Faculty Salary Policy Questioned

By Matt Nelmark

Though you may not realize it, most MIT professors are paid for only nine months of the year. If a professor wishes to be paid for the summer months, he or she must either obtain a research grant or teach during the summer session, a policy some professors oppose.

Among its most outspoken critics is Professor of Physics Walter E. G. Lewin. He said the system of employing professors for nine months is counterproductive to good research and has not been standardized.

"This policy differs entirely from department to department and professor to professor. It is not a uniform policy," he said. In particular, Lewin said that until a few years ago, the Institute paid him for only six months a year, and he was forced to find research grants for five months.

Professors usually must acquire research grants from outside MIT if they want to get paid for their summers. Even if professors teach during the summer session, they are paid for only two of the three summer months.

Paul L. Penfield ScD '60, head of the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science, likes the current system. He said it gives some professors in his department the opportunity to use the summer months to leave MIT and work in the private sector. "The system gives our faculty the opportunity to get away from MIT and do something else. We find that when the professors return, they are able to bring back to us many valuable experiences," he said.

Lewin's biggest problem with the policy is related to the Institute's handling of research grants. Like many universities, MIT charges organizations that award research grants a percentage of the money awarded to cover indirect costs such as building maintenance. For instance, if the professor employs a student to do research, the Institute charges an extra 140% to the award.

If a professor is unable to come up with research funding, he or she is usually forced to fire a graduate student. According to Lewin, professors suffer more from this process than graduate students. While graduate students can usually find a teaching assistantship, Lewin said his "productivity goes down, and the next year my chances of getting a grant are decreased."

Lewin also contended that being forced to come up with grants for the months he is not paid by the Institute makes it extremely difficult to teach. Lewin said lecturing a class takes 40 hours a week of preparation and leading a recitation class takes from 20 to 35 hours a week. The pressure to find grants leaves even less time to do research, he said.

"I am not going to lecture 8.01 every fall. If I did, I would go scientifically bankrupt. I would love to do it ... I would love to lecture 8.01 in the fall and 8.02 to the same students in the spring," Lewin said.

Penfield said the system in no way impairs the teaching responsibilities of the professors. He insisted that to be a good teacher, one must also participate in research. "The best teachers in our department are also good at research. We also find that when professors haven't been involved in research for a long time, they become stale," he said.

He added that the system is beneficial to the students since they have the option of staying for the summer if they wish and doing research with the professors.

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