

Freshman Pass/No Record Grading and Advanced Placement Policy

Report of a special subcommittee of the Committee on the Undergraduate Program

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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Preface

The accompanying report represents the efforts of the CUP Subcommittee on Freshman Pass/No Record Grading and Advanced Placement Policy to respond to its charge, spelled out in the letter of November 21, 1999 (See Appendix I-A), to examine these two important aspects of the freshman year at MIT.

The report itself is a bit complex in its organization, owing to the fact that the Subcommittee's charge was to examine *two* separate policy areas which needed to be considered separately and in combination. To assist in working through the report, it has been organized such that the main body of the text in each of the three parts can be read together as a cohesive narrative about the Subcommittee's findings and recommendations. The appendices in Parts II and III contain much supporting material behind these narratives. The "working parts" of the appendices include the direct answers to the questions that were put in the charge (Appendix II-A for Pass/No Record grading and Appendix III-A for Advanced Placement policy) and a direct assessment of the Pass/No Record grading system in light of the goals laid out for it in 1972 (Appendix II-B).

Executive Summary

In the Fall of 1999 the Committee on the Undergraduate Program formed a subcommittee and charged it with reviewing MIT's policies concerning freshman Pass/No Record grading and advanced placement examinations. This summary focuses on key recommendations made by the Subcommittee after a thorough review of both of these policies.

Pass/No Record Findings (Section II.B., pp. 14–19)

The current system of Pass/No Record grading for freshmen provides for an effective transition from high school to the rigors of MIT. However the benefits of this grading system diminish substantially in the Spring Term, to the detriment of the preparation of many freshmen for the rigors of the sophomore year and beyond. In addition, the current Fifth Week Flag system of identifying freshmen in academic difficulty needs to be enhanced and the status of subject prerequisites needs to be clarified.

Proposal to Change Freshman Grading System (Section II.C. pp. 19–25)

*In the **second term of the freshmen year**, all first year students should be graded on the basis of A/B/C/No External record, and the term rating should be computed.* Currently, freshmen are graded on a P/NR basis in both terms. Concerns noted in the previous section, reinforced by a desire to encourage an effective *transition* into MIT, lead to a recommendation that MIT adopt an intermediate form of traditional letter grading in the Spring Term. The proposal retains the “disaster insurance” feature of the current grading system, which does not externally report performance in subjects in which a student has received a D or F. See pp. 21–22.

A grading designation should be created to encourage students in their sophomore year to explore new intellectual areas. Sophomores should be allowed to specify one subject during the sophomore year as an “Exploratory Subject.” At the end of the semester the subject is taken, after the final grades have been assigned for the subject, the student would be given the option of accepting the letter grade assigned *or* having the transcript status changed to “Listener,” thus forfeiting the grade and credit. The Faculty should explore whether this mechanism should replace the current junior-senior P/D/F grading option. See pp. 23–24.

The Dean's Office should work with departments to develop additional methods to communicate in-term academic performance to students and advisors, to augment the current Fifth-Week Flag system. Currently a Fifth Week Flag system identifies freshmen who are in danger of failing subjects, based on early indicators, and reports that information to the students and their advisors. This current system replaced an extensive narrative assessment process that was part of the original Pass/Fail system adopted in the early 1970s. Because the effectiveness of the Fifth Week Flag system is limited, the Dean's Office

should work with the Departments to develop new ways to enhance the flow of information to freshmen and their advisors about student academic performance. See pp. 22–23.

Once the Committee on Curricula has approved a set of prerequisites for a subject, the faculty teaching that subject have the right to exclude students from taking the subject who do not satisfy the stated prerequisites. Currently, there is uncertainty and disagreement among faculty members about the right of instructors and departments to exclude students from subjects when they have not taken the appropriate prerequisite subjects. This presents special problems in the freshman year, when a small number of freshmen are tempted to take overly-advanced subjects to “get them out of the way” under P/NR. The most appropriate way to address this problem is local. Therefore, it should be clarified that faculty members and departments can actively enforce published prerequisites. See pp. 24–25.

Transfer students should, at most, be allowed one term of grading under the A/B/C/NR system upon their initial enrollment at MIT. Currently most transfer students enter MIT under the traditional letter grade system, but approximately one-third are offered the option of taking one semester under Pass/No Record. Because the strongest justification for Pass/No Record grading is to aid in the initial transition from home to college, transfer students should not be offered Pass/No Record grading in the future. Only a very small number of transfer students should be offered the opportunity to take subjects on an A/B/C/No Record basis. See p. 25.

Current policies concerning Fall Term Pass/No Record grading and the freshman year credit limit are unchanged. The present Pass/No Record system serves its goals well in the Fall Term. Any reduction in freshman academic effort is compensated for by various academic and non-academic benefits. The credit limits should remain unchanged, even in the Spring, to assist in assessing the new grading system and to remove the temptation to freshmen to overload. See pp. 19–20, 22.

Advanced Placement findings (Section III.B., pp. 54–57)

On the whole, the current system of offering advanced placement credit to MIT freshmen is consistent with the goals of MIT’s undergraduate program. MIT’s advanced placement system allows freshmen with varying backgrounds to engage with MIT’s rigors at an appropriate level. Nonetheless, there is uneasiness on the Subcommittee about granting college credit for subject material covered in high school, and therefore the Institute and its academic units need to be especially vigilant in ensuring that its policies of offering advanced placement credit are consistent with MIT’s educational goals. In addition, faculty governance over advanced placement policy has been unclear for many years, and is in need of clarification and strengthening.

Proposal to Change MIT’s Advanced Placement Policy (Section III.C., pp. 57–61)

Whenever advanced placement credit is granted, a score of "5" on the College Board Advanced Placement subject tests (or its equivalent on another examination) will generally be the accepted cutoff for receiving subject credit at MIT. The Subcommittee was uneasy with granting MIT subject credit for academic work accomplished during high school. Yet a balance needs to be struck between this uneasiness and the pragmatic need to assess the prior preparation of entering students, allowing those who are appropriately prepared to move ahead earlier in their academic program. The College Board Advanced Placement subjects tests, and their equivalents, are sometimes appropriate assessment tools.

Currently, the general cutoff for MIT subject credit for performance on a College Board Advanced Placement subject exam is a "4," although departments and programs have been gravitating toward the higher threshold in recent years. Concerns over a downward drift in the performance on College Board Advanced Placement tests, combined with MIT's high academic standards, require this higher threshold as a general matter. A lower threshold may be appropriate in particular cases; departments may make such exceptions, within a set of flexible guidelines. In addition, MIT academic units are under no obligation to offer credit through advanced placement examinations. See pp. 57–58.

Departments responsible for Science Requirement subjects may offer subject credit through advanced placement exams, so long as these examinations cover curricula that are materially the same as the corresponding MIT subjects. Changes in Science Requirement policies must be reported to the CUP. Recognizing the distinct flavor of many Science Requirement subjects as taught at MIT, it is important that students receiving credit for these subjects through advanced placement exams be exposed to the same material that is taught at MIT. In addition, there is currently no clear policy about faculty review and oversight of advanced placement examinations administered outside MIT. The recommendation emphasizes local oversight of policy and monitoring of tests, with periodic reporting to the faculty committee that is responsible for the freshman year program. See p. 59.

Departments responsible for subjects other than those meeting the Science Requirement or the HASS requirement may offer MIT subject credit, General Elective Credit, or subject placement, through advanced placement exams. Changes in departmental policies will be reported to the Committee on Curricula. This recommendation parallels recommendations pertaining to the Science Requirement (above) and HASS Requirement (below), and is intended to apply to all subjects that do not fit within one of these requirements. The COC is the faculty committee responsible for approving individual subjects and changes to departmental programs, and therefore is the appropriate committee to receive these reports. See p. 60.

The Dean of Humanities, Arts, and Social Science shall be responsible for developing and administering policy concerning the granting of HASS or HASS-D credit through examinations. This parallels the previous two recommendations. The Rules and

Regulations of the Faculty charge the Dean of Humanities, Arts, and Social Science with the responsibility for overseeing the HASS requirement. See p. 60.

The Registrar shall begin recording the individual examinations for which MIT undergraduates receive General Elective Credit, rather than aggregating this subject credit together in one single category. Currently, the Registrar's Office does not record, for each student, the individual subject examinations for which students have received General Elective Credit. This makes it difficult to administer some details of the advanced placement policy and to track, at the level of the individual student, the academic trajectory undergraduates follow when they come to MIT with advanced placement credit. See pp. 60–61.

The administrative oversight of MIT's advanced placement policy should be moved from the Admissions Office to the Office of Academic Services. The current administrative home of advanced placement policy at MIT is a vestige of past practice, in which several faculty members were involved in the daily administration of the Admissions Office. It is appropriate for advanced placement policy to be administered by a unit of the Dean's Office that is directly responsible for curriculum and faculty committee support. See p. 61.

Current policies concerning the granting of subject credit and placement generally, administering advanced standing exams, and allowing departments to accept advanced placement examinations should remain unchanged. Although the Subcommittee recommends incremental changes in MIT's advanced placement policy, and a slight tightening-up of that policy, the general policy of allowing Institute subject credit is unchanged, for largely practical reasons. (See pp. 56–58.) In addition, nothing in the Subcommittee's recommendations should be construed as affecting traditional advanced standing examinations given by MIT Departments (see p. 58) or the ability of Departments to accept an advanced placement examination as evidence of the completion of a subject prerequisite, at its discretion (see p. 60).