Commentary:

What is ESG?

By Craig Latham, et al.

Seven years ago, Professor George Valley and a group of MIT faculty members, graduate students, and upperclassmen met to plan the structure for an independent educational experience at the college level. The plan was implemented and the ESGers, as students who choose to switch out of the regular curriculum, have come to believe that the principles of mutual respect and responsibility which the ESG was intended to foster have been realized in the form of ESG.

We offer freshmen and sophomores the opportunity to choose what and how they want to study without the usual constraints on time, method of study, and subject matter. The reason for trying this approach is that we believe the kind of informal, self-selected learning that is best acquired through taking on such responsibility as easy as possible in one's education. In an atmosphere of mutual respect and friendship, freshmen and sophomores, upperclassmen, former students, and staff members are able to recognize their needs and determine the best ways of meeting them.

A period of flourishing and maturity is a fairly common initial reaction to the freedom offered by ESG. Students are encouraged to consider the nature of their commitment to college, to their friends, and to themselves. The ESG staff and older members work to provide a supportive environment, allowing the different students to deal with the problems that arise.

Freshmen and staff join ESG on a voluntary basis. Prospective ESGers are given ample information as possible about the ESG, and are invited to visit at length. This year about fifteen freshmen joined - our largest group ever. Once a freshman decides to join, he or she is asked to choose one of the ESG faculty members as an advisor. The only formal requirement is that the freshmen and advisors meet all year long.

Although an essentially full-time activity for freshmen (and half-time for sophomores), students often take subjects in the regular curriculum, usually in fields in which the ESG staff does not have expertise (such as foreign languages and foreign culture). Each freshman usually gets 70 units of free elective credit per term, which is turned into specific credits (e.g., 10.21, 10.41, 21.012) as he or she demonstrates sufficient competency in some specific subject or applicable content or subject within the regular curriculum. Certification is available on a per-semester basis. Each semester is accompanied by a peer evaluation of the student's work, which is an effective and relatively easy method of demonstrating competence.

The day-by-day life of ESG students is in some ways similar to that of students in the regular curriculum. ESGers participate in seminars, talk with staff or other students, or work in the lab during the month of March. However, no student is required almost always get help from another ESGer. Faculty talk with students as peers and even ask students for help. This allows students to feel comfortable and it extends the essence of the faculty's knowledge. It makes it easy for students to see members of the staff as friends, rather than as teachers. Personal problems become a natural subject of discussion in the context of closer-student-staff relationship. There is, therefore, a result in what some ESGers regard as a second home at MIT.

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