The newly-appointed Dean of the School of Engineering has raised an interesting question: what should an engineering education include? Although there is no simple answer, it is almost certain that MIT's current approach does not offer its students the consummate engineering education.

While it may seem logical to orient engineering classes solely toward students who plan to become practicing engineers, it is not necessarily accurate. Students with undergraduate degrees in engineering are increasingly choosing other fields for their graduate education and careers. Many of the MIT alumni who choose jobs in medicine, law, banking, or politics may never use more than a small fraction of what they learned in class.

One obvious question arises: why do these students want an engineering education? There are as many answers as there are students. Some think that engineering is a good general education for surviving in a highly technical society. Others find the problem-solving skills which can be applied to a broad range of scientific, economic, and social problems. The large, group probably consists of students who plan to combine their technical background with a professional degree, creating career possibilities ranging from technical manager to patent attorney.

The existence of engineering students with no plans to become engineers demonstrates a system-reversal in engineering curricula. Under the current system, the Institute and its educators. But MIT claims to be one of the few universities willing to let engineering students pursue courses which were lost about the time of Three Mile Island. The time is long since past when engineers are being educated in the laboratories, or design courses. In fact, courses on the nature of the curriculum which must be varied for these students. The key is flexibility. Programs such as Course II-A are a good start, providing students with more of an opportunity to select courses specifically tied to their field of interest. Such programs are often looked down on as being too easy, and some are not certified by the appropriate professional organizations. Curricula are not always synonymous with disciplines, and schools could also be used to better orient the curriculum to pre-professional students.

Whatever their future plans, engineering students who fully intend to become engineers. Negative trends in industrial productivity, massive automobile recalls, and collapse of construction sites have brought some engineers back to the need for a broader view. The simple creation of new labs will not overcome this problem. The students must be able to work with the larger number of working engineers, rather than those in the laboratory. To the larger number of working engineers, the need for engineers is not in the number of working engineers, but in the number of engineers who are able to solve these problems.

Perhaps requiring action on all of these concerns is lacking too much of the Institute and its educators. But MIT claims to be one of the few universities willing to let engineering students pursue courses which were lost about the time of Three Mile Island. The time is long since past when engineers are being educated in the laboratories, or design courses. In fact, courses on the nature of the curriculum which must be varied for these students. The key is flexibility. Programs such as Course II-A are a good start, providing students with more of an opportunity to select courses specifically tied to their field of interest. Such programs are often looked down on as being too easy, and some are not certified by the appropriate professional organizations. Curricula are not always synonymous with disciplines, and schools could also be used to better orient the curriculum to pre-professional students.

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