Is anybody there?

The semester is only two weeks old, but many students now find themselves three weeks behind in their work. Such is the mass panic at MIT. Undergraduates are beginning to remember—or learning for the first time—how easy it is to get completely lost in classes and labs. I will not follow this observation with a plea for participation in student activities. While I firmly believe in the value of extracurricular activities, I wonder how many students share this viewpoint and that no amount of floral prose can change this unfortunate situation.

The need to study—and eat, sleep, and party—should not, however, preclude the student from the responsibility to remain in touch with the outside world. While the average MIT student would rather focus on calculus than Reaganomics, the latter is more likely to affect the student sooner and more directly. Decision-making on foreign and domestic policy does not cease, even during final exams. Given time, a dozen issues being covered by the national press directly affect MIT students. While Reagan decimates the Guaranteed Student Loan program, the National Institutes of Health decrease dramatically, ARA research is cut, and Department of Defense funding for basic research is increased. Massachusetts changes, the state that gave us seven liberty lamps, and Cambridge publishes a unique civil defense plan.

Last spring, the level of student interest in a wide range of national and international issues was almost nonexistent. These pages were filled with letters on topics including the draft; El Salvador, affirmative action programs, and homosexuality. The dialogue was not confined to one or two students or even to The Tech. Dinner table conversations and late night discussions would often touch on such matters. However, the consensus of MIT students is that none of these issues are of immediate concern and that no professional knowledge is required to have an opinion about them. President Ronald Reagan spent the summer attempting to focus the attention of the MIT community on the major economic issues and construction of foreign-policy issues such as El Salvador and social issues such as affirmative action was postponed in the name of reviving the economy. Congress clearly accepted the President's direction, and apparently MIT students did the same.

Despite continuing problems with the economy, social, and foreign policy issues are now moving to the fore. The next few months will see Congressional and national debate on Mid-East policy, military spending levels, abortion, desegregation, and a variety of equally hot issues. These discussions will, also, I hope, reawaken within the MIT community a small group of vocal activists.

The pace of the dialogue between the MIT community and the Tech has slowed only slightly, but the subject matter has changed appreciably. Letters are almost uniformly focused on MIT-related problems. Belief in the condition of the East Campus tennis courts makes the second of exaltation. It is impossible to avoid these topics at MIT. The social issues are as often debated in the corrals as in the dorms and in the student lounge as in the Masters' Club.

The next few months will be critical for those concerned with foreign policy issues. While the student community is very aware of these matters, they are often jaded by the fear of a possible nuclear war. The student who believes that none of these issues is immediately relevant to his or her life is in a majority.

Any student who believes that none of these issues is immediately important is kidding himself. It is impossible to avoid these topics after leaving MIT as they are an equally difficult to disregard their impact while at the Institute. Most students, even upon becoming informed, will not be compelled to join protest marches. Nevertheless, cultural issues are one of these issues is necessary if students are to be truly educated while going to college.