WHEN USAGE SPEAKS, EECS LISTENS

Student group provides first-hand feedback on Course 6 issues ranging from class sizes to curriculum changes.

By Kathryn O'Neill | Connector Contributor

When big changes are afoot in Course 6 — and even when the changes are small — students involved in the Undergraduate Student Advisory Group in EECS (USAGE) have their fingers on the pulse of the department.

Founded during the 2011–2012 academic year, USAGE is an advisory committee of about 30 students who provide the leaders of MIT's Electrical Engineering and Computer Science Department (EECS, also known as Course 6) with insight into the how the department's nearly 1,500 undergraduates view curriculum changes, workload, and more.

"I see us as kind of a sounding board for the department," says Natalie Lao, a graduate student in the Master of Engineering (MEng) program, who has served on the committee since her freshman year. "Empowerment is a big part of USAGE. If you want to see something change in Course 6 and it's reasonable — and other people agree with you — it's one of the best ways to have your voice heard."

Over the years, USAGE has helped shape such signature EECS offerings as SuperUROP, the fast-growing advanced Undergraduate Research Opportunities Program (UROP), and StartMIT, an intensive workshop on entrepreneurism offered during MIT's between-semesters Independent Activities Period (IAP). In 2014, feedback from USAGE prompted the creation of a new undergraduate student lounge in Building 36; this year, members have helped guide the renovation of another lounge in Building 38.

"It's great to get student input on issues of importance to them before we implement a program," says Anantha P. Chandrakasan, the Vannevar Bush Professor of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science and EECS department head. "They give us a different perspective and bring up things to think about."

Among its many contributions, USAGE regularly represents the student perspective on Course 6 to the Visiting Committee that evaluates the department every two years on behalf of the MIT Corporation (the Institute's governing board). USAGE surveys students about such issues as workload, curriculum, and advising, and then produces a brief report; members later meet with the Visiting Committee to present the group's findings.

Front row, left to right: Lisette Tellez, Sravya Vishnubhatla, Sarah Hensley, Allison Lemus | Back row, left to right: Matthew Kalinowski, Jimmy Mawdsley, Ignacio Estay Forno, Natalie Lao, Anish Athalye

Lao found the experience of preparing a report for the 2015 Visiting Committee quite valuable. "That was a big project, and I learned a lot from doing it," she says, noting she particularly enjoyed relating USAGE's findings to the impressive roster of academics and professionals who serve on the Visiting Committee. "That was really awesome because we got to present our thoughts to all these world leaders in tech."

Members of USAGE also met with this year's Visiting Committee, providing input that is "extremely valuable," Chandrakasan says. "This helps us address issues of importance to students, such as class size, workload, and ways we can make the department more inclusive."

USAGE meets every few weeks during the school year, which can be a significant time commitment for any student, but members say they participate to give back to the department. "It's a way for me to contribute and make Course 6 a better place," Lao says. "I'm part of this community, and it's great to see it growing and becoming better."

In addition, USAGE provides students with "an exceptional opportunity to see how the department functions at a high

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Anne Stuart

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—Natalie Lao, long-time USAGE member

Front row, left to right: Uttara Chakraborty, Alyssa Cartwright, Nalini Singh, Nancy Hung
Back row, left to right: Allan Sadun, Daniel Richman, Billy Caruso, Kai Aichholz, Alexander Sludds, Isaac Kontomah | Not pictured: Efe Akengin, Suma Anand, Logan Engstrom, Hassan Kane, Keertan Kini, Aneliese Newman, Alisha Saxena, Alex Sloboda, Tejas Sundaresan, Sarah Wooders

level," says Kai Aichholz, a group member and senior in electrical engineering and computer science.

For example, just over the course of this year, USAGE has discussed such department concerns as faculty advising and teaching loads, training for teaching assistants, and the system for flagging students based on academic performance. The group also heard several presentations. Chancellor Cynthia Barnhart described how MIT is working to become more attractive to admitted students. Clinical Director for Campus Life Maryanne Kirkbride discussed the Institute's efforts to improve students' overall well-being. Asuman Ozdaglar, a professor of electrical engineering and computer science and EECS associate department head, outlined a proposed new interdisciplinary major.

Nalini Singh, a senior in electrical engineering and computer science, says she values her USAGE participation because it gives students a direct line of communication to EECS leaders. "This is an efficient way to raise concerns with the department," says Singh, who is also president of MIT's chapter of the national honor society Eta Kappa Nu (HKN).

For example, HKN was able to approach USAGE this fall to advocate for the Chu Lounge renovation. With USAGE's support, the project quickly gained ground; students discussed how the space could be repurposed and then worked together to help redesign the lounge to include new furniture, new electronics, and card-reader access.

"We really pushed for it to be a dedicated social space, and the department accepted that," says Alisha Saxena, a junior in electrical engineering and computer science and a USAGE member who is also president of the MIT IEEE/ACM Club. "It's going to be great for my club. We can hold more social events."

Ultimately, USAGE's impact is "a lot of small things that add up," says Anish Athalye, who is completing both his senior year in computer science and engineering and his MEng degree. "The department does take our feedback into account, which I think is great."