Guest Column/Erik A. Devereux

Taking more than a passing interest

MIT is a very contradictory institution. It is extremely expensive to attend, it often puts great strain on the finances of students and their parents. It is gaining importance in the politics and economy of the United States, with the ascendency of high technology. It engages in broad educational experimentation, like freshmen physics credit, the humanities, arts and social science requirement, the writing requirement, ESG, Concourse, and Project Athena.

Despite tremendous efforts on the part of MIT and the various student activities, it is still socially unbound, with the pace and pressure and four-to-one male/female ratio adversely affecting the ability of students to make the transition from being children to being full-fledged adult members of society.

MIT also has an ambivalent student body that rarely attempts to participate in major MIT policy decisions. While there are many controversies and conflicts surrounding MIT, and a lot of room for debate over such issues, there has generally been minimal participation of MIT students in the various forums and presentations offered by the Institute on some issues, and very little initiative to participate in other, more spontaneous platforms not offered or sponsored directly by MIT.

The only time massive student interest and involvement materializes is during extreme crises when it is almost too late to organize and present the student viewpoint effectively. The recent problems involving the Solomon Amendment are a perfect example of this phenomenon.

The students' ambivalence is more frustrating because the administration is often willing to listen and debate the issues, and if students were to present their views effectively there could be a productive dialectic. Even some in the administration wonder openly why there is so little student interest and participation.

The problem is that such a dialectic is not guaranteed from the start, and this lends support to the position that no matter what the students say, MIT will steer its course as it sees fit. The MIT student body should attempt to participate even if only because $15,000 a year entitles each and every one of us to some representation. I have opinions on the topic and will share them with time as perimeters with anyone interested.

The issues relating to the Lecture Series Committee registration day movie, in my opinion, go well beyond freedom of expression. Simply put, I don't feel it appropriate to show a motion picture raising these issues at a moment when we are welcoming new students to the community, purportedly attempting to make them comfortable. None of us as individuals would greet new acquaintances at the door of our home and then, before sitting down, introduce a display of pornography. It is a subject of delicacy or discomfort to many that would be dealt with only after a stronger relationship has grown.

Another concern is that the hype surrounding the matter, while perhaps understood generally by our community, will clearly not be the financial policy of MIT. One of my personal and professional goals is that MIT's image reflect its reality. I would not want the surrounding community -- which extends around the world these days -- to form an impression of MIT from insensitive showing of that movie and the rhetoric that has developed around it.

Thirdly, some women are brutalized by pornographic films. In as much as this is so, MIT's position on the issue, be it articulated by the administration, the faculty, or by the students' actions, impacts on our ability to welcome new students, male or female. The message now is that MIT is insensitive to women. I'm prepared to protect freedom of expression, but not if the price is to make women feel less welcome at MIT.

September is not the time for either the movie or the discussion. We must at all times be sensitive to those around us. Freedom of expression does not include the right to degrade women.

Peter H. Richardson '85
Director of Admissions

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Issue not just freedom of expression

To the Editor:

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