Change, tradition and R/O Week

The primary challenge facing MIT as a purveyor of technical education is the need to balance teaching constantly changing state-of-the-art methods and theories with teaching classical principles and techniques upon which science and engineering are based.

The primary challenge facing MIT as a purveyor of living environment for over 4000 undergraduates is the need to balance change brought about by the changing economic and social needs and priorities of its students with traditional practices and principles upon which MIT's current living group structure is based.

MIT's divergent resolutions of these twin challenges are well illustrated by the Residence/Orientation Week activities now underway. Lurier this week, freshmen will decide how best to fulfill MIT's core curricular requirements; in those subjects which MIT feels are essential to a basic understanding of traditional science and technology. The freshmen will also have an opportunity to explore one of MIT's approaches to the teaching of state-of-the-art subject matter — freshmen seminars.

While these two types of courses do not exhaust MIT's catalogue of educational opportunities, they are illustrative of MIT's mix of modern philosophy of technical education. Traditional subjects are separated from subjects covering newer, changing material. During freshman year the former are represented by the core requirements and the latter by the seminars; within the academic departments the former become departmental requirements and the latter restricted electives. Little or no attempt is made to blend the two types of subject matter together. Historical perspective and chronologically developed scientific theories have no place in a typical MIT science or engineering course.

Institute living groups take the opposite approach in their R/O activities. Tradition is the content within which each year's Rush activities are set. No artificial attempt is made to satisfy the changing character of the living groups from the changes which will undoubtedly be brought by the year's new class of freshmen. Living groups are allowed considerable freedom of action, and past and future are equally important stages in the evolution.

Most freshmen are concerned that R/O activities are insincere: living groups putting on a show for freshmen do not necessarily reveal their true character. The traditional nature of most R/O activities is no surprise; no cover-ups can occur. R/O activities have developed over the years in concert with the character of the living group and so represent the true nature of the living groups when R/O activities evolve, and past and future are equally important stages in the evolution.

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The most important aspect of the blend of tradition and change found in R/O living group activities is its constant success. Every year over 1000 freshmen are distributed among more than forty living groups putting on a show for freshmen do not necessarily reveal their true character. The traditional nature of most R/O activities is no surprise; no cover-ups can occur. R/O activities have developed over the years in concert with the character of the living group and so represent the true nature of the living groups when R/O activities evolve, and past and future are equally important stages in the evolution.

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While relying on tradition for both R/O activities and procedures, living groups must be flexible enough to accommodate the changing needs of their members. So, while no attempt is made to blend the two types of subject matter together, historical perspective and chronologically developed scientific theories have no place in a typical MIT science or engineering course.

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Welcome and congratulations. You've just arrived at the world's number one technological playground. For a smart student interested in science and engineering, MIT is an irresistible place, and over the next few weeks the Institute will undoubtedly seduce you.

You will be meeting more smart people than you ever realized existed. You will explore the Institute's nooks and crannies, uncovering 21st century gadgets practically everywhere you look. You will be engulfed and challenged by your new courses — courses that actually move at your pace, or even a bit faster.

You will start your initiation into the technological elite.

Our society has big plans for your brains. MIT has goals for you. Each of your professors have goals for you. For the next four years, these goals will be communicated to you through your courses, your advisors, letters from home, and even in news stories and advertising.

You are going to find yourself very busy very soon, so if you want to think about your goals for your life, your desires . . . now is the time. MIT can help you achieve many of your goals.

Among other things, you probably want to understand the way things work. Fine. You want a well-paid job that commands respect. Fine. You want to be at the forefront of technology. Fine. You want to use science and engineering to help others. Not so fine. Just which others might that be?

You will be told — again and again, but not always loudly — that your job is to make the American way work: to help America become more efficient, more productive, and stronger. Making the American way work: to help America become more efficient, more productive, and stronger.

But don't be blind. They are adored by the rich and powerful. As convenient tools. The poor, the weak, and those who still feel their consciences cry out simply look upon them as opportunities lost.

To be a tool of someone else's will — even a high paid, well acclaimed, high-tech jet set tool — is an incredible waste of intelligence and humanity. So think through what is really important to you. Think with your heart, as well as with your mind.