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MIT may quit ROTC over homosexuality

By Rowan Scarborough
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The Massachusetts Institute of Technology, the first campus to enroll students in the Reserve Officer Training Corps, is weighing principle against cash in a dispute over the military's policy on homosexuality.

A faculty task force has recommended MIT open ROTC to all students, including avowed homosexuals. If adopted, the move would put the nation's most prestigious technology school in direct conflict with the Pentagon, whose "don't ask, don't tell" policy bars open homosexuals.

And if MIT chooses to scrap ROTC, the defense secretary — under a new law — could cut off the school's \$56 million in yearly defense contracts.

Defense Department officials are nervously watching developments at the Cambridge, Mass., campus. The task force report calls for universities nationwide to rethink their relationship with the venerable ROTC and its adherence to the policy on homosexuals.

"MIT seems to be seeking a greater consensus among universities to oppose national policy, doing so through local manipulations of ROTC programs," said Bill Carr, the Pentagon's manager of officer recruiting.

Mr. Carr said the Pentagon worries that campuses may opt to drop ROTC or that students may shun enrollment, depleting a 56,000-student program that produces more than one-third of the military's officers each year.

"I think that when a program is caught in a cross fire of opinions, inherently people may step back and wait, and be more reluctant, as we saw back in Vietnam," Mr. Carr said.

Last year, ROTC commissioned 7,200 officers, which barely met the department's goal.

There is more at stake for MIT than faithfulness to its policy of nondiscrimination based on sexual orientation.

As MIT contemplates an end to an ROTC chapter started in 1917, it also realizes the \$56 million in Pentagon dollars make up a significant chunk of a \$350 million research effort.

"If we did that we would have obviously a financial crisis on campus," said MIT spokesman Kenneth Campbell. "Obviously, the intent is to avoid a collision between a very important nondiscrimination principle and the research that keeps the nation humming to some degree."

The turmoil at MIT has erupted at other universities. But only six of 1,200 ROTC campuses nationally have left the program over homosexuality since 1990.

The MIT task force presented a "final report" on March 20. But some professors complained it would have them involved in evaluating whether a student violated "don't ask, don't tell," a compromise policy adopted by President Clinton in 1993.

"The final report is definitely not now a final report," Mr. Campbell said.

Mr. Carr said the Pentagon is preparing a warning to MIT.

"We're developing a thoughtful response that allows the faculty a more informed argument on how this may conflict with the law, and would be very difficult, if not impossible, for the department to accept even if it wanted to," he said.

He added: "We're trying to find a way to work with MIT because they're a big source of super-degrees and produce extraordinarily skilled students. But we regret there are so many instances where the recommendation conflicts with the law."

MIT's ROTC is home to 221 students attending MIT, Harvard, Tufts and Wellesley.