

Reflections of an MIT Exchange Student

From my first day at MIT, Dagmar was always pushing me to "get out to Wellesley."

"Go out and enjoy the campus," she told me. "Take a class."

A tall, strong-willed chemistry lecturer at MIT, Dagmar was my freshman adviser. Coincidentally, her daughter had started at Wellesley the same week that I had started at MIT. She knew a lot about both schools—their strengths, their differences, their styles of education.

As the semester wore on and the days grew shorter, Dagmar commenced a personal crusade to get me to break away from the hallways and basements of MIT and walk around Wellesley's wooded campus. But I knew better. I was too busy playing the role of the

over-extended MIT student to take the time to see the College.

A semester later I didn't have a choice in the matter. I was taking a course in photography. My week's assignment was to prepare a photographic documentary of Wellesley's campus—in color. So one bright Tuesday in April 1984, I skipped classes for the day, hopped on the Wellesley-MIT exchange bus, and rode out to see the campus.

Stepping off the exchange bus by Jewett Arts Center and walking up the stairs to the Academic Quad felt strangely like



by Simson L. Garfinkel

coming home. It seemed odd at first; then I realized why. When I was in high school, I had taken classes at Bryn Mawr College. In many ways, Wellesley brought back those memories.

Perhaps it was the trees—trees the likes of which I never saw in MIT's sea of concrete. Maybe it was being once again at a campus of women, set against the background of monumental Gothic buildings. Of course, it could simply have been that I was suddenly more than a day's walk from a major metropolitan center; that distance conveyed a sense of tranquility and safety that had been missing from my life ever since I had moved to Cambridge and MIT.

I spent the day with my camera raised to my eyes. I photographed the Wellesley lamps, the students, the lake, and the observatory. The Science Center evoked memories of the Habi-Trail a first-grade friend of mine kept gerbils in. I saw a piece of heavy construction equipment that looked like a gargantuan grasshopper.

The more I looked, the less the College reminded me of Bryn Mawr, the more it became something unique itself. Something about Wellesley felt warm and inviting in a way that Bryn Mawr never had. Except the students, that was. The few I tried to speak with seemed singularly apart. They were polite, but they made me feel like an uninvited guest, walking about their campus with my camera in hand.

I returned to the Institute and developed my pictures. Then I stopped by the Chemistry Department and told Dagmar to lay off. I had spent the afternoon photographing Wellesley; that was enough for the next three years.

She didn't. Even though she was no longer my advisor, she continued to offer me her advice. She told me that classes at Wellesley were taught differently from classes at MIT. She told me that I would be missing out on a critical part of my education if I passed up the chance of seeing that difference.

I ignored her. I didn't think that I had the time—didn't want to break the momentum of my studies at MIT for classes that I thought would be inferior. I didn't want to deal with what I imagined to be the hassles of transferring credit. I didn't think that I would be able to convince MIT's Department of Political Science to accept Wellesley courses in fulfillment of MIT requirements.

I was scared.



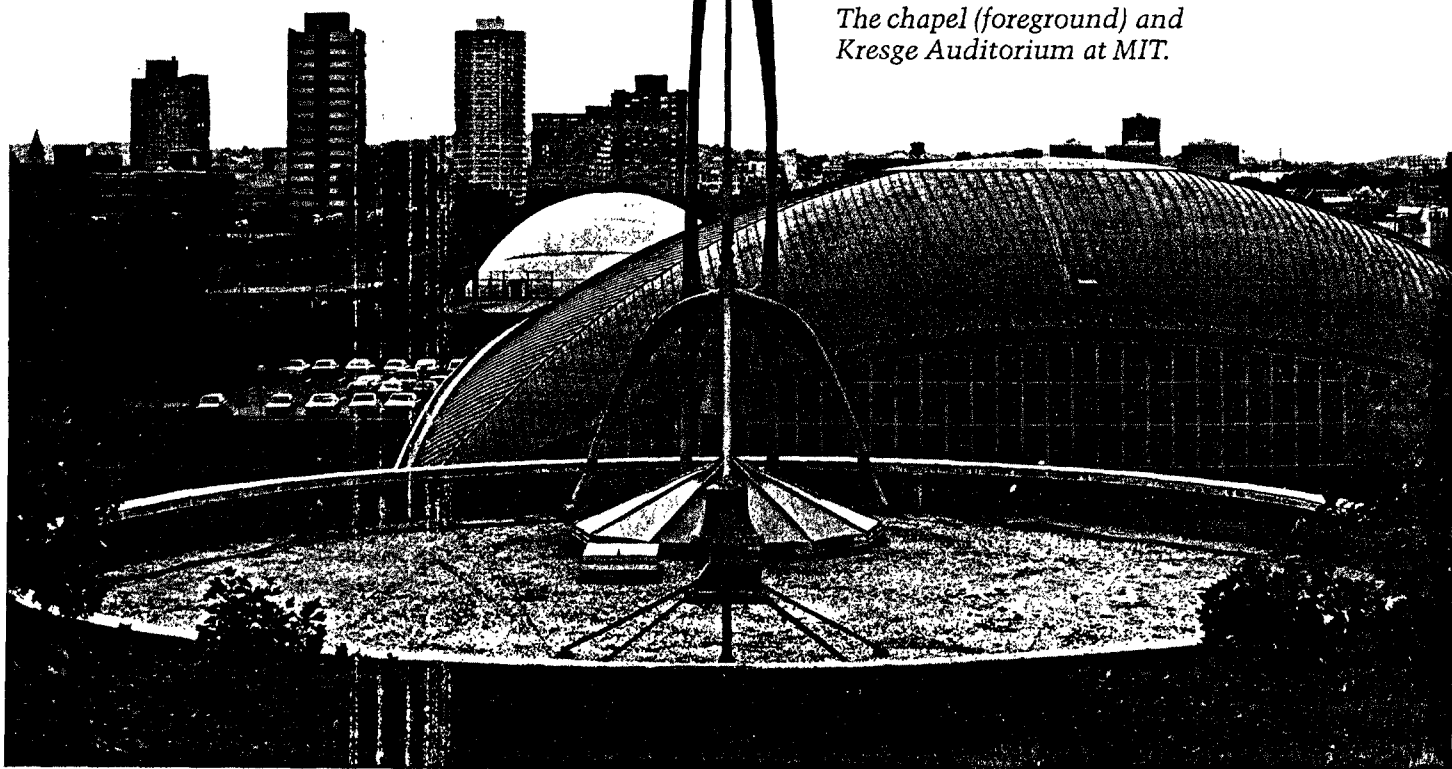
Five months later I returned to the College, again by another's choice. My best friend from high school had just started her first year at Wellesley. She was amazingly busy with classes and athletics. She had the time to talk with me for a few hours, but didn't have the time to come to Cambridge.

If there's one generalization that can be made of Wellesley's first-year students, it must be this: they are all in love with their campus. Lisa and I spent the afternoon and early evening tramping around the lake, through the woods and past the burned pillars that stand in memorial to Wellesley's first building, College Hall.

She took me into the Schneider Student Center, where she introduced me to some of her friends who happened to be having dinner there. One of them was worried about an upcoming chemistry test in a course similar to one I had taken. Another friend wrote poetry. A third was planning

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The chapel (foreground) and Kresge Auditorium at MIT.



on spending the night at the observatory. But all of Lisa's friends were open and warm, interested in who I was, and eager to ask me questions about MIT.

Suddenly, the College had been transformed into something other than an interesting location to photograph. It was a campus of friendly people. The key to Wellesley was having a guide, I learned.

Three weeks later I was back at the College, this time alone, taking more pictures. I ran into one of Lisa's friends; she remembered me, and showed me Paramecium Pond, thinking that it might make an interesting photograph. On the way over, she introduced me to somebody else.

Something about Wellesley kept pulling me back. The following spring, I finally gave in to Dagmar and enrolled in two classes through the Wellesley-MIT exchange program.

On Tuesdays and Thursdays, I had an 8:30 a.m. class in expository writing with Doris K. Eyges, a twenty-year veteran of the Wellesley English Department. Mrs. Eyges gave us an eclectic collection of readings, from the Bible to Susan Sontag's *On Photography* to four Sundays' worth of the *New York Times*. We used those readings as the jumping-off point for our own essays.

The composition of the class matched its readings: English 200 was filled with students from Wellesley's Continuing Education programs. We had students who had been consultants, who had run their own companies, and others who had been housewives for twenty years. There were only three people in the class of fifteen who were not C. E. students.

Even more curious was the decidedly right-leaning slant that the politics of the students took.

"I used to think that as I grew older my students would seem more radical to me," Mrs. Eyges told me. That certainly wasn't the case in English 200. We had students writing—and reading aloud in class—essays decrying the liberal leanings of the teacher and the newspaper that had been assigned.

‘I like the breeze,’ Professor Miller said. ‘It keeps the class alert and awake.’

I spent my break between classes at the tables in Schneider and at the El Table, the student-run café in the basement of Green Hall. It was around those tables that the C. E. students who were in my class opened up to me, telling me about their lives, their hopes, their plans. "I can't believe Mrs. Eyges is such a radical," one of them told me.

After break was World Politics with Linda B. Miller. I'll never forget that first arctic morning in January when Linda Miller entered the lecture room in Pendleton East. She walked to one side of the hall, opened a window wide, then walked to the other side of the hall and opened another window, wider still.

Within a minute the brisk cross-draft had dropped the room's temperature by a good fifteen degrees. A student in

the front row raised her hand and asked if she could close one of the windows.

"No," Professor Miller said. "I like the breeze. It keeps the class alert and awake."

That never would have happened at MIT, I thought. It is a common sight at the Institute to see a student blissfully sleeping through a lecture while the professor covers the blackboard with equations that are vital to passing the final exam. The professors, for the most part, do not care. If the student wants to sleep, that is the student's prerogative. Indeed, I had slept through many of my thermodynamics classes my first semester at MIT, and my grade in the course had reflected that fact.

But the teachers at Wellesley seemed genuinely concerned about their students. "Killer Miller," as the students called her, was a kitten compared to the teachers at MIT. Like every other teacher I ever had at Wellesley, she scheduled conferences with her students and all but demanded that they visit her during her office hours. At MIT, in contrast, many professors often sit alone in their offices at their appointed hours. Others have abandoned the practice and are available by appointment only, due to lack of interest.



Over the following three years, I took a total of six classes at Wellesley, three successive springs in a row. Spring is the time of the year that I love best at Wellesley. I like watching day by day as nature breathes new life into the dormant campus. I virtually kept notes as the first shoots of green appeared on the trees, the first day that it was warm enough for the squirrels to lounge about outside without scurrying back to their nests.

Then there was Lake Day—that uniquely Wellesley invention of a school day with no classes, in which the students are commanded to enjoy the beauty of the spring. Early one morning in the spring of 1985, my telephone rang as I was leaving my dorm room to catch the exchange bus.

"Don't bother coming," Mrs. Eyges said. "Today's Lake Day. There aren't any classes."

I came anyway. Part of being a cross-registered student, I thought, was taking part in the customs of the natives. There could never be anything like Lake Day at MIT: there wouldn't be room for everybody outside if they were forced from their laboratories and classrooms, and the administration would have to lock the doors to keep people from returning inside after an hour or two.



Many of my friends at MIT winked when I told them that I was taking classes at Wellesley. "Hunting for a girlfriend?" somebody from my dorm asked when I told him.

My arguments that Wellesley offered classes that MIT didn't (a philosophy course studying Plato's *Dialogues*); that the classes were taught with a lesser emphasis on exact mathematical modeling and greater emphasis on empirical understanding (introduction to macroeconomics), or that working with women gave one a different perspective (a course on fiction) were lost on him. Looking for a member of the opposite sex was the only rationale he could see for spending an hour on the exchange bus each way to take a class or two.

To my surprise, many of the women in my Wellesley classes treated me as if I felt the same way. They assumed that I was looking for a girlfriend, and therefore left me out of their after-class discussions with an easy-to-understand evasiveness. The C. E. students would talk to me, as would the Wellesley students I knew from other circumstances. But with very few exceptions, the undergraduates in my classes were uninterested in making friends with the occasional MIT student who shared their classroom.

The most suspicious were the women in my women's studies course. I told them that I was genuinely concerned with the status of women in America, but they were sure that I had ulterior motives. I told them that I had taken women's studies courses at MIT, but they didn't care.

Every now and then, however, something would happen that would make me seem a little more human in the eyes of the Wellesley students, a little less like "the man in the class from MIT." Often, I was completely humanized to the other students by the last class in the term, only to start the following year with a brand new crop of students and the same old set of assumptions.

One such event was a trip in March, 1986 to the abortion rights rally sponsored by the National Organization for Women. Two students in my women's studies course were absolutely shocked to see me getting onto one of the buses in the Wellesley parking lot, then spending a twelve-hour bus ride going down to Washington, D. C. to show my support for something which, by their former reasoning, should

have been none of my concern. Actions speak louder than words, I learned.

That same spring, a group of students painted black circles around the trees in the Academic Quad, protesting Wellesley's investing in companies that did business in South Africa. One day there was a protest that went from classroom to classroom. With several other students in the classroom, I stood up, apologized to the teacher, and left the room to join in to the procession. The teacher bid us good fortune.

Dagmar had been right about Wellesley offering a different viewpoint. Both in the students and the faculty, there is something very different about Wellesley, something that made it an invaluable part of my education. MIT didn't send a single bus to the pro-choice demonstration in Washington. The thought of joining an anti-apartheid protest parading down the Infinite Corridor would never have occurred to me—the anti-apartheid activists at MIT never enjoyed wide support because of their ties to the Marxist-Leninists. There's a lot more to Wellesley than being amidst the trees.

But they help. □

In 1986, the author joined Wellesley classmates at the Abortion Rights rally in Washington sponsored by the National Organization for Women.



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