Experts address social change

By Howard D. Sizer

MIT students have a wide variety of professions to choose from if they want to affect social progress in the future, according to a panel of social-planning experts.

The panel, which addressed a Political Science Forum on "The Role of the Expert in Social Change," last week, stated that, "The many facets of social policy today require a comprehensive planning and implementation process." This, they added, has encouraged specialization in fields affecting social policy, which in turn "emphasizes the options open to an MIT student who wants to select a career relevant to social change."

Ellen Feingold, an advocate planner employed by Justin Gray Associates of Cambridge and president of the Civil Liberties Union of Massachusetts, reflected on her profession's utilization of specific tools relating to the physical environment. She emphasized that lawyers and planners are limited in having a "realistic" approach to handling the same problems. She argued that lawyers are susceptible to the "multiple facets of social policy" which in turn "emphasizes the options open to an MIT student who wants to select a career relevant to social change."

Gary Bellows, a teacher at Harvard Law School, asserted that "the legal profession is more attuned to preserving the status quo in problems involving institutions, rules, and personnel." The profession stresses a system of social relations and has an enormous stake in the dependency on a specialized group in the system, he said. Bellows saw this trait of the profession as an impediment to applying law to social change. "As in other professions," Bellows continued, "in law you become a technician." He continued that law and legal theory is presented without any of the promises of modern liberalism. "There is a separation of fact and value in the discipline," lawyers are predictively detached and dispassionate in their professional relations. They are only partially critical due to the "blind nature of the intellectual enterprise in which they are trained."

Bellows was disturbed that legal rules are disembodied from social and economic processes. "Despite my enthusiasm for the intellectual nature of the legal enterprise, I regret that lawyers are susceptible to the problems of competency and autonomy shared by all professionals who try to step out of training molds."

Howard Margolis, a research associate for the Center for International Studies, discussed the specialist's work with details in the less familiar areas of policy analysis. "The expert is used before the decision is actually made," he pointed out, "in order to gain a sense of the task at hand and the various options in solving the problem."

Margolis distinguished between the counsel-advocate role of the lawyer and the inflexible role of techniques. "The technique is concerned with presenting and accurate and objective study based on quantitative methodology. The ethics of the profession forbid the intervention of any political process."

Each panelist agreed that his profession takes on a social rather than private orientation when focusing on social change. "Individually, each contributes a significant area of expertise in approaching the different aspects of social problems," one pointed out. "For those committed to social change in the world, particularly at MIT, many alternative occupational fields exist for the realization of this goal."