Sass, Margrave seek vital restructuring of curriculum

By SANDY COYNER

Two years ago “A New Plan for Undergraduate Education at Rice University” presented to the University Community some ideas and objectives and a suggestion for how they might be embodied in educational structure. Those ideas were primarily that students be encouraged to learn with their teachers, as much as from them; that they be accepted as colleagues in a common endeavor; and that removing much of the formality from the present educational structure might encourage such activity.

The plan has never been developed into a finished form, and currently no group advocates its actual implementation here. But the principles upon which it was based continue to provoke new plans.

Two ideas for fundamentally changing the structure of undergraduate education at Rice are currently in the earliest stages of development: one in Hanszen College (under the direction of Master Ronald L. Sass), the other in the Undergraduate Curriculum Committee (chaired by Dr. John L. Margrave).

Hanszen Plan

The Hanszen Plan, termed by Sass a “response to President Pitzer’s comments” on the College System just before Christmas, would provide an interdisciplinary approach to the material in the participant’s non-major fields, thus allowing him to secure “professional” training in his major interest and “lay” training in his other interests.

The approximately 50 volunteer freshmen in the pilot program would take one “course” in either “science” — for academics — or “humanities” — for science-engineering majors. The students thus would be taking three regular University courses.

Mass Lectures

That the course would probably be organized around one “mass lecture” per week, with numerous tutorials, seminars, assignments, and independent papers and reading. Grading would be on a pass/fail basis. The freshmen would live near each other, and the course would be integrated into the whole of their college life. The meetings would be held within Hanszen College.

Money Needed

Sass anticipates that the college might be able to hire its own professors to teach the courses — and those new people could “show us how it’s done.” The plan would probably need a foundation grant to support it financially.

Sass thinks that the rough provisions of the plan would provide an answer to some of the problems of the freshman year in the current curriculum. The student would no longer be taking pre-professional courses in fields outside his major interest, but interdisciplinary courses designed to give him general understanding and interest. The less formalized format of the course would probably encourage student interest and participation.

Pilot Program

Sass hopes that the plan could be a pilot program for a similar curriculum change to involve the entire University.

He has appointed a committee of about 15 faculty associates and about 10 students, who have met once, to develop and discuss the plan during the semester. Illustrating one of the hopes of supporters of the college system, Sass noted that the idea for the plan came up and has already been discussed in spontaneous discussion in the college.

Create Own Courses?

The Curriculum Committee has discussed a plan which would allow students to create new courses on subjects which interest them but are not presently offered, invite their own professor to teach the course, and receive course credit for their work.

Margrave anticipates that the ideas for such courses would probably first come up in spontaneous discussion within a college, and that the independent courses would probably contain students from members of the same college. They would probably be required to have a minimum enrollment of some kind and a syllabus rigorous enough to justify the credit. Plans would of necessity have to be made well before the beginning of the semester in which the course would be scheduled.

Pass/Fail

The courses would probably be “free electives” in the participating students’ schedules, and could be graded on a pass/fail basis.

The committee is investigating the possibilities of securing a foundation grant to support the program. Funds are necessary for distribution to the departments which would be providing professors to teach the independent courses. The departments could use this extra money to hire a replacement.

If the plan has any preliminary success in securing a foundation grant, it will be developed by the faculty at large into a more complete form.