

## Slice of MIT Podcast | Dignity, Taste, and Charm: A Tour of MIT's IAP

---

[SLICE OF MIT THEME MUSIC]

- ANNOUNCER:** You're listening to the Slice of MIT Podcast, a production of the MIT Alumni Association.
- ROBERT DIMMICK:** IAP is such a vigorous and unique period in the MIT calendar. There's not another school that does anything quite like it.
- HOST:** At MIT winter break means Independent Activities Period, known as IAP. The break between semesters allow students and members of the MIT community a chance to take classes, expand their professional development, and just learn something new. But because this is MIT, this isn't your ordinary winter session of classes. IAP is a time for learning about figure skating, fabricating electronic tattoos, and astrobiology.
- JIA HUI LEE:** Part of the workshop is going to look at the different ways in which different groups of people have thought about smell and taste.
- HOST:** There are courses in things you would expect, like robotics, architectural computation, and Intro to Matlab.
- LAWRENCE BARRINER:** I definitely remember taking my freshman year a programming class, like Intro to Python or Intro to Object Oriented Programming or something like that. That was a crazy experience.
- HOST:** But there are also quite a few classes and workshops that you might not expect. Looking to build a small radar system? Look no further than the IAP course called Build A Small Radar System. Want to learn more about pond scum? Try The Amazing World Of Microorganisms.
- In this Slice of MIT podcast, we'll explore three IAP courses being offered in 2017, as well as one beloved since retired course. Want to know more about human dignity and automation or just how to tie a bow tie? Stay tuned.
- Launched in 1971, IAP has been offering students a chance to learn about just about anything for decades. It's an enshrined part of MIT culture, alongside hacks, PSETs, and IHTFP. Students can take any course they want for credit or not. IAP gives students a chance to explore life at MIT not driven by PSETs and exams.
- And if students find themselves enjoying the break that IAP offers and want to know what it would be like to study on break forever, there's an IAP course for that. In Artificial Intelligence

and the Effect on Human Dignity, students can discuss what work means to the human experience, and what life might be like once the technology they someday develop removes the need for many jobs.

**ANDREW**

If you imagine a world where people don't have to work anymore to be even more extreme or

**KORTINA:**

they don't have the opportunity to work anymore and they don't have that way to feel like they're necessary or helping other people, how does that change their idea of human dignity?

**HOST:**

That's Andrew Kortina, co-founder of the digital wallet Venmo. He's leading the course and the discussion. He learned about MIT when meeting with students about his newest venture, Fin, a virtual assistant that's like Siri or Amazon's Alexa. So naturally, he knows a thing or two about AI and how it can impact humans in different ways.

**KORTINA:**

I'm a pretty big fan of the school and then the opportunity to teach a course there sounded really cool.

**HOST:**

You might think Kortina would teach a class on the technical aspects of AI, as his newest company enters the virtual assistant fray. But Kortina is more interested in the cultural and social aspects of technology. And that's what he wants students to think about too. What happens to us when AI makes our lives too easy?

**KORTINA:**

For the past century, dignity has been very tied to work, which I think is probably sort of due to the idea that people are social creatures. They get a lot of meaning from each other and from feeling like they're helping other people. And so the idea of being forced into retirement by machines and software is a pretty interesting and potential kind of scary one.

**HOST:**

Students will also talk about Camus, Sisyphus, and Plato's Apology, works that were written before artificial intelligence threatened and aided our way of life. Kortina is especially fine of Camus' *Myth Of Sisyphus*. In the work, Camus imagines laborer Sisyphus in a unique light.

**KORTINA:**

The specific work about Sisyphus is actually Camus on Sisyphus, just sort of interpretation that myth. Sisyphus is kind of like this every man whose work was very repetitive and yet he somehow imagined Sisyphus having dignity in his toil and his suffering and kind of paint him as an absurd hero. And I think there's a lot to unpack in that work.

**HOST:**

What's the purpose of life if work is eradicated? The discussion is open this IAP.

How much do the experiences of others impact our own perception? More specifically, how

does someone else's sense of taste impact yours? That's what Jia Hui Lee, grad student in MIT'S History, Anthropology, and Science Technology and Society program wants to know. He's leading an IAP offering called Bestial Sense, A Smell and Taste Workshop.

**JIA HUI LEE:** I realized that smelling and tasting are a very much part of our everyday experiences, although people seem to talk about them as if they're maybe perhaps lesser important sensory perceptions compared to hearing or sight. And that prompted me to think about ways in which I can get people to think more carefully and more engagingly about odors and tastes. And so this workshop is trying to address, I think, that curiosity about whether or not people can engage with their sense of smell and taste.

**HOST:** Like Andrew Kortina, Lee's inspiration for his IAP course comes from a personal question. It's one related to his research on how humans train animals to detect cancer, explosives, and contraband through smell.

**JIA HUI LEE:** It's going to help me understand the sorts of ways in which people think about, talk about, and experience odor and flavor. So the struggle that I have with my research is that I'm working with humans who train other animals to smell. And so it's impossible for me to understand how, for example, a rat smells. And if it does, what source of experience it's having.

**HOST:** With humans, specifically those in his IAP workshop, Lee can learn about those experiences.

**JIA HUI LEE:** What are the memories or emotions that people associate with certain smells and flavors? If people had to consciously smell or taste something, do they eat differently? Do they use their noses differently? And I think that will be very--

**HOST:** Students in the course will learn about their own sense of taste and smell, perception, and influences through experimentation.

**JIA HUI LEE:** We're going to try to smell and taste a host of different things and include more consciously invented concoctions like perfumes, but also very much everyday items such as cooking ingredients, a piece of carpet from a room somewhere.

**HOST:** As Lee explains, our sense of smell doesn't always get the credit it deserves. We don't have a very good way of categorizing smells. Think how often we use relative terms to describe smells, like cheese smelling like dirty socks. Lee hopes his students will create a system to classify smells, one that's a little more sophisticated.

- JIA HUI LEE:** People are going to try and do is to try and invent a system through which they can use to classify other smells that they've never smelled before or taste. Argument behind this is that if a system can be invented to predict the smells you've never smelled before, then there is a way of thinking about smell as a social experience that can be categorized using a group's categories of an experience.
- HOST:** Lee says he's most excited about learning how students in different courses perceive smells.
- JIA HUI LEE:** So I'm really looking forward to how an engineer would approach a smell experiment, for example. I'm always curious about how other people approach these things and what they bring to the table. If they can walk out of the workshop and suddenly be more aware of the smells around them, the taste of their food, I think that would be great.
- HOST:** Thankfully, those students will have more time to stop and smell the roses and anything else that catches their noses before classes resume in February.
- BARRINER:** The first week is going to be a lot about learning, seeing, and listening.
- HOST:** Alumnus Lawrence Barriner II will spend much of his IAP listening. Listening to the MIT community and East Boston residents. Barriner is the co-instructor of IAP course Media For Movement Building, Making Podcasts About Urban Planning in East Boston. The course will teach students how to collect stories, empower storytellers, and package their creations in podcast form.
- Students will learn directly from East Boston residents just how real estate investment and rapid gentrification are impacting their neighborhood and way of life. Nse Umoh Esema conceived of the IAP class. She earned her Master's in City Planning at MIT and previously worked for the Community Innovators Lab at MIT, known as CoLab.
- NSE UMOH  
ESEMA:** It's a largely immigrant neighborhood, has that as part of a core story, and so we just thought that those kind of phenomenons were really compelling for folks who are interested in planning and interested in neighborhoods that are going through rapid changes.
- HOST:** Focusing on urban studies and planning through the point of view of neighborhood residents, students in the IAP course will learn the stories of East Boston residents by meeting with them and sharing meals with them. Marie Choi, radio producer and co-instructor for the course, says this face time and sharing stories from the people who experience them is essential.

- MARIE CHOI:** This isn't about just training more people who are going to do the same thing that everybody else is already doing. When you look at the media landscaping, it's overwhelmingly white. It's overwhelmingly college educated. The regular folks, like all of us, we come into the stories as victims.
- We're there to be if you're listening to a story about homelessness, you'll talk with somebody who's houseless who doesn't have a house, and they'll say, this sucks. And then who do you hear from? You hear from people that have a bunch of letters after their name, who may have never experienced not having a house to live in.
- HOST:** So how does one take things learned in this course and build a movement? Barriner says that comes after the stories are packaged and IAP has ended.
- BARRINER:** It would be a real victory in my mind, an above and beyond victory, if the audio pieces that are produced in the class are able to be used by people living in the neighborhood to help them further advance or advocate for something that they're working on, or if the audio pieces can be used to help them support their work.
- HOST:** In this podcast, we've learned about classes where we can discuss a future without work, what the smells around us say about our collective experiences, and the importance of storytelling. What's the best way to share our new found knowledge? How about over a nice meal? For our last stop, we're headed off to a retired MIT favorite, Charm School, where students learned everyday etiquette for the formal dinner table and the office.
- DIMMICK:** I always think of Charm School as like an etiquette bazaar, with booths here and there that you can stop in, learn things, get your little charm school diploma ticket, and then move on to the next.
- HOST:** Robert Dimmick works for the MIT Alumni Association and is a former instructor of a few different courses within Charm School.
- DIMMICK:** So for several years, I did How To Tie A Bow Tie. And then in the early 2000s, when I got back on the Charm School faculty, for a couple of years I did something called Formalities, which I could really structure the way I wanted to, but it would include things like drafting personal notes, thank you notes, the etiquette of using a card case as opposed to just carrying your business cards around in your pocket, that sort of thing. The idea of how you dress and put things together in a particular way rather than just throwing it all on. So those were fun

courses.

**HOST:** Charm School was first offered during IAP in the 1990s in response to the MIT community's desire for some general life tips, like how to dress for an interview or how to stay connected with contacts. Charm School was held on a single day and lasted just four hours. But thanks to short 15 minute sessions, students left with a wealth of knowledge and formalities, having had their uniquely MIT questions answered along the way.

**DIMMICK:** MIT people can be very analytical and very granular. And with etiquette, sometimes you don't have to be quite so analytical. So it did, it made it interesting. But that's one of the defining factors of our community is that people are big into analysis and knowing every possible ramification.

**HOST:** Running consistently for nearly two decades, Charm School was an IAP course that earned a reputation, in a good way. So much so that it was featured on CBS Sunday Morning. An early commencement for the short course even featured Miss Manners, the well-known etiquette columnist, as its commencement speaker.

**DIMMICK:** I was really pleased that Charm School was a part of IAP. And it just sort of developed as this vibrant program that was the first of its kind.

**HOST:** Charm School isn't being offered at IAP this year. It's being combined with permanent programming for new students. But Dimmick is always happy to share one more etiquette tip for the IAP community.

**DIMMICK:** Well, at MIT especially, it's that your backpack is an extension of your body and it does get in the way. So be conscious of your total girth. Your total cubic footage volume, I guess would be the right words. The students will tell me if that's incorrect science language.

**HOST:** That's it for our tour of IAP and this Slice of MIT Podcast. IAP 2017 runs from January 9 through February 3. If you want to hear more surprising, insightful, and quirky stories from the MIT community, subscribe to the Slice of MIT Podcast on iTunes.

Let us know what you think. Please rate the podcast and leave us a review. We'll be back next month with another episode of the Slice of MIT Podcast. In the meantime, check out our website at [slice.mit.edu](http://slice.mit.edu). Thanks for listening.

[SLICE OF MIT THEME MUSIC]

