

Massachusetts Institute of Technology
TASK FORCE ON THE UNDERGRADUATE EDUCATIONAL COMMONS
Re-thinking the Humanities, Arts, & Social Science Experience
Introduction to the Subcommittee v.3

I. Subcommittee Membership

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II. Background

A distinguishing mark of the MIT undergraduate curriculum is the extensiveness of the requirement for study in the humanities, arts, and social sciences. Compared to other universities, the HASS Requirement (and its predecessors) has always been the most extensive among students pursuing engineering degrees. After most American universities loosened up their general education requirements in the 1960s (including MIT), the MIT HASS Requirement remained as the most extensive requirement of its kind among our peers, broadly defined.

The high esteem in which our engineering and science graduates are held comes in large part from the seriousness of the “HASS experience” at MIT. Nonetheless, students, faculty, and alumni have raised important questions about the structure of the HASS Requirement. These questions require a serious examination by the Task Force. Some of these questions or concerns are the following:

- *The MIT undergraduate curriculum lacks a common undergraduate experience in the humanities, arts, and social sciences akin to the Science Requirement. Among many consequences of this fact is the lack of a common vocabulary for understanding the broader world. In addition, contrasted with a relatively unified science core, the diffuseness of the initial HASS experience primes students and their faculty advisors to assume that intellectual pursuits outside of science are rootless.*
- *Undergraduates are disengaged from their HASS classes. This results in large part from a culture which devalues intellectual experiences that do not strive for a single right answer. It also results from a culture of busy-ness, which makes*

it difficult for students to spend time contemplating difficult problems, or even reading.

- *The general structure of the HASS Requirement is confusing for students and advisors. The overlay of various components of the HASS Requirement (8-subject requirement, distribution, and concentration) with the Communication Requirement has resulted in confusion among students and advisors and unproductive gaming among faculties trying to attract student enrollments. An eight-subjects (one-per-term) is easy to understand, but the layering of other requirements (distribution, concentration, and now communication) is not. As a consequence, many students regard the HASS Requirement as a puzzle to be solved rather than an opportunity to be taken.*
- *Major departments are generally prohibited from prescribing the HASS classes their majors take. The HASS Requirement is rooted in a “liberal arts” tradition that bridles from linking these subjects too tightly with professional preparation, which is the primary goal of many majors. One result is that departments that recognize a special value of particular HASS subjects for their majors often feel they serve their students poorly.*
- *The flexibility of the HASS Requirement allows students to graduate from MIT without ever encountering important intellectual traditions or problems that will face them in later life. The faculty recognizes that the future success and happiness of MIT undergraduates rests in their being prepared to embrace their social roles, as well as professional roles, after graduation. This recognition is embedded in the requirements for most majors, but not in the HASS Requirement. The result is that students are not challenged to confront the major cultural and social questions that will face them in the larger society.*
- *The HASS Requirement irrationally excludes certain domains of scholarship while including others. Being grounded in a liberal arts tradition, the HASS Requirement has explicitly excluded study in closely related fields, such as management and teaching. Many faculty wonder whether the high walls thrown up around the HASS Requirement keep students from encountering studying the humanities, arts, and social sciences that would enrich their professional and social lives.*

These concerns are not uniformly embraced by all members of the MIT community. They may be based on false premises. They may be mutually inconsistent. Yet each is a serious enough concern to demand careful attention and response.

III. Charge

The Working Group is charged with examining the experience that undergraduates have with study at MIT in the humanities, arts, and social sciences, broadly conceived. This includes the common experience, mostly embodied in the General Institute Requirements, and experiences particular to majors. Among the questions to be answered by the Working Group are the following:

- 1) What are the goals of the current Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences requirement and how well are those goals being met?
- 2) What *should* the goals of a requirement in the Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences be? How should success in achieving these goals be assessed?
- 3) How many MIT graduates never take classes in core intellectual fields within the humanities, arts, and social sciences? Without being narrowly prescriptive, these fields might include literature, philosophy, creative arts, economics, government and politics, history, and foreign languages and cultures.
- 4) How many MIT graduates never take classes in HASS-related fields that have been identified as of special interest at MIT? These fields include ethics; the interplay of science, technology, and society; and the behavior of organizations.
- 5) How do the practical problems of scheduling classes influence the choice of subjects that students make? Can these problems be written off as natural inconveniences in a large, complex university, or do they have significant consequences for the quality of the HASS experience?
- 6) How could the HASS Requirement be structured differently?
- 7) Should the HASS Requirement be changed to require a class that addresses the interplay of science, technology, and society?
- 8) What are different ways the freshman year could be restructured to allow for a “unified freshman experience” in the humanities, arts, and social sciences?
- 9) How could the HASS Requirement be restructured to grant undergraduates greater flexibility in the classes they take?
- 10) What are appropriate and fruitful ways in which there could be greater collaboration between major departments in the Schools of Science and Engineering with faculties in the humanities, arts, and social sciences, to meet the special needs of particular majors? Are there ways in which there might be better integration with the Science Core subjects?

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