MIT marks 25 years of international initiatives at MISTI

The Institute celebrated 25 years of international engagement through the MIT International Science and Technology Initiatives (MISTI) at an Oct. 2 dinner hosted by Dana Neub, chairman of the MIT Corporation, and Deborah Fitzgerald, Kenan Sahin Dean of the School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences.

MIT’s largest international program, MISTI is a pioneer in the field of applied international studies. It prepares students to participate in the global economy by connecting them to hands-on professional internships and research opportunities across the globe.

MISTI began in the early 1980s with the creation of the MIT-Japan Program. By 1991, more than 60 MIT interns each year were working in Japan. Today, MISTI prepares and sends more than 100 MIT interns annually to nine countries: China, France, Germany, India, Israel, Italy, Japan, Mexico and Spain.

“From the path that MISTI has broken, we are now paving the way to a whole new avenue for education at MIT,” President Susan Hockfield said at the dinner. “The reason I’m convinced that global exposure makes an MIT education even better for our students is that we have been very careful in designing those experiences. MISTI is the premier example.”

MISTI students prepare for their internships through immersion in the language, history and politics of their host country. Working with leading companies, research institutes, universities and nongovernmental organizations around the world, MISTI individually matches each student with a project.

MIT senior Wendi Zhang told dinner attendees how MISTI gave substance and new direction to her MIT education. “I came to MIT wanting to do something international and business-related and exciting and new — and thanks to MISTI, I have found that something.”

MISTI alumnus Jake Seid (’96, MEng ’98), now managing director of Lightspeed Venture Partners, described how vital the ability to connect to innovation around the world has become. In the past, he said, “start-ups happened when a group of people set up shop in a garage. That’s not the case anymore. A friend and fellow MIT alum has a two-person start-up: one founder is in China and one is in the U.S. The garage is virtual now.”

MISTI has partnered with MIT’s Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science (EECS) to increase global opportunities for EECS students. Eric Grimson, Bernard Gordon Professor of Medical Engineering and head of EECS, underscored the importance of international experience: “Current students understand that to compete in today’s world, they also have to appreciate global perspectives: global markets, different cultures, national priorities, nuances of communication in different languages, even the impact of social and religious norms on commercial and technological behavior. MISTI has been the leader in this meta-education of our students.”

MISTI alumnus Dave Xia, co-founder and chief technology officer of Lightspeed Venture Partners, described how MIT’s “sponge” — has been, among other things, one of MIT’s most unique buildings. Now it is the focus of a book documenting an MIT-student competition that analyzed communications and the use of space within the building.

Designed by architect Steven Holl, the building’s exterior contains more than 5,500 small square windows, but its uniqueness doesn’t just involve its façade. Though architects came from far and wide to tour Simmons, its residents soon identified problems with the building. For example, the terraces were small and difficult to make use of, and, given the perforated elements key to much of the interior walls of the building, there was no place to hang bulletin boards, a key method of communication in college dorms.

Carlo Ratti, Associate Professor of the Practice in the Department of Urban Studies and Planning, has been living in the building for about a year when a student resident approached him about the problems. Instead of tackling them on his own, from his perspective as an architect Ratti proposed that the students themselves address them in the form of a competition.

“The great thing is to have input and feedback from users," Ratti said of the competition. “Letting students speak out was an important part of the dialogue.”

The competition, chaired by Robert Campbell, the Pulitzer Prize-winning architecture critic for the Boston Globe, had a jury of students, faculty and administration. Ten teams of various sizes participated. The teams were to address the problems of terrace use and building communications, but could also suggest other changes to the building or its furnishings.

The results ranged from practical to outrageous. One team proposed that the level 8 terrace be converted into a glassed-in movie theatre with stadium seating. Another simply proposed building a “clone” of Simmons across the street so that students would not be disturbed by visiting architects.

Yet another team suggested extending certain walls and covering them with chalk-friendly paint. Although it’s not yet certain whether the students’ suggestions will be implemented in the building itself, their results were so unique and interesting that they were put on display at an exhibition organized by the Canadian Center for Architecture in Montreal. Further, “Inside the Sponge: Students Take On MIT Simmons Hall,” a book documenting the competition and its results, was published this month by the Canadian Center for Architecture.