realtalk@MIT

**A flagship initiative of the
MIT Center for Constructive Communication**

2024-2025 Report

**MIT
center for
constructive
communication**

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

In its inaugural year, realtalk@ MIT laid the foundation for a new kind of civic infrastructure at MIT—one that elevates listening as a shared practice, turns dialogue into insights, and connects people across roles, departments, and identities.

As a flagship initiative of the MIT Center for Constructive Communication (CCC), the program channels MIT's tradition of designing systems to solve complex problems—applied here to the fabric of campus life.

Since its kickoff in August 2024, realtalk@MIT has facilitated **92 small-group conversations** with over **400 members** of the MIT community, trained **24 peer and staff facilitators**, and captured over **980 highlights** of insight across **75 recorded dialogues**. From peer-led orientation sessions to pop-up conversation spaces and storytelling games, these formats helped deepen a culture of trust, reflection, and community engagement.

What makes realtalk@MIT unique is its **integration of rigorous research, participatory design, and experimental tools**. The program draws from CCC's translational research model to combine **human facilitation, AI-supported sensemaking, and iterative prototyping**. Formats are intentionally co-designed to be inclusive, low-barrier, and responsive to the lived experiences of the MIT community.

To deepen integration across campus, realtalk@ MIT is cultivating high-trust partnerships with units such as the Division of Student Life, central Human Resources, the Office of Sustainability (MITOS), the Media Lab's Media Arts and Sciences program, the Office of Religious, Spiritual, and Ethical Life (ORSEL), the Undergraduate Association, and the Teaching + Learning Lab.

These collaborations serve as a connective tissue across campus while supporting embedded initiatives: public-facing dialogues, campus activations, and cross-role engagements that reflect the values of a Listening Campus in action. At the same time, the program is exploring system-level conversations on the Future of AI and Education, using structured dialogue and systems thinking to surface tensions between innovation and equity, automation and agency, helping MIT make sense of its own direction in an era of technological transformation.

To ensure lasting capacity, the program is building the infrastructure for scale: an evolving Resource & Learning Hub is already providing self-guided modules, toolkits, and templates for independent use. Certification pathways are also being explored through CCC workshops and course integration, creating a distributed, trusted network of dialogue leaders across MIT's community.

2024–2025

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Our Vision: A Listening Campus

At MIT, we engineer systems to solve complex problems. realtalk@MIT brings this ethos to the MIT community life—treating dialogue not as a soft skill, but as a system to be intentionally designed, tested, and embedded in the everyday rhythms of the Institute.

Our goal is to make listening a visible and shared practice across MIT, where conversations are not just events, but infrastructure that builds trust, surfaces insight, and strengthens community. realtalk@MIT offers research-backed methods, facilitation practices, and AI-powered tools that serve as connective tissue across MIT's student-, staff-, and faculty-facing initiatives. It introduces novel dialogue initiatives while also complementing existing programs with a scalable model for small-group dialogue, facilitator training, and sensemaking, activating a culture of shared reflection and community engagement.

We ground our work in MIT's values:
- **Excellence & Curiosity**: Iterative, research-driven experimentation
- **Openness & Respect**: Brave, transparent spaces for meaningful conversations
- **Belonging & Community**: Inclusive design that centers lived experience and personal storytelling

Theory of Change

realtalk@MIT is grounded in the belief that authentic dialogue can spark personal growth, strengthen empathy, and catalyze collective action.

By creating structured, small-group conversations centered on lived experience and intentional reflection, we help participants build the confidence and skills to engage more deeply—with their communities, across differences, and in community and civic life.

Using conversation guides, facilitation methods, storytelling tools, and human–AI sensemaking, we make possible the kinds of conversations that wouldn't otherwise happen. When people feel heard—deeply and without judgment—they begin to believe their voice matters. This, combined with exposure to diverse perspectives, creates a ripple effect: from individual transformation to broader cultural and institutional change.

Immediate Outcomes	Intermediate Outcomes	Long-Term Impact
• Increased **willingness** to share and listen • Strengthened **facilitation** and **outreach** skills • **Heightened empathy**, trust, and openness toward others	• Increased **self-efficacy** and ability to **ask for help** • Increased engagement with existing feedback forums • Ability to take on a **systems approach** to community problems	• Greater trust in levers of change • A campus **culture of dialogue** and public service • Sustained civic engagement post-graduation

Strategic Shifts: Evolving the Model, Tools, and Leadership

Early Learnings: August 2024 Launch
Ahead of our formal launch in August 2024, we gathered feedback from student leaders during Orientation training. Their insights led to immediate improvements—clearer consent language, restricted transcript access, and more transparency around privacy and AI.

On August 22, 2024, we hosted our first Day of Dialogue:
• 70 peer facilitators
• 92 unique participants
• 268 highlights captured across 14 hours of conversation

Peer facilitation proved effective, setting a warm tone and building community. Most participants (88%) reported satisfaction, and 67% expressed interest in future conversations. However, we encountered technical issues with the Cortico app. Low attendance from orientation groups, and limited long-term app engagement highlighted the need for redesign.

Redesigning the Model: From Projects to Systems
Following its initial launch in Summer 2024, realtalk@MIT demonstrated both promise and limitations. The program continued for a few months with a project-based model focused on recorded, small-group dialogue across campus, classifying projects to student-led, staff-led, and faculty-led. These early projects created opportunities for localized engagement, but their structure lacked the scaffolding needed for scale, sustainability, and sustained ownership.

The design was based on a tried and proven approach that had been effective in civic contexts in communities and cities; implementing the approach in a campus setting raised novel questions around

trust and privacy. Some students were wary of being recorded in general, while others doubted the benefit of finding time to gather in groups. Some perceived the program as top-down or "too serious," reinforcing a sense of distance; the idea of entering into a vulnerable dialogue space seemed intimidating. The result was fragmented uptake, limited momentum, and low visibility beyond individual projects. An ongoing question remained: How can we benefit students skeptical of the value of recorded conversations or those who are generally less likely to volunteer for a conversation program?

In response to this feedback, the team undertook a strategic redesign, shifting from one-off projects to a campus-wide ecosystem approach supported by prototype tools, capacity-building, and long-term institutional collaborations.

Conversations are now lighter, more accessible, and co-designed. Participants can opt out of recording and still fully engage, building comfort and trust before choosing to share their voices more broadly. This opt-in model has made it easier to embed realtalk@MIT methods and tools into other student-facing programs, and better reflects our values of agency, care, and transparency. We have also launched a new wave of casual, socially embedded formats—from pop-up cafés to game nights—offering low-pressure entry points that align with students' rhythms, curiosities, and everyday experiences.


Strengthening the Tools
Over the past year, realtalk@MIT has been largely relying on Cortico's desktop offering for audio data processing and storage and has phased out use of the Cortico mobile app. We have also experimented with novel methods of recording that engender greater participant trust, including photovoice, recording devices, or restricting the recording only to the final reflections, rather than the entirety of a conversation. By playing with ephemerality, students are able to enjoy conversations in-the-moment, while elevating what they would like others to experience and hear.

In addition, CCC's prototyping team has accelerated the integration of a growing suite of experimental tools, reflecting MIT's ethos of hands-on innovation and rigorous iteration. These tools are designed not only to reduce friction and enhance usability, but to embody our values of transparency, agency, and participatory design.

Investing in Upskilling and Capacity-Building
Investing in Upskilling and Capacity-Building
In collaboration with Cortico, we are offering realtalk@MIT partners access to Cortico's online course, a set of self-guided online resources to help community members organize and implement their own conversation projects.

In addition to these resources and to move from one-off projects to sustainable culture change, realtalk@MIT is investing in additional training and resource development. This includes workshops, facilitation labs, and civic dialogue toolkits designed to empower students, staff, and faculty to lead their own conversations. By building campus-wide capacity in listening, facilitation, and sensemaking, the program amplifies impact and supports MIT's values of collaboration, inclusion, and practical learning.
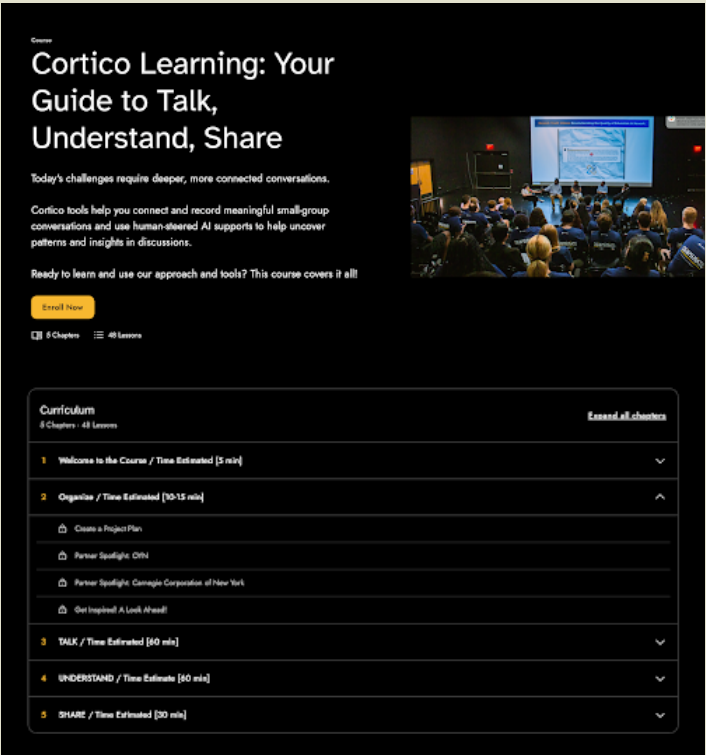
Leadership for a Systems Approach

In early 2025, CCC Director Professor Deb Roy, invited Dr. Dimitra Dimitrakopoulou, Head of Translational Research at CCC, to oversee realtalk@MIT. A key leader of earlier pilots of the program in 2022-2023, Dr. Dimitrakopoulou brought a systems lens to treat dialogue as a design challenge MIT is uniquely positioned to solve. Since stepping into this expanded role as Head of Translational Research & Practice, she has restructured the program, built a cross-functional team, and embedded a design-led, experimental mindset into every layer of the work.

To execute this vision, CCC ran a competitive search and appointed Marina Rakhilin as Program Lead. Formerly a Program Manager on CCC's translational team, Marina combines research fluency with community organizing and trusted campus relationships. Finally, we have welcomed Alice Liao as our new Instructional Designer & Program Manager. Alice brings valuable expertise in curriculum design and workshop facilitation, further strengthening our team's capacity to collaborate with and support a wide range of campus partners.

Additionally, in February of 2025, we launched a student advisory board of seven undergraduates representing key communities (e.g., athletics, Orientation, The Tech, sustainability, UA). This board meets biweekly and rotates members each semester, helping shape both programming and research.

This work is made possible by a broader team (see team section) whose creativity and commitment drive our shared vision for campus-wide civic infrastructure.

"The realtalk@MIT approach is integral to MIT's identity as a university that sees the most difficult problems not as obstacles, but rather as challenges to overcome. This is who we are as both individuals and as an institution."
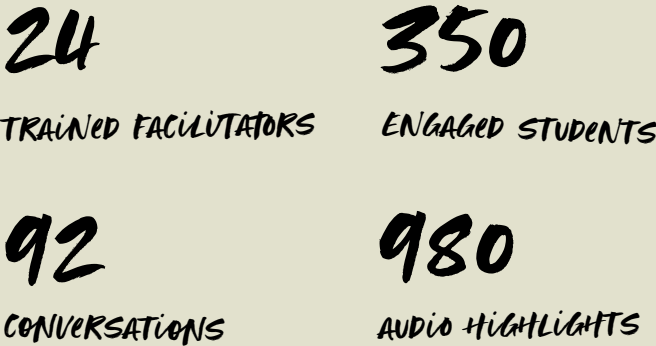
Prof. Deb Roy
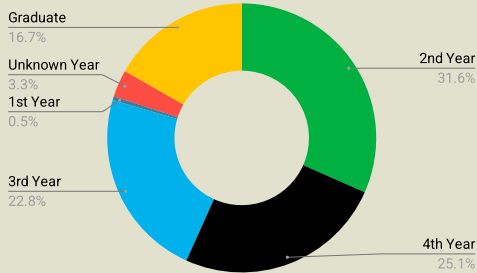CCC Director

One Year in Action

Now a flagship translational research initiative of the MIT Center for Constructive Communication, realtalk@MIT operates through a cohesive model grounded in three interdependent pillars. This structure balances strategic alignment with creative experimentation—building the civic infrastructure needed to embed dialogue, deep listening, and deliberation into the fabric of campus life.

Year One Impact Metrics
In its first year, realtalk@MIT convened **92 conversations** across campus, engaging **400+ members** of the MIT community. Of these, **350+ were students**—94% undergraduates and 6% graduate students. We trained **24 facilitators** in our tools and methods, and across **75 recorded conversations**, captured over **980 audio highlights**, preserving meaningful insights and lived experiences.
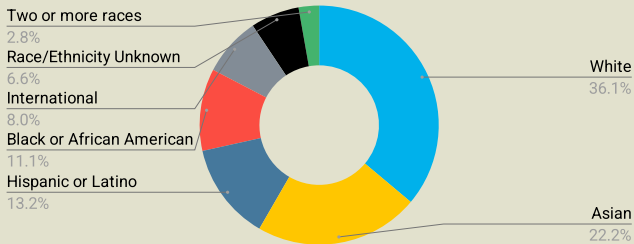
ENGAGEMENT BY STUDENT YEAR

24
TRAINED FACILITATORS
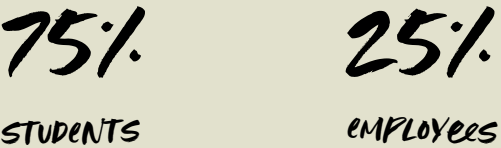
350
ENGAGED STUDENTS

92
CONVERSATIONS

980
AUDIO HIGHLIGHTS

ENGAGEMENT BY STUDENT YEAR

Graduate 16.7%
Unknown Year 3.3%
1st Year 0.5%
2nd Year 31.6%
3rd Year 22.8%
4th Year 25.1%

ENGAGEMENT BY RACE

Two or more races 2.8%
Race/Ethnicity Unknown 6.6%
International 8.0%
Black or African American 11.1%
Hispanic or Latino 13.2%
White 36.1%
Asian 22.2%

ENGAGEMENT BY GENDER (BINARY)

57%
FEMALE

43%
MALE

STUDENT VS. EMPLOYER ENGAGEMENT

75%
STUDENTS

25%
EMPLOYERS

BUILDING A LISTENING CAMPUS THROUGH MULTI-LEVEL ENGAGEMENT

PKG
PRISCILLA KING GRAY PUBLIC SERVICE CENTER

MIT Systems Awareness Lab

Lecturers in Writing, Rhetoric, and Professional Communication (WRAP)

Office of the First Year

MIT Office of Sustainability

MIT UNDERGRADUATE ASSOCIATION

realtalk@MIT

MIT Office of Graduate Education

MIT Well-being Lab

mit media lab

MIT Division of Student Life

Office of Religious, Spiritual, and Ethical Life (ORSEL)

ENGAGEMENT BY STUDENT DEPARTMENT

Frequency

6 (Electrical Engineering), N/A, 2 (Mechanical Engineering), 15 (Management), 18 (Mathematics), 10 (Chemical Engineering), 20 (Biological Engineering), 8 (Physics), 1 (Civil and Environmental), MAS (Media Arts and), 9 (Brain and Cognitive), 16 (Aeronautics and), 11 (Urban Studies and), 14 (Economics), 4 (Architecture), EM, 12 (Earth, Atmospheric, and), 17 (Political Science), 21E (Humanities +, 22 (Nuclear Science and, 3 (Materials Science and, IDS (Data, Systems, and, 21 (Humanities), 21S (Humanities +, 7 (Biology)

Institutional Partnerships & Student Leadership
realtalk@MIT centers high-trust, high-leverage collaborations with MIT departments, student organizations, and campus leaders. These partnerships enable co-created initiatives that respond to both institutional priorities and student realities. The newly launched **Student Advisory Board** plays a key role—anchoring the program in lived experience, identifying emerging needs, and co-designing its next chapter.

Our collaborations follow a three-part framework:

- **Bridge:** Connecting students, staff, and faculty through shared dialogue
- **Elevate:** Surfacing and amplifying underheard voices
- **Recommend:** Piloting ideas and feeding insights into decision-making spaces

BRIDGE

SOCIAL SYSTEMS
DISCOURSE
ETHICS QUEST

Bridge work builds the connective tissue of a Listening Campus. It creates low-barrier, opt-in spaces where people meet as peers across roles and identities, practice light-weight listening, and develop a shared language for campus life. Design choices—clear consent pathways, optional recording, short formats, approachable prompts—lower social and logistical friction so participation feels safe and easy.

Bridge projects generate the baseline conditions for everything else: networks of relationships, norms for constructive disagreement, early signals of emerging needs, and a pool of students and staff ready to take on deeper roles. Success looks like broader participation, repeat engagement, and themes that start to echo across previously disconnected corners of MIT.

Social systems

We collaborated with the MIT Systems Awareness Lab in 2024 on a small pilot study conducted in the Fall of 2024, and asked 26 non-researchers from across the MIT community to describe a time when they experienced a "generative social field." According to the formal theory, a generative social field is an environment where new ideas, practices, and relationships are created and spread. It's not a static group or organization, but a dynamic, ever-changing space.

But, how might an average MIT community member come to understand and relate to this term? In addition to teaching about this field of research, we engaged participants in analyzing their own stories–with and without AI-suggested tags.

What we learned:
- When supported in in-depth reflection, participants noticed details that do not normally come up in stories: nature, silence, ambient noises, laughter, and light.
- There are some prerequisites to attaining a generative social field: spaces where mutual care and a sense of the collective can outweigh otherwise difficult power dynamics and self-consciousness.
- Some experiences were grand (e.g., sky diving, creating art, or making discoveries), but the mundane were just as touching (e.g., a doctor's visit, a late-night school project, or waiting for the shared shower to open up).

I REALLY APPRECIATED YOUR WILLINGNESS SHOW UP IN THIS SPACE AND BE PRESENT WITH THE PARTICIPANTS.

"Yeah, I really appreciate both your willingness to kind of go with the flow and kind of experiment, you know, and know that each conversation or sort of gathering that we had was going to maybe go a little differently, but that the real willingness to, show up in this space and really be there and present with the participants. So that wasn't just a team of technologists who are coming in wit a shiny tool. It was more about, how do we really hold this community space in a way that people can share and be heard and that we can sensemake across?...This work, it really enable all those little dialogues and all those moments where we're exploring what could be, what makes up these, generative social fields, what makes up those kind of relationships that give us meaning?"

Lana Cook, Ph.D.
Associate Director, MIT Systems Awareness Lab

DisCourse

DisCourse is a curated dinner series that transforms a meal between strangers into an experiment in how we gather, listen, and be in conversation with one another. Taking inspiration from immersive theatre, DisCourse is an unconventional invitation to the MIT community to reexamine their relationship to socializing, and set the stage for a collective future grounded in listening, sharing, and mutual understanding.

Hosted in "The GUT" – an underground archive of the future – and led by a whimsical facilitator, the experience immerses guests in an alternate universe filled with rituals and rules, where technologies actually support meaningful connection, not just divide and distract.

In April-June 2025, the GUT was open by invitation only for students in the MIT community. 8 dinners were hosted, each with 5-8 guests. These gatherings resulted in an archive of 51 collected objects and artifacts that serve as a representation of what students really wish they'd spend more time talking about. The team is actively working on creating an exhibit on campus to showcase these objects and their stories.

What we learned:

- Students found the experience unique because it forced them to be present and vulnerable, free from the usual distractions like phones.
- The initial awkwardness and hesitation to speak were quickly overcome, in part due to the theatricality of the experience, leading to feelings of release, spontaneity, and fun.
- The nature of the conversation fostered a trusting environment where people felt comfortable sharing deep, personal topics, and one participant even felt a sense of love for the experience and the strangers they met.

EVERYONE'S TOO BUSY TO SIT DOWN AND HAVE INTENTIONAL CONVERSATIONS, NOT JUST SMALL TALK

"I feel like it's pretty rare, especially at MIT because everyone's too busy to sit down and have intentional conversations–not just small talk or squeezing in like a few minutes of conversation with your friends. To gather and sit purely for the sake of talking about things and coming here with a willingness to listen to people and to learn about people that you really have no obligation to get to know...I've kind of been lacking that in my life, so it's been very enjoyable."

Anonymous MIT Student

I DON'T GIVE MYSELF A LOT OF CHANCES TO BE UNCOMFORTABLE INTENTIONALLY.

Whenever I'm in a situation with a bunch of people that I don't really know well, I feel very uncomfortable. You might've noticed, at least towards the start, I was struggling to stay things. The first thing you typically would do is just look at your phone. And not having that was nice. So it's like I was forced to be uncomfortable, and I think I don't give myself a lot of chances to be uncomfortable intentionally. And I think it is a good experience."

Anonymous MIT Student

Ethics Quest

How can MIT students stay true to their values once they enter the workplace?

Some MIT undergraduates go through their time here without engaging in questions of ethics or preparing to face ethically murky situations, which can emerge within their first year in the job market. The Priscilla King Gray Public Service Center (PKG) is collaborating with realtalk@MIT to pair MIT alumni with current MIT undergraduates to talk about ethics and values in a card-based conversation game.

What we learned so far:

- Both groups want an opportunity for human connection, not networking. So, students do not share their majors and alumni are told not to share their field of work – rather, both sides talk about values and experiences to listen deeply to one another.
- Many students can feel pulled in opposing directions, wanting to make a positive social impact while also worrying about sustaining themselves in a stable, well-paid career.
- Alumni are willing to share openly about the lessons they learned in the workplace when these honest experiences can benefit those following in their footsteps.

What's something you thought was true about success when you started at MIT, but now you question?

What was the first t... ever wanted to be... grew up? Does par... want to do

Share a moment when someone's advice helped you navigate a tough decision at work or at school.

... a colleague says ...son you were ... at do

NOW'S THE TIME FOR ME TO TRY TO GO PURSUE MY DREAMS.

"When you're younger, you think of all these jobs, and you're like, oh, I want to be a chef or a teacher or a firefighter or whatever. And then you go to MIT, and then everyone is so career focused. And so then I became a management consultant...And I did that for four years, and I was very good at my job. But then I burned out, and I was like, now's the time for me to try to go pursue my dreams. And that's what I do every day."

Kat Jiang
Pastry Cook and MIT Alumnus

ELEVATE

FIRST YEARS' HOPES AND DREAMS

DORM VALUES

LGBTQ+ PRIDE GRADUATION ADVICE

WHAT IS YOUR LIGHT?

Elevate work ensures that who is heard matches who is here. It centers communities and perspectives that are often missed, using consent-forward storytelling and reflective practices so participants decide what to share, how it's attributed, and where it travels. Curated medleys and thematic syntheses turn lived experience into actionable insights that the wider community can see, learn from, and reference.

This matters because institutions gain durability and legitimacy when decisions are informed by the full breadth of experience, not just the loudest or most connected voices. *Elevate* reduces performative listening risk, strengthens belonging and psychological safety, and improves the "signal quality" of campus sensemaking. Success shows up as increased visibility of underheard perspectives, stronger cross-group empathy, and leaders citing community insights in planning and communications.

First years' hopes

Feedback from the Class of 2028:

Partnering with the Office of the First Year and Office of Graduate Education, we organized 30 conversations in August of 2024 with incoming first-year undergraduate and graduate students during Orientation Week. Students were invited to reflect on the values they intended to bring to MIT and talk through their anxiety and hopes for the exciting year ahead, while their Orientation Leaders facilitated the conversations.

In 2025, this project continued, with a twist: students finishing their first year looked back on the past few months to reminisce and come up with feedback for next year's incoming year. This culminated in a medley and custom card game shared with resident peer mentors and a subset of first year students in 2026.

What we learned:

- Most students were intentionally readying themselves (sometimes excitedly) for a challenging workload, knowing they would likely be pushed further than they were at their last academic home.
- Some students were worried about the "grind" mindset or culture at MIT, knowing that it would be easy to get swept up by these pressures and miss out on making connections and meaningful experiences.
- Many want to make a personal impact here and be remembered for how they changed a dorm, lab, or other group environment in a way that has positive ripple effects for generations to come.

IT'S NOT ALWAYS NECESSARY TO GET AN 'A' IN CLASS

"Sometimes I'm like, I'd rather, I'd rather put in like, you know, B-level effort or C-level effort and, and use a P&R if it means I will be sleeping and happy and, you know, able to breathe and do the things I enjoy. It's not always necessary to get an A in in class."

Gabbie Girard
MIT Peer Leader

Dorm values

THEY'RE FORTHCOMING WITH THEIR HELP

"What distinguishes it to me is...they're forthcoming with their help. Like you don't really need to ask. 'Cause a lot of times...the biggest hurdle is asking for someone's help."

Anonymous MIT Student

Students across MIT dorms shared meaningful moments within their communities, and their hopes for the future of their unique dorm cultures.

Partnering with the Division of Student Life, we organized 15 conversations across 7 dorms during the 2024-2025 academic year facilitated by each dorm's Area Director. Students reflected on the strengths of their unique dorm's culture, sharing moments when they felt supported by their community as well as their hopes and concerns for their dorm's future.

What we learned:

- Students find deep support in their dorm communities. Whether they're coping after a difficult exam or learning how to cook for themselves for the first time, friends in the dorm consistently step up to offer help and share knowledge without judgement.
- From participating in quirky, dorm-specific traditions to simply being present with one another and offering mutual respect and understanding, students form long-term bonds in their dorms and are emotionally invested in seeing their dorm's culture thrive into the future.

LGBTQ+ pride

What does queer joy look like to you?

https://etchings.ccc-mit.org/queer_scrapbook

In celebration of pride month, the realtalk@MIT team worked to design a program that could include MIT students and staff both on-campus and off. By collecting photos of everyday queer joy and then presenting these in an in-person gallery walk, we offered more and less anonymous ways to engage in community building.

What we learned:

- Feelings of invisibility, which could provide safety, although it also could lead to a lack of queer support.
- Finding one's voice through protests, parades, and local gatherings helped battle a sense of helplessness and worry.
- Nature, in the form of flowers, picnics, rivers, cats, and even turkeys, provided a sense of peace and grounding in difficult times.
- Self-expression through crafting, art, and fashion was a notable theme underlying joy.

WE GOT MARRIED ON THE STEPS OF WALKER

"We got married on the steps of Walker on the 9th anniversary of our first date. We met in undergrad at MIT and I'm still here as a grad student. Getting married felt like something concrete we could do for ourselves given our worries about the political climate in the US. I'm also getting top surgery in a few weeks!"

MIT Community Member

YOU CAN SEE THE DIVERSITY IN THE SUBMISSIONS.

"You can see the diversity in the submissions. People choosing to share different aspects of what they felt was meaningful to share with the world. So I think part of it too that really is appealing is the different stories behind these pictures. The fact that I'm seeing pets, I'm seeing food, I'm seeing adventure, you know, meaningful ceremonies, exchanging vows...That's the substance and the value of this."

Alma Jam
Community Building and Student Engagement Officer, MIT Media Lab

Graduation advice

With support from the MAS team, we gathered graduating Master's and PhD students at the Media Lab over lunch and helped them reflect on their time here and how to make meaning of it during a busy period of transition.

What we learned:

- The Media Lab can be a very intimidating place at the start of the graduate program, leaving students wondering, "Do I belong here?"
- There are structural issues and students work hard to improve their corner of the space, so that it can be a little easier for the next generation, whether at 99F or just at late night study sessions at the lab.
- The coffee machine might not consistently work, but it always provides a good chuckle and friendly gathering space to see a friend! Take that time to refill your cup and reconnect.

IT'S ABOUT CREATING A SUPPORT NETWORK

I think that when you first come here, it's fundamentally intimidating. It's fundamentally like everyone is going to be the top of their game, internationally important superstars, and no matter how could you possibly match that. So it takes a while to realize everyone's human, everyone's doing their best, and it's about creating a support network where you actually connect with people that allows for that to come out.

D. Pillis
MAS alumnus

THAT SPACE IS VALUABLE FOR THEM TO HAVE

"The graduate students don't have an opportunity to be with each other in one room and just reflect on how their time at MAS was. And so regardless of if those conversations are being recorded for a graduation ceremony or not, I still think that space is valuable for them to have."

Alma Jam
Community Building and Student Engagement Officer, MIT Media Lab

What is your light?

@ **What keeps us going in dark times?**

What keeps us going in dark times and what can we learn from the ways in which others manage feelings of pessimism, overwhelm, or loss? Could the MIT Chapel transform into a place of solace for MIT community members with and without religious affiliations?

In collaboration with the Office of Religious, Spiritual, and Ethical Life (ORSEL), we have developed a unique conversation experience which guides students through meditative reflection and personal sharing around the prompt: "What is your guiding light?" Recordings were captured at the end of the 1.5 hour experience, and were shared with Maria Finkelmeier, of MF Dynamics, who worked with ORSEL to create a follow-up event for those unable to join initial conversations. On October 20, passersby were able to listen to our conversation highlights interspersed with a beautiful percussion performance, share a warm hot chocolate, and talk about what gives them light as the nights get colder and the semester becomes more stressful.

What we learned:

- Warming up a conversation with recorded conversations from the past worked best when sharing peers' unresolved questions, rather than their concrete insights.
- Students especially appreciated a chance to pause, lay down, and be guided in a body scan; however moving from passive engagement to active questioning and reflection took careful facilitation and prompting.
- The spiritually charged nature of the space seemed to change how participants talked (slower, softer, with great self-awareness).

THE PRICE OF FREEDOM IS UNCOMFORTABILITY OR VULNERABILITY

"I think one of the things that I've been thinking about in our conversation is, like, the bounds of freedom, specifically, we were talking about movement, and I think it kind of brushed on the surface of less than physical movement. So emotional or intellectual, kind of for separation, or the cycling of thought and feelings that everyone kind of has in their daily life. And one of the kinds of questions that I have that come from that conversation kind of is this question of, does it all have to be so painful? And I think that comes from kind of the discussion that we were having where the price of that movement, the price of freedom, is uncomfortability or vulnerability in some sense. And so kind of toeing that line of, how much pain can you stand before it becomes too much? And then, like, what do you do when you get to that point?"

Anonymous MIT student

RECOMMEND

SUSTAINABILITY AT MIT

WRAP LECTURERS

PARTICIPATORY BUDGETING

Recommend work moves from listening to collaborative problem-solving. It translates dialogue into actionable options: tight briefs, small pilots, and practical recommendations inform decision-making.

This matters because without visible follow-through, listening becomes extractive, eroding trust and participation. *Recommend* creates a repeatable pathway for community voice to shape policies, programs, and resource allocation—and for the Institute to learn what works. Success is measured by pilots launched, decisions informed, and changes adopted, alongside clear communications back to participants so they can see how their contributions mattered.

Sustainability at MIT

What should MIT's Office of Sustainability prioritize to address student needs and interests?

In January 2025, nineteen undergraduate delegates came together for a three-day Student Assembly on Sustainability to learn, deliberate, and vote on a set of recommendations for the MIT Office of Sustainability.

Three days of conversation were recorded and analyzed, culminating in this openly accessible website, to the benefit of staff and researchers: ***sustainabilityassembly.portal.cortico.ai***.

What we learned:

- Student trust in large institutions is currently strained because of what feels like a lack of transparency and ineffective community engagement.
- Students want to stay up-to-date with sustainability news and opportunities, but there is no effective, central communication channel, so it is difficult for both administrators and students to know how to reach one another.
- Students know that sustainability is a core issue for this generation, but they are barred from action by the complexity of this polarized issue as well as their own limited energy.
- As an influential center of higher education, delegates believe MIT should be integrating education about sustainability into every students' experiences, if not their coursework.

THERE'S A LOT OF REALLY INSPIRING AND REALLY INTELLIGENT PEOPLE OUT THERE WHO REALLY WANT TO CREATE A SOLUTION

"Personally, I think that it really just shows that, yes, it's a widespread problem, but it's also there's a lot of really inspiring and really intelligent people out there who really want to create a solution."

Hannah F
MIT Undergraduate

"Participating in the Student Assembly process as an expert gave me new insight into how students are thinking about sustainability—not just in terms of policy, but in how it affects their everyday lives. It was a valuable reminder of the power of dialogue in shaping more grounded, responsive decisions."

Brian Goldberg
Assistant Director of the MIT Office of Sustainability

WRAP Lecturers

Dr. Andreas Karatsolis, director of the MIT Writing, Rhetoric, and Professional Communication Program, reached out to realtalk@MIT with the intention to collectively set a future direction for his department's next five years of work. After convening 30 lecturers across seven small group conversations, WRAP had these answers and much more.

What we learned:

- The sense of community and collegiality within WRAP is a powerful catalyst for educational innovation and personal growth.
- WRAP's integration across the MIT landscape enhances its value, creating opportunities for interdisciplinary collaboration and relationship-building.
- At the same time, there is a need to address the misalignment between workload and compensation, highlighting the challenge of translating intellectual rigor into easily quantifiable hours.

WE HAVE THE SPACE NOW TO BE ABLE TO TALK ABOUT THINGS THAT NORMALLY WE DON'T GET TO TALK ABOUT

"I go to class, I go to a meeting, and then I come back and they were still there chatting, laughing, you know, that whole thing. I was like, what is going on? It's been like two and a half hours. What are you guys doing? But it definitely created this sense of...we have the space now to be able to talk about things that normally we don't get to talk about."

Dr. Andreas Karatsolis
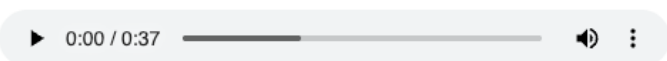Associate Director of Writing, Rhetoric and Professional Communication, MIT

Participatory Budgeting

Explore Community Suggestions

Spotlight on Community Voices ⌐

Hear from Islam on funding hands-on farming and nutrition education:

▶ 0:00 / 0:37 ━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━ 🔊 ⋮

I feel like MIT is doing some work on sustainability, but we can use some push on that direction. Like there is the MIT farm team now and like we go to a farm every weekend. I'm just volunteering so far. But like this is kind of what I'm interested in as well. Like Tufts have School of Nutrition and the new entry Sustainability Farming Project. Like to teach people how to be farmers and like engage farmers with scientists...

Hear from a course 2A CIR senior on food expenses:

▶ 0:00 / 0:27 ━━━━━━━━━━━━━━━ 🔊 ⋮
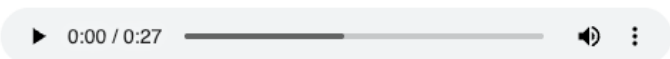
I would say subsidize some of the food. Like, we're college students, we're broke. My biggest expense by far is food, and I'm off the meal plan because spending $17 a meal is a little ridiculous. I can go to Chipotle breakfast, lunch and dinner, and it's cheaper than being on a meal plan here at MIT, which is absurd. But, yeah, subsidized food make it more accessible and cheaper for students because we're hungry and food is important.
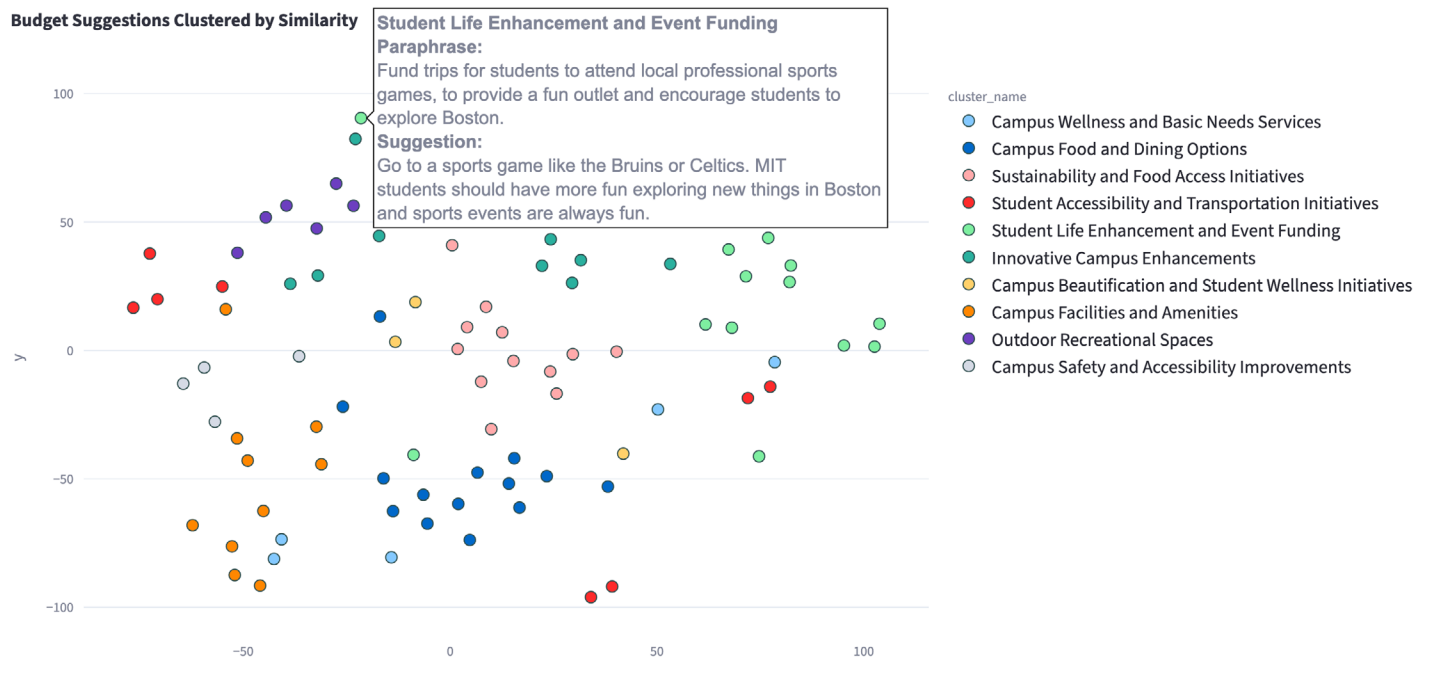
Visualizing Suggestion Clusters

This Fall, realtalk@MIT and the UA have teamed up to solicit ideas from the undergraduate student body. These ideas will be developed by a representative, deliberative council and ultimately voted on once more before being implemented in Spring 2026.

What we learned:

- The UA is more committed than ever to engage their peers, but requires tools and methods to reach a wide, representative audience.
- Students appreciate a chance to have their voices heard, but are hesitant to reach out to the UA, uncertain of the resources available.
- Collaboration between experts and departments on campus (e.g., Student Organizations, Leadership, and Engagement (SOLE) and the Division of Student Life (DSL) is necessary for informing budgeting concepts that are effective and not covered elsewhere by existing, underutilized campus resources.

Follow along with the ideation and voting process

Budget Suggestions Clustered by Similarity

Student Life Enhancement and Event Funding
Paraphrase:
Fund trips for students to attend local professional sports games, to provide a fun outlet and encourage students to explore Boston.
Suggestion:
Go to a sports game like the Bruins or Celtics. MIT students should have more fun exploring new things in Boston and sports events are always fun.

cluster_name
- Campus Wellness and Basic Needs Services
- Campus Food and Dining Options
- Sustainability and Food Access Initiatives
- Student Accessibility and Transportation Initiatives
- Student Life Enhancement and Event Funding
- Innovative Campus Enhancements
- Campus Beautification and Student Wellness Initiatives
- Campus Facilities and Amenities
- Outdoor Recreational Spaces
- Campus Safety and Accessibility Improvements

## I WANT AN INTERACTIVE MUSIC INSTALLATION ON CAMPUS.

"I want an interactive music installation on campus. I think those are so fun and I think the people here are creative like that... there's people in the practice room just, like, practicing away and it's like, 'Dude, you're like, literally a concert level pianist. What are you doing here?'...I remember this is one guy, he would go from playing the Winter Wind, a tune by Chopin, right into...some other Chopin...It'd be cool to I guess have more or something out here."

Anonymous MIT Student

INNOVATION & PROTOTYPING

Now a flagship translational research initiative of the MIT Center for Constructive Communication, realtalk@MIT actively prototypes creative dialogue formats and technologies that make conversation more accessible, joyful, and meaningful. From storytelling games and pop-up conversation spaces to AI-powered sensemaking tools, the program embodies MIT's iterative ethos—testing new ideas, gathering feedback, and refining what works. This continuous innovation ensures realtalk@MIT remains responsive to the evolving needs of the community while expanding what dialogue can look and feel like on campus. Below is the list of prototype tools that have been integrated into the different projects of the program.
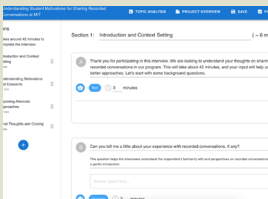
Coalesce

The realtalk@MIT team uses Coalesce to help our partners generate conversation guides for their projects that are backed by CCC research and methodologies. Coalesce allows for AI-enabled efficiency and bias-checking while keeping the human in the driver's seat of guide creation.
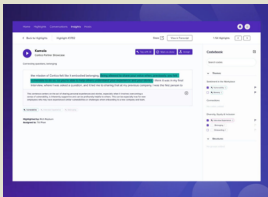

AI-Assisted Sensemaking

AI-Assisted sensemaking is a capability of the Cortico platform developed in collaboration with CCC researchers, allowing realtalk@MIT partners to jump-start their sensemaking work with AI assistance that always keeps human sensemakers in the loop as co-authors and reviewers.
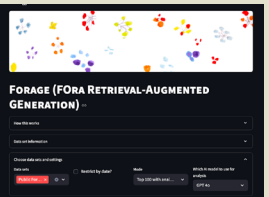

Conversation Cards

Conversation Cards is a virtual card game built for realtalk@MIT's collaboration with the Priscilla King Gray center. In it, current MIT students and alumni self-facilitate a conversation about how their values and ethics played into their MIT experience and their experiences in industry, which the PKG center will use to inform their ethics curriculum and create case studies.
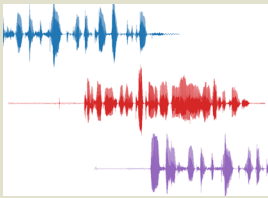
Voice Conversion/Anonymization

Voice Conversion is an experiment in allowing conversation participants to control how much of their identity is shared with a listening public. Users could redact specific words, their name, and convert their voice.

FoRAGe

Forage is a RAG-based search engine that allows partners to explore, synthesize, and cite voices from their conversation collection with natural language queries like "show me themes about housing," or "find the most memorable quotes about budget." realtalk@MIT project organizers have the opportunity to use Forage to explore their conversation data and create analyses backed by citations to actual participant speakers.

Querycraft

Querycraft is an LLM-powered prototype training module for undergraduate Resident Peer Mentors at MIT. The app simulates conversations with first-year students facing various challenges, providing real-time feedback on mentoring skills and techniques, and was built as part of realtalk@MIT's involvement in the Division of Student Life's fall 2025 Resident Peer Mentor training.

Ideabank: Participatory Budgeting Proposal Clustering

Ideabank is a site for collecting and visualizing participatory budgeting submissions for realtalk@MIT's collaboration with the Undergraduate Association. It iterates on CCC research that developed tools for participant engagement and understanding in the context of deliberative assemblies, bringing this methodology to on-campus civic engagement.

Analogia

Analogia is a customizable conversation game that guides players to tell emotion-rich personal stories by combining story 'threads' with surrealistic AI-generated images. Conversation recordings between MIT students were used to create a whimsical deck of conversation cards. During orientation, 16 groups of students were given a game kit and invited to play, allowing them to share personal stories and compare to past student experiences.

STRATEGIC PRIORITIES FOR YEAR 2025-2026

As realtalk@MIT enters its second year, the program is poised to expand its reach and embed its methods more deeply into the fabric of campus life. Building on key learnings from Year 1, we are advancing seven strategic priorities to scale our impact, grow visibility, and ensure long-term sustainability.

Strengthen High-Impact Collaborations: We will continue to deepen collaborations with key units, including the Division of Student Life (DSL), Human Resources (HR), MIT Office of Sustainability (MITOS), Media Lab's Program in Media Arts and Sciences (MAS), MIT's Office of Religious, Spiritual and Ethical Life (ORSEL), the Undergraduate Association (UA) and the Teaching + Learning Lab (TLL) to co-develop flagship initiatives. These collaborations will support public-facing conversation series,

embedded dialogue programs, and campus activations that demonstrate what a Listening Campus looks like in action.

Expand Training and Certification Pathways: To meet growing demand and build lasting capacity, we will formalize a predictable cadence of facilitator trainings and workshops for students, staff, and faculty. These will be piloted within CCC's instructional portfolio, with integration into Media Lab and cross-campus courses. We also aim to partner with MITx and Open Learning to explore certification pathways for participants who complete realtalk training.

Build Scalable, Self-Serve Infrastructure: Recognizing the importance of decentralized access to tools and methods, we will launch a digital Resource & Learning Hub: a one-stop platform offering toolkits, templates, guides, and self-paced learning modules. This

infrastructure will allow MIT students, faculty, and staff to independently host conversations, use CCC and Cortico tools, and deepen their civic practice without intensive program staff involvement.

Design Playful, Low-Barrier Entry Points: Year 2 will accelerate creative engagement formats that meet students where they are. From pop-up tea rooms and DIY dialogue kits to social games and campus activations, we will prototype playful, low-pressure formats that make dialogue feel spontaneous, approachable, and fun—broadening participation and embedding listening into daily campus life.

Amplify Visibility through Creative Storytelling: To raise awareness and build a distinct identity, we will invest in creative, student-centered communications. Projects include a realtalk zine featuring student art and reflections, curated social media campaigns, and video/audio storytelling assets. These artifacts will elevate student

voices and communicate the program's values in compelling, accessible ways.

Center Student Leadership: Student voice remains at the heart of realtalk@MIT. In Year 2, we will expand opportunities for students to lead facilitation, curate prompts, shape content, and help steer strategic direction. A growing Student Advisory Board will serve as a key hub for feedback, co-creation, and shared ownership of the program's evolution.

Strengthen the Campus Listening Ecosystem: Having conducted a landscape scan of related programs on campus, we will initiate a campus-wide gathering in early 2026 to support cross-pollination and seed a more coherent, sustainable listening culture, positioning realtalk@MIT as a catalytic force within a broader community engagement ecosystem on campus.

THE TEAM

Dimitra Dimitrakopoulou, PhD, is Principal Research Scientist and Head of Translational Research & Practice at CCC. She leads the strategic vision of realtalk@MIT, shaping it into an MIT flagship initiative advancing civic dialogue, inclusive student engagement, and scalable, research-driven infrastructure to support a culture of listening at MIT.

Marina Rakhilin, MSW, Program Lead at realtalk@MIT, brings experience in human-centered design, community-based participatory research methods, and social work for a unique perspective on campus issues, facilitation training, and community-level interventions.


Julia Matthews, Technology Specialist for realtalk@MIT, is focused on the tools that support program execution, including recording processes, consent mechanisms, and software. She evaluates and administers software platforms and develops new prototypes that integrate into the realtalk@MIT program.

Maya Detwiller, Prototype Manager 2 on the Translational Research team, manages prototypes' transition from research to deployment, turning research ideas into pilot-ready prototypes and, ultimately, public-facing tools.

Alice (Liao) Gold, Instructional Designer/Program Manager at realtalk@MIT, provides expertise on how to support students as they seek to learn and implement constructive communication strategies in their everyday lives. She takes the lead to design, plan and execute the programmatic and educational activities of realtalk@MIT.
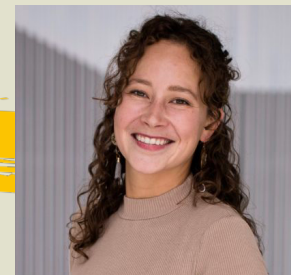
Cassandra Lee, MAS, Research Designer on the Translational Research team at CCC. Drawing on her master's thesis work around how games can facilitate conversations with greater depth, engagement, and interpersonal connection–she designs unusual experiences that push the boundaries of how technology is used in social spaces.

Ali Klemencic is a Research Software Engineer on CCC's prototype team, where she develops and iterates on tools that support realtalk@MIT initiatives. She also maintains the infrastructure that powers these prototypes, ensuring they remain dependable, adaptable, and responsive to the needs of the MIT community.

Matthew McKenna, Program Coordinator for realtalk@MIT, supports program execution and ensures smooth logistics that keep projects moving from planning to implementation.

GRATITUDE & ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We are deeply grateful to our campus partners, facilitators, and every community member who has entrusted us with their stories—each one a gift that strengthens our shared understanding and purpose. This year's campus collaborators have included:

- MIT Division of Student Life
- MIT Office of Graduate Education
- MIT Office of the First Year
- The Media Lab's Program in Media Arts and Sciences (MAS)
- The MIT Systems Awareness Lab
- The MIT Office of Sustainability (MITOS)
- The MIT Wellbeing Lab
- The Office of Religious, Spiritual, and Ethical Life (ORSEL) at MIT
- The Priscilla King Gray Public Service Center (PKG) at MIT
- The Writing, Rhetoric, and Professional Communication (WRAP) Program at MIT
- The Undergraduate Association

Our heartfelt appreciation extends to our extraordinary 2025 Student Advisory Board members, who generously committed their time each week to ensure our work remains authentically student-centered and student-led: Anoushka Tamhane ('28), Caleb Mathewos ('27), Deana Prasad ('28), Ellie Montemayor ('26), Jessie Lin ('28), Ruben Stephen ('27), and Tasnim Zulfiqar ('26). Your voices and vision have been invaluable.

Finally, we extend our sincere gratitude to the Office of the President and the Office of the Provost for their essential partnership and unwavering support. This work exists because of the trust and collaboration you have shown in our mission.

Together, we continue to build something meaningful—thank you for being part of this journey.

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