Are problem sets a prelude for a 128 career?

To the Editor:
Steve Solnick's editorial, "Class of 2009?" (Nov 14, 1980) was probably read with quite a bit of interest by students and faculty. The column provoked a rather interesting response by Charles Holt of the Biology department, which was basically a defense of problem sets and the time demands of a regular course load. Professor Holt, when confronted with the question of the lack of time MIT students have to grow and explore admits that "Maybe it's true" and concludes by saying that the problem requires deeper analysis.

About problem sets, Professor Holt states that "students want problem sets and find them useful," and adds that "problem sets are supposed to make life easier for the students, not harder." He further states that his first statement is simple, true, because after becoming used to solving problems by success with problem sets, students like a good bit of their initiative and interest in attaining long range goals. Hence the unpleasant truth of the second statement: problem sets do make life easier by providing a weekly crutch which supports the failing student.

What's the alternative? Abolish problem sets? Realistically viewed that would be difficult. However, their role in determining grades could be greatly deemphasized. Students might focus on long range goals like studying the classics or perhaps even doing quite a bit of reading. Steve writes that "The essence of an undergraduate education is having the time to explore and grow." I would only add that the way to get a real respect for and growth is the will needed to do just that, which isn't strengthened by doing problem sets.

Another basic question is, "why do we have problem sets at all?" This suggests an interesting answer. By its nature, engineering as practiced in industry requires systematic, if often unimpired effort. Current products make money, not future brilliant ideas. As much as we would like to think of MIT as what Walter Rosenblith once called "a liberal technical school," greatly concerned with basic research, we must realize that MIT exists largely to serve American and particularly Massachusetts industry. In Electronics of November 29, we find that Ray Stata, chairman of the Massachusetts High Technology Council, helped founded it "to lobby for legislative and educational actions to increase the state's pool of technical talent." He sets in "MIT president Paul Gray firmly and consistently efforts to redirect MIT's traditional "teacher of teachers" orientation toward one that will produce more career engineers."

In the same issue of Electronics, in a debate on manpower issues, an editorial remarks, "But the new administration is looking now for more input and assistance from industry in drafting its academic course, says James D. Bruce, director of MIT's industrial liaison program. This is still an experimental period for us, and MIT will be taking a more active role in approaching industry for its suggestions." Now is it a wonder that we have problem sets when MIT's curriculum is increasingly a warm-up for life along Route 128? Maybe this highly organized marriage of convenience helps to put some of Charles Holt's questions, and Steve Solnick's remarks, into perspective. I venture to guess that if MIT trained only social scientists and men of letters that we wouldn't have problem sets. However, it doesn't and we do. To paraphrase Professor David Noble, it seems that the Ivory Tower has gone silicon.

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