Research funding for UROP grows

By Andrew Bein
Funding for the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (UROP) through faculty members' research contracts has increased significantly in recent years, although MIT's budget for the program has stayed at about $250,000, according to Norma McGavern, associate director of UROP.

Students participating in the program earned a total of $2 million last year, mainly from outside research grants to faculty members, she said. "The faculty has figured them into their budgets," McGavern said.

About half of MIT undergraduates and 60 percent of faculty members participate in the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (UROP), she said.

Students participating in the program may earn either credit or pay. Those who are paid will earn a minimum of $4.50 per hour — less than the Institute's minimum wage of $5.25 — but a faculty member may increase the salary by using his own research funds, McGavern said.

The program, initiated over 10 years ago, has based its success on a unique blend of faculty and students.

MIT professors often prefer to work with undergraduates involved in the program than with graduate students, for several reasons. "Undergraduates are cheaper for professors," she said. "Undergraduates are also more willing to experiment than graduate students who are under pressure of completing a thesis," McGavern said. Some faculty members prefer to teach in an informal laboratory setting than in the classroom, she added.

"Young professors can build a research team" of undergraduates through the program, McGavern said. Students may also contact a faculty member to start a research project.

The Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program is "an amazing opportunity to work one on one with a professor on relevant research," said one student who participated in the program.

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