Some of the good things

Fourth in a series on life at MIT

Three-quarters of what you read on the opinion pages involves complaints, criticisms or censures. Somebody is dissatisfied with something. The UA Council of Commoners, the Dean’s Office, you pick it.

This column will be different. MIT students have it better than many of their peers at other schools. We should step back from our criticisms for a moment and take note of the worthwhile things here.

Food: "What?" you exclaim. "Commons is worthwhile?" No, of course it isn’t; it’s terrible. But go on up to Harvard sometime. They have a place in the yard called the Harvard Student Union. All the freshmen have to eat there, three meals a day, seven days a week.

The Union does not actually serve dishes. They just have two vats — one filled with greens, the other with beans. The green is the meat, the brown the vegetables. Try subsisting for a year on large dollops of vile-tasting colors.

Wellesley College’s food is slightly better than MIT’s, but their system is a bigger screw than ours. Wellesley used to require a 21-meal plan. That changed a couple of years ago: Now students can buy a 14-meal plan, although it costs much more than two-thirds the 21-meal price.

Wellesley students can also cash in their meals at the college convenience store — re-inventing 50 percent less than what they paid for the meal in the first place.

At MIT, you can get off commons if you really hate it. With the installation of kitchens in East Campus and Senior House, only four of the ten dormitories have any mandatory commons requirement.

Housing: MIT’s system is great. Residence/Orientation Week may be hectic, but I don’t know of any other college where 80 percent of the freshmen get their first choice in a single year, let alone year after year. Caltech has a similar system, but you have to live with nerds.

Even if you are one of the small number who get stuck in your last choice dormitory, you can almost always transfer after one term and definitely after a year. If you like your room, you can stay there for four years. Most other schools are like Wellesley when it comes to housing. Everyone goes into a lottery each year. There are no squatter’s rights to rooms or even dormitories. The diversity among dormitories falls on a line between good and bad, not among different types of good. Many people get stuck in places they do not want to be.

Autonomy: MIT students have tremendous freedom in planning their academic and social lives. My friends at other schools are continually amazed at how late I can add and drop classes, that I can easily take classes in any department or school at MIT, that I can take classes at Wellesley and Harvard.

They are amazed by the concept of Independent Activities Period. They just don’t do those things. Social life at MIT may be difficult to manage, but you have great freedom in managing it. There is a balance between dorm things.