

**Report of the Ad Hoc Working Group  
to Review Past Reports on  
Undergraduate Life and Learning**

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## Introduction

Like most academic institutions, MIT relies heavily on committees to evaluate the success or failure of its educational programs and institutional initiatives. Periodically, we appoint groups of faculty, students, and administrators to examine important issues like the first year experience, the role of humanities at MIT, the General Institute Requirements, and undergraduate housing, to name a few subjects of recent inquiry. Many of the major educational initiatives adopted by the Institute over the past half century -- e.g., the current HASS curriculum, IAP, pass-fail, and the new biology requirement -- have come about through the thoughtful recommendations of such committees. But it is also true that many previous committees charged with examining aspects of student life have labored hard only to see their recommendations fall on deaf ears, or worse yet, to be actively repudiated by the faculty, students, or the administration. Unfortunately, repudiation is far from a rare occurrence. When it happens, committee members may rightfully feel embittered by a process that does not adequately respect their work on behalf of the larger community. Perhaps more importantly, when the work of a group appointed to address an important issue is not acted upon, the underlying problems that prompted the creation of the committee remain unresolved, if not buried. Moreover, after one group has dulled its ax on a problem without result, it is difficult for others to muster enthusiasm to tackle the same problem again, regardless of how pressing the issue may be.

It is against this backdrop that we have been asked by the President and the Dean for Undergraduate Education and Student Affairs to review a number of past reports of committees charged with evaluating different aspects of undergraduate life at MIT. Our task was to revisit the recommendations of these past committees to determine what we might learn prior to appointing another group to examine a similar set of issues. Specifically, we were asked to review four reports:

- 1989 Report of the Freshman Housing Committee;
- 1989 Report of the Committee on the First-year Program;
- 1979 Report of the Committee on Campus Dining;
- 1973 Report on Undergraduate Housing in the 1970s.

Our charge was to answer three questions about these reports:

1. What recommendations have been implemented in the intervening years?
2. Which of the remaining recommendations from these reports should be carefully re-considered at this time?
3. How should the work of a new task force on undergraduate life be influenced by a review of these past reports?

In addition to the reports noted above, we also briefly examined a number of other reports including the 1989 Report of the Context Review Group, 1988 Report of the Ad Hoc Student Committee on the First Year, and the 1986 Interim Report of the Committee to Design an Integrative Curriculum in the Liberal Arts. We also discussed the recently completed Senior Survey to gain insight into issues that might be addressed by a new task force on undergraduate education.

In reviewing all of these reports, we have been impressed by the capacity of our colleagues to diagnose problems and prescribe reasoned solutions. However, all too often the process by which we move the Institute from status quo to reasoned solution has been ignored. Our review of past reports leads us to believe that the committee process frequently undervalues problems of implementation as well as the reality of resource constraints. Furthermore, committees sometimes fail to look beyond their own membership in determining whether broader support exists for their recommendations. If a new group is to be charged with reexamining undergraduate life at MIT, we believe it must be challenged not just to envision change, but also to build a consensus for that change among students, faculty, and administrators. The process of policy design should not be divorced from policy implementation.

### **1989 Report of the Freshman Housing Committee**

The Potter Committee was appointed by John Deutch and asked "to study the impact that R/O has on the quality of life and character of the MIT community, with special reference to the freshman class," and to consider "a policy that would require all freshmen to live in Institute dormitories."<sup>1</sup> The chair of the committee was a former Chair of the Faculty, and other members included the Deans of Engineering, Undergraduate Education, Student Affairs, and the Associate Deans for Student Affairs in charge of Residence and Campus Activities, and the Undergraduate Academic Support Office, the MacGregor Housemaster, as well as three undergraduates and three other faculty mem-

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<sup>1</sup> 1989 Report of the Freshman Housing Committee, page 6.

bers. One would have a hard time imagining a better committee to review freshman housing.

The committee concluded that it would be desirable to house all freshmen on campus and defer rush until second term. In the words of the committee, "R/O would become Orientation. Orientation (would) be refocused on the goals . . . (of) assuring a student's well-being, security, and sense of 'being in the right place,' the generation of intellectual excitement, an introduction to academic opportunities and the freshman curriculum, provision of practical information about student life and co-curricular activities, an introduction to community life and norms, an introduction to the larger community beyond MIT, and orientation for parents."<sup>2</sup> The committee also recommended additional faculty involvement in residential life, as well as changes in dormitory management and governance. To implement its recommendations, the committee suggested that 350-500 beds would have to be added to the dormitory system, and plans would have to be made to minimize the adverse effects on independent living groups.<sup>3</sup>

Notwithstanding the stellar make-up of the group, the Potter Committee's recommendations went nowhere. Students were outraged by the suggestion that their freedom of choice in freshman housing be replaced by a system of preassigned rooms. Independent Living Groups feared that deferral of rush to second term would threaten their viability. The Dean for Student Affairs, who was close to the end of her term, did not strongly support the recommendations. The Provost (also nearing the end of his term) similarly did not endorse the report, in part, because of the strong adverse student reaction.

In retrospect, it is clear that in spite of broad representation of different groups on this committee, it failed to build support for its recommendations. Perhaps it is asking too much of three undergraduates participating in a committee composed largely of faculty and high level administrators to adequately (and vigorously) represent the concerns of all of their classmates. The committee hoped that implementation problems could be considered after publication of its report.<sup>4</sup> We believe this was a mistake. Any chance of having a serious discussion of these issues was rendered moot by the strident

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<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.* page 2.

<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* page 4.

<sup>4</sup> "While the Committee developed effective consensus on a number of recommendations in principle, we were not in a position to make firm or specific recommendations for implementing reform. Further detailed discussion in the appropriate forum will be needed, and we strongly recommend that such discussion be undertaken...." *Ibid.* page 34.

student response to the recommendation that rush be deferred to second term.<sup>5</sup> More puzzling is the role of the administration's representatives on the committee. Even though five deans served on the committee, the administration never supported the committee's conclusions. Thus the deans had no more success than the students in building consensus among their colleagues in the larger MIT community.

In spite of the obvious difficulties in moving to a system where all freshmen are housed on campus, we believe that the Potter Committee's recommendations still have merit. Our current R/O system does divert student attention away from academic orientation. For many of our students (and their parents), R/O week is "chaotic, exhausting, and anxiety inducing." We believe housing all freshmen on campus would create additional opportunities for faculty involvement during the first year. If the implementation problems can be addressed, we would like to see the Potter Committee's recommendations reconsidered.

### **The 1989 Report of the Committee on the First-year Program**

Like the Potter Committee, the Committee on the First-year Program (chaired by Ken Manning) issued a report that met with little enthusiasm and had little impact. Its charge was to "examine the essential features of our current first-year academic program structure and to make recommendations and concrete proposals appropriate to improving its intellectual quality and effectiveness."<sup>6</sup> The major conclusion of this committee was that the first-year program would have greater educational benefit if it provided students more opportunity for choice. Towards this end, the committee made a number of specific recommendations:

- That freshmen be encouraged to complete only the Institute mathematics requirement and two of the three remaining "core" science subjects, along with two HASS subjects in contrast to the current expectation that all five science core subjects be completed in the freshman year;
- That pass/no credit be eliminated during second semester of the freshman year along with the junior/senior pass-fail option;
- That a new pass/no credit option be created which would allow students to take at most one credit/no credit subject per term up to a maximum of seven with only two HASS subjects eligible for such treatment;

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<sup>5</sup> According to Jay Keyser, 400 students showed up at a meeting to discuss the final report. When a straw poll was taken on the report, 399 students voted against it. When the lone supporter was asked why he agreed with the committee's recommendations, he is reputed to have replied, "I don't agree. I just always vote against the majority as a matter of principle."

<sup>6</sup> 1989 Report of the Committee on the First Year Program, page 3.

- Require a grade of C or better to earn credit.

The committee report argued that by redistributing pass/no credit over seven semesters, students would be less inclined to overload during the second semester of the freshman year. Also, allowing students to designate one subject per term pass/no credit would, in the eyes of the committee, encourage students to delay completion of their GIRs until later in their MIT career, thus opening up the freshman schedule for more exploration.

Prior to completing its deliberations, the Manning committee solicited student input into its recommendations through two open forums. According to the report, the views expressed at these forums shaped the substantive recommendations of the committee.<sup>7</sup> Moreover, the opinions expressed in the report of the Ad Hoc Student Committee on the First Year (prepared in parallel with the Manning report) echoed many of the same themes. In short, while students were not unanimous in their support of the recommendations, they appeared to be on board. The same could not be said of the faculty which rejected the committee's major recommendations.<sup>8</sup> Although the committee membership nominally represented the major schools and departments within the Institute, the report did not have the support of some key administrators responsible for the first year, and the report died on the floor of the faculty meeting. Like the Potter committee that failed to anticipate and respond to student concerns about its findings, the Manning committee also failed to seek consensus, albeit from the faculty. And like the Potter committee, the Manning committee also labored without tangible result.

We think the Manning committee was correct in observing that the first year is overly constrained. Moreover, we believe that many faculty and students also hold this view. Where people differ is in how to fix the problem. The Manning committee elected to address it through changes in the grading system. We could also imagine more fundamental reforms that might involve reconsideration of both the General Institute Requirements and the relationship between departmental requirements and the first year curriculum.<sup>9</sup> We believe additional flexibility in the first year is desirable, and encourage reconsideration of the issue as part of any future review of undergraduate life.

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<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.* page 12.

<sup>8</sup> Some of the more modest suggestions of the Manning committee have already been adopted (e.g., strict credit limits on second semester freshmen.)

<sup>9</sup> We are not advocating such changes. Rather, we merely wish to point out that there are many different ways to introduce flexibility into the first year.

## 1979 Report of the Committee on Campus Dining, 1973 Report on Undergraduate Housing in the 1970s

We have considered these two reports together because they share a number of common attributes. In contrast to the Potter and Manning reports, these two committees were both very successful. They were each charged with rethinking important aspects of undergraduate life, dining and housing respectively. The two committees went about their tasks in a similar manner -- by spending lots of time soliciting the views of the consumers of the dining and housing systems. In both cases, extensive surveys were performed. In the case of the Report on Undergraduate Housing, at least one survey was generated and evaluated as part of a course in Managerial Psychology.<sup>10</sup> The charge to each committee was quite manageable.<sup>11</sup> In both cases, the reports were well received and most of the recommendations were implemented.

It is tempting to attribute the success of these committees entirely to the care which they took in incorporating student input into their deliberations. Other explanations, however, also are relevant. In both cases, the issues being addressed stirred few passions among the faculty. Most faculty were happy to defer to students and administrators on issues of how food services were provided (as long as the faculty had a place to eat lunch) and on the optimal size of dormitory entries. Also, at least in the case of the Committee on Undergraduate Housing, the recommendations did not necessitate any grand departure from the status quo. Students could cheerfully debate the design of a new dormitory with reasonable assurance that even if they objected to the final recommendations of the committee, they would never have to live with the consequences given the length of the planning, design, and construction process. We do not mean to belittle the accomplishments of these two committees both of which did exemplary work. The Kassakian committee report on campus dining is especially noteworthy for its thoroughness, insight, and clarity. However, given the passage of time and the different

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<sup>10</sup> 1973 Report on Undergraduate Housing in the 1970s, page 4.

<sup>11</sup> The Kassakian committee on campus dining was asked to "take a fresh look at dining at MIT; to identify strengths and problems in the current dining opportunities on campus; to develop goals for the dining program as part of the overall student experience at MIT, and to assess the university's responsibilities in this regard; and to explore alternatives to the current operating modes and dining offerings." 1979 Report on of the Committee on Campus Dining, page 1. The Graves committee on undergraduate housing saw its task as developing a set of recommendations to provide input into the programming of a new west campus dormitory that would follow the construction of MacGregor House. 1973 Report on Undergraduate Housing in the 1970s. Page 3.

issues that we confront today, we believe there is little to be learned by revisiting the substantive recommendations of these two committees.

## **Suggestions for the Organization of a New Task Force on Undergraduate Life**

We believe the time is ripe to take a fresh look at undergraduate life and education at MIT. Like many faculty, we are concerned about how to interpret the recent Senior Survey. Each year we observe freshmen as they arrive on campus full of enthusiasm and excitement only to emerge four years later fully steeped in a culture in which "IHTFP" is the watchword. While we may have different views about whether we should be alarmed by the response of MIT students to the COFHE questions, we all share a belief that the skills aligned along the vertical axis in the infamous comparison chart are important criteria for evaluating the quality of a student's undergraduate education. We would encourage the formation of a task force charged with building a consensus among the larger MIT community on how we can do better along these dimensions. We believe the focus of such a task force should be on the first two years when students adjust to life away from home, become assimilated into the MIT culture, select a living group, address the demands of the core, and declare a major. In the words of one of our members, "This is the period when our students are beaten into submission." Careful thought should be given to how we might encourage greater intellectual exploration during the first two years as well as foster greater faculty-student interaction. We think a task force on undergraduate life and learning should be encouraged to explore aspects of both the curriculum and undergraduate residential and extracurricular life.

Based on our reading of the Potter and Manning reports, we think it would be a mistake simply to name a "representative" group and ask them to write a comprehensive report. No matter how carefully individuals are selected, it is impossible to name a committee that fully represents all diverse interests on campus. Students, for example, are far from a homogeneous group. Moreover, our traditions of collegiality may actually discourage vigorous representation on committees. Having been appointed to serve on a committee, most members feel obliged to take a broader view of an issue than might be articulated by someone outside the process. Also, most committee members do not see it as their responsibility to actively solicit the views of colleagues in their school, or to keep different constituencies informed about the progress of committee deliberations. Thus we should not be surprised when the carefully crafted consensus of a small committee breaks

down when subject to the parochial, and sometimes more sharply worded opinions of the broader community.<sup>12</sup>

If a new task force is to be successful where others have failed, it must function differently from past committees. Perhaps the most important lesson from our review of past reports is that the process of policy formulation cannot be divorced from the process of policy implementation. Rather than charge a committee with the task of writing a report, we believe the committee should be charged with building a consensus for change. More specifically, we recommend that a new committee on undergraduate life and learning be given two specific tasks.

First, after appropriate discussion and review of past efforts, the committee should generate a series of possible suggestions for reform. It is important that the larger community see these suggestions not as fully formed recommendations, but different approaches to improving the quality of the undergraduate experience. Indeed, it may be desirable for some of these approaches to be mutually exclusive. The purpose of this first task is to stimulate vigorous debate throughout the entire MIT community on ways to improve the life and education of our undergraduates. The debate should encourage people to come forward with suggestions for improving upon the work of the committee.

Second, the committee should be charged with building a coalition for change that not only enjoys wide support and is sensitive to problems of implementation, but that also is realistic in light of our limited resources. To succeed at this second task, the committee will have to solicit the active participation of faculty and administrators who have a major responsibility for residence life, the first year, and the GIRs. Broad student participation is critical. Thus, the work product of the committee should be a consensus building effort, not just another report to be defended. Towards this end, we think the committee should think creatively about how to engage the larger community. Rather than simply publish a draft report and seek comments, the committee might consider meeting with focus groups composed of faculty from different parts of the Institute, holding meetings in the dormitories and ILG's, sponsoring electronic forums on specific topics, and

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<sup>12</sup> The experience of the Manning committee illustrates this phenomena as applied to students. The Manning committee had one student representative. This student found it difficult to act as a true representative of all student interests on a committee composed entirely of faculty. Accordingly, he organized a shadow committee of 12 students who used their IAP to produce the Report of the Ad Hoc Student Committee on the First Year. This report represents an extraordinarily thoughtful synthesis of student views of what is wrong with the first year and how to fix it. We recommend this report to any group interested in improving the first year experience.

holding a series of open sessions with key members of the administration to discuss fiscal priorities and realities.

Since we believe this process must involve the participation of the administration, we also recommend that the appointment of a committee or task force be delayed until we have a new Dean (or Deans) of Undergraduate Education on board. We believe that the Dean of Undergraduate Education must play a leadership role in any consensus building effort. We fear that potential participants are unlikely to invest their time in this process if they fear that a new (and unnamed) Dean will not buy into its results. Similarly, any individual who takes on the job of Dean is going to want a hand in setting his or her own agenda, which also argues for delay.

We recognize that the process just described represents a substantial departure from our normal way of doing business. We believe that if we are to succeed at implementing meaningful change, we must spend at least as much time thinking about how to move the organization as we do about optimal steady states. We know the latter strategy does not work. Perhaps the time has come to risk new forms of error.