Hoffman cites requisites

By Bert Haldorstad

Professor Kenneth Hoffman, chairman of the Department of Mathematics, spoke to the Stu- dents' Commission on Educational Policy about "Institute Requirements." Wednesday evening, Hoffman was the chairman of the MIT Commission, the most recent group to take a thorough look at the system of Institute requirements.

He began by identifying three basic questions: "What are the requirements now?" "How did they get to be what they are?" and "What ought they to be in the near future?"? Apologies of the second question, a brief history of MIT was offered to the audience.

The history begins in 1916, when Boston Tech moved to Cambridge and became MIT. At that time, there were only two schools: Engineering and Architecture. Even though there was no formal School of Science, people worked in math, physics, and the humanities still went on, including such notables as Nor bert Wiener, who came to MIT in 1920. In 1930, Karl Taylor Compton became president. He immediately began a program of emphasizing basic science more heavily, and the School of Science was born.

With the Second World War came the era of "high technology" at Hoffman calls it, which requires a theoretical understanding of the subject, as well as a knowledge of "engineering." It was during this period that MIT became more or less what it is today, and much of the pride people at MIT have as their institution dates from this period. Also with the war came graduate students (to what had been until then primarily an undergraduate school) and large volumes of research money, which has made possible a ratio of one faculty to every three undergraduates.

Up until this point the Institute requirements had been quite rigid and demanding. In 1969, the Commission took a thorough look at the system and suggested many improvements, none of which were implemented. As a result of its work, the humanities requirement was dropped from such subjects as "English Composition" and "History" to six present subjects, and the School of Humanities and Social Science was created.

The next look at the requirements was by a committee chaired by Professor Jerrold Zacharias in 1964. As a result of its deliberations, some of the Institute requirements were ef- fectively cut in half (from two years of mathematics and physics to one). This was part of a general trend, operative ever since the Lewis report, of re- ducing the rigor of the core requirements. Four years later, the French Task Force recom- mended a lightening of the chemistry requirement, but that never came to pass. And in 1969-1971, the Commission on MIT Education, of which Hoffman was the chairman, investigated the matter but came to few conclusions.

Hoffman broke the current Institute requirements into four pieces: 60 units of basic science (6.01, 18.01, etc.), 72 units of humanities and social science, 48 units comprising the science di- stribution and laboratory require- ments, and, last but not least, 180 units of departmental require- ments. Hoffman stated that the basic premise underlying all of this, and it is a premise to be thought about, is that "a B.S. degree from MIT is supposed to represent something: technical skill, intellectual maturation, and exposure to the MIT ethos" which he defined as "hard analy- sis, sweat and compassion."

Hoffman then moved on to discuss "Where do we go from here?" The first question he asked was, "Why go anywhere?" Why not be satisfied with the structure as it is? One dissatis- fied group wants to see a further liberalization of the require- ments, Hoffman characterized this group as "not very strong, and getting weaker." On the other hand, there is growing concern about the humanities requirement. Among the prob- lems here is a gap between the stated purposes of the humani- ties requirement and what is actually going on. Another prob- lem is growing student demand for more freedom of choice and more intellectually demanding humanities courses, according to Hoffman.

The talk was followed by a wide-ranging discussion between Hoffman and members of the committee.

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