Students, faculty disagree over Writing

By: Daniel Nathan

The lack of agreement over the role of the writing program in meeting the needs of MIT students was revealed at the forum on writing at MIT held Tuesday night.

About 35 people attended the forum, which took place in a panel of four people representing all sides of the question, including head of the Humanities department, Bruce Mashiach and Professor of Humanities Nathan Sivin, head of the committee evaluating the program. The three-hour discussion, moderated by Undergraduate Association President Phil Moore '77, dealt with most of the issues involved, yet had a "fractionated quality," as Sivin put it.

Following Moore's initial summary of the history of the writing program, three questions were addressed in turn by each member of the panel. The first question, "What are the writing needs of MIT students and how can these needs be met?" was answered first by Dave Feinberg '79, a member of Students Organizing for the Survival of Writing at MIT (SOS). Feinberg presented a two-year-old poll of MIT graduates who felt that writing was the most neglected part of their education at MIT. He also emphasized the two needs filled by a writing program at MIT: to prepare students for writing technical papers used to give students "a chance to be creative in an informal atmosphere."

Assistant Professor of Humanities Patricia Cumming, a member of the writing program staff, described the results of a recent survey which said that the level of writing decreased significantly between 1970 and 1974. She stated the needs of a "sympathetic audience" for students who write of writing often, and of skilled teachers. The second question, "Does the writing program meet students' needs?" was posed by Assistant Dean of Humanities Donald Blackmer to be "an empirical question" since the forum wouldn't have been held if students didn't feel that the program meets their needs.

Ken Skier, another writing program staff member felt that while one can't judge the writing program "qualitatively," the program "increases competence" in "the process of writing."

The third topic, and the most debated question of the meeting was "How will the proposed budget and staff cuts affect the writing program and students who want or need to take the writing course?"

Harry Hancock, Dean of the School of Humanities, stated that the issue is not money, but projected enrollments and policy. He said that the budget has not been completed yet. The question of need for improved writing is "purely academic" according to Madison, who addressed the questions of budget and policy. He said that the three writing teachers, who were being cut from the staff were originally hired at the last minute last semester to take care of the excess enrollment. Among the other issues discussed at the forum were the termination of the TA program, a program described by Skier as being "one of the cornerstones of the writing program," and the faculty guidelines for giving distribution credit.