First IAP met with wide approval from all

Editor's note:
This is the tenth year of MIT's Independent Activities Period (IAP). This article summarizes the findings of a survey conducted after the IAP ended.

January's Independent Activities Period earned approval as a "good idea" from 89% of the faculty. The majority of students and a majority of the faculty who returned an evaluation to the Committee on Educational Policy Subcommittee on IAP Evaluation recommended the program be continued.

The committee's report to the CEP included the recommendation that the "IAP experiment be carried to its conclusion."

The findings of the committee, reported in its final report, are as follows:

1) "Both students and faculty favor the IAP." 2) "Both students and faculty expressed the IAP in general during January in "sizable majorities." 3) There was a "virtually unanimous" opinion among students and faculty that the new semester should begin after the end of the fall semester. 4) "Most students are "very appreciative" of the opportunity to be at MIT in the absence of the "usual academic pressures." 5) Faculty and students were "unhappy" with the shortened fall semester, but no "major problems", of an academic or administrative nature, were created by the IAP.

In addition to recommending the continuation of the IAP, the subcommittee urged the faculty, "in general, to avoid the term, to account for the shorter term by adjusting subject content rather than increasing pace," urged "stronger and earlier efforts" by departments to involve student and faculty groups in consideration of possible major innovations in the type of activities to be available during the IAP, and urged appointment of planning committees: one for "planning and communication," one for "continuing evaluation," and one to undertake an extensive study of new forms for the academic calendar for possible adoption at the conclusion of the IAP experiment.

The survey reported that a number of problems with this year's IAP. Most people were dissatisfied with the shortness of the fall term, a difficulty which may have already been solved by the elimination of the October break. While people felt fairly well-informed about IAP activities, the report noted that more can be done in the way of planning and communication.

Professor of Nuclear Engineering Kent Hansen, chairman of the subcommittee, commented that much of this was due to first-time inexperience. A number of IAP activities require some form of financial assistance, and the subcommittee recommended that the departments should "budget in advance" for them.

While admitting that there was a problem with employees (for example, secretaries) who might want to participate by taking a course, the subcommittee saw no immediate solution. The report also noted that over 500 colleges now have "four-one-four" calendars, a fact which could affect student exchanges programs.

Two other areas which the report mentioned were registration and faculty roles. A better system, it stated, is needed for reporting IAP grades, which were still being sent to the Registrar's office last week. The report also raised the question of whether fall or spring courses should extend into the IAP.

The findings of the subcommittee were based on a questionnaire, distributed at the beginning of the term, to which 90% of MIT's 7200 students responded, as well as 60% of the faculty. The subcommittee also met with members of the Office of the Dean for Student Affairs, the Faculty Council, the Graduate Student Council, the Committee on Graduate School Policy, MIT dormitory housemasters and tutors, the IAP planning committee, the General Assembly Task Force, the MIT Medical Department, and members of the staff and administration.

Hansen explained that no one was informed beforehand that there would be a questionnaire about the January period, in hopes of preventing people from looking for things to say about IAP during the question period.

The replies to the questionnaire revealed that students had engaged in very wide range of activities during the period. None of the dozen categories listed on the evaluation had been significantly favored by the students. There was no activity with which people were very unhappy with, according to the report.

Hansen commented that students who were unhappy with what they were doing could easily change their activity to something they found more satisfying. Of the 15% of the students who were engaged in activities labeled "other," only 9% said they were "unhappy" with what they were doing. The survey reported that a number of people joined the intensive subjects offered during the IAP, and 15% of the students began academic work towards this semester. Hansen added that many people had used the January period to begin preparing for the spring term on their own.

Most of those who responded felt that the new fall calendar was "more satisfactory" than the old one, although it was less popular than the IAP itself. Hansen noted that this was interpreted to mean that people felt the problems were worth it, even if they were engaged in other activities labeled "other" in order to have an IAP.

The survey revealed that many students response and were disappointed at the actual turn-out they received. One explanation advanced for this was that when students were first asked to indicate their interest to their departments, they were unaware of the full range of activities available. The subcommittee felt this could be resolved by publishing the IAP notebook sooner. However, 81% of the students still felt that they were adequately informed. The recommendation to examine "new forms for the calendar," Hansen explained, was the result of an awareness that, while the new calendar produced "clear benefits," it is not clear that this is the only one that could benefit the MIT community. Its institution, Hansen said, should not "exclude consideration of others."

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