Freshmen entering MIT arrive with a wide variety of background and preparation, but the overwhelming majority bring with them an intense desire to learn. The question: Does the freshman year still consist of core subjects not of the individual’s choosing? Of course, interest in these large subjects generate for an individual might not be enough to entice him to compete aggressively for grades, and exchange his learning motivation for a grade motivation.

Of course, it is easy to declare grading, in general, the whipping-boy in any such discussion. But without having to raise the specter of evaluating the whole problem of what is a proper grading system—indeed, if one exists—we can state positively some of the important arguments in favor of a pass-fail system at the freshman level.

The freshman year still consists of core subjects not of the individual’s choosing. Interest in these large subjects generate for an individual might not be enough to entice him to compete aggressively for grades, and exchange his learning motivation for a grade motivation.

The Coltech experience is very enlightening. It is to be remembered that their pass-fail system consisted of essentially the same method which was in effect previously. Only at the end of the freshman year, the student knowing his "grades", was the record wiped clean, except where there had been failure. Though this is seen like a small change, the results were remarkable. Students did the work and were motivated as long as the course remained stimulating. The math course had to be changed to prove that stimulation when as long as was found the students were not working very hard in the subject. But, over-all they entered the sophomore year better prepared than their predecessors.

The principle credo of pass-fail is that it puts the student's emphasis on learning, not on grades. When grades become dominant, the student's desire to learn and explore stifles that learning. The freshman year, in particular, stifle that learning desire. He may wish to explore as many subjects as possible.

A system which de-emphasizes grades can make achievement much easier. With reduced competition a student will evaluate what he is studying more in terms of his own interests and values. Of course, pass-fail brings some added problems. Courses must be stimulating; they must excite the student to work hard in that field. The instructor, too, must bear the burden. MIT students may have the motivation, the instructor must supply the incentive.

The student who becomes overly ambitious under a pass-fail system also presents a problem. He may wish to explore too many subjects with too little attention to the core requirements. The freshman advisor must play a greater role in more closely advising a student on the best course of action.

No one will claim that pass-fail is a panacea. Some of the important arguments in favor of a pass-fail system at the freshman level.