Teaching not a priority at MIT

To the Editor:

My experience at MIT has been both one of intense enrichment and learning, and also one of severe disappointment and frustration. I will discuss both here in the context of someone I met and got to know during my freshman year, Professor Frank E. Morgan.

I began at MIT not knowing whom I could really trust. My adviser had too many of us to lend the support each of us needed. Many of my professors were telling me so many technical facts so fast I did not know how to stop in the middle of it and ask, "Why is this important to me?" I was left cold by their ramblings and inability to teach and enrich in a way that would make me understand why they were fascinated with the material they were presenting.

Morgan was the only professor I had in that term who "taught" no one else but himself. Everyone else merely recited. Morgan made teaching an integral part of class, walls of indifference were torn down, on the very first day we had put them up. He gave of himself. He was uniquely concerned with us. He made it fun. He didn't just lecture. He made the material tiring and demanding. Many of my professors were boring, having decided this on some of the social unawareness, I can offer. I will only regret to see one more brilliant mind at MIT. He was a true educator, of course.

In the end, this is what I left 18.011 with: evidence that there existed at least one person sufficiently convinced of the importance of a true undergraduate education at MIT. I think this is what many of my classmates left with as well.

Professor Morgan will no longer be teaching introductory math courses, or anything else for that matter, at MIT after next year. He will no longer be seen running gallantly up the steps at 77 Mass Ave., sometimes stopping to say "Hi" to someone he recognizes. He will no longer be seen cutting lunch on the lawns of Killian Court on beautiful "spring-full" afternoons, while the squirrels nearby. He will no longer be seen railing gallantly up the steps at 77 Mass Ave., sometimes stopping to say "Hi" to someone he recognizes. He will no longer be seen cutting lunch on the lawns of Killian Court on beautiful "spring-full" afternoons, while the squirrels nearby. He will no longer be talking to his students about soap bubbles, or the importance of Athena, or about learning strategies. He will no longer be rewriting childhood memories in class. And I ask ... why?

Morgan will no longer be in charge of heading the Institute Colloquium Committee which was responsible for alleviating some of the social unawareness, or perhaps the ignorance of too many brilliant minds at MIT. He will no longer be found guilty of getting the MIT freshman out of his shell, and into an environment of trust and support that allows for true learning and enrichment. Never again will someone accuse him of wasting his time learning students' names, on the grounds that: it doesn't matter who it is that responds to questions in recitation, as long as, of course, the correct answer is spoken. And I ask ... why?

Thus, I am disappointed. As a student I was not taught to learn, but rather was told to memorize. It is the system. I am disappointed because I think I know why. I believe teaching has never been MIT's priority, and with an open mind I question who the emphasis is placed on research. My opinion is that as long as there exists an undergraduate program at MIT, the emphasis should be put where it needs to be: on teaching. Having decided this on an administrative level, MIT then has the responsibility to me, and to the community, to hire and give tenure to the best teachers, not necessarily the researcher with the most publications.

I agree that this is a question of values and priorities. I happen to be one who cares deeply about learning. But, I also accept the contrary view seemingly expressed by the math department, for MIT to lose the best mathematicians in the world. If they truly believe this, then they must come out and state it without any ambiguities. And, at that juncture, they must then allow the MIT community to voice their opinions, and subsequently come to a decision.

Finally, I believe that MIT can be the home for the best teachers and the best researchers mankind can offer. I will only regret to see such a deeply committed individual as Professor Morgan not be given the chance to continue generating excitement in students' minds as he so exquisitely did in mine.

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Opinion