

Origin and History of Visiting Committees at MIT

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How did MIT Visiting Committees come into existence? What purposes have they served? How have they changed over time? This historical review attempts to answer these questions.

The value of the VCs has been consistently recognized. In 1955 President Killian noted: "I also pay special tribute to the highly effective service which the Corporation Visiting Committees have rendered to the Institute in recent years. I think that we here in Cambridge often overlook the sacrifices made by Corporation members, alumni, and others in order to attend and participate in these meetings. I can say, however, that in a very important way, these advisory groups have guided and greatly stimulated the activities of the Institute over many years of its development."¹

The widely commented assessment that VCs are MIT's "secret sauce" is comforting but provides an unsatisfactory basis for evaluation and improvement. Since the MIT administration, MIT community, and many individuals make very real investments of valuable time, we must understand what this process accomplishes, and determine if the activities within the process are effectively supporting the objectives. The historical record helps identify several different purposes and explains the evolution of aspects of the process.

In 1961, in addressing the Corporation, President Stratton lamented the thin historical records of MIT and said: "Some day we must add to these a coherent account of the flow of ideas that have influenced academic aims and the methods of teaching at the Institute throughout the century."² This is an attempt to contribute a history of MIT Visiting Committees.

In addressing VC history, instead of a single linear chronology, the separate evolution of each aspect will be considered, starting with the origin and then looking at the evolution of VC purpose, process management, VC portfolio, membership, frequency, agendas, preparation, reports, non-meeting activities, and follow-on effects.

The Origin of Visiting Committees

In 1860, 18 citizens in Boston led by William Barton Rogers published a report proposing a "Massachusetts Institute of Technology," which they claimed would be "of great importance to the business interests of the State."

In 1861, the legislature approved the charter and granted MIT "One square of land" in Boston. In 1863, the commonwealth provided a \$5,000 per year perpetual grant to the Institute, and charitable grants totaling \$175,000 were raised. In 1865, the "School of Industrial Science"³ at MIT opened with 27 students.

By 1872, there were 280 students spread over 10 departments and the Corporation consisted of about 30 members. The Corporation met 11 times per year. Tuition was \$150 per year, but on average, only 25% of students who started successfully graduated.

In 1875, the Corporation adopted the following motion: "VISITS TO THE SCHOOL: On motion of Mr. Atkinson, it was voted that the Secretary notify members of the Corporation of a vote by which they are requested to visit certain specific departments of the school with which they are familiar and in which they take specific interest. He thought that the management of the school would be greatly facilitated by such visits." There were 18 committees "to visit and inspect the several departments" with 5 Corporation members listed on the committee for each department.⁴ Although these votes were taken and assignments made, the visiting committees did not appear to serve much function and mainly resulted in members sitting in on classes. Records have no further mentions of these visits or their activities until 1883.

Around 1882, MIT underwent a significant evolutionary change. Under the charge of MIT's third president, Francis Walker, MIT transformed from a small trade school to a university.⁵ In a little over a decade, MIT's physical footprint grew by a factor of 8, enrollment quadrupled, a humanities requirement was established, the first student housing was established (the Boston fraternities), regional alumni associations were created, graduate programs expanded, academic departments grew from 10 to 18, and the endowment started from zero. Further, MIT admitted the first black students and expanded the enrollment of women by a factor of seven.⁶ President Walker, under his mantra "The needs of the Institute are so great because the Institute itself is so much needed," successfully risked building facilities with the commitment to raise the money later.⁷ During this time, MIT circumvented multiple takeover attempts by Harvard, which continued for over 25 years.

When he started, President Walker found the Corporation to be disconnected with little involvement and poor ability to make decisions. Corporation appointments were for life and many had started their service 20 years earlier. He made several policy decisions that still guide the institute today. Three of the important ones are:

1. He established the Executive Committee of the Corporation in 1883.⁸ Although without a formal charter, this body was able to deeply understand the economics of the Institute, meet frequently, and support him in quick decisions.
2. He established the pre-eminence of the faculty in setting the educational direction of the school. A member of the faculty, after his death, provided a clear summary of this: "I have always regarded Walker's absolute insistence early in his presidency that the Faculty of the Institute, not members (often intermeddling ones) of the Corporation, should be the body to decide educational questions relating to its work, as perhaps the most fundamentally important step which he ever took. Without this he could not possibly have held his faculty firmly together nor have made them so feel their own responsibility as to act thoughtfully and with foresight. This also was a powerful aid to the retention of that solidarity of the Faculty, its power in team-work and freedom from cliques that has been of such great importance through its history. Incidentally, it saved him from embarrassment since he could truly and properly hold the Faculty responsible for what it decided by vote. The manner in which the Faculty held together, and, I think I may say, almost without exception regardless of individual interests, was a great help in carrying us through the long succession of "lean years."⁹

3. Walker established the requirement that Corporation members serve on visiting committees.¹⁰ He reported: "The appointment of committees of visitors, under the recently adopted rules of the Corporation, promises to be of great service."¹¹ The dominant role of the executive committee had isolated the Corporation from the activities of the school and he wanted to re-engage the older members (Corporation members served for life until 1904).¹² To solve this problem he pressed each member of the Corporation to serve on one of eight newly re-formed visiting committees to familiarize themselves with the curriculum, the students, and the role of the University.^{13,14} There were fewer visiting committees than departments because many had purview over more than one department. In the first year, they are reported to have done little more than attend "recitations, lectures, and laboratory practice" and make "several suggestions."¹⁵

This is where the history of the Visiting Committees begins.

Historical Purposes of the Visiting Committees

President Walker provided encouragement for the VCs: "Already, the good influences of the new force thus set in operation have been felt throughout the school. Instructors and students alike have been gratified and encouraged by the presence of members of the Corporation at recitations, lectures, and laboratory practice, while several suggestions of manifest practical value have been offered as the first result of this visitation."¹⁶

The purpose of VCs is from time to time articulated in broad terms. In 1971 a Corporation guidebook provides one summary: "Committee members bring to the department the point of view and the needs of industry, other educational institutions, government, and the professions; they help to maintain a close relationship between academic procedure and professional practice; and they afford the instructing staff and students expert comment and appraisal on current and proposed programs. The effects of a Visiting Committee's review of departmental activities are clearly stimulating; important changes in Institute policy have resulted from Committee recommendations."¹⁷

In 1975 Provost Rosenbluth attempted to define the spirit of Visiting Committees as "...essential organizers of the intellectual metabolism of the Institute."¹⁸

An examination of the historical records identifies *ten* different purposes that have become apparent to the Corporation and Administration over time.

The ***first and original purpose was to engage the Corporation to improve their direct understanding of the operations of the Institute to fulfill their role as trustees.*** Originally, VCs were comprised of Corporation members only. In 1936 President Compton's report provides insight reinforcing his understanding of this role of the VCs: "In presenting such a program I am well aware that a convincing case must be made for it, if this Corporation is to be expected to give its approval and its cooperation in achieving the desired objectives. Through the studies made by its visiting committees, however, the Corporation is already informed of many urgent needs of the Institute, so that my task in presenting them is lightened."¹⁹ In 1938 President Compton referred to the way that VCs inspire and inform the Corporation's and MIT's role: "our greatest opportunity for increasing significantly our contributions to human welfare is undoubtedly dependent upon increased funds for research. I have said this same thing

on previous occasions. I do not need to defend this viewpoint by answering the criticism that it is ideas and genius primarily, and money only secondarily, which bring values in research. I do not need to argue this, for every one of you has, through Visiting Committee duties, seen part of the vision of what the Institute could accomplish for the benefit of humanity with the ideas and genius already waiting but for the resources to make this vision a reality.”²⁰

The ***second purpose that emerged almost immediately was that the VCs made “suggestions” about specific departments, which appeared to be a mix of suggestions directly to the faculty, the department head, the administration, and the Corporation.*** In the first 20 years, there are no extant records of what form these suggestions took or to whom they were directed. By 1910, recommendations became more formalized in written reports, sometimes numbered, and received formal recognition by the administration. President Maclaurin in his report to the Corporation noted: “The report of the Visiting Committee on Chemistry will be presented to-day and will make important suggestions for the improvement of that Department. I need not therefore pursue the matter further until that report has been considered.”²¹ By the 1930s, departmental reports to the Corporation by the department heads, which occurred from time to time, often mention progress against a recommendation by the VCs.

Some of the recommendations of the VCs recur over and over again for long periods of time; familiar recommendations date back to 1958: “The Department Visiting Committee believes the Department's foremost problem is to attract increasing undergraduate enrollment.”²² Also “...attempts to attract top-quality candidates are still hampered by the inadequacy of scholarship and fellowship resources”²³ And another common refrain from 1978: “At present, the Department is spread across four buildings and as many floors. Physical separation makes for social and intellectual estrangement as our Visiting Committee emphatically noted.”²⁴

In addition to recommendations specific to the department, by 1924, VCs began to make broader recommendations affecting all students: “...the suggestion of the Visiting Committee of the Corporation, [that] undergraduate instruction [be] designed to develop the capacity of the student for oral presentation.”²⁵

The records show a ***third purpose for the VCs.*** In the early 1900s, the administration was thin and depended on the VCs ***to provide due diligence in assessing the plans and requests of departments.*** Over the next decades, reports often referred to VCs as granting “approval” for departmental plans including curriculum changes and hiring, but a read of these records suggests that such “approval” should not be viewed as a delegation of formal authority to the VC but rather as a “recommendation of validation” to the administration and Corporation. In the early 1900s, after assessing such requests, the VCs occasionally propose that a one-time grant of endowment capital be released to a department for a specific purpose.²⁶

During the early 1900s, a ***fourth purpose of Visiting Committees began to emerge: A bonding of members of the Corporation to different departments, as champions for the department within the Corporation, and providers of financial support for specific initiatives:*** “[funds] have been kindly contributed by certain members of the Visiting Committee to the department.”²⁷ In 1950: “Due to the generosity of Mr. J. Willard Hayden, a member of the Medical Department Visiting Committee, a new X-ray table has been added to the equipment of the X-ray department.”²⁸ “As a long-time member of the Visiting Committee on the Earth Sciences, Mr. Cecil H. Green[provided a] magnificent gift of

\$2,500,000 for the Earth Sciences Center.”²⁹ Records reflect that this aspect has continued to the current day.

In 1908, a ***fifth purpose of VCs emerged: Helping form/deploy strategy.*** Until this time, issues dealt with by the Corporation and visiting committees were related to specific current departmental issues relating to instruction, lab space, faculty recruitment, and funding. In 1908, the Institute began to recognize the area of research, and the president called on the visiting committees to respond: “The formal organization of research laboratories accomplishes much more than the same expenditure of money for uncorrelated investigations by the individual members of the departments. It calls attention to the activity of the Institute in this field, raises its scientific standing, attracts advanced students, who are often just as effective research workers as inexperienced assistants, offers facilities and inducements for advanced study and investigation to our younger instructors, and forms a nucleus of development in this important direction. I recommend that the Visiting Committees of the Departments give this matter their attention.”³⁰ Committees sometimes took the definition of their charge into their own hands: “The committee has assumed that its province is less to report upon the work actually being done within the Institute than to submit considerations as to the general aims and policies which may render the work of the institute...”³¹ In 1923 the main focus of a VC was on a strategic issue: “There was a general discussion as to what type of student it was desired the Institute should produce, and what principal qualifications were desired when employing the student graduates.”³²

A sixth purpose emerged in the 1920s, by having industry representatives and academics from other schools to provide fresh perspective to the departments In 1924, President Stratton reminded the Corporation of the constructive nature of the VC role: “In each department[,] the Visiting Committee of the Corporation, the Instructing Staff, and technical experts selected from the various professions, are cooperating in a way which is of the greatest benefit to the Institute in the development of its courses of instruction and investigational work.”³³ Some visiting committees, which were then made up entirely of Corporation members, brought in outside experts from industry and academia as advisors.

This practice was determined successful and formalized by adding alumni and presidential appointments around 1935. In 1955, the Secretary reported: “Among other results, the visiting committee meetings keep departments alert to the needs of industry in a way that would be difficult to achieve by any other mechanism.”³⁴ The influence of industrial members begins to show “At the suggestion of the [1951] Department Visiting Committee, active efforts are being made to offer an option in Biochemical Engineering in the Department curriculum which should be of particular interest to the pharmaceutical industry”³⁵ (the next year this curriculum was announced by President Killian.)³⁶

In 1937, President Compton identified the ***seventh key purpose of visiting committees, which was to spur each department to come together in preparation for the meeting, thinking through and organizing their program and plans.*** This is one of the least obvious purposes of the VCs, yet arguably the most important. Compton gave a most remarkable and expansive statement reviewing the purpose and experience of visiting committees in 1937:

“This committee organization appears to be almost if not entirely characteristic of the northeastern universities. An extensive though not exhaustive study of other educational institutions discloses a visiting committee system in operation at Harvard, Yale, Brown and Amherst, and that a similar activity was discontinued at Purdue University about sixteen years ago.”

He then continued: "Several members of the Corporation have recently suggested that it would be of general interest for the President to report back to the Corporation as a body some of the more significant results of the visiting committee operations. This I am most happy to do, and at the same time to pay a tribute to the very great stimulation and assistance in many ways which these visiting committees have given to the administrative officers of the Institution. At the same time I would point out that the values of visiting committees are of various types. The very fact of these periodical inspections is undoubtedly a stimulus and a spur on each department to operate effectively and to think clearly through its program and its problems. The direct discussion between visiting committee and departmental staff develops many criticisms and constructive suggestions which may not appear on the record. Frequently visiting committees can place the weight of their recommendations behind some project which has originated in the Faculty and this always has weight with the President and Executive Committee, because of confidence that this backing would not have been given without careful scrutiny and consideration.

Occasionally there are very difficult problems confronting the organization of programs of a department, in whose solution the administration is urgently in need of suggestion and advice, and it is probably in these cases that visiting committees have performed their most striking services. Fortunately these extreme cases are rather rare.

In addition to all these types of service, there is the important background of maintaining a well-informed contact with the personnel program and equipment of the Institute in order that the Corporation as a whole may feel confident that the Institution for which it is responsible is in a healthy state. Or, if this be not the case, that the Corporation may be aware of the fact.

It is also recognized that it is generally unnecessary for the visiting committee on any given department to do an exhaustive job every year. If a very careful study has been made in one year for example, and the serious problems have for the time being found solution, the committees on this department for the next year or two may quite possibly make a rather superficial study of the situation simply to be sure that affairs are running as scheduled. I believe, however, that at least every three years or so there should be a careful and thorough investigation into the affairs and problems of each department.

A list of the specific recommendations or judgments which have been made by visiting committees during the past two years quickly convinced me that it would be impossible even to mention all of the interesting points which have been brought out in these reports. I will, however, comment on at least the major recommendations which have been made."³⁷

This was the preface for Compton's written summaries of all the visiting committee findings of the year, by department, which was the first (and only) time any such summary report of VCs by a president was given. After running through the departments, Compton made the following remarkable summary of his observations:

"With this summary of the activities of our visiting committees and the positive accomplishment which has followed their recommendations, I believe that we should all be convinced that the visiting committee plan is operating effectively. Close as I have been to these activities, I will

confess that I was distinctly surprised when all of these facts were assembled and I realized how important and how effective the work of these committees has been.

I know that individual members of the Corporation have sometimes wondered whether the time and effort which they expended was justified by the results or, on the other hand, may have felt that the committees were not active enough and were of but nominal significance. The above record speaks for itself and I wish personally and officially to express appreciation of the great help which you have given the Institute through these visiting committee activities. The work has been done by many members and each individual may have wondered about the significance of his efforts. When the aggregate picture is considered, however, I believe that there is justification for a considerable degree of satisfaction and enthusiasm on the part of the Corporation of this aspect of its responsibilities.³⁸

Thirty years later, the 1967 report of President Johnson contained a further summary of purpose: "During the year the Academic Council and the Corporation devoted special attention to the role of the Visiting Committees in an effort to reexamine their value and effectiveness. As a result of these helpful discussions, a number of considerations were brought out which are worth recording here."

1. The Visiting Committees are Committees of the Corporation. They serve to keep the Corporation informed about the progress and plans of the departments.
2. The periodic meetings of the Committees unquestionably help the departments to take stock of their position and quality. The participation of the deans and senior officers of the Institute is essential to this aspect of the Visiting Committee procedure.
3. The active work of the Committees is an important assurance to the departments that the Corporation is interested in their specialized fields.
4. The Visiting Committees make timely, positive recommendations which clearly have a stimulating effect. To the extent that the Committees can act as advisors to the departments, there are additional values in their operation, but they are not intended primarily for this purpose, even though their specific recommendations are often implemented. It is asking a great deal, as do many institutions who employ departmental advisory committees, in contrast to visiting committees as we know them, to expect an annual or biannual committee meeting to serve a departmental advisory function as its principal objective. The advisory aspect of the Corporation Visiting Committees is best seen as a continuing process in which departmental plans and programs are clarified through the exercise of their being presented to a group of informed, interested friends and colleagues. This informal process, rather than the specifics of reports and recommendations, is the medium through which the Committees operate most effectively.
5. University trustees have an obligation to be deeply concerned about educational matters. In carrying out this responsibility, it is not reasonable to expect enlightened trusteeship in the absence of a personal involvement with the academic programs in some depth.
6. We have a uniquely valuable system of Visiting Committees at the Institute. It profoundly helps the Corporation and the Institute by enlisting leading alumni and professional leaders from

all over the country (around 150, in addition to Corporation Members, at any one time) and involving them in the work of the officers of the Institute.”³⁹

An ***eighth purpose of the VC, to assess overall climate issues which may be related to the culture of department or the Institute, first was described around 1920.*** This began with generic statements about the department: “A splendid spirit of cooperation exists and it is carrying-on effectively.”⁴⁰ Climate was not always assessed positively: “there is a great lack of personal harmony in the department... [including] personal antagonisms and jealousies [causing] real damage...”⁴¹ Later, around 1978, this evaluation evolved to the VC examining the climate with regard to specific subgroups: “It afforded an opportunity to review candidly before the committee issues raised in a report prepared by the Minority Community of the Department of Urban Studies and Planning and Professor Donald Schon’s analysis of issues that influence the climate of education in the Department.”⁴² This trend accelerated after 2015 with the VCs’ increasing focus on Title-9 and DEI issues.

More recently, a ***ninth purpose of VCs is apparent from recent reports, but is not historically discussed anywhere. VCs today assess the leadership of the department and advise the administration on whether it should change.*** All VC oral reports including the executive session appear to include an assessment of the department head and their team. No reports during the 1900s mention this function, and there do not appear to be any historical references suggesting this is a role of the VCs. Members of the VC who also serve on boards of organizations where this is a primary function may assume that this is an expected function of the VC.

Finally, while never described in the records explicitly, it is clear that the VCs have a ***tenth role in building community,*** which is defined as development of a common sense of connection, understanding, and belonging. Originally conceived in part to develop trust and shared vision between the administration and the Corporation, the VC is the only current method to develop trust and shared vision between the Corporation and the faculty, students, and department staff. Listening sessions and the faculty dinners serve to provide this community-building function. While this was probably not considered a noteworthy purpose 50 years ago, it has become a high priority today.

Piecing together all of the consequences of the VC system that can be gleaned from the historical record leads to the following summary list of ten emergent purposes:

1. Make Corporation members better-informed trustees
2. Make recommendations for both departmental and administrative improvements
3. Independent validation of Department plans and requests
4. Help develop/deploy strategy
5. Create department champions and supporters among the Corporation
6. Bring in outside fresh viewpoints and counsel from industry and academia
7. Compel departments to come together and organize their plans
8. Assess climate
9. Assess leadership
10. Community building

Evolution of the Visiting Committee Process

The evolution of the VC process over time is addressed separately for each of the following aspects: VC portfolio, membership, frequency, agendas, preparation, reports, non-meeting activities, and follow-on effects.

Process Management

Unlike visiting committees at other universities, the visiting committees are a creature of the Corporation. They serve the Corporation. The process is controlled by the Secretary of the Corporation. Corporation members are the foundation of the committees. Changes to the VC process are, in principle, the responsibility of the Corporation.

At many other universities having a VC process, all aspects of the process may be controlled by, and serve, the administration or even the department. As a result, trustees do not control the process or serve on such visiting committees. Many visiting committees are narrowly focused on academic issues such as accreditation.

The MIT VC process is weakly defined and tends to take on whatever format members of the Corporation are familiar with or recall from previous VC meetings, as guided and assisted by the Secretary. The Corporation includes many members with Corporate Board experience, and without other guidance, they tend to view VCs as they view a corporate board, which exhibits functions of audit, assessment of risk, challenging plans, assessing leadership, etc. As members of the Corporation, they also feel unconstrained in what they can investigate or what conclusions they might reach, no matter how uncomfortable.

The overall management of the day-to-day process of VCs has always been by the Secretary of the Corporation. In 1965, the secretary reported: "A modest beginning has been made within the Office of the Vice President and Secretary to strengthen the work of the Visiting Committees through improved scheduling and information services to Committee members."⁴³ By 1968, there was a special staff person under the Secretary assigned to support the VCs.⁴⁴

The VC process, including its inputs, outputs, purpose, and procedures, has been roughly described over time but never written in detail. The president and units over time celebrated their benefits, but there is no record of concern regarding them which warranted any clear review or changes. The record shows that during most of the early 1900s, no detailed procedures were necessary because the meetings tended to be unscripted and do deep dives on whatever issues seemed interesting to the members of the department. Making formal recommendations was the only consistent part of the process.

The first record of an intentional review of the VC process was in 1962. The president wrote: "...there has been some discussion of how the present visiting committee procedures might be made more effective, even though the present system works well. In fact, inquiries come regularly from other institutions about the M.I.T. system; these stem from complimentary comments about our visiting committees by alumni and presidential appointees as well as by Corporation members. Ways of improving the system will be actively explored in the coming months."⁴⁵

In 1967, the president reported that a review of the VC process had taken place: "During the year the Academic Council and the Corporation devoted special attention to the role of the Visiting Committees in an effort to reexamine their value and effectiveness. As a result of these helpful discussions, a number of

considerations were brought out.” (note: these considerations were listed in the prior section on Purpose). While the Corporation could have done this work on its own, it is notable that the Corporation and the Academic Council collaborated on this work.

In 1984, once more “the Corporation undertook an in-depth study of Visiting Committee procedures. A number of interesting changes have been made as a direct result of [chairman] Mr. Saxon's determination to improve the effectiveness of these vital Corporation Committees:

1. Membership in the average Visiting Committee has grown steadily through past efforts to diversify the composition of membership. Many of the Committees are now in excess of 20 members each. A multiple-year effort to reduce the size of each Committee to 15 or 16 members is underway.
2. Frequency of meetings, after a series of well-intentioned efforts to slow down the frequency during the MIT Leadership Campaign and then to speed it up again, has returned to the 18 to 24 month interval. This frequency is unequivocally the optimum time interval which nicely balances the need to hold meetings to carry out the Corporation's mandate and the need to allow enough time for organizational changes, plans, and progress to mature in academic departments. The cumulative translation to overall activity is approximately 15 Visiting Committee meetings per year in the steady state.
3. Length of meetings has been increased from a modular evening dinner followed by a full meeting day to at least a day and longer session in the interest of covering the agenda more thoughtfully and of allowing more time for individual discussions with component parts of departments being visited. This elongation has been universally welcomed despite the added meeting time and administrative effort involved. There have always been several Committees which have required two full days to accomplish their goals. The others are now gravitating toward day-and-a-half meetings, and we are watching carefully for strains on attendance due to the longer meetings.
4. Length of terms has been kept at three years to encourage rotation, but the additional rule has been instituted that no Visiting Committee member shall be terminated unless the individual has at least two opportunities to attend scheduled meetings.
5. Oral and written reports have been decoupled for the first time in 15 years in the interest of making these reports more dynamic and relevant. We have discarded the requirement introduced in the late 1960's that a Visiting Committee chairman must first submit a written report to the Executive Committee before being permitted to make his or her oral report to the Corporation. Under the revised reporting scheme, we have returned to the earlier and original standard, viz., an oral report is due at the next Corporation Meeting after the Visiting Committee meeting is held, and a written report is due as soon as it is practical and possible to prepare but not later than the semester following the semester in which the Visiting Committee meeting was held. To assist the Visiting Committee chairmen in preparing their reports, the Committees are now asked to meet privately in executive session, then meet with the senior officers at the end of the day to report their findings, and a prompt, confidential interim record of what they reported is furnished to them and to the senior officers by the Office of the Secretary. Despite the added administrative burden of preparing this interim record, the new reporting

arrangement has been well received by the Corporation. We have had only a partial year of experience with it, but the results so far appear to justify the added effort in terms of more timely reporting.”⁴⁶

Notable in the above discussion is that the analysis is purely focused on process mechanics and not a review of the purposes, goals, or results of the process.

In 1985 it was noted that “a systematic, biannual evaluation of visiting Committee performance with the President, Provost, and Secretary is continuing.”⁴⁷ This does not appear to have been a formalized process with reports.

In 1988, CJAC reported that they undertook “a discussion of the Visiting Committee process.”⁴⁸ Records of any result of this discussion have not been located.

In 1999, the Executive Committee had discussions about the VC process where they considered whether certain features of the VCs were appropriate, including the number of VCs, the size of VCs, the burden on the administration, the frequency of meetings, and the reports.⁴⁹ The result of these discussions was a number of proposals, including a VC planning guide, an annual meeting of VC Chairs, furnishing the VC with departmental statistics from the administration, and some kind of mid-cycle connection between the VC and department. Many of these features have become part of the process.

After 1999, neither the secretary of the Corporation nor the President report any review, assessment, or evaluation of the VC process. Subsequent reports of the secretary only include lists of the meetings of that year, changes to the VC portfolio, and data about the membership composition of the VCs in total.

In general, the VC process has been considered stable and routine since around 2000.

Visiting Committee Portfolio

During the early 1900s, visiting committees did not always clearly correspond to departments, which in turn did not correspond with the numbered degree courses we know today. For example, in 1915 there were 18 departments but only 15 degree courses.⁵⁰ Today the number of departments matches the numbered degree programs (1-22). Around the turn of the century, there were a number of “departments” that were not degree programs but complementary; these included departments of Drawing, English and History, Languages, Economics, and Hygiene; many of these departments had visiting committees. Adding to the confusion, related departments were often placed under the same visiting committee.

The need for non-departmental VCs was recognized early. In 1926, the Corporation created the first non-departmental visiting committee for the new “Division of Industrial Cooperation and Research” along with an advisory committee: “In addition to [the visiting committee], an Advisory Committee will be appointed consisting of experts interested in the relation between scientific research and industry. This committee will work jointly with the Visiting Committee and the staff of the division.”⁵¹ Over the next 100 years, examples of non-departmental visiting committees that formed are:

- Division of Industrial Cooperation and Research (1926)
- Humanics (Student Affairs by 1930; merged with Athletics by 1978)
- Libraries (by 1936)

- Institute for Medical Engineering and Science (1988) (formerly Whitaker/HST 1979)
- Institute for Data, Systems, and Society (formerly Engineering Systems Division)
- Media Lab
- Undergraduate and Graduate Education

The total number of VCs slowly grew with time:

- 1884 8
- 1894 11
- 1916 12
- 1928 18
- 1939 22
- 1956 24
- 1968 24
- 1978 29
- 2023 30

The records suggest that the Corporation governance committee recommended when a new VC should be created. A departmental VC may initiate the formation of a new VC: “The affairs of the Center have become too large, too complicated, and too specialized to remain within the purview of the Corporation Visiting Committee on the Department of Economics. A Special Visiting Committee of the Corporation has, therefore, been appointed and had its first visit this year.”⁵²

Membership

Originally, membership for each VC consisted of 3-5 members of the Corporation (who all served for life). In 1904, members no longer served for life, and the turnover of Corporation members (and therefore the VCs) increased. However, by 1910 it became clear that the attendance of the members could be a problem: “Your visiting committee consisted of four members, one of which has resigned and two have found it impossible to serve actively...your lone visitor, however, has been in constant touch with the Department during the year.”⁵³

It is interesting to note that the President was frequently an attendee for a VC meeting before 1950. It not known how long this continued, but it certainly ended when the VC administration readout was introduced in 1984.

During the early 1900s, VCs began to recognize the need for external advisors from academia and industry. As early as 1908, some VCs took the initiative to create external advisory groups to assist them and noted the value they provided. Such practice became widespread in 1923 under the authority of the Corporation “as suggested by President Stratton.”^{54 55} This became routine over the next decades: “The Visiting Committee appointed by the Corporation, and their advisory group, carefully reviewed the affairs of the department during the year and reaffirmed and emphasized their report of the preceding year, including therein the need of promotions in the staff and problems of laboratory space.”⁵⁶ Also: “the Visiting Committee, under Mr. Bemis, invited a number of leading men in the profession to advise on the course of study...”⁵⁷

While the *VC membership* was still exclusive to the Corporation in 1924, the *VC meetings* would include outside experts: “In each department, the Visiting Committee of the Corporation, the Instructing Staff, and technical experts selected from the various professions, are cooperating in a way which is of the greatest benefit to the Institute in the development of its courses of instruction and investigational work.”⁵⁸ These outside experts were called the “advisory group.”

In 1877, the Alumni Association attempted to make its own visiting committee to report annually upon such subjects connected with [the school] as should seem advisable.”⁵⁹ This function operated intermittently and was eventually discontinued when Alumni became formally part of the VC process.

In the mid-1930s, to institutionalize the involvement of other academics and industrialists, VC membership was extended to alumni as selected by the Alumni Association. The president was given presidential appointments to the VCs to meet special needs. The rule was: “not more than two nominated by the Alumni Association and not more than two nominated by the President, on each committee.”⁶⁰ By 1938, there were, on average, 7 members on a visiting committee, with three being from outside the Corporation.

VC membership over time

1884	3-5	Corporation members only
1916	3-5	Corporation members only
1934	7-8	3-4 Corporation plus 3-4 presidential or alumni
1968	8-10	3-4 Corporation plus 3 alumni plus 3 presidential
1971	15	3-4 Corporation plus 6 alumni plus 6 presidential
1983	21	temporary increase to bring on more women and minorities
1986	15	3-4 Corporation plus 6 alumni plus 6 presidential
2023	17	5 Corporation plus 6 alumni plus 6 presidential

In 1955, the Secretary commented on the outside membership: “I want to acknowledge the important contributions of the alumni and “presidential” representatives, who, with the Corporation members on the Committees, bring to bear a rich background of industrial and professional experience on educational affairs of the institution.”⁶¹

Although the VC membership included these outside members, there was still occasion to create an outside review board for a major issue. Such an outside review board would be validated by the VC: “Last year [1955] a distinguished committee under the chairmanship of President Edwin S. Burdell of Cooper Union in New York recommended establishment at the Institute of a Center of Urban Studies to supplement, extend, and strengthen our work in city planning and to provide research facilities in this area of growing importance. The principal recommendations of this committee were also endorsed by the Corporation Visiting Committee for the School of Architecture and Planning”⁶²

In 1971 the size of VCs was expanded to 15. “The rationale for this move is to strengthen the Visiting Committees, recognize the growing numbers of distinguished alumni who are eligible and anxious to

serve on these Committees, and to support greater attendance at mid-winter meetings of Visiting Committees.”⁶³

The role of the Dean in the meetings appears to have changed over time: “The suggestion that the Dean of the Graduate School attend departmental Visiting Committee meetings has provided an excellent and valuable opportunity for the Dean to become more knowledgeable about the spirit and character and the current status and future plans of many activities.”⁶⁴

As late as 1956, the entire VC membership was described as made up of “distinguished men.”⁶⁵ In 1973 the first woman chaired a VC.⁶⁶ In 1982, the size of VCs was temporarily increased to 21 at the urging of President Gray in order to add an infusion of women and minorities. When this was complete, “Women now represent 20 percent and American minorities now represent 10 percent of the total number of 575 positions in the Visiting Committees.”⁶⁷ By 1998 “Women comprised 23 percent of the visiting committee membership, and minorities 15 percent; 68 percent of the members were affiliated with corporations, 31 percent with academia, and one percent with government and foundations.”⁶⁸

While there are scant early records relating to how VC members are chosen, there are snippets that indicate who was involved: A 1965 record states: “Special thanks ... to the Provost for his patient advice in the selection of new Committee members for the coming year.”⁶⁹ A 1978 record of thanks states “I wish to thank Rosemary Carpenter of the M. I T. Alumni Association for her exceptional support of the nomination of alumni to the Visiting Committees and for her assistance to the Corporation Screening Committee for younger alumni...A total of 76 alumni were nominated by the Association's Committee on Nominations for Corporation Visiting Committees to fill vacancies on the Visiting Committees.”⁷⁰

Some procedures for membership became better defined in 1986: “This spring we decided on two procedural changes: New presidential appointments will serve a four-year term in keeping with the 18- to 24-month meeting cycle, thus allowing each member to attend two meetings during his or her term; and Chairmen will now serve five-year terms in order to tap the expertise and perspective of new Corporation members and to ease the burden on those who have served many years. Several ongoing goals include a limit of membership to 15 for most committees and a continued press for an increase in minority and female representation.”⁷¹

Today VCs are reviewed for membership every other year (half of the VCs are up for review every year). Presidential and alumni VC members are expected to serve for one term, consisting of two cycles of the VC; such members may be renewed for a second term. The Alumni Association solicits applications/nominations. The Corporation office also collects nominations from schools, units, and the administration. The Corporation Office and staff from the Alumni Association and Resource Development meet with unit heads to review the needs of the department, discuss whether to renew or retire VC members with terms ending and generate a list of preferred nominees and alternates for each available presidential and alumni slot from among the candidates. The Membership Committee, led by the Corporation Office, including members of the administration, approves the final slate of candidates.

Frequency

While early records show no official statement of frequency, Corporation reports show that they were annual. In addition, other special-purpose VC meetings are occasionally noted with advisory groups or

the administration. In some cases, VCs were reported to meet multiple times per year; Civil engineering reported that “two well-attended meetings of the visiting committee” were held in 1945⁷² and two again in 1947.⁷³ VCs that met more than once per year typically had different agendas for the two meetings; for example after a December meeting regarding laboratory facilities, a VC scheduled a second meeting 6 months later to “devote its time to the work of students and the teaching programs...”⁷⁴

By 1949 many units still had an annual VC meeting.⁷⁵ References in 1951 suggest that many (possibly all) VC meetings were annual.⁷⁶ As late as 1955, VC meetings were annual; some lasted one day and some lasted two days.⁷⁷

By 1956 two-thirds of VCs met annually, and one-third met bi-annually.⁷⁸ This pattern was also found in 1965.⁷⁹ However, in 1967, the frequency began to move to biannual based on “a desire on the part of some departments and Committee chairmen to meet at other than an annual interval.”⁸⁰ Nevertheless, in 1968, annual meetings continued for some units: “some Committee chairmen and academic departments preferring an annual meeting, others preferring to meet less frequently.”⁸¹

In 1976, the Corporation voted to slow down the meeting cycle of those units with an annual cycle.⁸² In 1978, the Secretary commented on the two-year format: “The rationale for fewer meetings is sound in the light of the increased outreach activities of the Institute during the intensive period of off-campus campaigning under the current capital drive. In addition, the turnover among Department Heads, in recent years averaging around 20 percent, has mitigated the demand for meetings somewhat, as Visiting Committee Chairmen have tried to recognize the need for new Department Heads for adequate time to develop their plans.”⁸³

Nevertheless, in 1982, the Corporation then increased the frequency to a “guideline set by the Corporation during its March 6, 1981, meeting to increase Visiting Committee meetings to a 12- to 18-month cycle from the 24-month cycle.”⁸⁴ Within a year the Corporation found this frequency unworkable and set the frequency to bi-annual.⁸⁵

Agendas

The records indicate that early VCs would visit classrooms and laboratories, where they might interact with students, and the VC would have meetings with the unit head and the faculty. Extant records show that the entire agenda for meetings up to the 1940s might consist of visits to laboratories and classes, followed by a wrap-up.⁸⁶ Other than the visits, any other part of the meeting was unscripted and instead focused on deep dives on a few topical themes, which were typically issues brought up by the department.

The way VC meetings were organized appears to have been left somewhat to the units. In at least some units the unit staff were allowed to attend. As one unit in 1938 noted: “For several years these meetings of the Visiting Committee have been open to all staff members and the writer has noted with satisfaction the developing aptitude of the staff in the difficult art of assimilating and adapting suggestions to specific problems.”⁸⁷

Meeting Theme

The assumed theme of the VC was to assess the condition of a unit and discuss its various needs. However, this was adaptable and may be taken over by a single theme: “It was the intention of the

Committee to report at this time and at some length upon the various matters to which its [past] deliberations have been directed, but in order that your attention may be focused upon a single matter of immediate and large importance it has been deemed advisable to postpone any general presentation of the affairs of the department until your next meeting and to request your consideration at this time of certain proposals in connection with the training of chemical engineers.”⁸⁸

While there are few early agendas found, a retrospective summary in 1947 provides a representative agenda: “A Visiting Committee meeting was held in May, and the following topics were considered and discussed: competition for scholars; professional status of departmental graduates; teaching material from large versus medium-sized industries; public relations; opportunities for adult education; departmental alumni relations; departmental research; interim industrial experience during collegiate training; departmental graduate work; instruction in educational techniques; departmental collaboration with the oil industry; interest of technical students in liberal arts; significance of the historical approach. The meeting was in the nature of a preliminary consideration of present and future departmental problems, which will be further reviewed.”⁸⁹ The last line indicates the theme of the meeting. What is particularly notable is that the meeting is not organized around meetings of constituency groups, but instead organized by issue.

In an interesting variation, one unit in the 1950s would have the VC dinner with faculty *prior* to the meeting, at which there would be a roundtable where after dinner the faculty would propose to the committee the subject of focus of the meeting: “After supper, Professor Draper outlined the following important areas which he hoped the Committee would consider at its business session.”⁹⁰ Today, the session with the faculty is often where important issues come up, but it may be as late as near the end of the meeting.

Another retrospective summary suggested a more generic theme of a VC meeting: “to examine the programs and facilities of the Department” and in which they “approved the proposal to provide a transonic blow-down nozzle for the Wright Brothers Wind Tunnel, the Honors and Cooperative courses of instruction, and the graduate curriculum for the professional degree of Aeronautical Engineer.”⁹¹

Sometimes a VC meeting would be devoted to a deep-dive into a specific issue: “A meeting of the [1949] Visiting Committee in the spring term was devoted to an examination of the Department's program, first with reference to staff and facilities available and, second, with reference to the curriculum and the requirements of industry both for scientists (specialists) and for more broadly trained engineers.”⁹² In 1968 a VC meeting was focused on a single theme: “the [VC] program was mainly on the theme of the Department's expanding involvement with research fields motivated by societal needs, in contrast to problems arising in industry or, more commonly in the three decades since World War II, from military and aerospace requirements.”⁹³

Sometimes VC meetings were specifically not themed but developed a focus theme at the meeting: “At the [1969] meeting of the Corporation Visiting Committee on Student Affairs, the agenda was open-ended so that discussion could move in any direction. Counseling had not been proposed as the main topic. By the end of the meeting, it was apparent from the concerns voiced by students and the response of the members of the Committee that the subject of counseling, and its improvement, was of major importance.”⁹⁴

Today, VC meetings are agenda-driven with a packed series of 45-minute to 1-hour sessions, primarily with constituency groups. Constituency group discussions can take up much of the meeting, leaving little time for deeper exploration of other topics or facility tours.

Meeting Duration

The records show the length of VC meetings was either 1, 1.5, 2, or 2.5 days. Early meetings were annual and a single day, although larger units sometimes had longer meetings. From time-to-time the Corporation appears to have stated a policy: “This year [1978] a change in the format of the Corporation Visiting Committee proved to be very effective. The two-day visit of the newly established subcommittee enabled the members to visit all discipline groups in the Department, and also gave them sufficient time to understand the professional program in the context of the whole Department.”⁹⁵ Yet there was still variation; in 1985, “One of the above Committees met for two and one-half days, two met for two full days, and ten met for one and one-half days”⁹⁶

In 1984, the Corporation set the 1.5-day target duration going forward, but allowing some to go to two days if essential.⁹⁷

Agenda Items

While early VC meetings generally were theme-focused, in the latter half of the 20th century, a standardized agenda began to be defined for academic unit VCs. This scripted portion of the agenda subsequently grew. Today, academic unit VC meetings have become highly scripted and include first the following meetings regarding the state of the academic unit:

- Dean
- Academic Unit Head
- Undergraduate academic program (if applicable)
- Graduate academic program

The VC then meets with a standardized list of constituency groups, including

- Faculty
- Junior Faculty (ca 1970s)
- Undergraduates (ca 1960s)
- Graduate students (ca 1960s)
- Post-doctoral researchers (ca 2010s)
- Administrative and teaching staff (ca 2020s)

With the exception of the sessions with the Dean and unit head, which occur first, these sessions are in no particular order and are often dictated by schedule issues.

During the 1970s, the dinner after the first day became standardized: “All 18 meetings, save one, included dinner at which the Committee members were brought together informally with members of the faculty and administration and in a few cases with students.” Interestingly, some VCs in the 1970s also had an optional informal student dinner the night *before* the VC meeting for those VC members who had arrived by then.⁹⁸ Today, some Chairs will offer an informal dinner with the unit head and any VC members interested the day prior to the meeting.

While in the early 1900s, the departmental VCs clearly met with faculty, in the latter half of the century, agendas began to add constituency group sessions: “Another innovation [1969] is the participation of students in the meetings of the Visiting Committees of several departments.”⁹⁹ “[T]he Committees made effective use of private sessions with students on their agenda, further formalizing this additional and valuable means of gaining insight into departmental activities. A number of the Committees for larger departments included similar separate sessions with junior faculty.”¹⁰⁰

The post-doctoral researchers' meeting was added around 2015, and the administrative and teaching staff meeting was added in 2022. Constituency groups now consume the majority of the VC's time, and reconciling what was heard during those meetings consumes a considerable amount of VC discussion time. Tours, overviews of research programs, and deep dives into specific issues have been reduced or eliminated to accommodate these constituency groups.

The agenda *within* the individual constituency group meetings is controlled by the VC chair and today varies across chairs and units. The chair can direct the conversation to issues she believes are relevant to the president or the Corporation; the chair can focus on issues raised by the dean or unit head; the chair can open the meetings to whatever the constituency wants to talk about; or the chair can direct the discussions to any combination of these three.

What is clear is that meeting agendas over time have evolved from being issue-driven to being constituency-group-driven. There does not appear to be any flexibility to remove these groups from the agenda to release time for other purposes.

Meeting Variations

In a novel and interesting development, related units with similar issues sometimes had joint meetings of their visiting committees, such as this example from 1928: “The joint meeting of the Visiting and Advisory Committees of the Physics and Electrical Engineering Departments resulted in many helpful suggestions, both as to the scope of the work and the equipment of the department.”¹⁰¹ It is not clear whether such a meeting replaced or was in addition to the regular meeting.

Preparation

There is very little information on the history of preparation for VC meetings. Today the VC Chair meets in advance with the unit head to prepare an agenda and discuss various issues. The Chair also meets with the Dean to discuss the administration's view of the unit and its issues.

The records of the earliest VCs indicate that the preparation included little more than an itinerary of the labs or classes to be visited. In some cases, the VC chair or the unit head would frame ahead of time one or more issues to be discussed. By the 1950s, record references suggest that the unit head would prepare and present a state of the department with key challenges.

Today, VC members receive a pre-read package of up to 500 pages, with a new trend of additional video presentations. These packages do not have a prescribed content and format, but tend to include:

- Unit head summary of the state of the department,
- Prior VC reports (last 2 plus interim)
- Progress regarding prior VC recommendations

- Unit official strategy and/or plans
- Academic data and trends
- Curriculum changes
- Biography information on new hires
- Summaries of recent research
- Recent awards and publications

Today, members of the constituency groups that attend the visiting committee meeting are chosen by the unit head or self-selected volunteers. Preparation by constituency groups is inconsistent. Some do not prepare; some meet ahead of time to discuss issues, some conduct surveys of their constituency group, and some prepare formal reports that the representatives present to the Corporation. When the groups prepare, in some cases, the preparation is requested by the chair or the unit head, and in other cases, the group may self-organize. Typically, any such presentation is not reviewed or approved in advance by the unit head. The request for presentation may ask that it address certain issues, address any problem issues, and/or address “things that are working well.”

Reports

Early VC reports before 1930 had no clear standardized structure, ranging anywhere from a single page¹⁰² to 20 pages in length. Some reports focused only on recent changes or accomplishments of the department. Some focused on identifying issues that should be studied without making any recommendations. Some spoke in very broad terms regarding the mission of the department, and some focused on small details regarding specific equipment. Some reports provided vague recommendations, and some gave very specific and detailed problem statements with numbered recommendations.

While the reports eventually converged somewhat over time to a common length and predictable structure, no record has been found of any template or policy regarding this.

In the early 1900s, the annual president’s report occasionally referenced an oral presentation of VC findings to the Corporation. The first known written reports date around 1905.¹⁰³ It is clear from the records that the reports took the form of listed and numbered recommendations: “This is in accord with recommendations Five and Nine of the Report of February 11, 1924, of our Visiting Committee.”¹⁰⁴

From 1875 to the present, a report on the state of MIT has been published and publicly distributed. Originally called “The Report of the President” and containing about 30 pages, it was addressed to the Corporation. Over time the content grew to about 700 pages. By 1983, it was called the report to the president and included an overview by the president followed by reports of the different parts of the administration. The structure of these reports and how the work of the VCs is covered in them varies considerably. Listings of membership of VCs ended in 1942. In some reports, the presidents talk about the general value of the VCs; in some reports, the president talks about specific issues raised by the VCs; in some, there are reports written by individual unit heads discussing the VC meetings, and occasionally listing VC recommendations; in some reports, the state of units are summarized by the deans; and in some reports, there is no mention of VCs at all.

The annual report occasionally goes into some detail regarding a department; a 1947 summary noted: “The Visiting Committee held an unusually extended and provocative session and has rendered a long

and thorough report calling for substantial expansion in some fields and indicating the nature of the contribution which the Library should render to world scholarship. The greatest emphasis is laid upon the full exploitation of technological tools, such as microreproduction, visual and aural aids, and rapid selectors, a program which calls for both basic research and pilot-plant types of study.”¹⁰⁵

A 1950 discussion in the President’s Report was unusually detailed regarding the nature of one VC report:

“The Visiting Committee of the Department, under the chairmanship of Mr. Frederick S. Blackall, Jr., met on December 13, 1949. The following is a brief outline of the major points of discussion and the conclusions reached. On the general problem of the undergraduate curriculum it was recommended that

(1) The principal objectives of the curriculum should be to provide a thorough groundwork in basic scientific principles, a well-rounded program in the humanities, and adequate professional training. The latter should offer students the opportunity to deal with relevant professional problems which develop sound methods of reasoning, experience in creative effort, and an understanding of the circumstances in which they will work as professional men.

(2) The greatest possible latitude and flexibility should be afforded to students - and especially to those of superior attainments - in the planning of their programs, in order to take full advantage of their own interests and motivation. Students should be fully informed of this possibility, and a sympathetic and efficient system of student counseling is of the most vital importance.

(3) The Department should continue its study of the curriculum and attempt to delineate as clearly as possible the basic objectives and the best means for their realization. Any changes in the curriculum should take full advantage of the creative work which is carried out by the staff members of the department. The faculty should exercise a continuing effort to replace dull and irrelevant material with inspiring subjects of maximum relevance to the world in which the future engineer will live. On the question of engineering education for the liberal arts graduate and the associated question of extending the undergraduate curriculum beyond four years, it was recommended that

(4) The four-year program should be basic for engineering education, but the utmost use should be made of the Combined Plan wherever this is economically feasible.

(5) The maximum flexibility should be permitted for graduate students at the Institute to take advantage of previous training at liberal arts institutions. The significance of a wise system of student counseling is very great in this connection.

(6) Greater publicity should be given to the opportunities which the Institute affords for flexibility in the selection of courses, for engineering training for the liberal arts graduate, and for specialized engineering education at the graduate level. The Visiting Committee strongly endorsed the strengthening of manufacturing and metallurgy as professional objectives for the mechanical engineer of the future. The Committee also voiced a strong enthusiasm for the Cooperative Training Program, Course II-B, and urged that it be developed to the maximum possible extent. The Committee took a great deal of interest in the efforts being made in the Machine Design Division to foster ingenuity and judgment in the undergraduates. The general

developments in the Department during the year have, in the main, followed the directions outlined in this report.¹⁰⁶

By 1980 the annual reports included a section specifically on the operation and staffing of the visiting committees, and which VCs met in the prior year. Departmental and School reports regularly refer to working generally on recommendations of the visiting committees.

The original sequence of reporting has evolved. In the 1920s there was no oral presentation to the administration as is done today. Dating back to 1887, the VC would first report orally to the entire Corporation, who would vote to refer to the Executive Committee.¹⁰⁷ The VC would then write the report (presumably with the opportunity to consider feedback from the Corporation), and the Executive Committee would then vote whether to accept the written report and release it for publication, which in the early-mid 1900s took the form of small printed individual booklets; the Institute recorded hundreds of dollars of printing expenses for VC reports annually. It is not known how widely these booklets were distributed.

In 1984, the practice of making a presentation to the administration at the end of the meeting was established. Each VC agenda was required to include an executive session of the VC at the end of the meeting where the VC would discuss their preliminary findings and then present them to the administration.¹⁰⁸

Today, VC reports go first to the Executive Committee and, after approval, are included in the Corporation package, and the VC then reports to the Corporation. It has not been determined when this change occurred, but it apparently occurred sometime between 1930 and 1970.

On occasion, complete or excerpted VC reports are contained in the public annual report. Public distribution went further: "In accordance with suggestions made by the Alumni Association, a Course Reunion was held at Department Headquarters on [1950] Alumni Day. The reception was well attended by many former graduates of Course II, who engaged in a lively discussion of the educational objectives formulated by the Visiting Committee"¹⁰⁹ In 1894, the Executive Committee decided to allow the president to "authorize publication in the Technology Quarterly of such portions of the [Visiting Committee reports] as he may think appropriate" (this was apparently the predecessor to Technology Review.)¹¹⁰ In 1936, a VC report was casually mentioned as being published in Technology Review: "See the first report of the Visiting Committee, in the Technology Review, November 1935."¹¹¹ A paper copy of a 1948 VC report is marked "Copy for the Technology Review."¹¹²

The practice of making interim reports was introduced in 2001. The Chairman wrote a letter to the VC chairs requesting these reports, asking chairs to "meet with your respective department head" and "review your committee's report and the department's progress in acting on its recommendations."¹¹³ One department had successfully experimented with this concept and provided the rationale for such a report: "1) it kept the department leadership focused on a reporting date for progress; 2) it kept the communications between the department and the committee open; 3) it helped us identify areas to concentrate on during the discussions at the next meeting; and 4) it helped identify issues that the committee might assist the department in addressing during the period between meetings."¹¹⁴

Non-meeting activities

This is a category not recognized today and is of particular historical interest. The VCs would sometimes work on projects jointly with the department and the administration, or even with other schools.

In 1919, a Visiting Committee chaired several joint meetings of the department with the same department at Harvard, including representatives of the associated professional associations, to “study and compare the courses of the two schools, and suggest changes and improvements.” The chair noted that these meetings were “purely suggestive” but that they “had the tendency to keep the instructors wide awake.”¹¹⁵

In 1924, the President established an initiative to determine how MIT could become useful to industry and established an “Advisory Committee on Industrial Biology” comprised of the VC, the department faculty, and representatives of Industry.¹¹⁶ This committee addressed issues including the composition of pollution, making fuel from crops, artificial propagation of fish, and food spoilage.

Here is an example from 1938 of the VC, the dept, and the administration working together on an issue of great interest: “The Faculty, the Visiting Committee of the Division of Industrial Cooperation, and the Administration joined in formulating during the year a codification and restatement of the policies governing the handling of industrial research at the Institute. In another case, the VC had discussions outside the meeting format: “On the basis of considerable joint discussion with the Athletic Board, Dr. Killian, and President Johnson, the Committee arrived at the following conclusions....”¹¹⁷ Such discussions were not unusual: “The Visiting Committee on the Division of Industrial Cooperation has been most helpful in its consideration of our sponsored research program, and, during the coming year, I shall seek the advice of the Committee on specific ways whereby we can minimize the hazards to the Institute while wisely and effectively discharging our commitments.”¹¹⁸ Today, this type of activity is not recognized as a VC function.

Interestingly, a VC in some cases took it upon itself to do independent research: “Conscious of the changing requirements that characterize current practice, certain members of the Visiting and Advisory Committees united in sending out a questionnaire to some forty or more architects throughout the country in an effort to learn what was thought of our present teaching policy and methods, the adequacy of our alumni's equipment to meet future architectural needs, and the extent to which our graduates measured up to the professional, administrative, and educational opportunities of the day.”¹¹⁹ Today, this type of activity is not recognized as a VC function.

In 1980 “One Visiting Committee returned after an interval of only six months to inspect the physical facilities and to recommend a new design facility for the Department of Mechanical Engineering.”¹²⁰

VCS were sometimes deeply involved in projects. Concerning the design of the Hayden Library, it was reported: “Through several years of study, the Visiting Committee and its consultants have developed this plan.”¹²¹ This appears to indicate that the VCs apparently hired a consultant and worked with them to design the library. Today, this type of activity is not recognized as a VC function.

Other than jointly editing the report, the VC today has no understood function outside of the VC meetings.

Follow-on Effects

Records show that the specific recommendations of visiting committees are taken seriously by both the unit and the administration. In 1908, the VC for the Department of Architecture strongly recommended that it be restructured as a School.¹²² This was debated for over 15 years, with repeated recommendations by the VC until the change was made. In 1938, a departmental report noted, "In the past year, the Department has endeavored to carry out as far as possible the recommendations made by the Visiting Committee in its last report."¹²³ The VCs often contributed specific recommendations regarding facilities; the Wright Brother's Wind Tunnel "follows the lines recommended three years ago by our Visiting Committee on Aeronautical Engineering."¹²⁴

The Executive Committee would have meetings devoted to whether to take action on the VC reports: "Voted: that the reports of the visiting committees referred to this Committee be made the special business of the next meeting."¹²⁵ At the subsequent meeting, the Executive Committee voted that the president would "report, in rough, such answers as he thought best for the Executive Committee to present." The VCs would seek formal confirmation whether the Executive Committee was going to follow up on their specific recommendations, by requesting the Executive Committee to adopt any or all of them: "The four recommendations which require affirmative action by the Corporation and Executive Committee should be recommended for adoption by the Executive Committee at such a date as might be practical."¹²⁶

Around 1900, for a time, there was a special "sub-committee on the needs of the departments," which appeared to have some role in resolving requests. No records of this sub-committee have been found, and it is not clear if it was effective or what happened to it, although it appears to have been a predecessor to the library VC.

The VCs also made recommendations regarding particular curriculum changes: "At the suggestion of the Visiting Committee, a sharp distinction between Process Metallurgy and Physical Metallurgy will no longer be made, and beginning with the Fall Term of 1938, there will be a unified course in Metallurgy."¹²⁷ "At the suggestion of the Visiting Committee, the staff is now considering the introduction of a one-term survey course of principles of biology as an elective for all M. I. T. students."¹²⁸ "Upon recommendation of its Corporation Visiting Committee, the Department of Meteorology is planning to discontinue the undergraduate course (but not the graduate course) in meteorology; upon recommendation of its Visiting Committee, the Department of Civil Engineering has moved to consolidate the undergraduate curriculum in building engineering and construction with that in civil engineering."¹²⁹

In addition to recommendations that the unit can implement, recommendations are made that only the administration can implement. The units note from time to time how the VC helped them with the administration: "The [1948] Visiting Committee for the Department has been most helpful during the past year, particularly in connection with our efforts to secure improved laboratory facilities in Fluid Mechanics and in Photogrammetry."¹³⁰

The issue of faculty slots is one that has always come up in VC meetings. Curiously, more than one early departmental follow-up report appears to suggest that departments had the ability to create appointments with the consent of the VC: "To this end, on the advice of the Visiting Committee, we intend to make one or two faculty appointments."¹³¹ Appointments today cannot be made

independently by departments, so the “we” in such statements made by department heads may have represented a decision supported by the administration.

There are many examples in the record of the unit or the administration describing acting on and completing recommendations. There are examples where the unit or administration describes deferring due to other priorities or funding. In 1953 President Killian reported: “A review of Corporation Visiting Committee reports reveals many recommendations which we are still unable to put into effect for various reasons.”¹³² There are no records found of any recommendation being rejected, although this presumably must occur.

For recommendations that can be implemented by the unit, the process of prioritizing and planning in response to recommendations is essentially within the control of the unit head. Today the report may be provided to the faculty of the unit and discussed among them. Whether or not the report is distributed to the faculty is a decision of the unit head and varies by department.

For those recommendations that require the involvement of the administration, the process can be considerably more complex, and there is no visibility of the history or evolution of that process, which remains obscure today.

Some recommendations from different VCs must deal with common issues across the Institute. There is nothing found in the record to describe such issues or how they are addressed.

The question of follow-through has been raised over the years; President Compton in 1937 noted, “Several members of the Corporation have recently suggested that it would be of general interest for the President to report back to the Corporation as a body some of the more significant results of the visiting committee operations. This I am most happy to do.” While this may have been raised from time to time, no formal process or expectation was ever established.

The record shows that the way the administration treats the VC reports varied by president. When President Compton signaled that the VCs were important through his remarks and actions, the focus and follow-up reports by deans and unit heads were greatly amplified in the records. When a president did not make VC response a priority, the records of deans and unit heads regarding VCs were thin.

In Conclusion

The MIT Visiting Committee system reflects a fundamental MIT ethos that has evolved over the years. This was recently summarized by President Kornbluth in her January 3, 2024 letter to the community which she opened with the following sentence.

“Seeing MIT up close for a year now, I’ve come to value something I could not fully appreciate from the outside: the matter-of-fact problem-solving ethos, the willingness to name a problem, measure it, design a solution, and keep iterating until it’s right.”

In that spirit of continual improvement, in the fall of 2023, the Corporation established an ad hoc committee to examine the Visiting Committee system. The preceding historical review of the Visiting Committee system was produced to support this effort.

¹ President’s Report 1955 p52

² President’s Report 1961 p5

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- ³ MIT originally consisted of three parts governed by three different Corporation bodies: A School of Industrial Science, a Museum of Science and Industry, and a public forum for lectures on science and invention called Society of the Arts. Years later the Museum and Society were eliminated and portions incorporated into the School.
- ⁴ President's Report 1875 p160
- ⁵ Obituary of Francis Walker, *Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science*, March, 1897
- ⁶ Alexander, Philip; *A Widening Sphere: Evolving Cultures at MIT*, p131-132
- ⁷ Minutes of the Executive Committee, October 22, 1883; Presidents Report 1886 p 32
- ⁸ Munroe, James; *A Life of Francis Amasa Walker*, p220
- ⁹ Munroe, p237
- ¹⁰ No mentions of VCs or their activities appear in the reports of the institute before Walker restuctured "the committees of visitors" in 1883.
- ¹¹ President's Report 1883 p27
- ¹² Munroe, p220
- ¹³ Munroe, p220
- ¹⁴ Alexander p118: The number of departments grew from 10 to 18 during Walker's tenure
- ¹⁵ President's Report 1883 p28
- ¹⁶ President's Report 1883 p28
- ¹⁷ Corporation Guide Booklet, Oct 1971
- ¹⁸ Rosenblith, Walter, Minutes of the Corporation Meeting, March 1975
- ¹⁹ President's Report 1936 p21
- ²⁰ Presidents Report 1938 p28
- ²¹ President's Report 1915 p21
- ²² President's Report 1958 p165
- ²³ President's Report 1959 p 64
- ²⁴ President's Report 1978 p180
- ²⁵ President's Report 1924 p76
- ²⁶ VC Report, Dept of Architecture, 1918
- ²⁷ President's Report 1907 p23
- ²⁸ President's Report 1950 p95
- ²⁹ President's Report 1959 p324
- ³⁰ President's Report 1908 p29
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- ³⁵ President's Report 1959 p184
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- ³⁷ President's Report 1937 p23
- ³⁸ President's Report 1937 p37
- ³⁹ President's Report 1967 p647
- ⁴⁰ VC Report, Dept of Biology and Human Health, March 1925
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- ⁴² President's Report 1978 p158
- ⁴³ President's Report 1965 p563
- ⁴⁴ President's Report 1968 p738
- ⁴⁵ President's Report 1962 p435
- ⁴⁶ Report to the President 1984 p457
- ⁴⁷ Report to the President 1985 p459
- ⁴⁸ Report to the President 1988 p453
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- ⁵⁰ VC Report, Dept of Civil and Sanitary Engineering, June, 1915, p3
- ⁵¹ President's Report 1926 p31
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- ⁵⁶ President's Report 1924 p69
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- ⁵⁸ President's Report 1924 p12
- ⁵⁹ Alumni Association Minutes, Vol 1 P 38-40, Jan 18, 1877
- ⁶⁰ President's Report 1937 p23
- ⁶¹ President's Report 1955 p262
- ⁶² President's Report 1956 p44
- ⁶³ President's Report 1971 p419
- ⁶⁴ President's Report 1964 p378
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- ⁶⁶ President's Report 1973 p380
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- ⁶⁸ Report to the President 1998 p236
- ⁶⁹ President's Report 1965 p563
- ⁷⁰ President's Report 1978 p583
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- ⁷⁵ President's Report 1949 p120
- ⁷⁶ President's Report 1951 p153
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¹⁰⁹ President's Report 1950 p145
¹¹⁰ Executive Committee minutes, March 20, 1894
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¹¹⁴ Mead, Dana, Chair of the VC for Nuclear Engineering, letter to the Chairman, Sept 20, 2001
¹¹⁵ VC Report, Dept of Architecture, June 1919
¹¹⁶ MIT Report on the Meeting of the Advisory Committee on Industrial Biology, May 1923, mixed within VC records
¹¹⁷ President's Report 1968 p521
¹¹⁸ President's Report 1952 p31
¹¹⁹ President's Report 1938 p22
¹²⁰ President's Report 1980 p560
¹²¹ President's Report 1944 p19
¹²² VC Report, Dept of Architecture, July 1908
¹²³ President's Report 1938 p136
¹²⁴ President's Report 1938 p16
¹²⁵ Executive Committee minutes, March 4 1890, p82
¹²⁶ VC Report, Dept of Electrical Engineering, Feb 1924, p3
¹²⁷ President's Report 1938 p99
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¹³¹ President's Report 1968 p206
¹³² President's Report 1953 p31

Note: records of early VC reports are incomplete and are stored in looseleaf form within MIT "Distinctive Collections"