Students voices need to be heard

The Committee on Educational Policy’s (CEP) attempts to revise the freshman pass/fail system are well-intentioned. Instead of sustaining MIT’s commitment to innovative education by instituting a more useful system of freshman evaluation than simple letter grades, however, the CEP has just driven another nail into the coffin of freshman pass/fail.

The current proposal would institutionalize hidden grades by putting an end to a practice already suspended at the mid-point of the semester. The CEP would rid the freshman year of these unnecessary and unwanted thoughts that have weakened MIT’s pass/fail system. If MIT is truly committed to its pass/fail experiment, hidden grades should be eliminated entirely.

There were several reasons for eliminating freshman grades originally. One was to ease adjustment to MIT’s challenging environment. Moving away from arbitrary grades and replacing them with substantive evaluations was designed to give students a personalized assessment of their performance that single letter grades do not provide.

Formal hidden grades will increase pressure on MIT freshmen. Many freshmen, aware of the difficulty of gaining admission to selective graduate schools, will not be fooled by the CEP’s claims that grades will only be temporary on the outside of MIT. When other schools realize MIT does not really have a true freshman year, they may demand release of freshman grades. Students who believed they were on pass/fail would in effect be placed on grades retroactively. Whether they did or did not satisfy their grades will seemingly be based on their freshman performance.

The argument that concrete A-F freshman grades are essential to student performance or their success in graduate school is a red herring. Almost all such schools are satisfied with MIT’s certification of pass or fail. The one medical school in the country that requests theirs — Johns Hopkins University — would have to relax its rules, or forego the possibility of admitting MIT students. The MIT Administration should have confidence in the qualifications of its student body.

Hidden freshman grades are not a needed precursor to sophisticated undergraduate education. The CEP’s elitism to grade-shocked sophomores, who have pleaded for traditional grades, are unsubstantiated. Their anecdotes should not ruin MIT’s successful pass/fail system.

There are several ways of improving the current freshman grading system to help students learn course material. These changes would place some of the burden for improving under-graduate performance on the MIT faculty — not always renowned for their interaction with students.

The first step is to revamped the freshman advising system. Advisors get no credit or recognition for advising freshmen; they have no incentive to do their jobs well. The faculty should ap- point a faculty committee to investigate this essential aspect of student life.

The second freshman evaluation forms do need revision. The CEP argues that the current evaluation system does not work because no one completes the forms. Eliminating the forms entirely, and imposing grades instead, is analogous to throwing the baby out with the bath water: the forms are not returned, so get rid of the forms. The solution to the problem is to require freshmen to fill out these forms in an incomplete course. The entire blame for this problem may not be placed on students, however; faculty members fail to fill out forms, too. They should be required to turn in evaluations or else face the same penalty they would face if they forget to turn in grades for upperclassmen. Hidden grades should not supplant the in-depth evaluations pass/fail was designed to elicit, and MIT students who pay $8,700 tuition bills deserve.

A second way to assist freshmen is to overhaul the MIT cur-riculum. Rather than nipping at the edges and adjusting a humanities requirement here or a science distribution there, the CEP should assess the relevance of core courses to later performance at MIT. Once courses are deemed impor- tant, MIT must dedicate more of its resources to teaching such courses. In my opinion, MIT should identify and deliver interesting, understandable lectures should be rewarded, rather than being reminded they have not published anything. Rewards for outstanding freshmen do not learn core courses; the sad fact is that this is as much the instruc- tional functions of pass/fail.

Pass/fail is a valuable asset to MIT and its students. It must not be sacrificed to solve petty administrative problems.

Column:

Martin Dickauer

How I was abused

I have decided that it is time for me to come out and tell you all the contusions that I endure. Yes, I sit down here to write about the abuses of the pass/fail system, as Chairman of the Faculty M. H. Villanueva of the Student Committee on Evaluation. It has been a hard journey of ethics and loyalties. However, I must also add that I do not believe I am "playing games" with the system.

I have met with many friends from different schools that heard that the entirety of my freshman year at MIT would be under pass/fail, so I was envious of the great deal. After all, I would have the golden opportunity to do less work and get away with it. Apparently, Professor Villanueva is of the opinion that the pass/fail system is not merely for the students but also for the professors. As such, I am not sure what the advantages of the system are doing just that.

I claim that the advantage of the fact that I will not have grades because I take a subject twice or three times is not to my use. First of all, I decided to take an advanced Russian course (actually, two of them) although my high school education certainly neglected such a language. I was not interested in the thought of pass/fail in my mind, though, I decided to try. As it turned out, I did not do well in the course and learned quite a bit as well. Now, I ask you, is that "playing games" with the system? As I mentioned previously, I also work on the Tech, not contemplating taking up sports journalism. I was not interested in how much time I would be able to put away from doing journalism. I was assured by the indi- viduals encouraging me to join that I should "dive in." I was going to be on pass/fail. It turned out that I managed to do all of my work and write for the Tech. Is this also "playing games" with the system? Certainly is taking advantage of pass/fail.

Now there is a push to change the current system. The claim that all freshmen receive a hidden grade report along with the Registrar’s letter is that they are not on a true pass/fail system. However, I am pigeonholed to remind freshmen that their grades are not over their heads and are not going to help ease them into their sophomore year.

Whether this will have any effec- tion on the students remains to be seen. All freshmen realize that they are not on a true pass/fail system as it is. Reporting the hid- den grades will only add pressure, both from the student himself and from the dean for grades.

If this change means that the student will have increased time to come into his work, that extra time extra will have to come from somewhere. What will fill up that extra work? I know, such as sports, intercollegiate and intramural games. Esoteric courses, especially those in the Humanities and related departments, will also lose enroll- ment.

Perhaps the proposed changes will succeed in getting freshmen to spend more time on their work instead of five. The changes will also end the common practice of putting off work to the last minute to participate in some type of extra-curricular event. Students will probably make the freshman year one of discipline and growth. It will put back on the pressure that pass/fail is supposed to have. However, that is perhaps, the most important, the proposed changes will succeed in giving the advantage of the system.