Pass/fail for electives should be extended

By Tom Curtis

In 1967, the faculty voted to allow seniors in good standing to take one unrestricted elective pass/fail. Since then, the pass/fail option has been extended to juniors and allow up to two unrestricted electives to be graded pass/fail. Preliminary results from a recent survey by the Student Committee on Educational Policy (SCEP) seem to indicate that an overwhelming majority of the undergraduates (nearly eighty percent) believe this option should be extended to allow all students to take any number of unrestricted electives pass/fail.

Extended pass/fail relieves pressure

Such an extended option makes very good sense. Unrestricted electives are a source of special significance in a student’s educational program. Their purpose is to allow students to explore subjects they would otherwise miss if they were confined to the requirements and restricted electives of their major. Unrestricted pass/fail grading would enhance a student’s willingness to take courses outside his major. Instead of using unrestricted electives to escape from pressure, the extended option would reduce pressure.

Furthermore, the extended option would remove the anxiety of juniors and seniors who aren’t sure whether the unrestricted electives they take now will qualify them for their major. If grades are really an absolute requirement on grades for a requirement would more often result in the allotment of several points. First, extending pass/fail grading would reduce the number of students who take rigidly graded in-depth courses. With the extended pass/fail option, grading pressure would be less of a factor in choosing unrestricted electives. If unrestricted electives were not included in the cumulative grade point average, grading policy would be less of a factor.

Finally, the extended pass/fail option would reduce pressure when there is no real need for pressure. Grades certainly exert pressure on students to perform. Although this pressure may be necessary in the course of study to a student’s major program, it certainly is not necessary for restricted electives. Pressure is extremely intense at MIT; any relief would be welcome.

Psychological relief

The extended pass/fail option would probably be similar to the eleven-week drop date. Although few students would use the extra freedom, the availability of such an option would provide a convenient escape from pressure. The extended option provides psychological relief even for those who don’t want it.

Futhermore, the extended option would remove the anxiety of juniors, who aren’t sure whether the unrestricted electives they take will or won’t qualify for their major. With freedom to designate all unrestricted electives pass/fail, juniors in good standing would no longer be less of a factor in choosing restricted courses as a concern would be accomplished.

Opponents of extended pass/fail grading would probably argue several points. First, extending pass/fail grading would reduce the anxiety of juniors, which isn’t too clear. The strongest argument against pass/fail grading, inevitably as pressure is reduced, will also be somewhat reduced; it’s a tradeoff. At this stage now, however, pressure needs to be reduced more than anxiety needs to be retained at its current level. The image of the MIT student constantly bent over his books is universally known; students here are probably more diligent than they are at any other school in the nation. A small loss of the last image in courses unrelated to a student’s major is a small price to pay for a needed reduction of pressure.

Opponents may also argue that since students on pass/fail would often find themselves near the bottom of the class, students taking a course on pass/fail would more often find themselves at the top of the class getting A’s. However, if grades are really an absolute indicator of ability and not a relative indicator, this cannot happen.

There simply are no really good arguments against extending pass/fail grading for unrestricted electives to all students and all electives. Huge student support recognizes this. The full Committee on Educational Policy should immediately consider this proposal and bring it before the faculty. There is no sense in waiting any longer.

Secretaries thanked

To The Editor:

My experiences in the past month have made me realize what outstanding jobs Peggy Lang and Sue Lang (the secretaries in the Undergraduate Physics Office) are doing.

At the end of the term I was very ill in the hospital and missed my final exams. Although I had notified my instructors and advisor, I failed to complete an OX form so my course grades were O (absent, equivalent to F). When my grades were released at the UPO, Peggy Richardson called my in Arizona to find out what had been wrong, and Sue Fennelly arranged a make-up exam. Also, when I was in the Dean’s Office clearing up the matter, a student overheard me mention the secretaries in the UPO, and he said that they had helped him very much, too.

All MIT employees I have had contact with do their jobs well, but I feel the secretaries in the UPO deserve special recognition for their personal efforts to help students.

Paul Friesen ’79

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Opinion

To The Editor:

Your recent article on gun control by Michael Taviss (The Tech, February 6) would have been more appropriate under the heading of Humor than Opinion. The article is so absurd one would be tempted to believe that the writer was having a personal joke at the expense of the Tech editorial board.

The article begins in a serious vein, discussing the fallacy of statistics on handgun use for the month of December. Mr. Taviss agrees there is a problem and that a solution needs to be found.

The article begins to take on a facetious tone when Mr. Taviss starts presenting arguments against gun control. Arguing that elimination of millions of handguns will result in oppression by a government made omnipotent by a weaponless citizenry is a gross distortion of the possible effects of gun control. Even the National Rifle Association never makes such an attempt to use that argument.

Mr. Taviss misrepresents the gun control position by arguing against the surrender of all weapons, though most gun control advocates are only concerned with the control of handguns.

When Mr. Taviss presents his “solution” to the gun problem, it is obvious that he has no familiarity with the problem beyond a superficial knowledge of some statistics for the last month. He argues that a proliferation of guns will result in fewer fatalities, because people will be too afraid to use them. This argument ignores that most fatal shootings are between acquaintances. They happen either by accident or as the result of unplanned arguments and fights. In these cases, the lack of firearms, not their availability, would result in fewer deaths.

I am not writing this letter because of my views on gun control, but because I feel that The Tech should use better judgment in selecting the articles that are printed. Some minimal level of accuracy should be required before an article is printed. This is not the first time The Tech has printed an article in which the author displayed a rather shallow acquaintance with the facts. I realize that people should have the right to express their opinion, but they should know of what they speak.

Terry Crowley ’81

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Columns are usually written by members of The Tech staff and represent the opinion of the author, and not necessarily that of the rest of the staff.

Letters to the editor are written by members of the MIT community and represent the opinion of the writer.

The Tech will attempt to publish all letters received, and will consider columns or stories. Letters should be typed, preferably triple-spaced on a 57-character line. Unsigned letters will not be printed, but the writer’s name will be withheld on request.

Paul Hubbard

By Kent C. Massey

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