The week-long rape

By Michael McNamee

The end of the term is upon us all. The last week of classes is here, last papers, quizzes, and tests are taking their toll, and the faculty is busy with its usual end-of-semester rat race of activities.

Rape? There’s no other word for it. Faculty activity over the past few years has unconstitutively deprived students of one-fourteenth of the semester and come close to killing students with a crushing burden of semi-legal tests and cheating practices that leave most students absolute wrecks just before what used to be the most important week of the term — Finals Week.

Used to be — because Finals Week doesn’t really exist anymore. Finals Week now is a ghost of its former self, a mockery of the idea that students should be given a small breathing space and study period before they’re called upon to recall the entire content of a course and be examined on it. All the tests that were once in Finals Week have been moved to the “last week of classes” — when no one holds classes anymore — to be added to the term papers, lab projects, and quizzes already associated with that time.

No one really has a grip on the problem, and most faculty will tell you that they haven’t seen a trend killing Finals Week. The trouble is, it just happens to be illegal — against the Faculty Rules and Regulations — to require final exams in the last week of classes.

It wouldn’t do to look at the matter and conclude that a substantial portion of the faculty is breaking the rules by offering them. So those last-week exams are “grizzes,” “review exercises,” or “last tests,” even if they cover all the material in the course, require substantial review by the student, and look, smell, and taste like a “final.”

The rationalizations break down because not all the faculty is up to date on these fine legalities and distinctions. Many of them headlessly tell their students the truth — that they’re getting finals during the last week of classes.

Even if the “logic” of the rationalization holds up, the practical effects of the system as it now stands are pretty horrendous. No one holds classes during the last week of classes — there are only rows and rows of test-best heads as far as the eye can see. At current tuition rates, that’s a $250-plus-week waste as far as learning is concerned. Performance on the tests that are given suffers, because the whole idea of a final exam is to allow some time for review and reflection, and who can review and reflect for four tests at once? Performance on the traditional end-of-term exams suffers, too, because term papers are never as immediate or seem as important as tests, and they get pushed aside. And most students end up the last week and go into whatever finals they have as zombies, burned out by the intensive crush of work dumped into that one week.

There are drawbacks in the traditional system. Many professors don’t like the “final atmosphere” — the feeling of pressure and intense competition that occurs when make-or-break exams are put on one test. Others feel that students shouldn’t be put through several hour-long gruzs during the space of one week. Scheduling problems result when students face several finals in that week. Students and faculty alike appreciate the opportunity to go home a week early.

But the finals atmosphere exists anyway, and under circumstances that make it general, not local. There’s no law that Finals-Week exams must take a full three hours, although some of the tests now offered in the last week would be more useful if allowed to take that long. Administrative problems would be easier to handle, and Finals-Week tests made more appealing, by the simple scheduling reform of allowing one- and two-hour tests to be scattered throughout the two-day blocktimer. All students would be interested and faculty wouldn’t need that extra week of rest nearly as much if the work could be spread over that time.

“Rape” may be too strong a word, but “robbery,” “torture,” and “extortion” all fit the bill. The regular committees of the faculty aren’t there to study these issues, and the teachers are in no position to take some action to force them. If they won’t look at the problem, a special committee to consider abuses of the calendar would be in order. It’s in the best interest of all students to force some action on this — if they have any energy left after this week.

Letters to The Tech

Nuclear Safety

To the Editor:

There was a shocking letter to the editor in The Tech of Dec. 2, about nuclear power plants. It was one of those pieces whose overly emotional prose pretends to be merely humanistic, but whose pushing roman- ticism washes out the meaning of the subject.

The letter’s authors complained about the objectivity of a report mentioned in the Nov. 5 Tech Talk concerning the safety of nuclear power plants. The authors claimed “such objectivity about human life and health is like the objectivity of counting corpses in a pile — it treats people like so much meaningless matter and denies that human life must outweigh considerations of economic efficiency and progress.”

What the authors have forgotten is that they are the ones (along with several more rational individuals) who first asked the important question, “How safe are nuclear power plants?” Regrettably, when the authors got an answer to their question, they refused to accept any answer on the grounds that such things cannot be measured and faculties would never need that extra week of rest nearly as much if the work could be spread over that time.

Sculpture Debate

To the Editor:

It would be tragic indeed if the generosity of sculptor Louise Nevelson, and her prodigous interest in MIT, was gobbled by slap in the face this Wednesday when she comes to our campus for the dedication of her sculpture (“Transparent Horizons”) and the discussion of it with the MIT community. Yet the Committee on the Visual Arts doesn’t feel that a forum should be provided for open debate on the issue, and invites all interested persons, both pro and con, to attend a forum on Monday, Dec. 15 in the Bush Room, 10-105. Persons interested in addressing the issue from the platform should contact me at x3-7612. All students, staff, faculty and administration are invited to participate.

Wayne Anderson
Chairman, Committee on the Visual Arts

The Tech welcomes letters to the editor. Typed letters are preferred. Letters must be signed; names will be withheld upon request.

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The Tech

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