AAC to evaluate BS degree

By Gene Chang

Declaring that undergraduate programs have become "fragmented, overspecialized, and diapsychoned," a committee of the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC) said that a three-year study of the meaning and purpose of a bachelor's degree. The committee of 17 university presidents, deans, and trustees received a $300,000 grant from the Pew Memorial Trust.

The AAC comprises 575 public and private colleges and universities. MIT is not a member of the association, according to Nancy Lombardi, Administrative Officer in the President's office.

"It is not surprising that organizations such as the AAC are doing this study, with the cost of tuition going up, people are going to wonder whether the value of a bachelor's degree really is," commented Vincent Fuller, secretary of the Institute. "It is very shortsighted to look at an education in consumer value, but people are doing it. Students entering college are assessing, in monetary value, what their education will cost and how quickly they can expect a return once they go into the job market. They go to universities that will command higher salaries."

A bachelor's degree "is a marvelous convenience for a mediocre society, putting passive acceptance ahead of questioning, and propagating the dangerous myth that technical skills are more important than ethical reasoning," commented one of the committee's members, Charles Muscotte, a professor of English at the University of California at Berkeley.

Louis Menud 3rd, Special Assistant to the Provost, remarked, "If American society is mediocre, it certainly doesn't result from undergraduate education. However, the very nature of the AAC study tells me that a lot of people involved in higher education do not know what they're doing. As a result, higher education has lost its purpose. Education for the most part has not induced enough personal and ethical questioning."

"The ideal education gives students the opportunity to be literate in many ways; for example, in effective communications skills, scientific and social motivations, and the gaining of technical skills. [The] MIT curriculum is very effective in developing analytical and scientific literacy, but it doesn't have a lot of the humanities aspect," he added.

Menud said an MIT education provides not only the understanding and mastery of a field of study, but also gives awareness of the community and the world.