Report hints at year-round plan

By Mike McNamara

A key idea runs as an undercurrent in many of the suggestions on the Self-Appraisal Project of the School of Engineering — an idea which the Project report stopped short of recommending, but which in places implied it would have welcomed.

Restructuring most important

By Mike McNamara

The recommendations of the Self-Appraisal project of the School of Engineering range from minor tuning of accounting systems to sweeping changes in the Institute's calendar.

But people who worked on the Project feel that the most important recommendation is the one which suggests restructuring the School along lines other than the department/center organization currently used.

"I think we're at the stage in the School's evolution where we have to start thinking of transdisciplinary fields (fields which bridge several disciplines) — and how to formalize those fields so we can really make people learn within them," Associate Dean for Engineering James Bruce said. "To do that, we're probably going to have to break down the discipline-oriented departments and start looking at broader fields.

"Interdisciplinary programs have become an increasingly regular means of spanning several fields in 'job-oriented study,' Bruce said. "Things like the Centers for Transportation Studies, for International Studies, for Advanced Visual Studies, and so forth, are one means of getting at these areas," he said.

But the Engineering School, with its large number of transdisciplinary "divisions" or "centers," would be the first to abandon the departmental form of organization, such reorganization might be done, Bruce said, by giving centers or "divisions" the right to grant degrees, to admit graduate students, to have faculty chairs.

"It's a facade to force students who want to major in transportation to fit into a departmental mold," Bruce said. "Why couldn't the Center for Transportation Studies admit students, give them a curriculum to follow, and grant a degree in transportation when the student is through?"

Bruce admitted that emphasis on "job-oriented" education would be useful mainly on a graduate level — "an undergraduate would probably still be better off in a well-defined department," he said — and agreed that overlapping departments, centers, and divisions would "lead to some organization confusion. But one area in undergraduate education would be improved by such a plan. It's core engineering courses.

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