MIT has spent hundreds of person-hours and thousands of dollars in expenses and salaries in the last year on one seemingly simple question. In the last three months, three faculty meetings and two large-scale student meetings have been largely devoted to discussing it. Reams of paper have been used reporting, explaining, and analyzing that one question:

What sort of grading system should MIT have?

Considerable additional action has led the MIT faculty and student body to discussing the problem of grading in MIT education. It has resulted in bitter debates over the nature of MIT education, the purpose of MIT degrees, and the importance of grading to the overall structure. It has divided faculty, students, and administrations, if not into warring camps, into factions which relate to academic knowledge in different ways, seemingly endlessly, over such points as Drop Dates, roll cards, and other items which seem to relate only vaguely to the central question.

In this Special Supplement The Tech attempts to summarize the debate over grades, the importance of grades, the conflicts, the costs, the results. Based on reporting by The Tech staff, it was appointed by the Ad Hoc Committee on Grading, minutes of recent faculty discussion, faculty letters, and other background information in an attempt at a clear presentation as full a picture as possible on the grading issue. No picture can present the entire issue with complete accuracy: this Supplement, however, will attempt to present as full a picture as possible on the grading issue. No picture can present the entire issue with complete accuracy: this Supplement, however, will attempt to present as full a picture as possible on the grading issue.

Subject Area: A variety of students have studied the same subject and taken different courses. This aspect of grading, the comparative aspect, is necessary to allocate scarce honors and positions which are subject to competition, such as admission into graduate schools.

Most educators agree that these two aspects of the grading system are, to some extent, mutually incompatible. The need for competitive grades, for example, requires grades that are as informational and detailed as possible; the more information that can be provided to the student to indicate what he has learned, the more valid the grades will be. The comparative function, on the other hand, requires that grades be understood and quickly grasped by a number of people, many of whom will not be familiar with the details of the student's learning process.

A second problem with any grading system is that different people view the same system differently. Grading intelligence on the one hand; grading as a game for the students to learn, or at least to complete on time; the fear of poor grades is felt to be a powerful motivator. People who are required to make a decision in any situation, have a variety of views of grades; for some students grades are a game to be played for the best transcript, while for others grades are a measure of personal worth, a scale of achievement and well-being that has a direct bearing on the student's self-perception. These varying views of grades and the purpose of grades, creating a confused image of what a grading system is and should do.

Anyone who wishes to design a grading system must also face a third problem: a system which accommodates and complies with all others. Grading—indeed, a grading system—is at best an extremely inaccurate field. There is no objective answer, and very little data of any sort exists to support any, or all, of the grading systems in use. The question remains, how accurately can grades reflect the student's work? Do grades do grades on students' motivation? Subjective perceptions are the only data available; such perceptions, in turn, are based on the observers' philosophies and beliefs about the questions being asked. The situation resembles the Heisenberg Uncertainty Principle in physics, except that in this case uncertainty knows no limits.

The MIT Case

The designer of a grading system faces serious problems from the start, even if he knows exactly what goals he wants to achieve with the system. In the ease of a particular institution like MIT, the problems mean even higher. As a large number of unique features which limit the freedom of anyone who wishes to solve the Institute's grading problems. A few of these features are:

- The nature of the student body. This is an area where there are no precise statistics, but it is assumed that MIT students are better qualified to do academic work, especially work in mathematical, scientific, and technical areas, than their counterparts at other schools. There are no accurate measures of the distribution of MIT students' abilities, but they are known to be high with regard to any "average" of all college students' abilities. How much a grading system is adjusted to account for the high abilities of students, especially in communicating with non-MIT people.

- Public misperceptions about MIT. Any MIT student can vouch for the fact that what people in his homestate think MIT is like is far different from what MIT really is. Like all institutions, MIT has a problem: that problem, MIT's problem is greater because MIT is unlike the others. While all institutions have problems, MIT's problem is greater. MIT is like is far different from what MIT really is. Like all institutions, MIT has a problem: that problem, MIT's problem is greater because MIT is unlike the others.

- Historical factors. MIT traditionally has had very liberal registration procedures, allowing students to register or deregister for courses very late in the semester. Students enjoy such a system; although it might interfere with grading proposals, changes will be difficult to make. Programs which do not fit traditional grading systems like the Experimental Study Group, Consuare, and Freshman Project, have also evolved from the system, creating more difficulties in grading. Freshman Pass/Fail (which is now actually Pass/No Credit) is another MIT program which might be taken into account in grading. Each of these programs has roots and backgrounds that so far beyond the grading system per se, but which must be taken into account in grades review.

The simple question, "What kind of grading system should MIT have?" has ramifications far beyond just the A's, B's, C's, D's, F's, and other grades on students' transcripts. Some of these ramifications are important and some perspective and options about what they mean appear in the following pages.

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