HASS debate reveals divergent aims

Analysis

By Kate Schwartz

In the lengthy debate over the humanities distribution requirement, there is a growing feeling that MIT's humanities, arts and social sciences requirement cannot fulfill all of the goals envisioned by faculty and students.

Until this week, a proposal intended to give more breadth to the HUM-D requirement appeared to have a good chance of being rejected by the faculty over the objections of some humanities professors. But a group of students urging the faculty to postpone the vote have collected over a thousand petition signatures, startling the proposal's backers.

Students have played very little role in the proposal's development; the only formalized participation was the eventual inclusion of Mark Curtiss '87 in the Maier Committee, the Institute-wide committee which spent June and July 1986 studying the HUM-D requirement. The petitioners accuse the top-level administrators of insensitivity to students' concerns, while those who support the proposal insist they provided ample opportunities for student input.

Two principal views on the role of the HASS requirement have emerged. One side feels that it should above all ensure a broad background and an introduction to the Fundamentals of Humanities study. This side favors more structure and commonality in students' courses, leading towards requirements in particular areas. Recently a dissenting view has appeared: some of the humanities faculty feel that, given the limited number of HASS subjects taken by most students, it is more important to preserve choices for students to choose courses they want — and possibly develop sophistication in some area — than to enforce breadth requirements. Lack of graduate students in Course XXI faculty prize context with those MIT students having a strong interest in the humanities. They favor losing this contact and becoming a "service" department, teaching general surveys instead of subjects in their own fields of expertise.

A significant part of the support for breadth over choice and depth appears to come from outside the Department of Humanities. Six of ten faculty on the Maier Committee, which first recommended a specific distribution requirement, were from outside the School of Humanities and Social Science, and two of the remaining four disagreed with the committee's report.

The leadership in the development of the current proposal came from Dean Ann F. Friedlander PhD '64 of the School of Humanities and Social Science and Richard L. Cartwright, head of the Department of Linguistics and Philosophy.

The HUM-D proposal has the solid support of several heavyweights with clout among the faculty: the CUP, the Committee on Undergraduate Education and the School of Humanities and Social Sciences. The faculty has usually agreed with recommendations by CUP and the Committee on Educational Policy; a notable exception was the 1984 rejection of a plan in reinstitution of the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science.

Maggioni wins election for Dormcon president

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The support for the current plan to open dormitory to women was a step in the right direction, Levin believed.

Maggioni also pledged to involve Dormcon in campus activities. The organization is planning a number of dormitory events, including productions of the musical "Hair" by East Campus and Senior House and "Gentle" (Baker House).

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