Editorial

Question concepts of MIT education

The Committee on the Undergraduate Program (CUP) will meet next week to determine what issues it should consider in the coming year. This agenda-setting meeting comes at a crucial time: MIT is currently in the midst of a critical evaluation of its undergraduate program. The very future of an MIT undergraduate education is being scrutinized.

Although the CUP has not disclosed its agenda, we feel the following areas demand attention:

- Tenure: The CUP must address the process by which MIT departments approve tenure for their professors. The Institute formally addresses the fact that tenure professors teach undergraduate courses, although the Institute's choice of those professors is primarily on the quality of their research. Departments must find a way to select faculty who are recognized as outstanding teachers — especially in core classes — while maintaining MIT's high standards as a research institute.

MIT must ensure that tenured faculty members have a clear commitment to undergraduate education, not just in classes and labs, but also outside the classroom and in community events.

Departments need to find a way to maintain the quality of the faculty while assembling a faculty which can inspire undergraduates to go beyond the classroom for their education. Departments must reconsider the priorities of research and teaching ability and strike a balance between the two in making tenure decisions. The real sacrifice is the damage done to under-graduate education when great educators become a rare commodity.

- Humanities and Social Sciences: Few undergraduates major in MIT's social sciences and humanities programs, even though their high quality is unquestionable. Students majoring in humanities or social sciences need dedicated diversity to the community. The CUP must examine ways to broaden the emphasis of an MIT undergraduate program in order to attract a more diverse student body.

- Course Quality: Students need more information about the courses they are taking. Although MIT has a unusually flexible system for assigning credit to academic subjects, this flexibility is rarely used and often abused. Some subjects require far more work than their unit rating indicates; some require far less. The CUP should enforce a better correlation between a subject's workload, as students experience it, and a subject's unit rating.

To provide more information about courses, the CUP should encourage departments to release a term guide — similar to the excellent Humanities and Social Sciences guide — detailing the number of assignments and exams for each subject. The CUP could also recommend support services for the revival of an improved Student Course Evaluation Guide.

- Project Athena: The CUP must investigate Project Athena's impact on the undergraduate programs. Taking into account the lasting effects when the project's five-year experimental period ends in 1988, has Project Athena improved or prevented access to word processing? Does the specially designed educational software make Athena courses better or worse than their earlier versions?

The CUP should address questions like these in order to understand how a campus-wide computer network can enhance the quality of undergraduate education.

The successful resolution of these issues is essential to MIT's continuation and growth as a top-rate educational institution.