Graduate Student Life Grants

Form type: **New proposal**

Tree.st / MIT

Report submission date: 10/20/2012

Author information

Name: Omid Sadeghpour **Email:** omid@mit.edu

Address: 17A Bigelow St. Cambridge, MA 02139

Phone number: 510-499-5497

Are you applying as an individual or on behalf of a group? Individual

If applying on behalf of a group, which one?

Indicate your role at MIT and/or your group:

Indicate your role at MIT and/or your group:

List any additional organizers/contacts:

Shailesh Mittal shailesh@MIT.EDU

Alexander Romanov aromanov@MIT.EDU

Adam Borelli aborelli@MIT.EDU

Graduate Student Life Grants

Account information (required)

MIT account number: N/A - applying as individuals

Account supervisor:

Note: By December we should be able to get you an account number

Other information

Project duration: 12/15/2012 **to** Ongoing

Requested funding amount: $14,600

To be divided in two phases. Phase I ($4,600) and Phase II ($10,000). See Budget for more details.

Please answer the following questions (in bold) and also address the subpoints.

1. Please describe the new service or activity you are proposing.

Finding other graduate students at MIT is hard. For example, when I first arrived at MIT I could not easily find all the other graduate students from Ecuador interested in Agricultural Bioengineering, let alone finding other graduate students from Ecuador.

Graduate Student Life Grants

As a result I created Tree (Tree.st/MIT) – this online tool allows MIT graduate students to easily and fluidly search for one another. Specifically, this tool will allow graduate students to:

1. Voluntarily provide their information to a MIT-specific community search engine *(Appendix A)*
2. Find other students that have specific qualities or attributes *(Appendix B)*
3. Automatically group new students in “Smart Groups” – these are groups that are dynamically generated and are recalculated 24/7 *(Appendix C)*
4. Communicate with all the members of a smart group to organize events, dinners, functions and to foster united graduate community *(Appendix D)*

We piloted Tree at MIT Sloan (Tree.st/MITSloan) and within the first two weeks of school, 400+ graduate students joined and began connecting with their peers, enabling a level of information sharing never before seen at MIT Sloan.

As we market Tree across MIT we plan to host “Tea & Cookie” social functions. These Tea & Cookie socials will each have very specific themes, for example:

- Mechanical engineers and software developers interested in 3D-printing
- Gluten-Free students
- Students interested in China and wind-based alternative energies
- Stressed students looking for support buddies with similar ethnic backgrounds

Graduate Student Life Grants

In essence, the service and activity we are proposing is composed of an online tool and many face-to-face social functions across MIT. The purpose of the face-to-face socials is to introduce graduate students to each other in an effort to break departmental silos and to engender a new level of collaboration focused on:

1. Helping graduate students improve their quality of life while at MIT
2. Introduce focused, scientifically interdisciplinary, and meaningful topics at thematically designed graduate student socials

2. How does your project foster graduate community?

After interviewing 60 graduate students the number one complaint we kept identifying was that MIT has departmental silos. These silos make it practically impossible for graduate students to easily find one other, and to have inter-disciplinary conversations.

Tree fosters the graduate community by presenting students with an innovative online platform (different from Facebook and LinkedIn) which allows them to search for their peers at MIT using MIT-specific attributes not found in other social media sites. For example, graduate students could easily find other students with similar research topics, experience, dietary restrictions, hobbies, academic interests, preferred sports, living location, and/or other specific criteria.

In a secure, private, and spam-free manner Tree allows for graduate students to easily find other students across MIT, knitting the school together.

Graduate Student Life Grants

The second aspect of our application (See Phase II in “Budget”) is creating “Tea & Cookie” social events across campus. These face-to-face socials are meant to introduce graduate students with similar interests with one another in an effort to create new bonds of friendship. These small social gatherings will inevitably improve the graduate student community since it will:

- Create inter-departmental, inter-program, and inter-disciplinary bonds of friendship in the graduate student population
- Allow a space for dialogue about very specific topics graduate students (and/or their significant others) currently have no place to share
- Allow for newly admitted students to, year after year, easily connect with the MIT community as they are automatically added to “Smart Groups” on Tree and consequently invited to the Tea & Cookie socials

Desired outcomes:

One of our desired outcomes is to have several thousand MIT graduate students join Tree.st/MIT. Our goal is to have at least 70% of the graduate body join the site, create profiles, and start finding peers through the site’s unique search engine. After marketing Tree.st/MIT we plan to host many “Tea & Cookie” functions.

Through these diversely themed social functions we expect to create a level of dialogue among the graduate participants that leads to (1) actionable improvements in the quality of life of the graduate students, (2) a sense of belonging to the MIT community, and (3) most importantly, a

new level of inter-departmental collaboration and knowledge exchange or forum.

3. Why do you consider this project feasible?

The website/online platform has already been developed. We believe that it is feasible to build a user base of several thousand MIT students, and to bring them together by hosting events that will focus on specific themes. Since there is currently no effective way to do this at MIT, and since we have heard from many graduate students the need for such a tool, we expect deploying this tool across MIT to be feasible.

Tree has already been tested with 400+ MIT Sloan students who are actively using the site. We have been asked by MIT graduate students in other departments to make the service available to the whole campus, but we require your help to make the marketing a reality. Marketing Tree is a very manageable task. After the marketing campaign, we plan to begin “Phase II” of our application, which entails hosting many Tea & Cookie social functions. By leveraging the search engine capabilities of Tree, finding and inviting graduate students to these Tea & Cookie functions is certainly feasible. Lastly, hosting small and simple social events that involve coffee, tea, cookies and pastries is very feasible.

Plan for implementation:

The website has already been designed and is currently active and usable by students. Please refer to “Phase I: Publicity Plan” below.
After the marketing campaign, for the Tea & Cookie socials we plan to find and train ambassadors across MIT that would be interested in hosting

these events. We already have 2-3 graduate students interested in hosting these events across MIT. In total we plan to recruit 5-10 MIT ambassadors, each of which we will ask to host 10-20 Tea & Cookie functions throughout Spring semester.

Timeline of planning and activities (as specific as possible):

Given the two-stages of our proposal (marketing Tree and planning social events) we have divided our timeline and required budget into two phases or segments.

Phase I: Publicity Plan

We plan to publicize Tree.st/MIT through e-mails to all students at MIT as well as with help from the MIT admissions office to promote this tool amongst incoming graduate students. In late December, we plan to recruit students from various departments and schools within MIT to become Tea & Cookie “Ambassadors” within their departments. In late December we also plan to market Tree by reaching out to professors and different student groups.

Phase II: Tea & Cookie Socials

If the publicity plan appears to be working, starting Spring semester we will plan a large marketing campaign across MIT, by February we expect at least a few thousand graduate students to have joined Tree. Late February after everyone has settled into their Spring semester routine we plan to begin hosting the first batch of themed Tea & Cookie socials which will carry out throughout the semester. We hope these simple, action oriented,

and focused social events to be a decentralized dialogue model that can be carried out for years to come.

Licenses required for proposal: N/A

☐Liquor
☐Entertainment
☐Movie rights
☐Other – please explain:

Liability issues for your proposal:

There are little to no expected liabilities arising from this proposal. We are simply promoting an innovative new collaboration tool for students within the MIT community. As for the hot water and coffee associated with the Tea & Cookie socials, we plan to purchase 2-3 secure water heaters for tea, and the cookies or assortment of pastries will have to be specific to the group (i.e.: cookies for the gluten-free social will have to be gluten-free)

4. What impact will this project have? Describe your desired outcomes for an enhanced graduate experience.

Tree will enable thousands of graduate students at MIT to search for and connect with peers across departments and schools – departments which currently have a “silo” effect to them as described by interviewed graduate students. Our desired outcomes are to enable the creation of new friendships among the graduate student population, and most importantly, to host **face-to-face** events that are themed and whose dialogue is action oriented.

Graduate Student Life Grants

Plan for evaluation of impact (qualitative and/or quantitative):

We plan to evaluate the impact of Tree.st/MIT by:

1. Counting the user base of graduate students on the site by February 2013
2. By counting the number of "connections" the graduate students created online, and determining whether or not these are inter-departmental connections
3. By sending out quick surveys to each student who signs up for the Tea & Cookie socials and asking them if they made meaningful connections with their peers at MIT.
4. We plan to generate social graph to visualize the types of connections we notice at the social events and on the website *(Appendix E)*. These will be useful in proving that Tree and the Tea & Cookie nights have create thousands of bonds of friendship which otherwise would have never have occurred

What will it take for your project to be deemed successful? How will you know if you accomplish your objectives?

In order for Tree to be a successful collaboration tool, a strong user base of MIT graduate students needs to be gathered. This needs to be done through publicity including e-mail, word of mouth, and Tea & Cookie socials. This objective will be accomplished when at least 70% of graduate students, research assistants, professors, and administrative staff, all within the MIT community join Tree and start searching for people that matter to them.

For the Tea & Cookie socials we hope to survey around 80% of all Tea & Cookie participants, from these surveys we expect 80% satisfaction on the "quality of dialogue" engendered at the social event. Two months post the social event we expect each participant (of the 80% covered in the survey) to document who they've met and regularly spend time with from the Tea & Cookie social. Since the themes of the Tea & Cookie socials will be very specific, inter-departmental, and action oriented, we expect bonds of friendship to improve the quality of life of most graduate students at MIT.

5. Where did you first learn about the Graduate Student Life Grants?
"MIT GSC ANNO" newsletter from Bomy Lee on October 1st.

---

6. Please also attach a copy of your proposed budget; a sample budget and optional template are provided. Any other supporting materials may also be included.

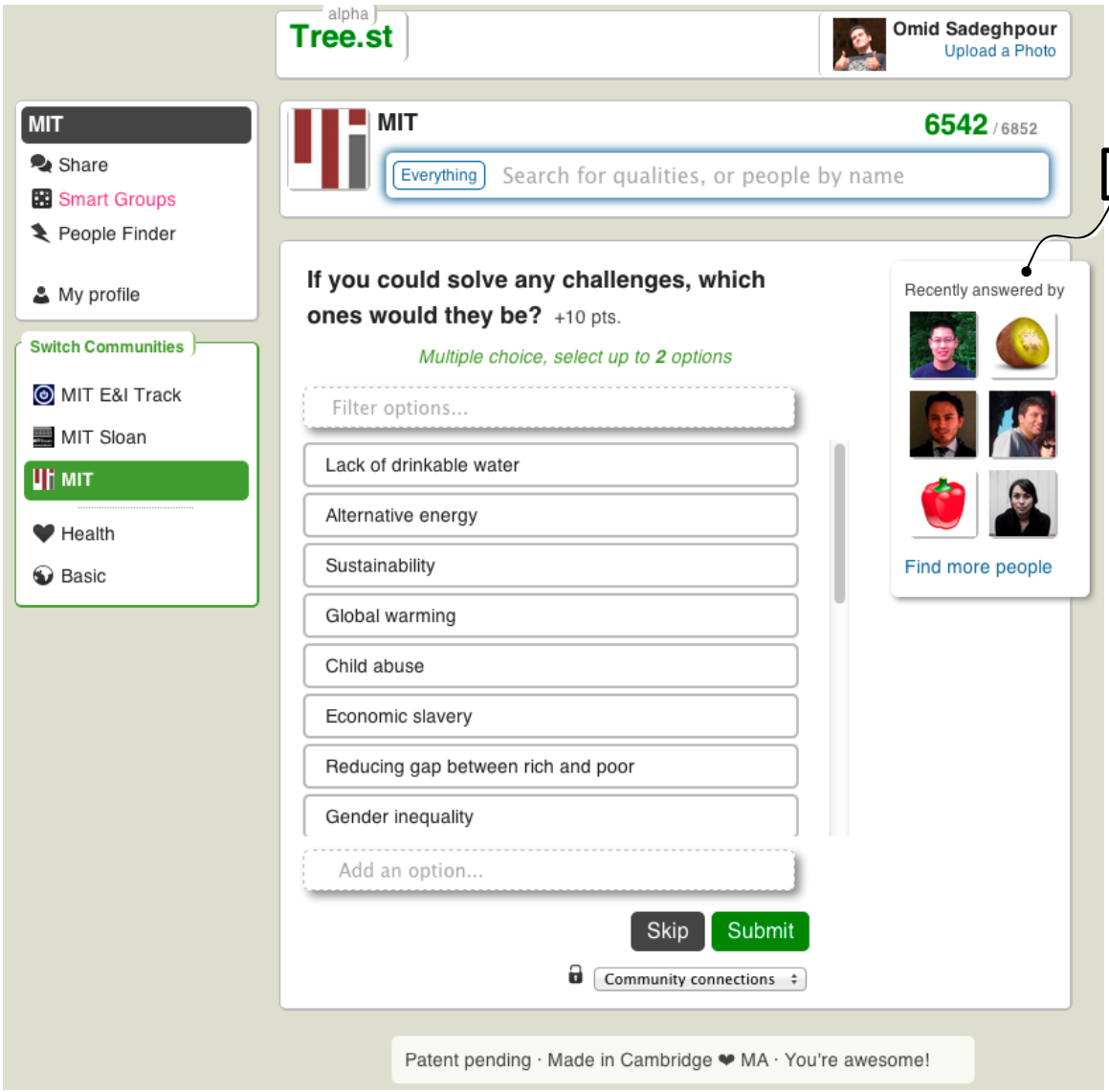
7. By submitting this proposal, I promise to keep in contact with Grants staff, and submit an annual progress report by the requested date while my project is supported by GSLG funds.

Please note that no events will be funded that are to occur less than two weeks after the final GSLG funding announcement.

Thank you for your submission!

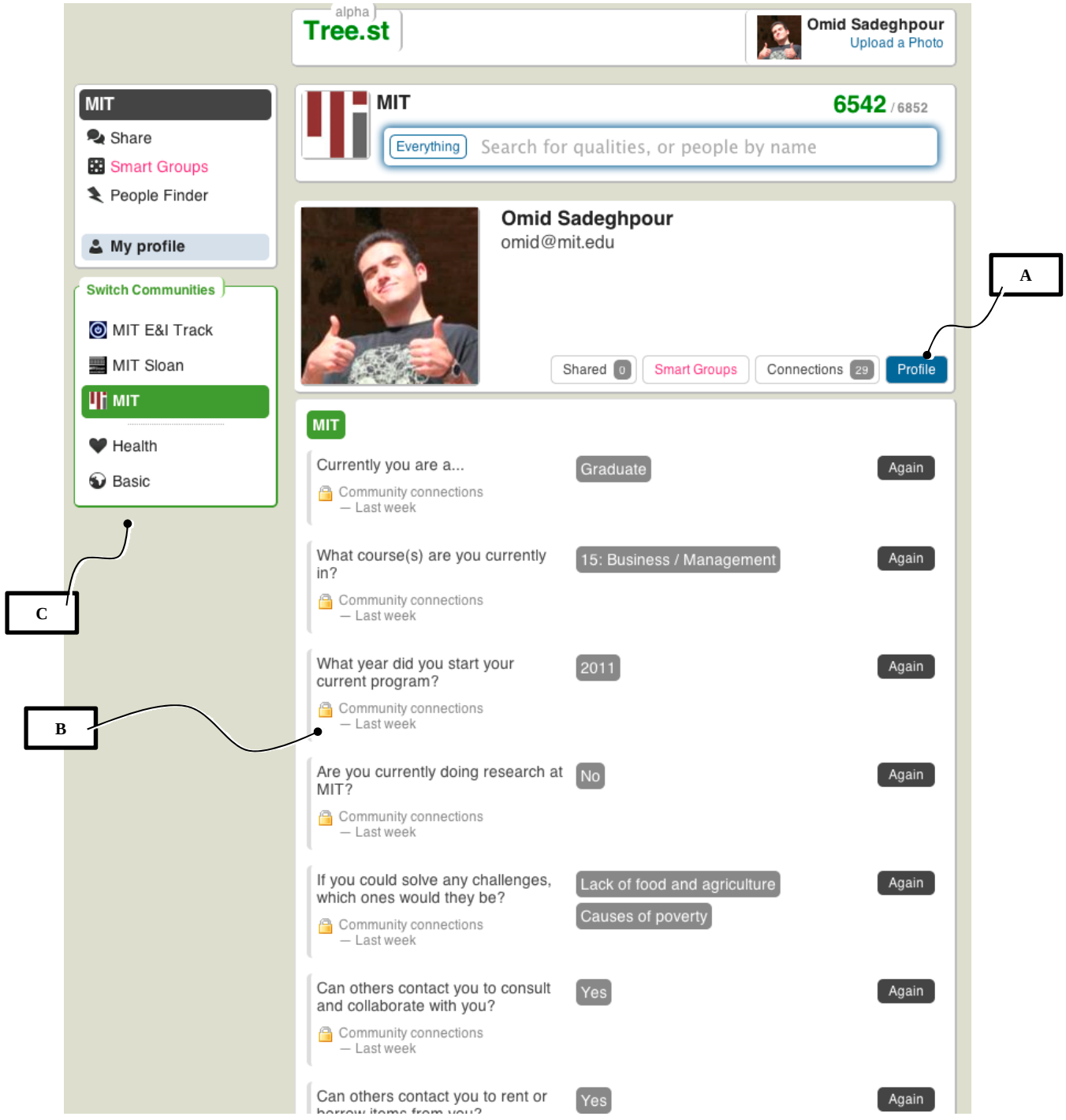
Graduate Student Life Grants

Appendix A – Information gathering



Quick data gathering user interface and mechanism is built on a decision-tree of questions so MIT graduate students only answer the most relevant questions. (A) As a graduate student answers a question he/she instantaneously sees other graduate students who answered that question.

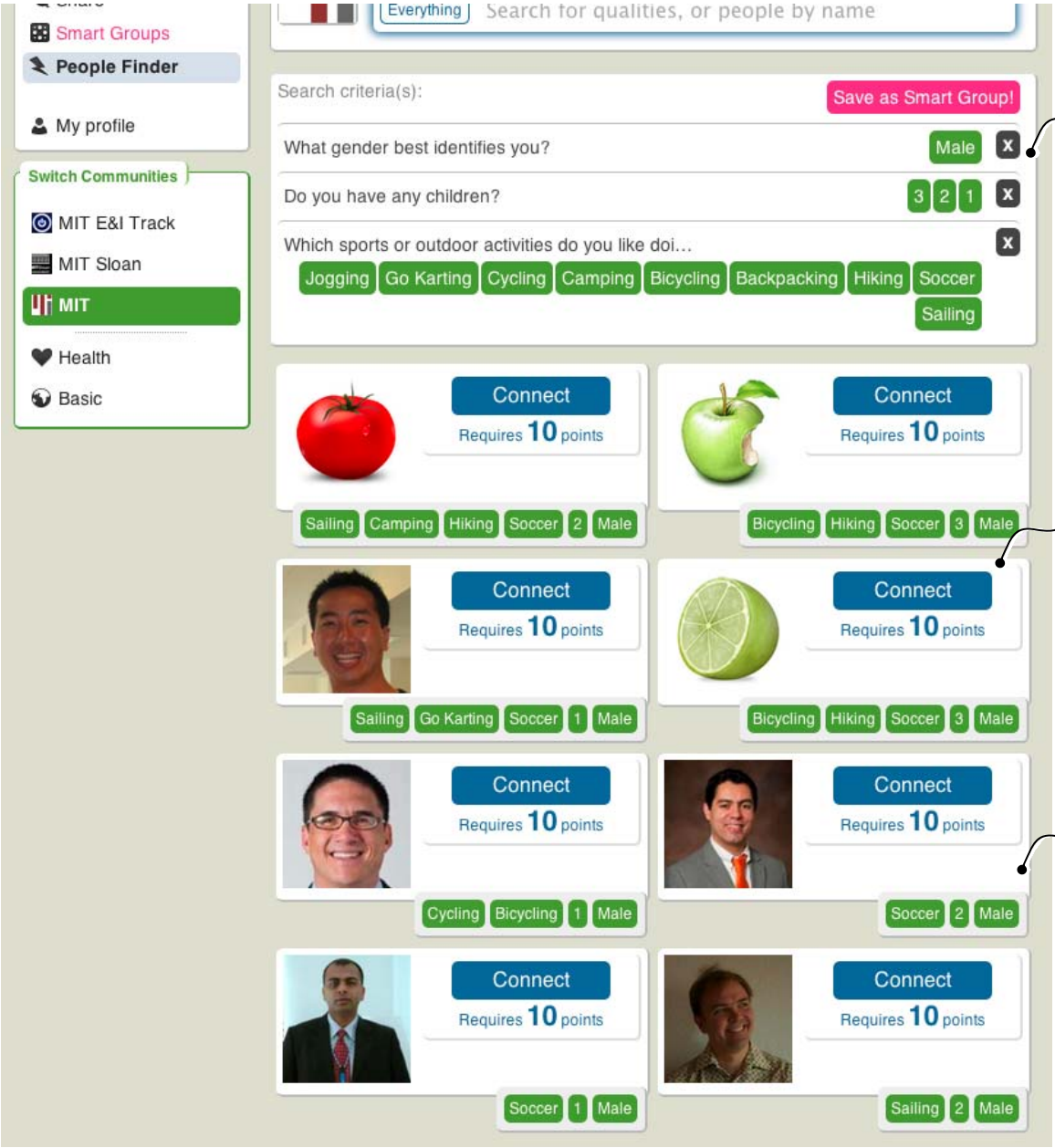
Graduate Student Life Grants



(A) As a graduate student answers MIT-related questions Tree builds a profile for him or her. (B) For the privacy of the graduate students each answer has a "visibility" and a timestamp for when the question was answered. Graduate students can easily update an answer by clicking on "again." (C) Tree communities are nest-able, in the future each department and lab can have their own sub-MIT community.

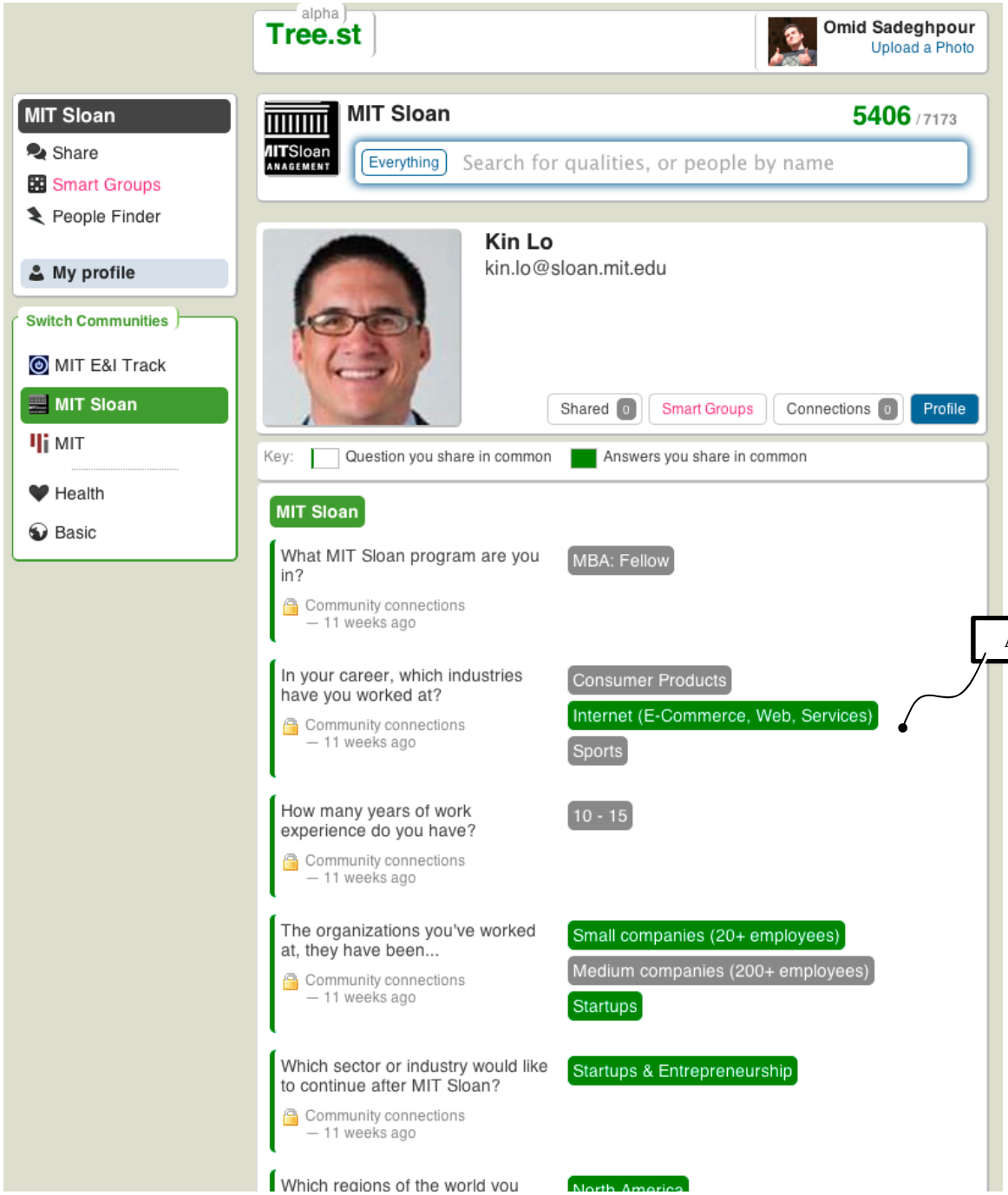
Graduate Student Life Grants

Appendix B – Search for others



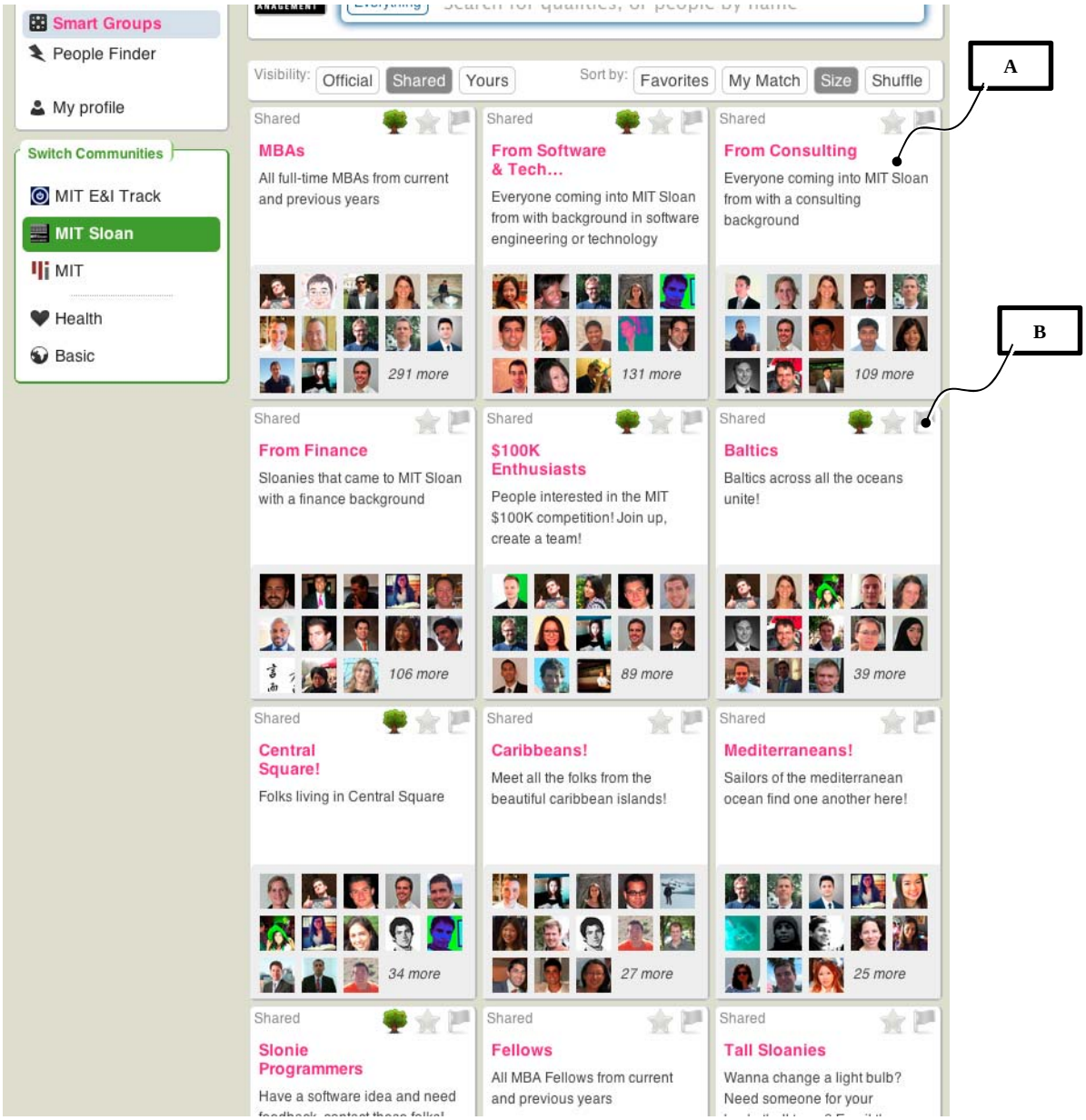
(A) Any graduate student can “layer” or “stack” any number of MIT-specific questions to find truly unique individuals at MIT. In the example above we are searching for any “male” at “MIT Sloan” that likes any number of specific physical activities and who has 1-3 children. At the end of any search the graduate student can save that particular search algorithm and create a “Smart Group.” (B) To prevent spam we have created a unique point system which we can demo. (C) To the graduate student performing the search, it is very easy to see what attribute(s) each of the results match.

Graduate Student Life Grants



(A) As a graduate student finds and connects with others, any attribute overlap between the two graduate students appears in green, making it very easy for the graduate students to see similarities between each other.

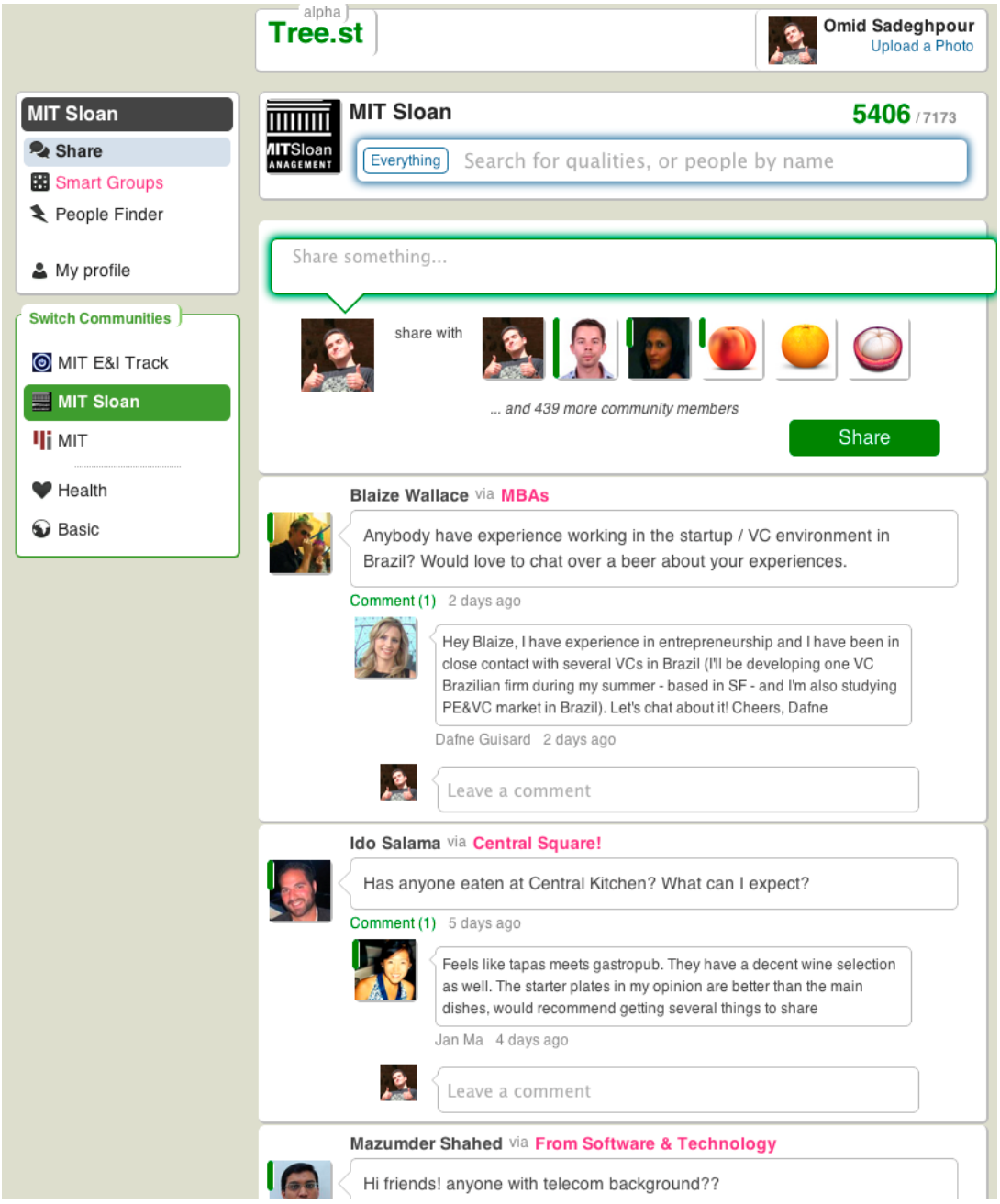
Appendix C – Smart Groups



(A) Smart groups are continually running 24/7 searches. That is, year-after-year, as new graduate students arrive at MIT by simply answering questions they get placed into specific smart groups. These smart groups will compose the audience of each Tea & Cookie social event in Phase II of this application. (B) When a user is automatically added to a smart group a small “tree” appears on the upper right of the smart group display. Alternatively a graduate student can also “favorite” or “flag” smart groups – these settings affect the rate by which he or she receive emails from shared items of a smart group.

Graduate Student Life Grants

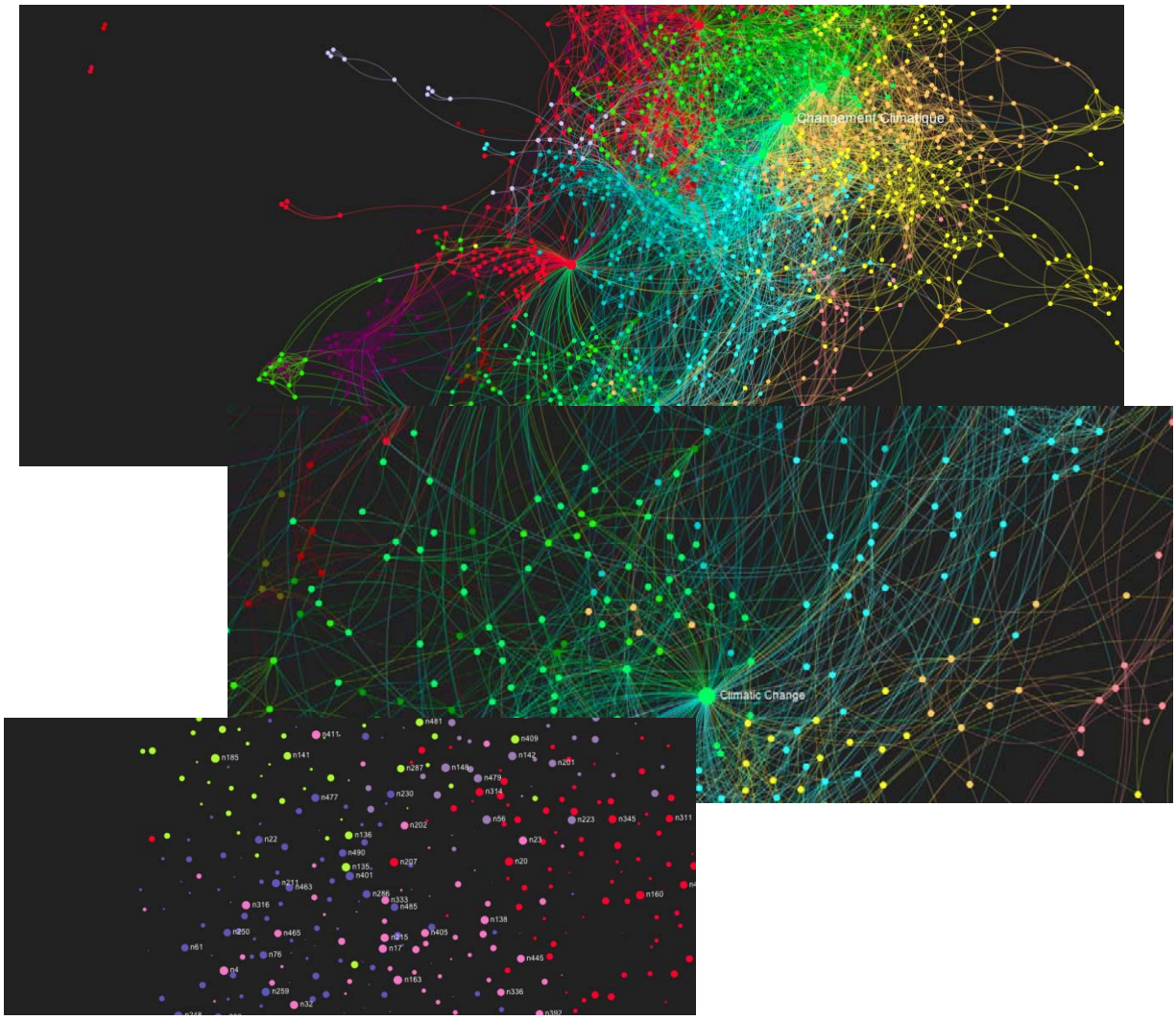
Appendix D – Communication Platform



There is a simple communication platform where current graduate students can use smart groups to exchange ideas, thoughts, events, etc. This communication system leverages the smart groups by sending email notifications to all members of such smart group.

Graduate Student Life Grants

Appendix E – Social graphs



Given the nature of Tree we keep track of all connections, shared messages, smart group memberships, etc. This allows us to create incredible social graphs to help find interesting patterns and relationships in the graduate population at MIT