilize certain resources, such as office hours or the registrar's office. Well-trained faculty and staff members can offer this guidance.

In certain MIT departments, steps have already been taken to cultivate these resources and culture. We recommend assessing existing resources and creating new learning opportunities to fill gaps. The FGLIWG findings echo the reality that this type of cultural change is a process and training for our teaching staff is one step along the road. The intent is that as a result of these ongoing trainings, teaching staff will create tools and systems that are mindful of the lived experiences of our FGLI students.

### **Ongoing Research**

It is important to note that the recommendations in this report are meant to be a guide on how MIT may *begin* better supporting its first generation and/or low income undergraduate student population. There are several areas of growth that the FGLI Working Group discovered, through our research, that would be sound next steps for continuing the work. Topics that MIT has yet to dive deeper into include, but are not limited to:

1. Navigating how MIT can include FGLI student voices into decisions made about grading and academic policies
2. Providing support for parents/guardians and other family members of our FGLI student so they have resources that will help them to better understand what their student is going through.
3. Addressing whether our FGLI graduate students are adequately supported, and following up with a report of actionable solutions and recommendations for any gaps.
4. Providing targeted advising for FGLI student in regards to navigating job/internship selection and career guidance.
5. Continuing the work started by the Food Insecurity Solutions Working Group to focus on FGLI undergraduate and graduate students.
6. Adding questions to the MIT wide surveys that are explicitly curated for FGLI students so we can continue to track if we are adequately supporting the first generation and/or low income population on campus

### **Conclusion**

In conclusion, our intent is that these recommendations build the path for MIT to continue to enhance support for FGLI students. In order to ensure our FGLI students are successful, we need to work intentionally based off of the research completed, as well as the voices of FGLI students themselves- the ones who will be most impacted by the changes.

We are confident that through the following steps MIT will be able to better serve its FGLI student population:

1. Institutionalizing a definition to help students understand their identity and utilize the resources offered.
2. Dedicating a space and office of increased full-time staff support for FGLI students will positively enhance student experience.
3. Offering a first-year seminar, taught by a FGLI identified faculty member, to teach students about MIT, which will support their transition.

4. Holding training for faculty and other teaching staff on using and implementing inclusive language inside and outside of the classroom to create an equitable environment.

MIT needs to prioritize providing resources for our FGLI students to build a network of peers, support offices, and faculty. Consistent assessment is essential to ensuring that the recommendations in this report are implemented effectively. As programs are initiated, assessment plans should be developed. As is current practice, regular revisions should be made to the Student Quality of Life surveys to ensure that we continue to capture accurate information from our FGLI population. This report should be revisited in two years to assess progress on the recommendations and uncover areas that require additional attention.