Column/Ken Meltsner

MIT is not for professionals

Ask an MIT student what he or she intends to be and you will be told a course name. Ask what he or she actually will do and you'll get an answer at all.

An engineering or scientific education is not often confused with the profession of engineer or scientist. A degree from MIT certifies only that you know the facts of your field, not their practice. Officers sometimes you win in your job will be either trivial or impossible. Problems and quizzes will not prepare you for telephone consulting, nor will your thesis prepare you for professional presentation. With rare exceptions, nothing at MIT will make you a professional.

Take a personal example: Two years ago I chose, I got told at the start of my research project, instead of taking a couple of days, I forced myself to go in every morning. I did not get my work done, my writing was incomprehensible, and my body felt like I had put through an old-fashioned washing machine. My mid-year performance summary listed all the problems and called me for an explanation. I explained that I had been sick. He listed the problems and mentioned that I had been sick. I told him that I had been busy, my body had been busy, and that I would not accept excuses about performance. In college, he continued, you could play the martyr and go on all of your social functions, but if I could not do the job I was paid to do, then I had better stay at home and not waste money. Life at MIT just does not prepare you for the real world. Rarely will you need to stay up late or work on weekends. Work, even the kind I did at Chevron because "relaxed working environment" is just a day-after-dad grind. The one good thing about the world outside is that your work will end when you go home. Even $30,000 a year should not suffice to buy your soul.

My major did not prepare me for any of this. It turned out that the subjects I took outside of the department were the most important. Even the job I got at Chevron because the big boss was impressed that I had learned German at MIT. Without a good back- ground in metallurgy, I could not have done my job, but without German I might not have gotten it. Perhaps the single most important subject anyone can take at MIT is the ability to judge you on how clever you are, and how well you can write about your cleverness. Chevron engineers write at least one or two reports every week and that is the only tangible evidence of performance. If lab reports or term papers make you break out in hives, you have better find a job in a technician. Professionals must write about what they do.

It all comes back to the myth that MIT is a professional school and that when you graduate, you become a professional. At least four of my friends have quit their jobs soon. They could not put up with problems at MIT because they learned from them, but writing your own video game or Unix program is unreadable when the learning phase is over. About two or three years into their careers, they all realized they were not doing interesting work and are looking for new jobs.

You can get paid around the second-year surplus. Insist that every assignment teach you something new. If you do not, in five years you will be in management or you will be in a new job.

In every field, you can be either a practitioner or a supervisor and what you do depends only on that choice. Do not confuse your career with your job. A man is no more a profession than an employee in a factory.

Column/Charles P. Brown

Powers of CAP are not well defined

First of a seven-part series.

During the 1983-84 academic year I served as one of the undergraduate student members of the Committee on Academic Performance. This committee has the power of life and death, so to speak, over the academic careers of students, yet most students are woefully ignorant of its purpose and powers.

MIT is an educational institution, and a student's program is evaluated in terms of his or her performance in academic subjects. Graduate students are evaluated by their departments, and undergraduates are evaluated by the Committee on Academic Performance.

The CAP is a standing faculty committee whose senior membership consists of a faculty member chairman, four members appointed from the faculty, a faculty member appointed by the Committee on Educational Policy, and three undergraduates appointed by the Undergraduate Association Nominations Committee. There are also several ex officio, non-voting members who work with the student services organizations.

The Committee has several areas of responsibility in academic matters. First, it hears student petitions for waiving academic regulations. These include petitions for:

• dropping a subject after Drop Date
• changing a subject from pass/fail to graded or vice versa after Add Date
• requesting the extension of the deadline for completion of an incomplete
• asking for cancellation or repayment of credit for a semester
• seeking permission to exceed a term's credit limit
• seeking permission to exceed a term's available credit
• requesting the extension of the deadline for completion of an incomplete
• asking for a change of terms or for readmission to a second term
• requesting a change of terms or of academic meaning of a "D" grade, and the procedures and privileges of a double degree program.

These issues and the CAP's duties are not well defined, nor are they clearly understood by the faculty or the students.

On this part of the column and the column to follow is to interpret the CAP after being required to withdraw from MIT for financial reasons. When I was on the CAP, we discussed issues including probation, financial aid, academic performance, and either normally or coming back from a prolonged withdrawal. For example, the committee apprised candidates for undergraduate degree and grants the students to the faculty for their approval. Usually, the committee discusses other issues related to academic performance, and either changes its policies or recommends changes to the Undergraduate Association Nominations Committee. There are also several ex officio, non-voting members who work with the student services organizations.

The Committee can discuss other issues including probation, financial aid, academic performance, and academic meaning of a "D" grade, and the procedures and privileges of a double degree program. These issues and the CAP's duties are not well defined, nor are they clearly understood by the faculty and the students.

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