Guest Column/Denise Bednarczyk
Survival and Growth: Can MIT have both?

MIT often reminds me of a lion who has all of his strength and ferocity to continue his species. I perceive MIT as an institution whose main purpose is to raise engineers and scientists who produce the cream of the crop, regardless of the cost that such production has on a student’s emotional well-being.

The passion to flush a freshman year is a prime example of the tremendous price that students sometimes have to pay to survive at MIT. Pass/fail was first implemented to provide some leeway when too many freshmen chose suicide over living through an MIT education. Yet years after pass/fail was implemented, the curriculum for an MIT undergraduate degree still has not adjusted to meet the typical student’s needs for emotional survival.

Instead, freshman year is now the time for students to adjust to MIT. For many, this adjustment means building an impenetrable shell around oneself in order to learn one’s way through the country’s top technical schools.

The obvious change with this type of adjustment process is that students often lose touch with the outside world. There are students at MIT in their senior year of college who have not ventured into Boston more than a couple of times during their undergraduate careers. A student’s adjustment from survival becomes the primary concern of students here for four years, what happens when the sudden journey into the real world after graduating with one of the best degrees in the country?

MIT students concerned mainly with their own grades become workers concerned primarily with making money. The student’s potential for improving the world may simply be lost. While some students could be de productive enough to solve the world’s food problem, they often might choose instead to work for the most profitable corporation using a nuclear weapon, because the perception of the government job is greater.

MIT could so easily cultivate altruism and compassion in its students instead of selfishness and frustration. The same amount of material can certainly be taught at MIT in four years without the intense pressure that is found here now. The benefits of lightening the pressure are so obvious, yet why does MIT continue to harm its students by making it almost impossible to allow them to grow and expand freely?

I am not saying, of course, that MIT is the only university a student could choose to pursue a college education. Support groups on the MIT campus can do a tremendous job of trying to keep the students’ heads above water. However, the counterproductive nature of pass/fail at MIT could so easily be corrected by a change in the institution and policy of the Institute itself. Such a change could make it possible for campus support groups to teach a student new swimming strokes instead of keeping his head above water.

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Feedback

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