Don't believe everything you read

Everything in this book may be wrong.

— Richard Bach

It's customary for Tech columnists to offer advice to incoming freshmen in the first couple of issues. As a sometime Tech columnist (and because Mike asked me to), I shall now follow that tradition. What follows is a random collection of thoughts and prejudices distilled from two years at this place. Please believe what you will, and take it all with a grain of salt. Here goes.

Talk to upperclassmen. We've been here a while. We've lived through the Institute's many varied screens. We can help you survive them.

Especially, ask upperclassmen about your freshman classes. Your freshman advisor often knows very little about such things. The sophomores, on the other hand, have just been through them. They know who the good and bad professors are, and which classes are for masochists only. But remember, we're all biased. Ask ten different people the same questions, and the answers will probably average out to the truth.

Listen to the numbers. MIT runs on numbers. Buildings, rooms, classes, and academic depart- ments are all often called by numbers rather than by English names. 21.100, 103.50, and 2.120 are large lecture halls. Courses 8.01, 8.02, and 8.03 are Physics, Math, and EECS, respectively. 18.01, 8.01, 21.60, and 3.091 are typical fresh- man courses. It may sound confusing, but by Christmas vacation you'll have trouble translating it into English when your other classmates ask you which courses you're taking.

Stay away from the computer labs. Tomorrow will be worse. This is not original, but will be good advice. At MIT, tomorrow is guaranteed to be worse. Remember, MIT is not a real college. Real colleges have trees, football games, school spirit, aesthetic architecture, liberal arts majors, scenic countryside, rug- ged jocks and beautiful girls. MIT has each of the above items, but in token amounts only. MIT has concrete and grunts, both in quantity.

To get away from comparisms, judging from past classes, a lot of you were probably computer people in high school. This means you probably came to MIT because of its reputation as a computer Mecca. Don't go rush off to the computer labs. Meet some people; make some friends in your living group. Learn what real people are like. Then, maybe, take a course or get a job.

Before you decide to major in course six, though, talk to the old upperclassmen about it. Ask someone about what happened to all the fresh who tried to major in that subject last year. If you decide to ignore this advice, at least know what you're getting into. There is a law, the Ivory Tower Law, which governs the interaction between attitude and reality in computer science departments. Thus, in NE-43 (MIT's CS building), we find the following divisions: On the third floor is the Real-Time Systems lab, concerned with linking computers to the real world. On the fourth floor is the Machine Intelligence group, which links computers to mathematicians. On the eighth floor is the Artificial Intelligence group, which is concerned with computers and human understanding. Under no circumstances should any freshman venture higher than the third floor.

Don't believe everything you read. The September Playboy contains an article about life at MIT. The part about hacking is fairly accurate; the parts about life at MIT are less so. You can get better information from any upperclassmen who will talk to you.

Hacking, by the way, is one of the more interesting parts of MIT life. It is a social club for people, large, difficult practical jokes (there are, of course, other defini- tions). Recently, a working phone booth was placed on top of the great dome. It describes that hack. More recently, a balloon labeled "MIT" erupted from the field near halftime at the last Harvard-Yale game. If you're interested in that sort of thing, ask an upperclassman about his favorite hacks. Also, keep your eyes open during the freshman picnic, and watch the Daily Conflation for Orion Tours and the Student's Club.

Form your own opinions — and discard them. This advice is not original, but it is useful to keep in mind. During rush, all sorts of groups try to get you to meet people that hack. More recently, a balloon labeled "MIT" erupted from the field near halftime at the last Harvard-Yale game. If you're interested in that sort of thing, ask an upperclassman about his favorite hacks. Also, keep your eyes open during the freshman picnic, and watch the Daily Conflation for Orion Tours and the Student's Club.

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