The Plight of UROP: Live and Let Die?

Even if you were hibernating in a Course VI laboratory last term, you heard about the crisis with the Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program. Unlike most events that were and are still at MIT, this one captured our attention. Ask the average undergraduate about the Center for Materials Research in Archaeology and Ethnology during closure dispute or the sudden death of Constantine B. Simonides '57, and you're likely to receive a blank stare. The UROP crisis was different — it was our bread and butter issue. But I think most of us have probably put UROP aside since last term. There hasn't been much news, and we've been away for awhile. And UROP is admittedly more stable now than at the end of last term. Let me tell you why you should still care about UROP.

For the freshmen and those with their heads in their noodle kits last year, let me give you a brief history. Last fall, MIT was told that an important set of government accounting regulations (commonly referred to as Circular 212) would be implemented beginning in July of this year. The regulations are so far too complex to be explored here, but they essentially "tax" government research spending. Despite a concerted lobbying effort, the administration was unable to reverse the harmful treatment of UROP under this rule.

One indirect consequence of this accounting change was the cost of hiring under-graduates for research with government funds more than doubled. More recent developments have reduced the impact of this "tax," but it still remains at about 60 percent or so. (For precise rules, contact the UROP Office.) The situation was most bleak before the beginning of the summer. When the situation became intractable, the Provost at last pledged one million dollars from the Institute's endowment to save UROP's for the summer.

As part of the brouhaha last term, three UROP students (ours truly included) went to Washington, D.C. (thanks to money from the Provost's Office), and lobbied the government to revert the accounting treatment of UROP. We were startled by the response to our juncture.

And with the unflinching support of the MIT Administration, people were surprised and pleased to see us, particularly those doing research. We cannot continue to rely on the MIT Administration, not that MIT undergraduates ever whine. But with this advantage, people were surprised and pleased to see us, particularly those doing research. And only recently has UROP been allowed to fund raise aggressively.

When push comes to shove, UROP is our program. We share in a legacy passed down by our administrators acting for undergraduates. We cannot continue to rely on the Provost, Comptroller, or even the Dean's Office to protect UROP from the federal government or MIT itself. But if this means going to Washington and making our case, or — God forbid — going to faculty meetings and making noise, we'll have no choice. As undergraduates, our responsibility to UROP can be nothing less.

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Column by Raajnish A. Chitalia

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