HASS proposal puts unnecessary cap on HUM-D's

Faculty members will convene in 10-250 tomorrow afternoon to consider a proposal to change the undergraduate Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences distribution requirement. The proposal would reduce the number of distribution categories from 22 to 5. It would gradually shrink the pool of HUM-D courses from 108 in the Fall of 1987 to 50 within a few years.

The plan recognizes and remedies some flaws in the current HUM-D system. For example, the consolidation of the 22 categories into five broader categories ensures greater breadth in a student's selection of HUM-D courses. The plan would encourage students to take a varied set of distribution subjects and not three courses confined to a narrow area within Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences. Students and faculty may haggle over a few exact classifications, but in principle this aspect of the plan will bring about a positive change in the requirement.

The proposal also tries to ensure the distinction between distribution and elective courses. Distribution courses should be aimed at providing students with broad exposure to an academic discipline. In the mid-to-late 1970s, the number of HUM-D's proliferated as professors realized they could increase enrollment by obtaining HUM-D status for their courses. The more subjects you succeeded in designating as HUM-D, the greater your likely share of the 1600-plus students mandatorily enrolled in HUM-D's for any given semester, reported the Committee on the History of HASS in May 1985. As a result, some courses that have a specialized intellectual focus continue to hold HUM-D status. Some HUM-D courses should and will be reclassified as electives.

The proposal's solution to this problem is to arbitrarily reduce the number of distribution courses to 50 courses within a few years. This reduction to 50 HUM-D courses represents an artificial and unnecessary cap on the number of HUM-D's offered.

Each course should be judged for its own scope and content, and should not be subject to an overall limit on HUM-D courses. MIT should offer as many HUM-D courses as there are courses that meet the definition of a distribution course. Offering only ten distribution courses per category excessively restricts students' choice of courses.

One possible reason for reducing the number of HUM-D's is to provide a common humanities experience for undergraduates. The August 1986 Report of the Committee on the HASS Humanities curriculum states there are so many HUM-D subjects to choose from, the likelihood that a substantial number of students from any living group will be enrolled in the same course is small . . . As a result, conversations outside classes rarely focus on HASS subject matter.

The proposal cannot provide a common experience because students will still be dispersed among a wide range of courses each semester. Without a true core curriculum, which would further restrict student choice, it is impossible to ensure such a common humanities experience.

The proposal is unsatisfactory in its current form. We urge the faculty to amend the proposal by removing the clause that stipulates a reduction to 50 distribution subjects.

Student reaction to the proposal has been strong. Faculty who worked for a long time on the proposal may feel frustrated by the number of students opposed to the proposal. Who worked for a long time on the proposal may feel frustrated by the number of students opposed to the proposal.

What the faculty must remember is that students tend to avoid discussing reforms until a concrete proposal is "on the table." Many ideas for changing the curriculum, such as the Marx Committee proposal to create a New Liberal Arts College, and the Committee on HASS's original proposal were never formally proposed as changes to the curriculum and were largely ignored by the student body.

The HASS proposal is one vote from reality — and has not been ignored. Column/Thomas T. Huang

Behold, the witching hour

In order to survive at MIT, students must "master the hidden curriculum," says Ben Snyder, a professor of psychology who works in the student counseling center. You can see in his watery eyes that he's been here a long time. He's the guy who studied a group of MIT students in the 1950s and traced their careers into the 1980s. He implies that the successful student learns how to juggle his or her commitments, when to work as a Fiji, when to work as a group member, when to stay up late, when to show up. The student learns to prioritize these commitments and takes off from there.

From past experience, Snyder warns us that any educational reform that ignores this hidden curriculum has a life expectancy of two to three years. It's been two years since Professor John M. Deutch '61 announced the new educational initiative. Perhaps the witching hour has arrived. He can hear the wolves howling. Everyone's trying to pull and puff each other's ideological leg.

Professor Leo Marx's proposal to create a College of the New Liberal Arts has long since fallen by the wayside. The Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences proposal is on the verge of getting bogged down. This is due to a lurid mistake: a question concern over the legitimacy of humanities majors who contend that the HUM-D counts. In forcing breadth upon the students, would sacrifice individual choice and excellence.

Meanwhile, a lot of students and faculty on this campus still don't understand what the hell's going on. You can count me in on this party. But Snyder's words have not sunk in. Indeed, the reforms exposed the benefits of lower HUM-D's, and core classes that provide for a common experience, but also that changes don't address the traditional survival instincts of MIT students, insticts that may be misguided, but that are nonetheless prevalent.

The way success of this educational reform hinges on getting MIT students to involve themselves in humanities with the same intensity as their technical classes. The very goal of this educational reform is to get science and engineering students asking value questions, thinking in humanities, as well as technical terms.

A good number of MIT students selectively neglect their humanities and social sciences because they perceive that their careers won't depend on these classes. They've got to spend more time on their technical classes. Call it apathy. Call it survival. Call it a wise allocation of time.