Column/Joseph J. Romm

Do what you can

If you are like most freshmen, you want to learn as much about MIT as you can as quickly as you can.

If you are like most freshmen, you are doubly skeptical of advice from upperclassmen since they will go to school there.

If you are like most freshmen, you probably are skeptical of advice from someone who lamps you all into the same category.

"You people, aren't you?"

If you really want to know what MIT is all about, without the commonplace (or pain) of having been here more than a few days, you have one and only one option. Go to the Coke machines in Building 16. Use a map, if necessary, and almost needless to say, Coke is a registered trademark of the Coca-Cola Company.

Between two of the Coke machines is a machine which symbolizes all that is good and bad about MIT. This machine is the can redeemer. It will take a soda can of any race, color, and set, crush it violently and noisily, and give the cans former owner a nickel in the pocket.

If you are like most freshmen, you are unlikely to like the can MIT will crush you, and in the process, re-deem you. The only difference between MIT and the can redeemer is that the can redeemer pays you a nickel, whereas you will end up paying MIT nearly 1,000,000 nickels. Yes, MIT makes money because the nation's first major technical school.

The can redeemer and MIT have two identical problems. First, the can redeemer's capacity to redeem cans falls far short of the actual demand for having cans redeemed. This means that the can redeemer is almost constantly full and as such, unable to redeem cans. Only after a visit by a very rare and talented person — the can redeemer emptier — is it possible to have your cans redeemed.

Similarly, MIT's capacity to educate its students competently falls far short of the students' demands. You will do well to find this out very soon when you take certain notoriously over-crowded courses, or when you have your first lecturer who cues insomnia.

Only when you meet a very rare and talented person — the good lecturer — will you be able to have your money's worth from MIT. Cherish the good lecturer because, in many ways, he or she is MIT's faculty's version of the can redeemer emptier.

The can redeemer's second problem is its detrimental effect on those who use it. Since the can redeemer is usually full, and when it isn't, it only pays a nickel for each can it redeems, there is a strong incentive to the otherwise extremely busy people of MIT who want cans redeemed to wait until they have enough cans to make a single (or even the can redeemer worthwhile. Thus, the can redeemer is only used by people who, after days or weeks of collection, have accumulated enough of cans into large boxes or bags.

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