Proposed Projects Review Initiative for review, revision and costing

PIC has come to the conclusion that it is a strategic imperative to acknowledge and strengthen WPI's core competency: our projects-based undergraduate program. The PBCL and OAF task force reports, along with recent CAP discussions regarding the IQP, make it clear that there is not consensus among the faculty about the goals, objectives, expectations, and expected outcomes of our three project degree requirements or of the unified whole. In addition, in preparation for the ABET Criteria 2000 visit, each engineering department may have identified different ways in which the Sufficiency, IQP, and MQP are intended to address expected educational outcomes, along with different assessment and evaluation methods. Furthermore, many non-engineering departments were not involved in this process. We are now in the situation where different departments may have different expectations for the objectives of these projects; this fragmentation needs to be rectified by reaching Institute-wide consensus and publishing the objectives and expected outcomes of the projects.

PIC proposes the establishment and funding of a one-time Projects Review Commission composed of faculty, students, alumni, and employers. The Commission would be charged with an intense and timely effort to:

1. Define the objectives and expected outcomes of the Sufficiency, IQP, and MQP, build consensus for these objectives, and recommend them to the Committee on Academic Policy for ultimate approval by the Faculty. The Commission should also review the relationships between the projects. The goal is to have project objectives and expected outcomes published in the Undergraduate Catalog by the 1999-2000 academic year.

2. Recommend a process for continual assessment of project outcomes. PIC recognizes that meaningful outcomes assessment is not a one-time activity; indeed, defining objectives is only the first step of an outcomes assessment cycle. PIC anticipates that the CEDTA (Center for Educational Development, Technology, and Assessment), proposed in another PIC initiative, would be the ideal group to pick up where the Projects Review Commission leaves off by leading outcomes assessment and resulting pedagogical and curricular innovation on a continuous basis.
3. Recommend to CAP and the administration whether a broader curriculum review is needed. In the 1994-95 academic year, CAP presented a motion to COG proposing a "comprehensive curriculum review":

The review should articulate the educational philosophy of the Faculty, reassert the Faculty's commitment to curricular innovation, and ultimately result in an Institutional program of studies sustainable by available resources. (CAP Minutes, 12/15/94)

The rationale for such a review at that time seemed to be the perception that many ad-hoc changes had been made in our undergraduate program (distribution requirements, minors, concentrations) since the inception of the Plan without taking the time to reflect on the pedagogical intent of the whole program. In addition, with ABET Criteria 2000 on the horizon, CAP envisioned the opportunity for reinstituting more flexibility in our curriculum and pedagogy if it was accompanied by outcomes assessment. There was also some sentiment in COG that an examination of resource allocation issues that led to the ballooning of class sizes be part of such a review. COG and CAP minutes from that year make it clear that faculty were "fed up and fatigued" with past studies that had not produced any concrete results. The CAP motion was never acted upon, and the only result of the fairly significant faculty committee discussions in 1994-95 was an inventory of current curricular and pedagogical initiatives by faculty. (Reference: CAP and COG Minutes, 12/94 - 4/95)

This PIC initiative is intentionally focused narrowly, with a well-defined milestone followed by separate deliberation regarding the need for a broad curriculum review once project objectives have been established. In addition, by presenting the Projects Review Initiative as a strategic imperative, PIC recognizes that resources must be made available for faculty release time. The initiative differs from past efforts in this respect.