MIT HR Podcast Series: Career Journeys at the Institute

Jimmy Doan

Associate Dean, Office of Student Wellbeing, Division of Student Life

Michele King Harrington (00:05):

Welcome listeners and MIT colleagues. My name is Michelle King Harrington. I work in Human Resources assisting staff with their career development. Today, you're tuned in listening to our Career Connect podcast, where we will hear from a diverse cross-section of MIT staff who represent many departments, labs, and centers at MIT. And these staff will share their very interesting career stories. Today I'm joined by Jimmy Doan and I will have him introduce himself to you today. Jimmy, maybe you can just speak to your career journey at MIT in general. We'd love to hear how that has evolved. Welcome.

Jimmy Doan (00:40):

Of course. Thank you, Michele. Thank you for coordinating this and thank you for having me. So I'm Jimmy Doan. I'm Associate Dean and I lead our Office of Student Wellbeing. The Office of Student Wellbeing is one of six offices in the Student Support and Wellbeing Group within the division of Student Life. So the rest of our group includes alcohol and other drug services, the care team, disability and access services, student support services, and violence prevention and response. And we all work within the Division of Student Life, which is part of the chancellor's area at MIT. The Office of Student Wellbeing is relatively new, and we work with undergrads and graduate students to help them care for and prioritize their wellbeing, including making sure they know how to get help when they need it. And we also work with faculty and staff to support student wellbeing and promote a culture where students can really be the best learners who prioritize their wellbeing while they're at MIT.

Michele King Harrington (01:33):

Wow, you do a lot, Jimmy. That sounds like it encompasses so many facets of the student experience and just wellbeing in general at MIT. So did you come straight to that role or how did you sort of start out in your journey at MIT ?

Jimmy Doan (01:51):

Yeah. My journey at MIT actually dates back to, gosh, August of 2013. I actually started as an area director in residential life and I lived at Next House, which is one of the undergraduate houses on campus. And in that role I supported students who lived in the residence halls, worked closely with undergrads and graduate resident advisors, worked with the faculty heads of house, and it really was a great opportunity for me to learn lived student experience at MIT. After a number of years in that role, in 2016, the Student Support and Wellbeing Group was formed, and at that time I was asked to help start our care team, which was our team that supports students in most acute distress at MIT. So we

worked to support students who were hospitalized for psychiatric treatment and evaluation and really we call it the care team, the thread that weaves us together, the support network at MIT.

(02:46):

I was in that role for about two years and we felt like we had our support system down and students were getting connected, but we really wanted to focus on education and training to make sure that faculty, staff, students knew how to recognize and respond to students in distress. So in 2018, my role evolved and I took on some more education and training responsibilities, and then we continued to go upstream and not just think about how we were responding to students in distress and how we were educating our community, but really wanted to think about how do we create this environment at MIT where wellbeing is prioritized from day one when students step foot on campus. So the Office of Student Wellbeing was created in the fall of 2020 and the height of the pandemic, which is a great time for all of us to think about wellbeing, and we have been doing the work since.

Michele King Harrington (03:41):

Wow, that sounds really, really interesting work. And to be there at the initiation of that is very exciting for you, Jimmy. Definitely. Wow. So what would you say are some sort of key moments that influenced your career direction, do you think? Those epiphany moments?

Jimmy Doan (03:59):

Yeah, I think with 10 years here, right, I think there's quite a few key moments. I'll certainly never forget my time living in the residence hall with students. I very, very clearly remember my first fire alarm in the middle of the nights and my husband and I waking up and being like, is this really our lives right now? And I was naive, right? Because we had so many more of those and there's also some joy in that, right? We had great moments with students at three four in the morning where we had impromptu snowball fights in the Westgate parking lot while we were waiting for the all clear to go back in.

Michele King Harrington (04:35):

Oh, that sounds fun.

Jimmy Doan (04:38):

I definitely don't miss those fire alarms anymore. And was excited to have fewer nights of interrupted rest. But after being in the area director role for a number of years, I was starting to think about my next professional step. And at that time I was taking some pre-req courses with a thought of going back to get my PhD in clinical psychology. And I remember sending in, really out of the blue, an email to the head of student support services. I knew very little about him at the time. I knew that he was a clinical psychologist professionally, and we had worked together on supporting some students, but I just always felt a deep respect for him. So I won't bore you with the details, but that outreach to him that summer and meeting with him a few weeks later really was the catalyst for my work in student support and wellbeing and led me to where I am now. I think about that key moment often and just sending that

email. And I'm really grateful that he was open to meeting while that work was challenging over the years. I think what it made me realize is I love creating and building things, including processes and protocols and thinking about strategy. So I've been really fortunate in my positions that have come after the care team to think that a lot and to do many of those things.

Michele King Harrington (06:00):

Wonderful, Jimmy. Wow. So just to get back to what you mentioned there, I suppose from a career development perspective, also that outreach you did for an informational interview. So maybe could you just talk a little bit more about that? Was it really about the work he was doing? Was it sort of how your work intersected and maybe your next step?

Jimmy Doan (06:21):

Yeah, I think it was a combination of all of that, right? I mean, early on in my career, I said to myself, I didn't feel like I was going to be in any role for longer than three, four years early on in my career. And I was creeping up to that point. And I naturally, because of mentors and advisors that I had from graduate school and on, they always encouraged me to think about my professional growth and professional development. And because of that, when I got to MIT, I sought out people I wanted to look up to and emulate and work closely with and get to know. Prior to coming to MIT, I didn't think that my work would be focused and centered on student support at all. Right? And I came to MIT with a higher ed background, but I was working in student activities and working with students who were in general doing well, they were engaged, they were connected to groups on campus. And the opportunity to work with students who were going through more challenging times was something that was really fascinating for me. So I really wanted to make it a point to reach out to folks that could share more about that, right, through their lived and professional experiences. So I think that's incredibly important.

Michele King Harrington (07:35):

Wow. That's great. Jimmy. And doing wonderful work, it sounds like. So thank you for sharing all that. Yes. So what do you see as key emotional intelligence elements that have helped you in your career and how has utilizing these been a benefit to you?

Jimmy Doan (07:53):

Yeah. It's funny because I think while my colleagues and I in the Division of Student Life and across campus, we think about equipping students with skills a lot and how do they live healthy and purposeful lives, and how does emotional intelligence help them, [it’s also] important to remember that we need to be thinking about this for ourselves as well. And it's not just a role model behavior, but it's also to show that we're caring for ourselves and thinking about our professional growth and development. So as you said earlier, relationship building I think is a big part of that. I think it's so important to be successful at MIT to understand and prioritize relationship building. I firmly believe that all my colleagues across campus, we have our best interest for students in mind, and we want to create an environment where students can be supported and thrive.

(08:45):

But we all go about that in different ways. And I think that it's important to be able to understand and see the ways that we go about that work and be able to empathize with somebody who might be approaching the work differently and to have conversations, sometimes difficult conversations, about how we approach our work differently. Cause I think that's where the “a-ha” moments happen and we can learn from one another and if needed, we can start moving forward together. But outside of the relationship building piece, I think just having self-awareness I think is another emotional intelligence skill that I think about a lot. I always try to pause and think about how I feel, right? I mean, through my career journey at MIT, I've had a fair number of moments of crisis. I've had to have difficult conversations with students and staff. I've also been really lucky to celebrate successes.

(09:39):

And in each of those moments, being able to pause and think about how I feel and how those feelings impact me and others, especially now as a manager, I think that's so important. And then I think just, again, that's something that I think increasingly more about as a manager. Cause I think it's important to have a good sense of myself, my values, and how I show up, because that impacts the team, and I think that they see that. But I also think that's a big part of the self-awareness is being able to recognize when I've made a mistake and recognize when I need to acknowledge that and hold myself accountable because I expect that of others. So I think those are all skills that are incredibly important.

Michele King Harrington (10:25):

Thank you, Jimmy. And definitely in the work that you do and are doing, I'm sure having highly developed emotional intelligence skills is really important. And so do you see how that, just following on from that question, given the care team and all of that that you do with students, do you see that changing with students at all in your work or in your time, them becoming more self-aware, tuning into some of those skills in a way that maybe they haven't in the past?

Jimmy Doan (10:55):

Yeah, I think college and graduate school is certainly a time to develop and hone those skills. These are lifelong skills. I'm figuring this out still. So I think the first and most important thing is setting expectations on where we want our students to be by the time that they graduate. And I don't want them to feel like they are fully self-aware people that have it all together by the time that they walk the stage at Killian Court. But I think it's important that they start developing those skills so that when they go out to the world outside of MIT, they can continue to develop those skills. So I think the pandemic has certainly made it more difficult. The students that are coming to MIT now, they had very non-traditional end of high school experiences where some of these skills start getting developed. So I think we think about our work very differently now, knowing the impact that that has had on students. And just thinking about the trends of mental health in general over the years. I, I wouldn't say that we're at full ease in thinking about where students are from a skill and developmental standpoint, but I think it makes our work ever more important.

Michele King Harrington (12:07):

And I think it's great that it's sort of on the radar of leaders who are involved with that sort of student experience from beginning to end. And I think that sort of trickles down to the students themselves. So thank you for that, Jimmy. So what do you see as unique about working in higher education in general and in a research institution like MIT?

Jimmy Doan (12:30):

I'm realizing that MIT isn't all that unique. I think the issues and challenges that we see with our students are in line with what colleges and universities, including many of our peer institutions, are seeing around the country. But that being said, I think that the innovative spirit at MIT and the desire to solve things and complex problems in innovative ways in working with students, I think that certainly makes us unique and we're incredibly well resourced. I think that this is much in part thanks to our large network of alumni and friends who care so much about the Institute and give back. But when I think about the innovative spirit and the resources that we have, and I think about MIT, I think that we have a lot of responsibility as an institution to share what we learn and to improve higher education because again, the challenges that our students are facing aren't isolated to MIT, right?

(13:30):

I think part of what drives me in my work so much is knowing that the work that we're doing at MIT, not just in the labs and in the classroom and in the academic world, but really in student life, I think we have an opportunity to impact higher education. And that's the part of the work that really excites me as I think about higher education in general. It's changed a lot over time when we're at a point now where people are questioning the value of higher education. And I went to graduate school for higher education administration. So I believe very firmly in education, but I think we have a greater responsibility now. The world is a very complex place, and if part of higher education is teaching students to enter that world through the lens of their discipline, I think we have to be thinking bigger, right? About what we're doing in higher education to equip students with skills and the tools to not just be experts in their discipline, but how do they engage with other people in the world? How do they navigate conflict? How do they take care of themselves? How do they have these basic skills are just so important to just living life?

Michele King Harrington (14:43):

Wow, you put that so eloquently, Jimmy. So many great points there that you raised. And I think that idea of MIT, I suppose being in the limelight or always there maybe as a leader or sort of looking to MIT and us feeling that sense of responsibility that yes, we can effect change and we are so well resourced and very lucky in that respect that MIT does have all of that, and as you said, the innovative creative spirit. So I just wanted to ask lots of questions here, but how do you think MIT has sort of evolved over your career tenure and what more can we do as an Institute in helping build sustainable careers at MIT, do you think?

Jimmy Doan (15:32):

Yeah, I think MIT has evolved so much over my time here, and I'm really proud of the progress that we've made as a community and as an Institute, as it relates to student life, as it relates to student support and establishing some common language around student wellbeing. So as I shared in my career journey, I think we've gone from really figuring out how to respond to students in distress, to how to coordinate this upstream thinking about our culture around wellbeing. And I think we have an opportunity now to do the same with staff development and wellbeing. So in addition to thinking about how we fill positions and recruit the best people to work here, I think that we need to be thinking about how we create an environment at MIT where staff feel that their wellbeing is prioritized. And that's culture-changing work.

(16:24):

It doesn't happen overnight, it certainly didn't happen overnight with students. But I think thinking about everything from how we communicate to staff, what policies and benefits say and don't say, how staff wellbeing is prioritized, what onboarding looks like, how do we equip managers to have this same shared vision? I think all of those things are so important. And I talk about our work in creating a culture of student wellbeing as a multifaceted approach. And I think it's the same here. I think that we need to develop a shared clear vision around what we want. And if it's that MIT wants to be known for our culture of recruiting the best staff and creating an environment where staff stay and feel that they belong and feel supported, I think let's say it and make it clear and have everybody on board and let's do it.

Michele King Harrington (17:19):

Yeah. Thank you, Jimmy. Yes. And I think it is so important, sort of a segue into my next question around that post-Covid climate and that wellbeing has sort of, I don't know, jumped up the ranks a little bit in terms of importance. So maybe on that note, how do you see the current post-Covid climate has impacted how people are looking at their career trajectories as well as wellbeing for staff and students?

Jimmy Doan (17:44):

Yeah, I think there's no question that Covid has impacted the way that people think about work. I know it did for me personally and how people think about their careers. But I think staff and student life in higher education in general, I think are recovering from the long past three years to ensure continuity and student life and learning. And so I think concretely, people want to have a clear sense of their work. They want to be in environments where the mission and the vision is clear. I think they want to have opportunities to grow and meaningfully contribute and ideate on new projects and do new projects and collaborate with others. I think people want flexibility. I think we're fortunate here. I know that work looks different for everybody across the board at MIT, but where we have been able to be flexible, I think being able to do so I think is very much so appreciated. And lastly, I think that people are weighing things outside of work more as they think about their career growth and trajectories. So families, hobbies, I think that's all great and healthy.

Michele King Harrington (18:56):

Thanks, Jimmy. That's wonderful. Yes. And as you say that about careers, I suppose maybe we used to think about it more in this siloed way that everything else worked in around that. And now it just feels like there's tentacles of home and just personal, all sorts of things that it, it's all big one messy pile sometimes, isn't it? That's great. Yes. So maybe just to sort of round it off as we're getting to the end of our time, how would you as a manager mentor your direct reports when it comes to their careers?

Jimmy Doan (19:28):

So I'm relatively new in being a supervisor. So with the creation of the Office of Student Wellbeing in 2020, I'm really lucky and I'm now working with a team and supervising staff who are relatively young and early on in their careers. And as a supervisor, something that I think about often is how do I find the balance between creating a vision that a team can see themselves a part of, right? And really helping people find purpose in their work and see how their work is contributing to a larger vision and making an impact while ensuring that each staff member knows that I care about their personal and professional growth and make it clear that it's definitely not my expectation and hope that they're in their current roles for the rest of their careers, and that I want to be thinking about their career and professional growth with them.

(20:18):

So in my regular one-on-ones, right, staff come with agendas and I'm open to talk about everything that people are working on with current projects, but also happy to talk about what they want to do to grow and skills that they want to develop. So something that I prioritize a lot is creating space for staff to innovate. And I think I'm fortunate in that the Office of Student Wellbeing is new so that we're figuring a lot of things out. And this isn't to just throw darts at the wall, but I think it's really being able to give staff a chance to hone skills and to develop skills. And I think the last thing that I'll say is, I do this because this is role models for me.

Michele King Harrington (21:00):

Great. Well, thank you, Jimmy. They might be lining up to go and work for you. No, but I love that sort of sense of purpose and vision, and as you noted, sort of learning from the people that managed you. I think that's a great lesson and a good one for managers, which of course can be a really challenging place to be at times. So thank you, Jimmy. I really appreciate you taking the time to come and chat with us today. There's so many interesting things that we, on the administration side, sometimes maybe don't know what's happening on the student experience side. So thank you for that.

Jimmy Doan (21:35):

Thank you again for the opportunity.

Announcer (21:41):

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