

REPORT OF THE IAP SUBCOMMITTEE

Spring 2013

Background

In August 2011, Registrar Mary Callahan wrote to Professor Samuel Allen, Chair of the Faculty, identifying a number of potentially concerning trends in MIT's Independent Activities Period (IAP) and requesting a review of its current state. The trends suggest that the original intention of IAP, offering "opportunities for creativity and flexibility in teaching and learning," does not match current practice, and that IAP has evolved over the years to assume many qualities associated with an academic term.

Registrar Callahan and Dean Julie Norman, Senior Associate Dean and Director of the Office of Undergraduate Advising and Academic Programming (UAAP), whose office administers IAP, visited with the FPC in October 2011 to discuss the evolution of IAP in more detail. After further consideration, the FPC agreed to charge an *ad hoc* subcommittee to conduct the first comprehensive review of IAP in at least 20 years. This report summarizes the findings and recommendations of the subcommittee.

Charge

The Independent Activities Period (IAP) Subcommittee of the Faculty Policy Committee (FPC) will serve on an *ad hoc* basis to conduct a thorough review of IAP and its evolution over the last 40 years. IAP's definition includes the following statement:

For students and faculty, IAP provides a welcome break from the academic routine of the fall and spring semesters. It offers opportunities for creativity and flexibility in teaching and learning. Students are encouraged to set their own educational agendas, pursue independent projects, meet with faculty, or pursue many other options not possible during the semester. Faculty are free to introduce innovative educational experiments as IAP activities.

A significant increase in student enrollment during IAP and a shift in the nature of subjects offered during IAP suggest that IAP has evolved and may have drifted from its original intent. The Subcommittee shall examine IAP with particular regard to the following questions:

- Should required subjects be permitted during IAP? If so, should they be restricted to pass/fail grading?
- Should faculty rules governing the conduct of graduate and undergraduate subjects during the fall and spring semesters apply during IAP?
- Should there be a consistent rule across Schools and departments regarding the annual course load expectations for faculty who teach during IAP?
- Is the high level of academic activity during IAP at odds with the flexibility and creativity that IAP was designed to encourage?
- Should IAP be shortened, thus allowing the spring term to begin and end earlier along with extending the reading period?
- Should a formal registration process and add/drop period be established for IAP?

- Should a formal advising element be added for the students enrolled in for-credit IAP activities?

The IAP Subcommittee shall maintain a membership consisting of one faculty chair from the Faculty Policy Committee (FPC) and one additional FPC faculty member, two faculty members each from the Committee on Curricula (CoC), the Committee on the Undergraduate Program (CUP), and the Committee on Graduate Programs (CGP), two undergraduate students from those committees' memberships, two graduate students appointed by the GSC Nominations Board, and the Registrar and the Senior Associate Dean and Director of the Office of Undergraduate Advising and Academic Programming (or their representatives). Particular attention should be paid to ensuring representation from the five Schools.

History

In the spring of 1970, the academic calendar was modified, by vote of the faculty, to allow for the creation of IAP and establish a 4-1-4 calendar (four months each for the fall and spring semesters, and one month for IAP) as part of a three-year experiment. The experiment's objectives were as follows:

1. Eliminate the January "lame-duck" period.
2. Ease the rush for academic and administrative problems between semesters.
3. Allow for "fallow" time, to be used by students and staff for study and research at a more leisurely and independent pace.
4. Create an opportunity for flexibility in learning and teaching styles.

A letter from the Committee on Educational Policy to the faculty in 1970 stated the intention of IAP clearly:

The purpose of the independent study period would be to provide a time for students to read and to study at a more leisurely pace than is possible during the regular semester, a time for them to get better acquainted with the faculty member assisting them, and a time during which they would be free from the pressure of homework, quizzes, and grades. Its purpose is not to give everyone a chance to pile up a few more units of academic credit.

In 1973 the experiment was deemed a success, the faculty approved a permanent change to the calendar, and IAP became a vibrant, meaningful, and much loved element of the MIT experience.

As part of the original motion, the IAP Policy Committee—a presidential committee that consisted largely of faculty—was established to monitor IAP within the context of the total academic program. The IAP Policy Committee was disbanded in 2000, with oversight of for-credit subject offerings shifting under the purview of the Committee on Curricula (CoC) and the Committee on Graduate Programs (CGP).

Methodology

Much of the subcommittee's early work focused on identifying the proper individuals and groups to consult, and on determining the appropriate tools for gathering feedback. In addition to speaking with several key stakeholders, as the report will detail, the subcommittee aimed to ensure wide representation of faculty, staff, and student perspectives. The subcommittee approached each constituency differently:

- **Students:** Just prior to the start of the 2012-13 academic year, the subcommittee sent a detailed survey to the undergraduate and graduate student bodies, excluding all first year students who would not have been on campus during the previous IAP. The questionnaire was wide-ranging, gathering data about how students use IAP, their level of satisfaction with it, and the opportunities that IAP presents.
- **Faculty:** The subcommittee identified 14 questions that each faculty representative on the subcommittee was asked to pose to five to 10 faculty colleagues. The faculty were asked about the level of academic activity during IAP, faculty accessibility, and participation.
- **IAP Coordinators:** Recognizing that there is a significant administrative component to IAP and that the staff in the departments have a unique perspective, the subcommittee posed nine questions to the departmental IAP Coordinators. These questions focused on administrative processes, as well as faculty and student participation.

Armed with feedback from the community, the IAP founding documents, periodic reports of the IAP Policy Committee, and data related to academic activity provided by the Office of the Registrar, the subcommittee began to formulate responses to the seven questions it faced.

Overview

One overarching message emerged from student and faculty feedback: "If it's not broken, don't fix it." This report will propose several moderate changes to strengthen IAP, but it became clear early in the subcommittee's review that IAP is a unique, valuable, and beloved part of the MIT experience, and any significant changes that the subcommittee might propose would be unnecessary and ultimately counterproductive.

The subcommittee's greatest struggle was reconciling the valuable ways IAP has developed over the last 40 years with a desire to maintain the qualities of "creativity and flexibility" envisioned when the period was established. Unquestionably, the academic rigors associated with IAP have grown over the years. Between 1991 and 2011, the number of for-credit graduate subjects offered during IAP increased by 125% from 44 to 99 and undergraduate subjects by 59% from 61 to 97, and the number of students enrolled in for-credit subjects during IAP has nearly tripled from 1,640 to 4,554.

Subcommittee members were especially sensitive to the idea of encouraging a holistic, healthy MIT experience. Given the stresses that faculty and students face during the fall and spring, is IAP's evolution into a something more akin to a term at odds with its original intention? And to what extent should the administration install or enforce safeguards to return IAP to a period of "creativity and flexibility"?

The subcommittee debated the merits of prohibiting all for-credit academic exercises during IAP, on one hand, and, on the other, removing restrictions and allowing departments and students the freedom to use IAP as they desire. The most notable restriction currently in place is the 12-unit credit limit imposed on students each IAP. Some of the student survey responses suggested eliminating the limit altogether and allowing students to accrue as many credits as possible during IAP. The subcommittee rejects this notion not only because it conflicts with the original intention of IAP, but because it is counter to the balanced, healthy experience that the Institute should be encouraging.

Responses and Recommendations

1. *Should required subjects be permitted during IAP? If so, should they be restricted to pass/fail grading?*

Although the practice of offering required subjects during IAP was not initially envisioned or intended, the subcommittee believes there is value in some of the ways in which departments have incorporated for-credit offerings into IAP. The subcommittee met with Professor Haynes Miller, the instructor of 18.02A, and Professor Krishna Rajagopal, the instructor of 8.01L, to understand how the departments of Mathematics and Physics have used the flexibility afforded by IAP to ensure that students devote sufficient time to fundamental math and physics before advancing to more complex subject matter.

Professor Rajagopal explained that the "L" (or "long") version of 8.01 is designed to serve as an "on ramp" to MIT. The material covered in 8.01L is no different from the material covered in 8.01, but it is presented at a slower pace, extending through late January. The data suggest that students who earn an A, B, or C grade in 8.01L do just as well in 8.02 as students with the same grade in 8.01. Professor Rajagopal made the case that without the option of using IAP for 8.01L, 100 or more students would fail 8.01 each year.

The Department of Earth, Atmospheric and Planetary Sciences has similarly found ways to use the unique opportunities presented by IAP to offer for-credit subjects focused on field work. Currently, students have two IAP options for completing the laboratory/field subject requirement of a degree in Course 12: 12.115, which spans IAP and the spring semester, and 12.221 (IAP) paired with 12.222 (spring). The time that students and instructors are able to spend away from campus during IAP allows for travel and immersive field exploration that would otherwise be impossible.

While these subjects demonstrate the potential value and creativity that IAP offers, the subcommittee is concerned by the rate at which departments are offering for-credit academic subjects. When the IAP Committee was disbanded in 2000, it left in place guidelines to restrict the growth of required undergraduate subjects during IAP, but those guidelines are insufficient to address the rapid growth of other academic offerings and student enrollment. While the subcommittee noted that those guidelines have generally been effective in limiting the number of required subjects offered during IAP, the group agreed that MIT should recommit to the following statement as outlined in Section 4.1.3 of *Policies and Procedures*: “Required subjects offered during IAP should not be created simply by compressing subjects offered for 13 weeks in the fall or spring term into the four weeks of IAP. Subjects should be appropriate to the intensive schedule and unique pedagogical opportunities offered by IAP.”

This policy, and the proliferation of academic subject offerings during IAP, stems from a 1993 review of the academic calendar that permitted departments to offer required subjects during IAP. As part of that review, the faculty approved a motion that reads, in part, “Departments will be encouraged to move into IAP more of their credit-bearing activities that are especially appropriate for IAP’s distinctive pace and timing...Departments will specifically be allowed to move no more than 12 units of their required departmental program exclusively into IAP, with the expectation that majors may be required to participate in an intense pedagogically appropriate departmental activity during one of their four IAP periods at MIT.” The minutes of the October 1993 Institute Faculty Meeting suggest that a number of faculty were concerned that permitting required subjects during IAP would increase the demands on students by “adding unacceptably to the burdens of students majoring in those departments.” Professor Robert Jaffe, Chair of the Faculty at the time, indicated that “any proposed new offering will bear the burden of persuasion in what will remain a careful, thoughtful process.”

The subcommittee reaffirms the 1993 motion and wishes to ensure that required for-credit subjects are “especially appropriate for IAP’s distinctive pace and timing.” **To this end, the subcommittee suggests that the CoC undertake a review of Section 7 of the committee’s guidelines describing the criteria by which it reviews required IAP subjects. As Section 7.2 of the CoC guidelines states, “[Required] subjects should be appropriate to the intensive schedule and unique pedagogical opportunities offered by IAP.” The subcommittee believes that there would be value in strengthening this statement and detailing the qualities that the CoC considers in assessing a proposal for offering a required subject during IAP.**

Also, the subcommittee affirms current policy stating that required subjects, whether designed to fulfill a general requirement or a program requirement, should be letter-graded. **However, the subcommittee recommends that subjects used solely as electives (i.e. those that cannot be used to fulfill a re-**

quirement in a degree program or a minor, nor can they satisfy a General Institute Requirement) be offered P/D/F during IAP. A department would have to make a compelling case to the CoC to offer an elective, non-GIR subject with a letter grade during IAP.

Moreover, the subcommittee calls on the CoC to take a more active role in monitoring required subjects that are offered only during IAP. **The subcommittee proposes that the CoC undertake a regular periodic review (e.g., every 3 to 5 years) of degree programs that include required IAP subjects to ensure that the subjects are appropriate for the “unique pedagogical opportunities offered by IAP” and are fulfilling the educational objectives of their respective degree programs.** The CoC should also evaluate the alternatives to these required subjects, which departments are required to provide as a means of ensuring that students are not penalized for circumstances that may require them to be absent from MIT during a particular IAP. The CoC should also periodically assess GIR subjects that are offered for credit during IAP.

The subcommittee does not recommend changing the guidelines for graduate subjects. Departments approach graduate subject offerings differently, and the subcommittee believes that decisions for coordinating graduate offerings are best left at the local level with some oversight by the CGP, a practice that is currently in place.

2. *Should faculty rules governing the conduct of graduate and undergraduate subjects during the fall and spring semesters apply during IAP?*

The only term regulation that the committee believes should apply during IAP relates to the scheduling of class meeting times and academic exercises in the evenings and on weekends. During the academic terms, undergraduate subjects are prohibited from holding required academic exercises between 5:00 PM and 7:00 PM Monday through Thursday, and between 5:00 PM on Friday and 8:00 AM on Monday. This prohibition is intended to ensure that students have a designated protected time for dinner and rest, and to pursue other interests, such as music, drama, or athletics.

The subcommittee met with Professor Henry Smith, MIT’s athletic liaison to the NCAA, to better understand the dilemma student-athletes face during IAP. Professor Smith explained that athletic practices are often scheduled in the evenings, making it difficult for student-athletes to meet the requirements of their classes.

The subcommittee believes that the rationale for the restriction during the terms is equally valuable during IAP and recommends that credit-bearing undergraduate subjects held on campus be prohibited from meeting during IAP between 5:00 PM and 7:00 PM Monday through Thursday, and between 5:00 PM on Friday and 8:00 AM on Monday. Requests for exceptions should be submitted to the Chair of the Faculty, just as they would for the fall and spring

terms. The subcommittee recommends that the term regulations be updated to reflect this change.

3. *Should there be a consistent rule across Schools and departments regarding the annual course load expectations for faculty who teach during IAP?*

The subcommittee reaffirms the original IAP faculty resolution, which now has become part of Section 4.1 of *Policies and Procedures*: “Every department should try to achieve an equitable distribution of academic responsibilities among its faculty during the nine-month period of each academic year, including IAP, and if inequities should arise, it should seek to correct them in succeeding years. It is up to each department to establish unambiguous internal policy practically conducive to these ends and to enunciate such policy clearly.”

To promote the value of IAP, it is essential that departments recommit their faculty to participate in IAP. **The subcommittee recommends that the Provost work with the Deans to consider the feasibility of granting appropriate teaching credit to faculty who participate in IAP activities.** Participation need not be strictly academic; there are a variety of non-academic IAP offerings, including lecture series, informational lunches, and UROP programs, that are consistent with the original purpose of IAP. **The subcommittee recommends that departments with academic offerings during IAP be strongly encouraged to offer not-for-credit activities as well.**

4. *Is the high level of academic activity during IAP at odds with the flexibility and creativity that IAP was designed to encourage?*

To some extent, the high level of academic activity during IAP creates pressures that are at odds with the flexibility and creativity that IAP was designed to encourage and with the break from the normal academic routine that this period was designed to provide. However, there are clearly valuable ways in which IAP has developed. An important example is the for-credit language classes that use IAP to provide a more immersive experience. It is also obvious from the data the subcommittee collected that students do not want to eliminate the opportunity to earn academic credit during IAP.

While IAP has developed in creative and flexible ways for undergraduate students, the same is not necessarily true for graduate students, many of whom experience little difference between IAP and the rest of the year. **The subcommittee recommends that the UAAP, in partnership with the Office of the Dean for Graduate Education, examine and adjust its methods for communicating the merits of IAP to graduate students.** While the level of undergraduate satisfaction with IAP is extremely high (91%), the same is not true for graduate students, who reported only a 60% level of satisfaction. Interestingly, though, graduate students did not report a high level of *dissatisfaction* with IAP; only 5% indi-

cated that they were unhappy with IAP. Overwhelmingly, IAP is simply not a factor for graduate students.

There would be value in finding ways to support graduate student participation in activities outside of their discipline. In addition to reassessing the current email communication between the UAAP and graduate students, a UAAP representative might participate in the Grad School 101 orientation. The orientation provides an opportunity to discuss the merits of IAP and to make sure graduate students are aware that they are eligible and encouraged to participate.

The subcommittee also noted that there is an absence of data to assess the level of student participation in non-academic activities, the very type of activities that IAP was designed to encourage. **To that end, the subcommittee recommends that the UAAP survey the sponsors of non-academic activities after each IAP to provide baseline data to assess how well this crucial element of IAP is serving the student body.**

5. *Should IAP be shortened, thus allowing the spring term to begin and end earlier along with extending the reading period?*

Some students, faculty, and administrators expressed an interest in either shortening or lengthening IAP, but the vast majority of the survey respondents indicated a high level of satisfaction with the current length of IAP. The subcommittee does not recommend a change to the length of IAP.

6. *Should a formal registration process and add/drop period be established for IAP?*

For legal, governance, and safety reasons, the subcommittee is concerned with the limited tracking of enrollment that occurs during IAP through the current pre-registration process. **The subcommittee recommends that the Registrar examine current practice for IAP and pursue a system for tracking subject offerings and enrollment that better meets institutional needs.**

In addition, given the level of academic activity occurring in IAP, the subcommittee recommends developing a class schedule and subject listing for IAP subjects in a manner comparable to what is developed for other terms. In making this recommendation, the subcommittee took note of wide variation in scheduling practices by departments, the need to be able to verify the instructional period within IAP when an academic subject is taught, and the concern about protecting the 5:00 – 7:00 PM time slot for undergraduate students. Similarly, the subcommittee believes that there are opportunities to substantially clarify and streamline administrative procedures governing the academic activity that takes place during IAP.

The subcommittee does not believe that formal add/drop deadlines should be established for IAP, an endeavor complicated by the varying start and end dates for

IAP classes. However, instructors will continue to be empowered to exercise their discretion in terms of determining when the timing of Add requests is appropriate, and the current guideline of prohibiting a student from dropping a class after the final exam or assignment has been submitted will remain in force. Preparing a schedule of classes for IAP, as suggested above, would make it easier for all concerned to identify the instructional period for any academic class offered during IAP.

7. *Should a formal advising element be added for the students enrolled in for-credit IAP activities?*

The subcommittee does not believe that a formal advising element should be necessary to enroll in an academic subject offered during IAP. **However, any registration system for IAP should provide a mechanism for notifying a student's advisor via email when the student enrolls in a subject.** In other words, notice of enrollment, rather than approval by one's advisor, would ensure open lines of communication without inserting an administrative burden.

Additional Recommendation

Although it was not part of the subcommittee's charge, members of the subcommittee were struck by the number of students who expressed feelings of "emptiness" and "loneliness" during IAP. With a smaller population on campus, combined with the darkness and cold of New England winters, students feel disconnected and alone. To cut down on costs and in response to decreased demand, a number of MIT's services (e.g. dining, SafeRide, library hours) are reduced during IAP. **The subcommittee encourages the Dean for Student Life, in consultation with the UAAP, to undertake a review of campus activities during IAP to help foster a greater sense of community.** There are likely simple steps that MIT might take to improve the quality of student life during this time.

Summary

Although the subcommittee has assigned each recommendation to a specific entity, responsibility for ensuring IAP's continued success is shared by the administration, faculty, and students. For IAP to remain a defining element of working, teaching, and learning at MIT, it is essential for the entire community to remain active in shaping it in unique and meaningful ways.

The subcommittee asserts that IAP remains a valuable part of the MIT experience. The subcommittee is heartened by the ways in which departments have used IAP to develop unique and interesting subject offerings for their students. However, there is an element of IAP that is not consistent with the original vision calling for a "leisurely and independent pace," an aspiration that the subcommittee still feels is extremely worthwhile. In many instances, the increasingly academic qualities of IAP are constructive and enriching; in others, the value of the evolution is less clear. The recommendations outlined in this report are intended to foster growth, but also to set clearer parameters to ensure

that the ideals espoused in the finding documents and reasserted during the 1993 calendar review are maintained.

In summary, the subcommittee recommends that:

1. The CoC undertake a review of Section 7 of the committee's guidelines describing the criteria by which it reviews required IAP subjects. As Section 7.2 of the CoC guidelines states, "[Required] subjects should be appropriate to the intensive schedule and unique pedagogical opportunities offered by IAP." The subcommittee believes that there would be value in strengthening this statement and detailing the qualities that the CoC considers in assessing a proposal for offering a new required subject during IAP;
2. Subjects used solely as electives (i.e. those that cannot be used to fulfill a requirement in a degree program or a minor, nor can they satisfy a General Institute Requirement) be offered P/D/F during IAP. A department would have to make a compelling case to the CoC to offer an elective, non-GIR subject with a letter grade during IAP;
3. The CoC undertake a regular periodic review (e.g., every 3 to 5 years) of degree programs that include required IAP subjects to ensure that the subjects are appropriate for the "unique pedagogical opportunities offered by IAP" and are fulfilling the educational objectives of their respective degree programs;
4. Credit-bearing undergraduate subjects held on campus be prohibited from meeting during IAP between 5:00 PM and 7:00 PM Monday through Thursday, and between 5:00 PM on Friday and 8:00 AM on Monday;
5. The Provost work with the Deans to consider the feasibility of granting appropriate teaching credit to faculty who participate in IAP activities;
6. Departments with academic offerings during IAP be strongly encouraged to offer not-for-credit activities as well;
7. The UAAP, in partnership with the Office of the Dean for Graduate Education, examine and adjust its methods for communicating the merits of IAP to graduate students;
8. The UAAP survey the sponsors of non-academic activities after each IAP to provide baseline data to assess how well this crucial element of IAP is serving the student body;
9. The Registrar's Office pursue a system for tracking subject offerings and enrollment that better meets institutional needs. This includes developing a mechanism for notifying a student's advisor via email when the student enrolls in a subject;

10. The Registrar's Office develop a class schedule and subject listing for IAP subjects in a manner comparable to what is developed for other terms; and

11. The Dean for Student Life, in consultation with the UAAP, undertake a review of campus activities during IAP to help foster a greater sense of community.

Motion to Update the Rules and Regulations of the Faculty and the Term Regulations

Moved that the Faculty approves the following changes to Section 2.12 of the *Rules and Regulations of the Faculty* and the corresponding term regulations (changes in blue):

2.12

Exercises shall, in general, be held between 9 A.M. and 5 P.M. Monday through Friday. Exercises shall begin five minutes after and end five minutes before the scheduled hour or half-hour.

For undergraduate subjects [taught on campus](#) during the instructional period of the fall and spring terms, there shall be no required academic exercises between 5 P.M. and 7 P.M. Monday through Thursday and between 5 P.M. Friday and 8 A.M. Monday. [This same restriction also applies to undergraduate subjects taught during the Independent Activities Period.](#) Requests for exceptions shall be referred to the Chair of the Faculty, who will direct them to the appropriate committee. Exceptions shall be granted for no more than five years.

Reminders for the Beginning of the Term

Undergraduate Subjects

Class Times

Exercises shall, in general, be held between 9 A.M. and 5 P.M. Monday through Friday.

Exercises begin five minutes after and end five minutes before the scheduled hour or half-hour; this gives students time to get to their next class and allows the faculty member coming into the classroom adequate time to set up. Instructors should make their teaching assistants who conduct recitations or tutorial sessions aware of this rule.

For undergraduate subjects [taught on campus](#) during the instructional period of the fall and spring terms, there cannot be any required academic exercises between 5 P.M. and 7 P.M. Monday through Thursday, and between 5 P.M. Friday and 8 A.M. Monday. [This same restriction also applies to undergraduate subjects taught during the Independent Activities Period.](#)

Monday evening class times are reserved for regularly scheduled classes; therefore, tests and required reviews are prohibited on Monday evening. When an optional review session is scheduled for a Monday evening (including a session that introduces new material or discusses upcoming test content), students must have an alternative way of obtaining comparable help within the normal instructional periods, e.g., faculty office hours.

Members of the Subcommittee

Lisa Steiner, Chair
Bryan Bryson
Ravi Charan
Joan Flessner-Filzen
Mark Goulthorpe
Steve Graves
Frank Dale Morgan
Balakrishnan Rajagopal
Ellan Spero
Naren Tallapragada
Kathleen Thelen
Roy Welsch
Elizabeth Young
Aaron Weinberger, Staff