

When Students Grade Professors

■ ANTARIKSH BOTHALE, ANUBHAV MANGAL, ISHAN SHRIVASTAVA, SRINATH RANYA

Some fill it with vindictive fervour against what they perceive as a semester spent in purgatory; a few, with the reverence of someone who believes that they spent 4 months under the tutelage of someone awe-inspiring. But most of us fill the course feedback with a sense of annoyance, quickly marking each question just so that we can get to see the grades afterwards. Regarded as a mere formality that has no effect whatsoever on how the course is conducted, many of us don't care tuppence about how we fill the course feedback.

The Course Evaluation Form was born when the institute felt that every instructor should get some feedback of how their course was perceived among the students, allowing him to make any suitable modifications to the course structure and delivery.

Previous Procedure

The feedback forms were filled manually by students during class hours under the supervision of another professor (not the instructor). The feedback forms were then scanned and evaluated by the Academic Office to give a rating to the professor. This rating was calculated using a formula dependent on the student's CPI and also his attendance. The rating and comments were collated and sent to the Heads of Departments. A copy of the same was sent to the course instructor and it was expected that he will bring about the necessary changes required, if any.

Transformation

In recent years with the rising influx of students as well as number of courses, the Academic Office could no longer handle the sheer workload. Due to this, the evaluation form was made online, allowing the forms to be directly uploaded to the server, bypassing the Academic Office. But with the form being online, and no instructor breathing down their necks, most students no longer had any reason to fill the form, and simply gave it a miss.

Which brings us to status-quo; to ensure that all students fill the form, the institute has effectively made it mandatory to do so by withholding a student's grade until he has submitted that particular course's feedback as well as disallowing him from registering for the following semester. But the current system still has many flaws, many students still do not take the form seriously, often marking all answers as 'Neutral' or otherwise. Many students who have never attended lectures also fill the form, resulting in an unformed feedback for the unfortunate instructor. The form itself suffers from its vague language and an absence of separate sections for the course and for the instructor, leaving several students confused.



Illustration by Arpit Agarwal

Changes Ahoy

Owing to the number of inherent problems with the current course evaluation form, a committee headed by Prof. Ravi Sinha of Civil Engineering, has been established at the institute level to look into the same. The committee is composed of various faculty members as well as both the GSAs and is looking into various reforms that could be implemented. It is scheduled to make its recommendation to the Under Graduate Program Committee (UGPC) and Post Graduate Program Committee (PGPC) by the end of November. It is expected that any recommendations they make, will be implemented by the spring semester of 2011-12.

Expected Reforms

Although any suggested reforms haven't yet been made public, InsIghT obtained a couple of expected recommendations that could go into the course evaluation committee's report:

- Every course has a different teaching methodology, which then effects the way the course evaluation form is filled up. While some courses run in LHC with more than 200 students, some are taught with just 20. Others involve the use of CDEEP videos with student-faculty interaction at a minimum. In such an environment, having the same course evaluation form for all the courses is inconvenient, due to which, different forms such as Form A, Form B etc. will be used for different courses. Each form will be accompanied with

certain guidelines that will explain what are the kind of courses it should be used in.

- Many times, because the students do not like the course content that is being taught, they blame the faculty and hence the faculty suffers, because he receives a bad review. In order to address this problem, subsequent course evaluation forms will have separate sections for the faculty evaluation and the course evaluation, helping to isolate the problem at hand.
- It is also felt that various parts of the evaluation form should be made public, in order to create an environment of transparency and stimulate the faculty members into incorporating the changes suggested by the students. However, not all parts of the form can be blindly made public, owing to some vindictive students putting something slanderous in text. Therefore, the forms will be made partially public, while keeping some of it private. What is to be kept public and what is private is still being debated upon by the committee.

All in all, the course evaluation form in its current state has a large number of troublesome issues ranging from credibility to content; hopefully the recommendations will solve most, if not all these issues. The rationale behind conducting such a feedback is one of helping to improve the quality of teaching in the institute. Hopefully we'll get to see a much better form in the future for feedback in the near future such that neither students nor professors are left short-changed. ■



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The New Face of Cultural Affairs

■ ANUBHAV MANGAL, NEHA INNANJE, RUSHINA SHAH, TANUSHREE PRASAD



As we bid adieu to a year of reform in the country, and indeed in the whole world, we notice that the same can be said about things much closer to home – reforms in this year's cultural calendar. Wondering about the sudden increase in the number of workshops and open events? What has happened to so many of the GCs that were held with such gusto last year? InsiGhT spoke to Kunal Mittal, the General Secretary of Cultural Affairs, to comprehend the ideology behind these changes in the cultural scene of the institute.

What's the Buzz About?

This year, a number of low-prep cultural GCs, such as the Ad-making GC, Jugalbandi GC, and Stop-motion movie making GC were scrapped from the Cultural Calendar. They have, instead, been replaced by a number of workshops and open events.

Reasons for the Change

Club Centric: 5–6 years ago, people who participated in the cultural events took it as a hobby rather than as a platform for being a professional. GCs turned into one of the few big platforms for them to showcase their talent in extra-curricular activities. As time passed, people learned more and started aiming for the perfect-TEN act. This led to profound domination of the various clubs in the specific genres. Unfortunately, this practice was something that was detrimental to the general cultural scene, as it encouraged 'club centric' activity and discouraged 'newbies'. Soon, the club meets were attended by a limited set of 'club members' and only they learnt the trade so as to speak.

On the one hand this serves as an excellent platform for the students to excel in their respective fields by providing them an excellent platform but on the other, it brings down the probability of novices entering a particular genre.

Forceful participation: The main aim for the existence of 'Cult' in an academic institute like IIT is to encourage hobby-activities and to develop personality skills in various arenas. Within the GC mindset, people are compelled to be a part of the 'forced cult' in the name of hostel enthusiasm.

Cultural overflow: The past cultural councillors of various hostels were of the opinion that the number of GCs that were held throughout the year were one too many. The fall in general levels of hostel spirit made it much more difficult to ensure good participation. The Cult Co was always under the scanner during the GCs and faces the brunt for poor performance, irrespective of the efforts put in.

The cultural scene in IITB should be more about personality development, leisure and fun, than about the competition

How will the Change Help?

One way to resolve most of the above issues, as mentioned by Kunal, is to cut down on the number of GCs. This will not only ensure keeping the inter-hostel competitive spirits high but also counter the issues of increasing club-centricity and 'forced cult'. The fewer number of GCs would take off a lot of undue pressure from the hostel councils too and help them to focus on just a few of them with better preparation.

Most of the low prep GCs have already been scrapped, this is again in view to upgrade the remaining high-prep GCs to the hype which Gyration and other such GCs share. The reduction was carried out gauging two essential requirements of a GC – hostel spirit and competition. GCs that did not satisfy both these essential criteria were given the boot. For example the stop-motion GC required highly technical skills and only those who knew it well, could excel. On the other extreme, Ad-making GC simply got in a lot of people together, without entailing much competition.

Due to restrictions on the number of teams allowed per hostel, many students were unable to participate. Open events and workshops have been increased to account for this void. The cultural council is of the opinion that they need to cater to not only the club members but also provide a platform for the newcomers. The cultural scene in IITB should be more about personality development, leisure and fun, than about the competition.

Increasing intra-hostel events and workshops, would not only help identify and encourage new talent, but also help restore the weakening hostel culture as the newcomers would relate more to workshops. Also, these are far less intimidating than a General Championship event, where they would be representing their hostel. If the efforts of the hostel council go into organising an intra-hostel-event rather than struggling to put up an entry in a number of GCs, the hostelites get to learn something new and it will be appreciated more. Similar is the case at the institute level where it's much easier to conduct an open event, given the limited resources.

It hardly makes sense to conduct GCs for every activity in a particular genre. Having open events for many of the activities in a genre instead would help reach out to the diverse expectations in a particular genre. But the institute also has a cap on the number of open events conducted and hence this problem is rectified only to a certain extent. The present response to the introduction of workshops, with an improvement in both the number and types of events has been very encouraging, according to the institute council. In comparison to previous years, the participation has increased, the council claims, and introduction of new events like sketching workshops, etc has introduced new people into the 'cult scene'.

The Flip-Side

The above ideology looks good on paper. When we take practicality into account, quite a few flaws come to the fore. Limiting the number of GCs to one per genre will cut down the number of people required to participate. Only the more experienced people, the 'club members' would participate with their eyes on winning the one and only GC being held. Although more open events will ensure people don't lose out on participation, they would still lack the experience of working in an event that counts. Having only one GC per genre would give a hostel only one chance to do well in an event. Failing to do so would push them out of the race, putting excess pressure on the council.

Another thing to be noted is that cultural activities are not part of a daily routine as other activities like sports. Besides the inter-hostel championship, sporting activities regularly have intra-hostel matches as well, which not only helps them practice and (but) improves hostel bonding as well. The new system might also lose out on people who participate with the motivation to compete.

Verdict

The cultural scene has to work in a two-pronged way, increasing opportunities in the institute for the students with experience and at the same time, roping more people into the cultural scene in the institute, encouraging them to let go of their inhibitions and explore new domains. Paying attention to one would inadvertently lead to suppressing the other as resources are limited. The current cultural council is trying to find a balance, giving a little more focus to the latter. As for experienced 'punters', there exist ample opportunities even outside the institute. As this issue can be resolved only from the grass root level, initial hiccups would inevitably crop up but it nonetheless promises to be an interesting change to look forward to. Whether it achieves success though, only time will tell. ■

Orientations and the Great Freshie Baiting Trick

■ ARCHANA DAS, ADITI JAIN, MADHU KIRAN P., MANU SAHAY, NIDHI SHANBHAG, VAIBHAV PITTIE

Chances are that if you have not been spending your semester in the jungle, you would have heard about the incident regarding the belly dancers at the Mood Indigo orientation. The scene was pretty much as you can envisage – belly dancers were brought in to attract the impressionable freshmen and create an aura of awe and wonder about the ‘Biggest Fest of its kind in Asia’.

Unfortunately, external media bodies got wind of the orientation and published an elaborate article highlighting the views of Delhi College heads and how they would never allow such a ‘blasphemy’ to take place in their college. Following this, a certain Mr. Ranjan Zed, President of Universal Society of Hinduism, asked for launching a thorough enquiry into this episode and demanded a public apology from the Director.

How did the Institute Respond?

In previous years, no action was taken when belly dancers performed at the MI All Team Meet. However, this time around, the institute docked MI one pronite. The then Dean of Student Affairs, Prof. Gopalan told us that *“the involvement of my office was merely restricted to signing the permission forms. Post that, the orientation organizers were deemed responsible for their content. We took a lenient view and never raked the content sheet, as it was very difficult for this office to micro-manage the orientations. However, as the issue spiraled out of control, the Director wanted to know how this could have happened, bringing adverse publicity to IITB. Since MI never took an official permission for this event, it was as if they sneaked this in. The discussion between me and the Director led to a penalty that had to be imposed. Monetary fines had been imposed in the past, but had proved ineffective. We wanted the whole team to resign, but that was deemed impractical, so we decided to scrap a pronite. Also, post this fiasco, all the bodies holding orientations will now be required to fill up a content sheet detailing the sequence of activities, to get permission. Also, I had written a letter to the Director when I was the Dean, saying that IBs have gone overboard, and that he should look in to the matter, to limit the number of orientations to a bare minimum.”*

The scrapping of a pronite, though hard on the organizers, will certainly hurt the crowd more. Not only would the festival lose some of its sheen, it would also deny the public the chance to experience another enthralling night through no fault of their own.

Whose fault was it and who did they punish?

The administrators have to take note when the institute’s reputation is on the line, but put yourself in the shoes of the MI core team and things look slightly different. One would assume that since previously they had belly dancers in their All Team Meet and Salsa dancers at their orientation, their actions this year would have been legitimate as well. To declare an activity a crime after it has been committed, is a form of retrospective prosecution – something that almost no constitution in the world allows.

The new DoSA, Prof. Yajnik responded by saying that the Dean’s office does not believe in micromanaging orientation proceedings. They give students a free run, trusting them to regulate the content wisely, at the same time assuming that they are responsible enough to do so and will not abuse this trust. The Dean’s office only steps in when it believes that the reputation of the institute is at stake. Belly dancers at an orientation are a gross contradiction to the academic setting and decorum of the campus and hence, such severe action was necessitated.

The Dean’s model gives students freedoms until someone abuses that trust; in contrast to a ‘license raj’ wherein we have to obtain permissions for every

activity we do, this model is mindful of the fact that we are responsible adults and places in us, this implicit faith. This will help maximize student liberties in the long run as long as we act responsibly and not sully the institute’s name. Some students though are still not convinced whether belly dancers at an orientation is such a taboo.

Taking a bird’s eye view

Entering IIT is a life changing experience for most of us, which often entails living in a new city with minimal parental support and leaving behind an established friend circle. Furthermore, freshmen face a plethora of activities that they can now pursue. They have pre-conceived notions about life at IITB, often from tutors at coaching classes or family and friends. Such information tends to reflect the personal experiences of those individuals to a great extent. Case in point is the notion that IIT graduates earn an astronomical pay. The synergy between massive social change and information opacity leads to freshmen being extremely impressionable. As a community, we have a two-fold obligation to ease this social transformation and to bridge the information gap which exists. This should be the goal of orientations and mentorship programs, but some faculty and students hold the opinion that orientations today have gone astray.

An Orientation in Ethics

As seniors organizing orientations for freshmen we must keep the above two obligations in mind. The opportunity to hold an orientation comes with the responsibility to provide balanced information to the audience. Unfortunately, instead of becoming the guiding lights, they have become flashy, advertising tools to lure gullible freshmen. Some orientations tend to overshadow others, which tends to create an illusory pecking order. Orientations can be made more balanced by removing performances which are not intrinsically linked to the event one is speaking about. A dance performance at an InSync orientation is acceptable because the club actually affords the student the opportunity to perform such an activity. But participation in MI’s dance competition is not

contingent on you working as an organizer; in fact the work of an organizer is very different, hence a dance performance at the orientation might seem out of place. Like all ethical matters, there is a flip side to this one as well. Overall Coordinator of MI, Swapnil Chichani defends the dance act by saying that he needs to tell the audience what MI is all about, first, and this they do by inviting performers and artists from last year’s MI; the actual specifics of the work involved are dealt with later in the All Team Meet. To put this view into perspective, MI has a range of alternatives, like look back videos, photos and experiences of charismatic ex-organizers which it can use, so it’s not a case of “dancers or nothing”. One might still argue that MI would not be able to represent itself in the best possible way or that its popularity among the freshmen would fall. But one must ask, “Are orientations being held to ensure that Fests are popular or to provide balanced information to the freshmen?”

Too much, Too soon?

Another issue objected to, is the disproportionately large amount of time consumed by these orientations, which adversely affects students’ academic performance. A possible solution can be to follow a minimalistic philosophy of laying out the structure of the cultural, sports and technical bodies. Each club would then have a minimalistic time slot to talk about their club. This information is sufficient to inform freshmen about what is on offer and what steps they should take if they want to participate; more information if required could be imparted in the club’s first meet. On suggesting the same to the MI OC, Swapnil, insisted that MI would accept the idea of smaller and fewer orientations, provided that there was uniformity across the board and each and every department of MI be treated on par with other clubs and that each department of MI be given the same time as an institute club to present itself to students.

In line with the above mentioned priorities, we laud the recent measures which restrict the distribution of freebies in orientations. ■

PROF. U. A. YAJNIK DEAN SA

When asked how he would like to see orientations evolve suggested, the current Dean SA Prof. Yajnik suggested having a two week program before the semester starts.

The orientation should also work to break the ice among the freshmen themselves. They should get

a systematic exposure to a few important core skills for self-development. For example one or two recreational sports and games, appreciation of a few performing / visual art forms, and other than that some inter-personal skills they will need for living in the hostel, participating in the classroom and the lab, etc.

PROF. BALLAL

I get feedback from students in the third and fourth year, and all of them say the same thing, that in the first semester, all emphasis is on the extracurricular activities. They have to show their skills in academics as well as on a hostel level. They are at a very impressionable age. They say that they never got serious in the 1st year, lost their passion for science and technology and now find it difficult to come back into the fold. First year students are left to tackle the introduction to a new life on their own. The hostel life is new for them, and they are not yet mature enough, and are highly impressionable at this age. Most seniors try to lure the freshmen into extra-curriculars even before they know what is good for them. They need time to find out what exactly interests them. But it doesn’t happen that way. They are attracted by the freebies you offer them in orientations. This is ethically wrong, students go astray. IIT Bombay extra-curriculs do not involve creativity by the newcomers; they use them only as bonded labour. It is like a drama company – there are excellent acts, and it grooms freshmen but no creativity is involved from their side.

PROF. GOPALAN FORMER DEAN SA

On orientations in general I have following view-points:

- Orientations should not be held formally
- Some lesser important orientations should be done by putting up of online posters rather than daily assembly of students

An academic orientation is fine, but a sports orientation is not necessary. Students are shown the gymkhana grounds and given a tour of the institute before the classes start, there is no point in showing them the same thing again. Also, mentors are there to guide them, they are supposed to meet them for 15–20 days, and guide them on sports and cultural matters. The orientations for the IBs, as needed, can be shifted down the line, maybe after midsems, since they are not very necessary during the starting of the semester.

PLACING THE PLACEMENT

ASHISH RATHI, NIDHI SHANBAGH, NINAD KULKARNI, SESHADRI G., TANUSHREE PRASAD

The Placement Team, headed by Prof. Ravi Sinha, and comprising of an army of Placement Managers (PMs), Company Coordinators (CCs), Department Placement Coordinators (DPCs) and Associate Coordinators, shoulders the responsibility of contacting and negotiating with companies to place over 1300 PG and UG students every year. With a placement policy that gets longer and more complicated every year, final year students, caught between compulsory PPTs, workshops, quizzes and shortlists, often find themselves grumbling about the elaborate, apparently illogical restrictions being imposed on them and tend to wonder if the placement team is doing enough. Inslght quizzed the Placement Team regarding the rationale behind three of their more controversial policies to present a more holistic critique from the point of view of all the stakeholders.

25% Attendance in PPTs

The Placement rules state that every student registered for placements is expected to compulsorily attend a minimum of 25% of all the Pre-Placement Talks (PPTs) conducted per week. We find out why students are being made to spend upwards of 5–6 hours every week in PPTs – even those, they aren't eligible to apply to.

Placement Cell's Take

Corporate Exposure: Over the last few years, companies have often been very critical about the lack of basic communication skills and corporate etiquette amongst candidates, even though they are fairly sound in their technical knowledge. There have been many instances of companies taking fewer students than they had intended to, for the same reason. It was to address this issue, that Prof Ravi Sinha, Placement In-Charge (PIC) instated this rule with the belief that an exposure to corporate culture and better communication skills which students would get at such PPTs would help them overcome this. While students might argue about the potency of PPTs in enhancing a students' communication skills, Prof. Ravi Sinha believes that in an institute wherein the current curriculum doesn't go out of its way to develop students' skills in this aspect-either by personality development classes or work visits, this is a carefully thought-out experiment. This is also the reason why this rule expects students for whom these JAFs don't open, to attend PPTs of other companies. While he conceded that such a move is highly onerous from the student perspective, it does have its merits that will be evident in the placement feedback from companies this year.

Measly voluntary attendance in PPTs: Another major contributor to this move has been the repeated occurrence of measly attendance (at times lesser than 20 in the LT) at company PPTs. In one such episode, recalls Ritika Goyal, Placement Manager, Dual Degree Program, the company was embarrassed enough to consider withdrawing from the Placement process entirely. The 25% rule was then established to avoid such incidents that might lead to loss of jobs for students.

Inslght's Take

While the actual efficacy of the rule in improving student communication skills remains doubtful, the Placement team does seem justified in taking this measure of compulsory attendance to protect the interests of the larger student body; students even though they do not attend PPTs do mostly end up signing JAFs, if we recognise that attendance in PPTs is linked to companies' willingness to come for recruitment, this becomes an issue that needs solving. However, in either case, we are still skeptical as to how seriously the student will take a PPT which he is not eligible to apply to. Perhaps, if the PPTs one had to attend, was linked to the JAFs he could sign- by making students attend maybe more than 25% of PPTs of companies whose JAFs they are eligible to sign, it would be an alternative that could be considered that would mitigate the concerns of both the students and the PT – students would only attend the relevant PPTs and companies would only expect a response as large as its target pool of candidates.

Incentive Points for Paid Services

Incentive points are a policy introduced by the PT wherein students are rewarded for participating in preparatory activities and fined points for violation of the policy. These incentive points enable students securing jobs in categories 3,4 and 5 to sign extra JAFs even after they have been placed. One of these activities includes participating in a paid programme by the management examination coaching body, T.I.M.E. costing students Rs.1200 for 6 sessions for specified incentive points. Although, students who did participate in this gave rave reviews to the actual workshop, they did find it unfair on 2 grounds:

1. The very principal on which the PT is awarding incentive points for a paid service is something that irks a majority of the students
2. Secondly, awarding incentive points for an activity conducted by a coaching class could be misconstrued as the institute legitimizing and endorsing coaching classes. This, especially at a time when the JEE is being restructured to discourage coaching classes and closer home; previously sponsorship from coaching classes has been discouraged for fests on campus

Placement Cell's Take

In response, the placement team told Inslght, that they felt these services went a long way in helping students sharpen their communication and interview skills. Hence, it was important to incentivize them so that students consider this option seriously and avail of it as far as possible. The principal of paid incentive points has been carefully balanced in the placement policy by ensuring that there are enough placement activities conducted the year round to easily reach the upper limit of incentive points without having to attend these sessions. Thus the student is presented with a very real and balanced choice, in taking up this service, although the institute would very much encourage all students to benefit from it.

As far as the endorsement of coaching centres goes, Prof. Ravi Sinha commented that these services had very little to do with the coaching these institutes otherwise offer. The reviews from the student community regarding their quality have been extremely positive and hence the placement team felt that their decision was justified.

Inslght's Take

The value-for-money that this service has provided has been unequivocally appreciated by the students sitting for placements this year. Since the placement cell has taken care to ensure that the student can achieve the maximum number of incentive points without ever having taken this service, it doesn't necessarily qualify as having to 'pay' for incentive points, yet principally it still presents an ethical dilemma. Also, whether this doesn't qualify as coaching classes using the institute for subliminal promotion, is something we leave the reader to ponder over.

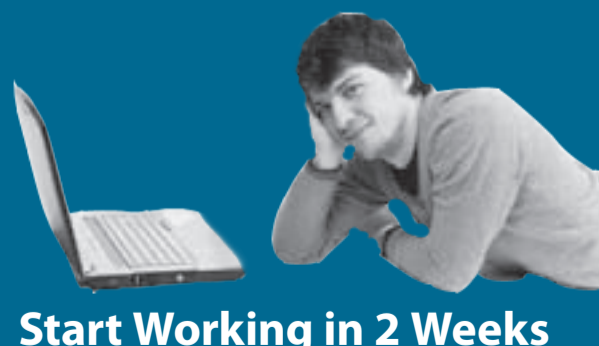
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PLACEMENT POLICY

DEPARTMENTS TAKING PART IN THE PLACEMENT PROCESS

Value Inc.

Value Inc., a Hyderabad based company founded by a former IITian, conducts short-interviews and sends back feedback assessing one's English speaking skills. In 2009, in response to poor feedback from companies regarding students' communication skills, Value Inc. was introduced as an optional service for a target group of students. In that year, focus groups which undertook this assessment gave it overwhelmingly positive reviews – 4.8 on a scale of 5. This coupled with the institute's interest in improving student communication skills led to it being made compulsory for all students enrolled in the placement process. Students were expected to compulsorily pay Rs. 200 over above their nominal placement fees which did lead to some disgruntlement. Many students felt that they didn't require the service or that the service wasn't up to the mark or relevant. This year, students' assessment, which should ideally be have been mailed to them within 2–3 weeks, was delayed by over 1.5 months. Candidates were severely disappointed; they couldn't use the feedback even if they wanted to, as the results were given so close to placements even though the evaluations were held quite some time ago. Additionally, some students question the utility of an assessment that merely points to their deficiencies and doesn't help them overcome them.

This year, students' assessment was delayed by over 1.5 months.

Placement Cell's Take

Why it is Compulsory: Value Inc. was made compulsory in 2010 on the Director's directive after the testing period, says Prof. Ravi Sinha. The institute is able to provide this service at a huge bargain by leveraging the volume of business it can offer. The placement team feels that imposing it on students, many of whom wouldn't sign up for this voluntarily even if they need it, is a necessary evil and works out for the greater good. However, he conceded, that Value Inc. is only a part of the solution and the complete package in itself.

Delay: The results given by Value Inc. were delayed this year, purportedly due to their internal problems and the strikes in Telangana.

Insight's Take

From our research with various parties, we did realize that the problem identified by the placement cell is indeed very large, pertinent and real. Many students who were informally polled, said that the feedback was very objective and more useful to candidates with fewer deficiencies which could be targeted, rather than the vast majority which by the PT's own admission, lacks basic skills. Hence, it is important that the feedback be taken this year and if the student body chooses to discontinue Value Inc, the PT not only consider other companies but also other products, especially since it is made compulsory for students.

For the very first time, this year several departments eg: Civil, Chemical took the lead in especially preparing their students for their placements by going out of their way to conduct full-fledged refresher courses for students sitting for core companies. Such an involvement by the faculty in helping their students with the placements can truly go a long way in student welfare, said Prof. Ravi Sinha. In fact, the PT is going one step ahead, and trying to encourage departments to nominate a Faculty Advisor, who will not only help conduct such preparatory activities for students, but also guide the placement cell in approaching core companies and negotiating better profiles for students, thereby giving an impetus to students who wish to join core companies.

DEFERRAL OF PLACEMENTS

A highlight of the Placement policy this time round that even made a splash in leading newspapers was the 'Deferral of Placements' policy which was to be introduced this year, in line with similar policies in leading management institutes around the world. It tried to introduce an option to students who wish to start their own enterprise to defer their placement for a period of two years after graduating. This was a move to encourage innovation and entrepreneurship amongst students, and provide them with a safety net with requisite checks in place to monitor these start-ups to prevent the exploitation of this rule. However, it has faced many glitches on the way, especially with the institute's insistence of restricting this to core start-ups alone, basic definition of core start-ups, co-ordination problems with the E-Cell on this due to certain institute policies, formation of the monitoring panel, etc. However, the PT feels optimistic that they would still be able to pass the policy by the end of this year, by the start of the second phase of placements in January.

STRUCTURE OF THE PLACEMENT TEAM

The Placement Team is structured somewhat like an IB (Independent Body) with Placement Managers (PMs) the highest student representatives and Prof Ravi Sinha as Placement In-Charge (PIC). The PMs present their views to Prof. Sinha but Prof. Sinha takes the final call on all decisions. Any problems with the placement policies can be taken up with Prof. Sinha and the Director.

As of now, the PT does hold an open house to discuss their policy (once it is released), they also take a comprehensive feedback of everything from policies to execution, near the end of the placement season; but there is no platform (apart from their email ID) which the PT provides to students to express their concerns or lodge complaints. It is not always possible nor always easy for a student to approach a professor with his grievances; if the PT were to launch a Feedback/Complaints forum wherein students could send in their problems and complaints for redressal, it would not only go a long way in improving the PT's image but would also provide students an outlet to voice their opinion at a platform where their voices would be heard and documented, with a chance of a genuine reply.

Poltu Khan

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Big Brother is Watching

■ OPINION EDITORIAL by NIVVEDAN SENTHAMIL SELVAN

The institute is incorporating an ever-increasing variety of surveillance measures to place tabs on students and other members of the campus community. Let's analyze the extent to which these surveillance measures intrude on our privacy, why it is a big deal, and the psychological, ethical, and societal problems associated with this.

Surveillance in the institute

Dataveillance and Online Privacy: Is our browsing data, e-mail and other personal accounts on various servers monitored and logged?

The Computer Centre's Privacy Policy for computer accounts, point 2 states "The institute, being the owner of the computer resources provided to its employees and students with the primary objective of facilitating academic work, reserves the right to access personal account of any such person on reasonable suspicion, supported by evidences such as download logs that the account stores and/or disseminates illegal material such as copyrighted or pirated material, hate mails, pornography etc." This is also in agreement with the IT policy signed by you (Point 8) "I understand that the IT resources provided to me are subject to monitoring ..."

As per the privacy statement, if the download logs are to be used as an evidence to access your e-mail or other computer accounts, it inherently dictates that all the browsing data and downloads are logged for every LDAP account and are accessible to determine any objectionable doing. Download logs seem to be treated as open knowledge. Apart from being a breach of privacy in itself (which is often passed off stating security reasons), it raises a variety of other concerns and questions. What measures are in place to protect the data from misuse and how strong/effective is it? Who is authorised to view your download logs and what qualifies as "reasonable suspicion"? The institute should clarify some details and come up with a more descriptive privacy policy.

Omniscience – CCTV Surveillance: CCTVs are employed as surveillance mechanisms in a myriad of places in the institute including the gates, the front (and backs) of all the department buildings, in auditoriums like FC Kohli etc. Some rather surprising and lesser known locations include a few labs in the chemistry department with the stated reason being that the experiments (and inevitably the RAs in the lab too) can be monitored by the professors from the comfort of their homes. The surveillance cameras in Hostel 11 mess kitchen is supposedly meant to be used as evidence by the hostel council if a disagreement or quarrel among the mess workers arises. Whilst the CCTVs at the gates can be passed off as 'security reasons', most others are absurd and a violent breach of privacy.

The Biometrics: Biometrics seem to be the latest toy at the hands of an institute already bit by the surveillance bug. Earlier, the biometric access restrictions were applicable only at research labs (mainly for access control). However, recently, an increased presence of biometrics is observed in residential areas. For instance, Hostel 5 has biometric verification at the mess and the computer room. The GSHA says that biometrics would soon be installed in all hostel messes and all hostel common areas. The development of an institute-wide biometric database (as in the case of the 2011 freshmen for attendance purposes) and biometric access restrictions at various places in the institute is also in pipeline. While the biometrics at the messes can be acceptable due to reasons of ease of operation with respect to mess bill calculation, the others seem rather dodgy; their effectiveness and the ethical aspects are deeply questionable.

Non-electronic Surveillance – The Classic Way: How many incidents have there been of our security pulling students over in the night (especially couples) and demand for their ID cards? Although in many cases the security personnel may very well know that they



Illustration by Arpit Agarwal

are students, it is still being done, possibly due to moral policing reasons. With no disrespect to their dedicated service, isn't the precise reason that they are employed is to enable us wander freely within the campus without worries? Is it worth getting so paranoid about security in an educational institute at the cost of affecting the positive academic atmosphere? We might want to consider taking a leaf out of IISc's book in this regard. IISc, for instance, vehemently opposed tightening security even after the 2005 attacks as it believed that the essence of an open, educative atmosphere would be lost by such a move.

Why is This Even an Issue?

There are several problems and serious concerns with growing into a surveillance society, especially as an educational institution. As David Lyon, the notable sociologist in Surveillance Studies says, "Surveillance has two faces - safety and control. However in most situations, the controlling face dominates under the cover of safety, thus feeding on individual liberty"

Invasion of Privacy: An individual's privacy is inevitably trampled upon by surveillance. But, why is privacy so important to you? After all, if you have nothing to hide, why do have a problem? This particular question can also be interpreted as the totalitarian statement, "As long as you do what you're told, you have nothing to fear", the ethical aspects of which are highly objectionable in a democratic world.

The right to privacy is a most basic, most human need: the need for our space. We all need our space for a variety of important reasons: psychological, ethical, political, societal among others. Feeling like your every move is monitored and recorded is not only disturbing, but downright scary. As privacy creates a space within which we can act autonomously without expecting judgement from others, the private space is the main source for autonomous judgement, on which a democracy thrives. In a surveillant environment which inhibits autonomy in situations that involve value-judgements by constantly enforcing conformity to rules, all the value-judgments are already made and materialised by a "big brother". The ability of a person to judge ethically is thus substituted by the mere need to conform to these rules.

Misuse and Abuse of Data: The data captured and logged through surveillance becomes easily susceptible to misuse and abuse. The idea of my movement around the institute logged by these machines at various places makes me highly uncomfortable. Personal comfort aside, the potential dangers of misuse of the logged data is tremendous. The data, for instance, could be used for personal profiling which could give valuable information regarding a person's behaviour which could be further misused to a great extent.

Indian Institute of Science (IISc) recently saw a protest against the UID project by students and faculty members. They argue that a secure electronic archive is just a myth and is a huge potential threat to the security of every individual. Such identification projects have already been tried, tested and given up as infeasible and rather dangerous by several countries – A

classic example would be the failure of the National Identification Scheme (NIS) of the UK, after spending a lot of pounds on it.

A Feeling of Mistrust and Tailoring of Behaviour: The presence of CCTVs in labs or in the mess kitchens tends to make its occupants highly mistrusted. When we turn to surveillance as a quick fix, it enforces a climate of fear and distrust, undermining the social ecology of the campus, instead of actually having an impact on the identified problem. The message it sends to students and employees is "We don't trust you, and everybody is a suspect". The more the restrictions that are imposed on students, the more likely it is to impress upon a student that he or she is inherently untrustworthy and that people who have authority may wield it without regard to individual liberties.

Some critics, such as Michel Foucault, believe that in addition to its obvious function of identifying and capturing individuals who are committing 'undesirable' acts, surveillance also functions to create in everyone a feeling of always being watched, so that they become self-policing. People tailor their behaviour to fit what they believe the observer wants. An analogy might be the well-studied population of children with overprotective mothers. Studies show that such children inevitably tend to be indecisive, dependent on others, have little 'ethical competence' and often live suppressed and unhappy lives.

Lack of Effectiveness: Surveillance has not been proven as effective as one might think. Studies done in California and London have found that security cameras had little to no effect on reducing the crime rate. In fact, sociologists argue that it even has a negative impact as it instils a false sense of security which usually leads to security personnel being more careless.

Let's also look at the effectiveness of restriction systems like in the hostels. For instance, even if a hostel computer room is locked biometrically, one could just very easily follow a hostel inmate who is entering the room! The worthiness of spending this much as opposed to the obtained benefits is something that should definitely be rethought.

A learning environment in an educational institution has to be a positive and a trusting one that aids both personal and societal development. Security is of course important but we need to realise what we're giving up in order to obtain a little temporary security – we need to know where to draw the line. Many institutes around the globe have already woken up to privacy issues and have realized its importance. Some of them even have a dedicated official known as the Chief Privacy Officer (CPO) who is responsible for ensuring the privacy of the members of the campus. Maybe it is time that we woke up too? *They who can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety, deserve neither liberty nor safety.* – Benjamin Franklin

This article is solely the writer's personal view and not necessarily that of Inslght

The Hidden Story of Mess Workers

■ ACHIN JINDAL, NIVVEDAN SENTHAMIL SELVAN, SATWIK PRADHAN, SESHADRI G.

Behind every meal prepared in each hostel mess, there is a story; the story of the mess workers. When we began enquiring about the nature of employment of workers in the hostel messes, certain government mess managers claimed that most of the workers are employed here on a temporary basis. These workers are paid much less than workers who were permanent employees in the mess, and are also denied benefits of housing, schooling and medical facilities given by the government to its permanent employees. At first, we found this difference startling, and set out to find the reason for this difference.

In 1999, the institute found that hostels employed 75 workers in addition to the stipulated number.

We spoke to Prof Anindya Dutta, the current Chairman of HCU and Prof Prakash Gopalan, who was the HCU chairman when significant changes were made in the institute's policy regarding mess workers.

Mess workers were never directly employed by the institute. They are employees of the respective hostels in which they work. This type of employment had its roots in the 1970's, and back then, there was no documented record of these mess workers. No one knew how long a mess worker had been working for. Sometime in the late 1970's, mess workers were made permanent and given the benefits of a government employee.

In 1999, when Prof. Prakash Gopalan became the HCU Chairman, he found that there was a disproportionately large number of mess employees in every hostel. The institute previously followed a policy of stipulating the number of mess workers in each hostel. They had agreed that for every 20 students, there would be 1 attendant employed as well as 5 cooks for a typical hostel strength of 250 students.

Due to the non-stop hiring by hostel councils, there were eventually 75 mess workers in addition to the number stipulated by the institute policy. It

was decided at that time, that the institute would not recognize any more mess workers than those who were already present, including these 75. This decision adhered to the directive of the MHRD which stipulated that no new hirings of employees in the Category 'D' be taken. Further, it was decided that these 75 workers, who were above the threshold set by the institute, would be retained on a temporary basis, and a list based on their seniority was made. These workers were then made permanent when another permanent worker retired, based on their seniority. It is noteworthy that no worker was asked by the institute to leave his employment during this period. Only much later, some workers in H10 were asked to transfer to private contractors when the mess was privatized.

In 2009, 28 workers from this list remained temporary. At that time, after some struggle, the institute managed to get these workers under the umbrella of the HCU (as opposed to being employees of a hostel) and all these mess workers were made permanent. This move aided the privatization of some messes, by transferring the mess workers to other hostels.

Subsequently, after 1999, all mess workers hired at the hostel level were not recognized by the institute. Such mess workers work on a daily wage basis, where they are paid the minimum stipulated wage of the Government. As of today, there are around 30 mess workers in all hostels with government run messes, with 18 of them in H11, working on a daily wage.

The institute is moving towards a day when all messes are run by private contractors, and all the labour in these messes are handled by the contractors themselves. The temporary workers currently working in hostels work with the hope that they may in time be made permanent employees. On humanitarian grounds, it seems unfair, not to mention unethical, to deny some mess workers job security and subject them to the harsh reality of daily wage earning. To elaborate, these workers are constantly under threat of being laid off or put on leave. In addition to that they are not entitled to the same employment benefits as the permanent employees. One wonders whether you or I, as contributors to 70% of these mess workers' salaries and as pragmatic individuals, would have framed a different policy had we been the policymakers? ■

Student Vigilantes

■ ANISH GUPTA, DWARKANATH PRABHU, NIKUNJ JHA, ROHAN SABLAY, SUMAN RAO

Transparency has to come from within, and at a micro level. This was recently illustrated in an incident at H7. When a request to increase the number of plug points in a room from the existing two, was put forth to the Dean IPS, it was promptly approved and a work order was generated. An estimate was drawn which came out to be around Rs 600 per room, across 254 rooms, taking the total cost to around Rs. 2 lakhs. As the work commenced, the H7 G.Sec, Rishabh Agrawal observed that the wiring for the new plug points was drawn from a switchboard on the opposite wall, while ignoring a switchboard right beside the location of the new points. This was even more unusual in light of the fact that the switchboard right beside had a higher capacity than the other one. The difference in the costs between the two methods would later prove to be more than Rs 300 per room with total savings of around Rs. 1 lakh.

When Rishabh shared these concerns with the supervising officer from the electrical maintenance department, the reply was rather vague and unsatisfactory. There seemed to be no likelihood of a revised work order. Rishabh then took up this matter up with the Dean IPS, Prof. K.V. Krishna Rao and Mr. B.K. Sahoo, Executive Engineer (Electrical Maintenance). The response from both of them was swift and a new work order was created where the wiring was indeed sourced from the closer switchboard.

However, Mr. B K Sahoo says that reliability and maintenance friendliness was higher in the old plan. He explains that in the older plan, any maintenance work required opening of only one circuit as opposed to three that would be required in the new plan. He disputes any great efficiency in the new system, only cost is saved. He says that the new proposal as suggested by the H7 G.Sec was accepted only because of aesthetics – "It was just a trade-off between aesthetics and reliability, so we figured in user requirement, user being student community here." But, considering that the cost savings were huge, it is really difficult to digest that such a cost intensive measure was justified to save on future maintenance work, which may not even cost so much. When asked about the reason behind the initial inefficient work order, Prof. Rao clarified that it was an oversight which should be avoided in the future and has promised a thorough examination of all future projects.

However, this brings a bigger question to the fore. We have always been aware of the delays that usually accompany any infrastructure project in the institute, but this is a proven case of wasteful expenditure and inefficient construction. The question that arises is – what is to stop this from happening again and what can the students do to mitigate this? Being watchful and taking proactive measures from the students' side is necessary. However, our GSHA Abhishek Agarwal (Monty) has set up a Special Task Force to look into these matters. The objective is to scrutinize the tenders and work orders that are released from the estate office and keep a check on the deliverables of these tenders. The members of the task force will check on how these projects are being planned and implemented and whether or not the quality of work being promised is being delivered. The task force has already been formed with a few members but it hasn't begun operation now. Abhishek clarified that this will be a completely voluntary job and no certificates will be provided for the same. The STF is scheduled to begin operation from the next semester and anyone who wants to contribute can contact the GSHA. Hopefully students can play their role and help eliminate wasteful expenditures and inefficiencies. ■

Missing: Main Gate

■ HARSHAD KUNTE, SOURABH BISWAS, SURYA KAZIPETA, SIBAPRASAD MOHANTY, SUMAN RAO

The main gate at IITB has often been a hot topic of discussion in the institute; students feel that a concrete structure befitting of a world class institution, one which showcases both technological and infrastructural brilliance, is a necessity rather than a luxury. It has been several years now that the bamboo scaffolding holding up huge sheets of black canvas served as the main gate, an official air imparted around the same solely due to the presence of security guards. However, it is all about to change, as the Dean Infrastructure Planning and Support (IPS), Prof. K.V. Krishna Rao reveals to Insight in an interview.

Why was the construction of a main gate delayed all these years?

A new gate is on the way. Plans of constructing a main gate began several years ago. It was delayed due to the reconstruction and widening of the Jogeshwari-Vikhroli link road. The actual work began in 2010. SSA Architects, a design consultancy, was appointed for designing all the 3 gates. The design submitted by them underwent a lot of review.

What is stipulated time of completion?

You can expect a new main gate, market gate and lakeside gate within the next 6 months.

How will the design be like?

The main gate design has an aesthetic appeal, apart from just security concerns. Security kiosks will be installed at the main gate and YP gate. The kiosk has seating and toilet facility also. For example, presently, students without I cards are not allowed into the institute. With the security kiosks installed, they can rest in there until the issue is sorted out.

Any other additions?

Main gate road will be widened into a four lane road. Vehicles with IIT stickers can go through a fast track lane. A pedestrian flyover will also be constructed outside the main gate.

The picture painted certainly looks promising. However, in light of all the roadblocks that have till now delayed its construction, how grand the final structure eventually turns out to be remains to be seen. ■

Language Classes ↔ Cours de Langue

■ ADITYA PRASAD, AKSHAY SONI, EKANSH BANSAL, MANU SAHAY

COURSE STATS

	FRENCH	GERMAN	JAPANESE	CHINESE
No. of students who applied	237	208	23	16
No. of students who got the course	60	50	23	16

Over the past few years, students in the institute have become increasingly keen on learning new languages. This led to the starting of language classes being organised by the institute under the Dean IR and the GS Cult – 2 hour sessions, twice/thrice a week. But due to a number of issues in the selection procedure and in the teaching methods, some of the students have been displeased with the overall process. We spoke with the GS Cult, Kunal Mittal and with students who have attended these classes about the current problems faced and the possible solutions to these problems.

Selection Procedures – Pros & Cons

The GS-Cult mulled over several options before finalizing an SoP based procedure. This is what he had to say about the various methods of selection–

1. First cum First Serve basis: This procedure might give rise to trivial disputes and this might arouse a feeling of dis-satisfaction among students. The possibility of “favouritism” is not ruled out.

2. Random Allocation: Random allocation would eliminate “favouritism” but it would certainly lead to the rejection of some genuine candidates.

3. Through SoPs: In consultation with the Dean-International Relations and keeping in view the shortcomings of various other methods, the SoP method of selection was finalized wherein they read SoPs of every candidate and decide selections on a case by case basis. They evaluated the SoPs on the basis of two major factors:

- Immediate impact:** This implies the intensity of one's need for a language course. E.g. preference would be given to a candidate who has secured a foreign internship or he/she is aspiring for it rather than the one who has already done one.
- Seriousness:** Based on the past record of attendance, class participation and other vital academic considerations, they were pro-PhD students, M.Tech students and students who would be applying to the foreign universities. Also, the underlying reason for the inclusion of this factor was the observed trend that most of the third and fourth year students join these language classes to obtain certificates, and not really out of an interest in the language itself.

Bias in the Selection Procedure?

With the SoP method in place, there have been allegations from certain quarters regarding favouritism, but the student community, on the whole, has been happy with the selection procedure. The GS Cult was of the view that one must trust the system because subjectivity can never be eliminated completely whatever procedure one chooses to follow. We suggested a modification in the SoP screening option wherein the SoPs were evaluated by the teachers themselves to eliminate favoritism completely but he pointed out that the teachers refused to take on such administrative tasks. However, he seemed to be open to any other procedure than could potentially make the selection procedure more transparent and smooth.

Burgeoning Class Size and the Need for More Teachers

Increased student intake has made gaining entry into these language classes rather difficult. As per the application and selection statistics, in the more popular French and German courses, demand outstrips the supply by almost four times. Due to the limited number of seats, a large number of students miss out on this unequalled opportunity to learn a foreign language at a subsidized rate, that too a walking distance away from their hostels. Meeting the demands of the masses necessitates a large class size, or more number of teachers. However, the GS Cult says that teachers don't feel comfortable with many students in a class. Efforts are on to accommodate more students; the Dean-IR is trying to hire more teachers soon to cater to a greater population.

It is also interesting to note that some of these teachers aren't professional language teachers. They are hired via corresponding consulates under a contract by way of which they get free accommodation in IIT along with nominal compensation. However, they are competent enough to teach the basics of the language. On being asked about getting more teachers from professional training institutes and raising fees for the courses, the GS Cult reiterated that it would ruin the whole idea of making this privilege available at a subsidized rate. Nevertheless, talks are going on with the Dean IR to implement such ideas in a structured manner. ■

CHINESE

The teacher is knowledgeable, interactive and organized and the classes are planned and executed well. However, due to the introduction of a new script, it becomes a very difficult language to master. This is something that comes with the course. Moreover, some students feel that class participation should be much more. The teacher is trying her level best to teach the subject, but with the limited time on hand and so much to learn, it is somewhat of a mountain to climb for the students.

JAPANESE

The thrill of learning a new language is present, no doubt, but Japanese is a very tedious language to master. It demands great dedication due to the various phonetic styles used. The course is certainly arduous, but the teacher has been trying her level best to help the students out. Consequently, it has been received with great appreciation by the students, especially the PhDs. The small class size breeds efficiency. However, the students feel that they have not been able to interact with the teacher as well as they would have liked due to the language barrier.

FRENCH

The experience has been mixed bag. Initially the course was going at a decent pace and most of the students were following what was taught. As the course progressed, the students were required to practice daily what they had learnt, but with a packed academic schedule and several quizzes, students tended to neglect their practice and eventually their interest flogged; the classes soon became an obligation rather than something interesting. Some students feel that had the course been included in the regular curriculum like an additional course (with credits associated) it would have been much better. Moreover, the teacher's attempts to teach and interact with the class in French to promote ‘learning by doing’ have received a mixed response- while some students relish the opportunity, others don't consider themselves competent enough to follow and converse fluently in the language and hence they don't grasp the proceedings as well.

GERMAN

The course gave a holistic view of German culture and not just the language. Besides the grammar and vocabulary, the students also learned about German culture. The teacher put in a lot of efforts to ensure that the students keep up. However, some students believe that the structure of individual lectures needs to be more carefully planned. On some occasions, the teacher didn't teach the planned topics due to low attendance, interrupting the flow of the course. Greater emphasis on pronunciation would also have benefited students. The movies and interactive sessions were appreciated all round. Students believe that more verbal, audio, and visual exercises need to be incorporated, if possible.

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IIT-BBC

We conducted an interview with the new Dean of Student Affairs, Prof. U. A. Yajnik. The interview deals with the Dean's views on various issues affecting the student populace, ranging from ‘LAN Ban’ to ‘Fines for various offences’.

We have also launched the first episode of a series on ‘Academic Awareness’. These episodes are aimed at bringing out some of the most important, yet not so well known facets of the academic programmes at IIT-Bombay. The first episode deals with URA (Undergraduate Research Award) and the scope of scientific research available for undergraduates. We will be following it up with videos that deal with ‘Tagging’, ‘Apping Dos and Don'ts’, ‘Curriculum Flexibility’, ‘Pros and Cons of Semester Exchange’ and more.

Catch these and several such interesting videos on www.insightiitb.org