Advice and consent

Stephanie Pollack

Complaining is one of the most popular extracurricular activities at MIT. Students contend that the level of financial aid is inadequate, the bureaucracy is out to screw everyone, the professors can't teach, and the MIT vacations are too short. Such criticisms are readily accompanied by constructive suggestions for improvement, however. The average MIT student will not only be able to reply if his advisor doesn't appear at his door and ask "What is the single most important flaw is the current system of education at MIT?" Almost all would be hard-pressed to give him suggestions on dealing with the problem.

After three and a half years at the Institute, my choice for the worst flaw is the current advising system. The best way MIT can develop is useless unless students understand it well enough to take advantage of it. The current advising system is frequently suspended, hopelessly disjointed, and poorly supervised. To most students, an advisor is simply a person who signs registration material and drop cards. Those inadequacies would be less damaging if students had access to other information sources. Unfortunately, the alternatives are equally incomplete. When not out, courtyard course summaries are hopelessly vague. Although a notable attempt, the recent course evaluation guide is little more than an abbreviated booklet on some freshman courses. While sometimes helpful, advice from upperclassmen frequenly perpetuates such conventional wisdom as "Don't worry—you're only on pass/fail.

I have never had a terrible advisor at MIT, but neither have I received particularly valuable advice from any of them. Not that I asked for guidance—I am rather a head-on and tend to do as I please, falling out the appropriate form, and forging ahead. I now wish someone had steered me, forced me to list, and made some suggestions. I have been fathered before or suspended results, and completely wasted my time in hearing lectures only to find out later that an alternative course would have been far more useful. I now realize that the advisors' office is in several cases just a box, and wonder how many other gaps I will discover if I ever try to apply anything I learned here.

Flaws in the advisory system have been mentioned and studied before, but, aside from administrative re-organizations, little has been done. Improvements must be made soon, especially since the current curriculum review is likely to result in significant changes in Institute requirements. Alterations must both improve quality of departmental and freshman advisors and provide viable alternatives for students wishing to acquire information about course offerings. A number of outstanding advisors may be the otherwise discouraging record of the current program. The advisors who are popular and predominant are those who want to be advisors and are willing to spend the time to do their job correctly. People should not become advisors just because they think it may help them get tenure. One way to work out such people is to require anyone wishing to be an advisor to attend a series of seminars on Institute and departmental requirements and other appropriate subjects. Regular attendance would at least indicate that the person was committed to the job.

Many departments have students evaluate professors at the end of the term, so advisors should be subject to a similar review. Those with poor ratings would be given the option of additional training or retirement. Those with high marks could be asked to provide the training. Running these evaluations through the Undergraduate Academic Support Office, rather than the departments, would ensure fairness and uniformity.

Finally, MIT should develop other information sources for students. The data currently collected by departments could be assembled into a useful written guide. The placement office could consolidate information on course requirements for graduate schools and gather information from student files, relative of jobs and graduate school. Upclosers could serve as departmental associate advisors, rather than assigned to work with individual professors.

The advisor should also have full knowledge of his student's curricular offerings, and advisors must serve as the students guide to this system. The present unsupervised system of untrained advisors will never prove adequate to this task.

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To the Editor:

Amy Axelrod argued in favor of a writing requirement at MIT (Tuesday, Dec. 1), expressing the view that "every student at MIT should take a writing course." Probably most of the opposition to the proposed requirement centers on the word "should." Few would dispute the importance of written communication skills. Certainly many students would benefit from some type of writing course. But should all entering students, including those confident in their writing ability, be required to take such a course?

The proposed writing requirement may be satisfied by receiving high scores on the English Achievement Exam or the English Advanced Placement Exam, or by submitting a ten-page paper for evaluation. Ms. Axelrod asks if (Please turn to page 5)

Opinion

Boston 3, New York 2

Richard Salz

Like most MIT students, I come from what local television advertisers refer to as the "greater New York metropolitan area." I've noticed that many of us have a New York metropolitan-area like to put for New York City. In an effort to determine the truth behind the folklore, I compared The City and The Town, rating them in a number of areas.

Subways: New York's subways run all night. Boston's close a half-hour before you're ready to go home. At first glance, an easy win for New York. However, while it's possible to ride a New York subway at 4am I'm sure I'd rather be home. But give the edge to The City: much better graffiti.

Commuter Zones: Give New York greater credit for creativity, but give Boston the round for greater sense of community. Besides, it's closer to the Chinese food.

Pedestrians and bicyclists: Any driver can tell you, one pedestrian is too many. New York pedestrians spill into the street because there's so damn many of them. Boston pedestrians flow out into traffic because they're students, and convinced that since the world revolves around them, the cars will get out of the way. A half-point to New York, for Boston's obstinate.

Have you ever been whistled out of the way by a bicycle rider? (A police whistle, I mean.) I've almost been run down while crossing the Harvard Bridge, but at least I've never had a bicycle rider use a rope whistle to justify swooshing in front of me. For New York's obstinacy, a half-point to Boston. Call this round a tie.

Entertainment: New York: Broadway, off-Broadway, off-off-Broadway, and so on. New York has the Metropolitan Museum of Art, the Museum of Modern Art, the Guggenheim, and the Cooper-Hewitt. New York has premiere movie houses. Boston has the MFA, the BSO, and LCS movies. A clear win for Boston.

Education: Boston has MIT, BU, Tufts, Simmons, BC, and countless others. New York has NYU, Columbia, Parsons, and countless others. Too close to call, perhaps, but... Boston has Harvard. A clear win for New York.