Humanities are too crowded

Column/Simons L. Garfinkel

"People are getting sick of science and engineering. . . I went to a French class. There are two sections -- 60 people showed up to just one. They're trying to try to make another three or four sections," an anonymous undergraduate.

What has happened to enrollment in the Institute's humanities subjects? Instead of dwindling, humanities are now among the most popular and overcrowded subjects offered, even in compared to desirable engineering subjects.

"I went to a writing class -- the kind where we are supposed to read each other's papers -- and fifty people showed up on the first day," an engineering student.

We tend to think of departments such as humanities, political science and architecture as "service departments" -- departments that exist in part, at least at the undergraduate level, to provide their subjects primarily to other departments. In recent years the number of students taking advantage of these departments has greatly increased. Students are now taking more than the eight humanities subjects required for graduation. I am fearful that the quality of humanities at MIT is beginning to suffer as a result of the overcrowding caused by over-enrollment in popular subjects.

Last Thursday, I spoke with Ruth (Klay) Spear, coordinator of the Humanities Undergraduate Office. She smiled at the thought of so many MIT students taking humanities subjects but admitted that they had been problems with overcrowding in some subjects.

A humanities major, in the office at the same time, was more vocal. "It's been getting worse every term, class by class," he said.

"Something is going to have to be done about it -- unfortunately, it is probably going to happen after I graduate."

What is it that is causing this overcrowding?

Two and a half years ago, I took Creative Photography (6.41). Seven students were in my section, and approximately 12 were in the other. This semester, over 100 students wanted to take the subject, yet fewer facilities and teaching resources are available now than were in 1983. If I had wanted to take 4.921 this semester, I might not have been able to. Similar conditions exist for almost all of the subjects offered in the visual arts.

Is MIT admitting a different kind of student, a broad-minded student interested in the arts and social sciences in addition to technical subjects? A student who is concerned with literature and philosophy in addition to circuits and signals? Or is it simply that students have internalized the Institute's stated position on the importance of a well-rounded education?

"MIT provides a substantial and varied program in the humanities, arts, and social sciences which forms an essential part of the education of every undergraduate," reads the 1985-86 MIT Bulletin. "Through this program, students can develop their knowledge in a variety of cultural and disciplinary areas and study skills vital to an effective and satisfying life as an individual, a professional, and a member of society."

As long as I have been at MIT, I have listened to advisors, deans and teachers tell students to take advantage of MIT's humanities programs. I have listened to the recent talk of educational reforms at MIT. I have watched the creation of the Dean for Undergraduate Education and understood that one of Margaret L. A. MacVicar's primary goals will be to see ensuring students take more humanities subjects.

The time has come for the Institute to support these goals with significant financial backing. If the Institute wants more students taking humanities subjects, then it must hire more teachers to provide more sections of these subjects. Popular subjects require more sections; students desiring to be able to take these subjects without crowding. We cannot accept signup sheets and limited enrollment as solutions to the problem of crowded subjects in art or literature. There is certainly no shortage outside the Institute of people trained to teach these subjects; we must hire them.

Students, for the most part, believe that MIT's humanities subjects are top-flight. This belief has been, until now, generally justified. But this degree of confidence cannot be maintained in the years to come unless serious efforts are made now to reduce overcrowding. The only acceptable way to reduce overcrowding is to increase teaching capacity.