Do not restrict EECS enrollment

The Committee on Undergraduate Admissions and Financial Aid (CUAFA) will meet today to decide whether or not to restrict some admitted students of the Class of 1991 from majoring in Course VI. The future of MIT would be severely damaged if the committee rejects those restrictions.

The issue of enrollment restrictions has resurfaced after two years of dormancy. Once again, the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science finds itself overenrolled. A university should allow its students to survey different fields and decide, without restrictions, what they wish to study further. On the other hand, the MIT environment affects the quality of an individual student's education. An overcrowded department will find itself short of resources, such as laboratory facilities and thesis supervisors.

Given this balance of issues, and given that enrollment in Course VI has stayed under the benchmark levels for the past two years, MIT should, at least for now, consider next year's projected increase in enrollment as an anomaly.

The Institute must be patient in solving the crowding problem. Restrictions might be effective in the short run, but they would also be detrimental to the student's freedom to mold his or her own education at MIT.

MIT instead must solve the problem, albeit slowly, seeking a more balanced student body and encouraging more interaction between departments. MIT should continue to follow the following:

1. Attracting a more balanced student community. Education for all is degraded when the interests of the student body are skewed too far in one direction. As the Long-Range Plan writes, if MIT administrators point out, every enrollment throughout the engineering school tend to create a culture where all other fields are implicitly devalued, damaging the quality of students.

2. "Jawboning" to the students, year in and year out. MIT must continually stress to freshmen the alternatives to Course VI and encourage them to investigate the possibilities. The programs in mathematics, physics, management information science, cognitive science and material science all have courses of study related to electrical engineering and computer science. If these measures fail over the coming years, then perhaps restrictive admissions will be the answer. But for now, the Institute must seek intelligent measures, rather than quick fixes, to balance its student body and ease the overcrowding in the Department of Electrical Engineering and Computer Science.

Only disaster causes change

The disaster mentality pervades the human experience. People, organizations and governments are rarely willing to reform until disaster strikes. To see the disaster mentality in action, one has to look only as far as from the front pages of the newspaper.

It is now widely recognized that the Challenger accident could have been avoided if NASA employees had paid closer attention to reports of potential flaws in the shuttle's booster rockets. They did not. Both inside NASA and out, the safety of the shuttle was not seriously questioned until after the disaster.

A chemical disaster in Bhopal claimed the lives of thousands of villagers. Nobody had considered the dangers of placing a sophisticated chemical plant into a third-world country until after the disaster. Despite a questionable operating record, Union Carbide's sister plant in the United States was not examined by the surrounding community until after the disaster.

Bridge failures, fires in skyscrapers and automobile recalls all point to the disaster mentality: we tend not to address safety issues until after disaster has struck.

The nuclear disaster in Chernobyl illustrates that the disaster mentality is not a result of the capitalist system or American and Western European attitudes about technology. The Soviets have their share of disasters, we just don't hear about them as often.

Each successive disaster in recent years has outdone all previous disasters, in costs to society and in human life. Chernobyl was a far worse nuclear accident than Three Mile Island. The Challenger accident was worse than the Apollo 11 explosion. As systems become more and more complicated, failures in single components can produce catastrophic results. If these trends continue, one day a disaster will kill all of us.

The disaster mentality is not human nature. It is simply a way society has taught us to think and work.

MIT is also teaching the disaster mentality. The Institute is not alone: schools in the world teach it. With emphasis on quantity of work and deadlines rather than on quality and detail, we are being taught to court disaster after we graduate.

This all comes to mind now that exams and final paper deadlines are approaching. How many of us are living on the edge? How many of us have saved substantial amounts of work and studying for the last week or days of the term? How many of us are counting disaster?

The Institute is training the engineers of future Chernobyls.

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