Arts committee reports that Visual Studies professors are overburdened

By Katie Schwarz

The decline of the Visual Studies program in the department of architecture must be reversed quickly, Provost John M. Deutch told the faculty at its meeting Wednesday.

Deutch was responding to the report of the Red Flag Committee on the Arts, which was presented to the faculty by the committee’s chairman, Professor of Economics Paul L. Joskow. Deutch said that he had appointed the committee in response to suggestions of President Paul E. Gray ’54, recognizing its relevance to the current review of undergraduate education.

There has been an enormous increase in programs involving students in the arts in the past three decades, Joskow reported. But the committee identified some problems, particularly in the Visual Studies program in the department of architecture. The committee was “bashed by the state of the program,” which was in a “drastic decline,” he said, with hundreds of students routinely turned away from classes every term for lack of seats.

In fact there was a good chance that the program would disappear within five years, as faculty members retire or shift their interest to other areas, Joskow said.

This is unacceptable, Joskow said, in light of the recent reforms of the humanities, arts and social science requirement, which precludes that there will be some HASS-Distribution classes in the visual arts. The provost and the department of architecture will act quickly on a “long-range plan” for Visual Studies, he said.

Deutch said that he had appointed the Visual Studies problem was the most important finding of the committee, and that a search for a new senior faculty in Visual Studies would begin soon.

Joskow also discussed the music and drama programs. Music is popular, enrolling a thousand students per year in classes, but it is constrained by the shortage of facilities for recitals, practice and performance, he said. This problem is not new, nor is it impossible to solve, he noted.

“Deutch said his response would stop short of a new building, but he would set aside funds to renovate and modify existing spaces.

Drama at MIT has been plagued by “a long history of controversy... incomprehensible organizational structure, lack of leadership and loosely defined goals,” Joskow continued; nevertheless, it has “a large, loyal student following.”

Clinging a confidential report to MIT by the director of Boston’s Huntington Theater, Joskow recommended that all drama and dance activities be consolidated with music in one section of the humanities department.

This had been done with the formation of the music and theater arts section on July 1, Deutch said. Dramashop, the Shakespeare Ensemble and the Dance Workshop are now formally under the control of the new section.

Finally, Joskow observed that support for the arts is decentralized among many small groups, such as the Council for the Arts, the MIT Museum and the Student Art Association. This is not all bad, but there is a lack of integrated institutional leadership,” he said.

Deutch agreed that there was a need for a senior individual in charge of the arts. A search has begun for a new faculty member who will devote half of his or her time to the duties of associate provost for the arts, he said.

Joskow noted that the committee’s report is not comprehensive; it did not have time to consider all possible issues relating to the arts, he said, and decided to focus on issues relevant to undergraduates, since the undergraduate HASS requirement was being debated at the time.