Grading: taming of the screw

By Alan Makowski

From the pure numerical marks of early years to the present Freshman pass/fail evaluations, the grading system at the Institute has generally mirrored a liberalization in educational philosophy.

During the first twenty odd years of MIT's existence only percentage grades were given. With a normal curve grading, a load of seven to ten classes, the average grades on tests ran from fifty to sixty. 1877 saw the appearance of grading on a letter system with letter grades: A designated a percentage of ninety or above, seventy-five to ninety nine a C, while a P represented a score of fifty to seventy five. Below fifty persons was considered failing, with the student having failed.

The system was radically adjusted in the 1890's. The H was dropped, while the grade L was added to signify a low pass. A new mark, FF, was adopted to record an absolute failure (below forty percent), while a single F would entitle the student to take another final. Satisfactory performance would then entitle him to credit for the course.

Few changes were made until World War I, a period of flux for many American universities. Professor Leicest Lincoln Hamilton, who has taught since the 1940's, relates, "There were many changes in staff and curriculum following the war. Previously Tech graduates had held most of the faculty positions. That, too, people began arriving, bringing new ideas. In addition, the burden of graduate school education in science shifted from Germany to American universities." The result was two major changes in the grading system during the twenties.

Abolition of the L mark, coupled with the reinstatement of the H, occurred in 1921. Many of the faculty were retired or deceased, though, and a committee was formed in the late twenties to review the new system. This research revealed that roughly half of the grades given were P's; this recommendation was to re-establish the L. To quote from the minutes, "Our grading system is liberal and should be so used. As defined, our scale seems to correspond, approximately, with the following percentages: H - 90, C - 80, P - 70, L - 60, F - 50, and FF - 40 and below.

Professor haden Andrus adds some insights as to how the system worked. "The conditioned pass (F) was used when the instructor felt that extreme condition affected a student's performance on a final. The second exam would confirm or negate your feeling." Second exams were given the following March or September in addition, minus marks could be given in such courses as

The most important discussions of grading philosophy began in the early sixties. Students complained that although professors knew their courses to two or three significant figures, there was too little interaction between undergraduates and their instructors. As a result of this discussion, six or seven years ago almost all seminars shifted to pass/fail grades.

Other changes in policy have come within the past couple of years. Looking back, there have been two significant trends these past ten years, trends that may result in future changes. More and more are the semester courses, for example, 6.47, an introductory computer course, are being offered with pass/fail grades. The egular letter grades have been rising steadily, from 60 percent A's and B's in 1963 to 72 percent last spring. The number of F's remained constant.

Do these trends predict important shifts in the future? A later article will discuss some of the current proposals initiated by both student and faculty groups.

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Announcements

* Interviews and election for Undergraduate Finance Board Chairman will be held at 2 pm Sunday in Room W20-493 of the Student Center. All candidates should sign up with the Student Government Secretary (Rm. 101) for an interview appointment. Questions should be directed to Richard Moore, Finance Chairman, at 229-292.

* Nominations for Stewart Awards should be submitted to the Institute Committee Office, Room W20-101, or to Harold Federer at East Campus. Stewart Awards are given for outstanding contributions to extracurricular life at the Institute.

* The Economics Department will sponsor a debate on Monday evening at 7 in 54-100. The topic will be "Radical Change in American Society."

* Spring Weekend Committee announces the cancellation of Goddard Lightfoot's appearance; Dave Van Ronk will appear in his place, in concert with Sara Jane.

* Nominations for the Goodwin medal should be returned to the Office of the Dean of the Graduate School (3-134) before Monday, April 7. These nominations can be made by any student or faculty member. Faculty nominations should be submitted through the Head of the nominee's department of appointment; student nominations should be submitted to CAP Nite Albert (the undergraduates) or CRC President John Harkness (for graduate students). The Goodwin Medal is awarded in recognition of conspicuous effective teaching by a graduate student who is either a Teaching Assistant or an Instructor.

* The Pool Luck Coffeehouse is featuring Joanna and Colby tonight at 8 in the Mezzanine Lounge. After tonight the Coffeehouse will be closed until April 11.

* The MIT Resistance will meet in the East Lounge of the Student Center tomorrow at 2 pm. All are welcome.