

Committee on the Undergraduate Program

2000–2001

Report and Recommendations to the Faculty on Grading, Advanced Placement Credit and Prerequisites

The Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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In the Fall of 1999, the Committee on the Undergraduate Program (CUP) formed a subcommittee to review MIT's policies and practices concerning freshman Pass/No Record grading and advanced placement credit. The report and recommendations of the subcommittee, chaired by Professor Charles Stewart, were submitted to the CUP on October 4, 2000. The CUP received the report with considerable enthusiasm and began several months of work soliciting and reviewing feedback from the MIT community. A series of student forums were organized in living groups, meetings with individual academic departments were arranged, and feedback was solicited via an online form provided to all members of the community. As part of the Faculty Meeting of November 15, 2000, Professor Robert Jaffe, chair of the CUP, and Professor Stewart discussed the recommendations and engaged in spirited exchange with faculty in attendance. Finally, CUP met with other key undergraduate Faculty committees to discuss these recommendations. As a result of these forums and meetings and the important feedback provided, the subcommittee was asked by the CUP to further clarify and comment on some of their original recommendations. You can read both the CUP's request for clarification and the subcommittee's response.

Input from the community — faculty, students, and staff — as well as deliberations within CUP have helped shape the final recommendations that we now forward to the Faculty.

It is understood that the implementation of the policy recommendations described below will require additional resources. The CUP will work with the Dean for Undergraduate Education to obtain these resources.

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1.0 Pass/No Record Grading

1.1 Findings

The current system of Pass/No Record grade reporting 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 second term, to the detriment of the preparation of many freshmen for the rigors of the sophomore year and beyond. The subcommittee encountered many faculty who voiced concerns that the lower level of accountability associated with the second term of the freshman year encouraged complacency among some students which interfered with their academic performance in the sophomore year.

There is also considerable evidence that the current grading system eventually undermines the mastery of fundamental material. This concern is frequently voiced by instructors who teach Science Requirement subjects and by those who teach the principal "portal" subjects in the majors. Many Science Requirement instructors testify to subtle games played by students to "get by" on less than full especially in the second term.

Many faculty also voiced concerns that the current grading system encourages undergraduates to take difficult subjects in the freshman year, before they have taken the prerequisites. The subcommittee found that such problems are significant, but localized in a few subjects.

The subcommittee examined a significant amount of data, which, viewed in its entirety, provides a useful and consistent view of the freshman year. Freshmen devote themselves to many academic and extracurricular pursuits at a level as great as, perhaps even greater than, that of upperclassmen. They devote considerable time to their studies, but the average amount of time spent on the Science Requirements seems consistently too low. As a result the average GPA of freshmen is lower for freshmen than for upperclassmen.

1.2 Recommendations

Grades. Beginning with the freshman class entering in the Fall of 2002, the CUP recommends that second term freshman grades be reported on the student's external transcript on the basis of A-B-C/No External Record, and a grade point average be computed based on these grades. (Under special circumstances, a second term of grade reporting under Pass/No External Record may be granted to a student through the Committee on Academic Performance.) This proposal retains the "disaster insurance" feature of the current grade reporting system, which does not externally report performance in subjects in which a student has received a D or F.

The CUP recommends that current policies concerning first term Pass/No Record grading and the freshman year credit limit be unchanged. The present Pass/No Record system serves its goals well in the first 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 second term, to assist in assessing the new grading system and to remove the temptation for freshmen to overload.

Performance Feedback. An improved performance feedback system should be introduced to augment the current Fifth Week Flag. 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. Because the current Fifth Week Flag system does not meet the goals outlined for it in the Faculty motion passed in 1995, the Office of the Dean for Undergraduate Education should work with the Departments to develop new ways to enhance the flow of information to freshmen and their advisors about student academic performance.

Transfer Students. It is also recommended that transfer students be allowed, at most, one term of grade reporting under the A-B-C/No Record system upon their initial enrollment at MIT. Transfer students would not be offered the option of Pass/No Record grade reporting, as it is deemed appropriate only for students making the transition from high school to college.

Review. The CUP recommends that the freshman grade reporting system be reviewed again after these changes have been in place for four years (i.e., in Academic Year 2006–07). The terms of the review should include trends in student performance in the first year and subsequent years; changes in subject enrollment and loads in the first year; the effect of including second term passing grades on the overall cumulative rating; and faculty and student opinion about the effects of these changes.

Implementation. These recommendations are changes to Faculty policy that will require Faculty approval to implement (please see the proposed Motions provided as an attachment in Appendix A).

Guidelines for the use of the internal grade record of freshmen have been revised to reflect the proposed new grading system (the proposed guidelines are provided as an attachment in Appendix B).

2.0 Grading in the Second Year

2.1 Findings

The faculty had originally hoped that the Pass/No Record grading system would encourage freshmen to explore a wide variety of new academic possibilities. The subcommittee's review of the use of the Pass/No Record grading system suggests that it, in fact, operates to encourage just the opposite — freshmen tend to concentrate their enrollments in a limited number of difficult subjects, to "get them out of the way" under Pass/No Record. The change proposed in §1.2 addresses this issue. However, many faculty would still like to see the grading system encourage exploration. Students likewise desire flexibility to encourage exploration.

The practice at MIT is for freshmen to choose majors at the end of the first year. As a result many students designate majors before taking a subject in their chosen field. Without any direct experience in a likely major and without strong opinions about what academic field they wish to pursue, many students naturally follow the line of least resistance, initially picking the largest majors. Once the sophomore year gets underway, the error of this strategy may be revealed, leading to a substantial churning of majors, as sophomores move (on net) from the larger majors to the smaller ones. As a result, some of our students end up with a significant blot on their transcript — poor performance in the first subject of a major — a major which may be abandoned in light of that poor performance.

Finally, the subcommittee observed that the sophomore year, alone among the four undergraduate years, does not offer students a flexible grading option, since juniors and seniors have the two-subject P/D/F option available to them.

2.2 Recommendations

The CUP recommends that a grading designation be created to encourage students in their sophomore year to explore new intellectual areas and to further the following goals:

- To ease the transition into the sophomore year by creating a flexible grading option;
- To encourage academic exploration in the sophomore year, just as the grading system encourages exploration in the freshman, junior, and senior years;
- To encourage sophomores to consider unconventional majors at the start of their second year and to help avoid bad outcomes based on insufficient information.

The CUP recommends that sophomores be allowed to specify one subject per term during their 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 or having the transcript status changed to "Listener," thus forfeiting the grade and credit.

Since there continue to be some concerns about whether the introduction of this grading option will, indeed, promote intellectual risk-taking among our second-year students, the CUP has elected to authorize a five-year educational experiment to further these goals through the introduction of an "Exploratory Subject" option for sophomores.

2.3 Implementation: A CUP–Authorized Experiment — Sophomore Year Exploratory Subject Option

Beginning in the Fall of 2002, the CUP authorizes a five-year experiment establishing an "Exploratory Subject" grade report option for sophomores. This option is intended to provide positive inducements to encourage undergraduates to try out new academic directions in the sophomore year. The terms of the experiment are as follows:

- During each term of their second year at MIT, sophomores will be permitted to designate one subject as "Exploratory." Any subject at MIT — including an Institute or departmental requirement — may be designated "Exploratory."
- An Exploratory Subject must be designated in consultation with the student's advisor by Add Date.
- Students may elect to forfeit the grade and units earned in an Exploratory Subject and change the status of this subject to "Listener." This must be done before Registration Day of the succeeding term.
- Students who have elected Exploratory status for a particular subject are not identified to the instructor, and the grading standards are unchanged.

The CUP will undertake a review of this experiment beginning in the Fall of 2006. At that time the CUP could make the Exploratory Subject permanent, extend it to the junior and senior years, replacing the present pass/fail option, terminate the experiment, or suggest further changes. If the experiment is not explicitly continued past the class entering their sophomore year in the Fall of 2007, it terminates with that class.

During the time of the Exploratory Subject experiment, the Office of the Dean for Undergraduate Education will monitor basic statistics about the use of Exploratory Subjects and its consequences. These include the number of Exploratory Subjects declared and their distribution across subjects; the unit loads of students declaring Exploratory Subjects; the date on which Exploratory

Subjects are declared (Registration Day, Add Date, etc.); the number of Exploratory Subjects actually completed (i.e., not dropped by Drop Date); and the number of Exploratory Subjects that are converted to Listener status and their distribution across subjects.

The eventual evaluation of the Exploratory Subject experiment should examine its use as a tool for selecting majors and for reducing pace and pressure among sophomores. In addition to reviewing the quantitative information mentioned above, the review should seek input from undergraduates and departmental advisors for qualitative evidence about how students and advisors use this choice.

By way of this summary, the CUP is informing the Faculty of its intention to undertake this five-year experiment. It intends to use the Faculty meeting as an opportunity to discuss this initiative further before it finalizes the terms of the experiment. The CUP will ask the Faculty for an endorsement of its intention to undertake this limited experiment. A resolution is provided to that effect in Appendix A.

3.0 Prerequisite Subjects

3.1 Findings

One of the most persistent and vexing problems heard from faculty was the tendency of some freshmen to take advanced subjects, without the appropriate prerequisite subjects. Currently, there is uncertainty and confusion among faculty members about the right of instructors and/or 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 Pass/No Record grading.

Some faculty and departments (notably Physics) have actively enforced published prerequisites and have worked with the Office of the Dean for Undergraduate Education to automate that practice.

After considerable discussion, the subcommittee and the CUP concluded that this problem could be effectively addressed merely by affirming this right, without further complicating the designation of prerequisites or the catalog description of subjects. Therefore, the CUP recommends that the Faculty affirm the right of faculty members and departments to actively enforce published prerequisites.

3.2 Recommendations

The CUP recommends that, effective immediately, language be introduced in the catalogue and other publications (as presented in Appendix C) affirming the right

of instructors to enforce stated prerequisites for their subjects and to refuse registration to students who do not meet those prerequisites. The Registrar will develop mechanisms to aid faculty in this endeavor at their request.

The Committee on Curricula will also ask that departments review current prerequisites to ensure that such subjects are to be completed prior to enrollment and not merely recommended or suggested as optional background.

It is expected that at the first class during the term instructors will reiterate the prerequisites and co-requisites of a subject and describe acceptable substitutions. Students who do not have the stated prerequisites should obtain the permission of the instructor to remain in the subject.

At the Faculty meeting, the CUP will ask to Faculty to take notice of and affirm this heretofore poorly communicated option available to instructors; a Resolution is provided to that effect in Appendix A.

4.0 Advanced Placement Credit

4.1 Findings

On the whole, MIT's current system of offering advanced placement credit to its freshmen is consistent with the goals of its undergraduate program. MIT's advanced placement system allows freshmen with varying backgrounds to engage with MIT's rigors at an appropriate level. Nonetheless, the subcommittee was uneasy about granting college credit for subject material covered in high school.

In recent years faculty oversight of advanced placement policy has been uneven, owing largely to uncertainties about who has responsibility for the policy and what general Institute-wide principles, if any, should guide changes. Advanced placement policy concerning the Science Requirement has been given the greatest scrutiny. The trend has been to "raise the bar" for students to satisfy the Science Requirement through AP exams, and instead to treat the exams as tools to place students appropriately in MIT subjects.

Currently, the Registrar's Office does not record, for each student, the individual subject examinations for which students have received General Elective Credit.

The current administrative home of advanced placement is in the Admissions Office. This reflects a past era, when several faculty members were involved in the daily administration of the Admissions Office.

4.2 Recommendations

The CUP recommends that MIT continue to award MIT subject and general elective credit and placement through advanced placement exams presented by entering first-year students. However, advanced placement credit policies should be consistent with MIT's educational goals, and departments should be under no obligation to award advanced placement credit or placement based on these scores. A score of 5 on the College Board AP subject test (or its equivalent on another examination) should generally be the accepted cutoff for receiving subject credit at MIT.

It further recommends that oversight of advanced placement credit be the shared responsibility of CUP (for subjects satisfying the Science Requirement); the Dean of the School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (for subjects satisfying the HASS Requirement); and the Committee on Curricula (for all other undergraduate subjects). As the faculty committee "exercising oversight responsibility for undergraduate education," the CUP retains oversight of general policy regarding advanced placement credit.

The Registrar should begin recording on grade reports and the transcript individual examination information for which MIT undergraduates receive General Elective Credit.

The administrative oversight for advanced placement and transfer credit for incoming freshmen should be transferred from the Admissions Office to the Office of Academic Services.

Finally, nothing in the recommendations described above should be construed as affecting traditional advanced standing examinations given by MIT departments or the ability of departments to accept an advanced placement examination as evidence of the completion of a subject prerequisite, at its discretion.

At the Faculty meeting, the CUP will ask the Faculty to take notice of and affirm the CUP proposals to improve the oversight and management of advanced placement credit. A resolution to that effect is provided in Appendix A.

Appendix A: Recommendations to the Faculty from the Committee on the Undergraduate Program Proposed Motions

The Committee on the Undergraduate Program (CUP) has received the report and recommendations of the CUP Subcommittee on Freshman Pass/No Record Grading and Advanced Placement Policy and offers the following resolutions to the Faculty:

I. Motion on Freshman Pass/No Record Grading

RESOLVED:

1. Beginning in the Academic Year 2002–2003, in the second term of the freshman year the grades of all first year students will be reported on the basis of A-B-C/No External Record. Non-passing grades will be recorded by the Registrar for use within the Institute only and will not appear on official Institute transcripts.
2. Passing grades assigned in the second term of the freshman year will be used in calculating students' term and cumulative ratings.
3. Transfer students will, at most, be allowed one term of grade reporting under the A-B-C/No External Record system upon their initial enrollment at MIT and will not be offered the option of grade reporting under Pass/No External Record.
4. The MIT freshman grade reporting system shall be reviewed by CUP again after these changes have been in place for four years (i.e., Academic Year 2006–2007). The terms of the review shall include an analysis of the trends in student performance in the first year and subsequent years; of changes in subject enrollment and loads in the first year; of the effect of including second term passing grades on the overall cumulative rating; and of faculty and student opinion about the effects of these changes.

Proposed Changes to *Rules and Regulations of the Faculty* (changes in blue)

- 2.62.1 The grades to be awarded to students who satisfactorily complete the work of a subject by the end of a term and the definitions of these grades are:
- A** Exceptionally good performance, demonstrating a superior understanding of the subject matter, a foundation of extensive

knowledge, and a skillful use of concepts and/or materials.

- B** Good performance, demonstrating capacity to use the appropriate concepts, a good understanding of the subject matter, and an ability to handle the problems and materials encountered in the subject.
- C** Adequate performance, demonstrating an adequate understanding of the subject matter, an ability to handle relatively simple problems, and adequate preparation for moving on to more advanced work in the field.
- D** Minimally acceptable performance, demonstrating at least partial familiarity with the subject matter and some capacity to deal with relatively simple problems, but also demonstrating deficiencies serious enough to make it inadvisable to proceed further in the field without additional work.
- P** When the use of the grade P is authorized, it reflects performance at any of the levels A, B, or C, with grading to be done on a P/D/F basis.

Modifiers of + and - shall be allowed on the grades of A, B, and C. These modifiers are only for internal grade reports. Term and cumulative averages (internal and external) shall be calculated without modifiers.

The grade of P is authorized for use under the following circumstances:

- i.** in any subject taken by a first-year undergraduate student in the first semester or during the January Independent Activities Period.
- ii.** in any of the subjects designated by the Committee on Curricula, the Committee on the Undergraduate Program, the Committee on Graduate School Programs, or by vote of the Faculty as subjects to be graded on a P/D/F basis for all students registered in them.
- iii.** in special programs designated by the Committee on the Undergraduate Program or by vote of the Faculty.
- iv.** in a total of no more than two subjects elected during the third and subsequent years in an undergraduate program. These

subjects cannot be used to fulfill General Institute or Departmental Requirements, and must be elected and the Registrar notified before the end of the fifth week of the term.

The factors which determine the award of grades in any particular subject will necessarily be affected by the scope and level of that subject. In relatively elementary subjects the mastery of particular skills will often be of primary importance, whereas in more advanced subjects more complex considerations may enter into the evaluation.

The Faculty wishes to make it clear that in determining a student's grade consideration will be given for elegance of presentation, creativity, imagination, and originality, where these may appropriately be called for.

The transcript of the student's record shall contain the names of the subjects taken, the grades received, and a description of the grades in use at the time the student was enrolled. Transcripts shall not include any reference to the +/- modifiers.

2.63 Special Provisions for First-Year Undergraduate Students:

2.63.1 For first-year undergraduate students: (a) in the first semester and in the Independent Activities Period, the only passing grade permanently recorded by the Registrar shall be P; and (b) in the first semester, in the Independent Activities Period, and in the second semester, the non-passing grades of D, F, O, and OX shall be recorded by the Registrar for use within the Institute only, and shall not appear on official Institute transcripts.

2.63.2 At the beginning of the sixth week of each term, instructors of first-year students shall notify in writing those students performing at a non-passing level that they are at risk of not passing the subject. Each notification should request that the freshman meet with the instructor immediately and may include additional relevant information about the student's performance. A copy of each such notification should be provided to the Dean for Undergraduate Education and to the student's Freshman Advisor. Instructors are expected to initiate with each student a discussion of the student's performance strengths and weaknesses.

At the end of the fall terms (and at the end of Independent Activities Period), letter grades equivalent to the letter grades assigned to upper-class students shall be provided to freshmen and their advisors. Freshman letter grades may not appear on students' official internal grade reports or external transcripts and are to be used in accordance with guidelines established by the Committee on the Undergraduate Program.

The department in which a subject is taught is responsible for ensuring that records of freshman performance are retained for a period of five years. This information may be released only when a student requests a copy of his or her record in the subject.

II. Motion on Exploratory Subjects in the Sophomore Year

RESOLVED:

The Faculty endorses the proposal by the Committee on the Undergraduate Program (CUP) to introduce a five-year experiment under which sophomores may designate one "Exploratory" subject in each of their Fall and Spring semesters. The experiment will begin in the academic year 2002–2003 and end after the academic year 2006–2007, unless it is explicitly continued or made permanent by a motion of the Faculty. A review of the experiment will be undertaken by the CUP in the academic year 2005–2006.

An Exploratory Subject is one in which the student may either accept the grade awarded in the subject or change the subject to Listener status after the end of the term. Any subject at MIT — including an Institute or departmental requirement — may be designated "Exploratory."

This subject must be designated by Add Date. Students who elect to forfeit the grade and units earned in an Exploratory Subject and change the status of this subject to Listener status may do so up until Registration Day of the succeeding term. Students who have elected Exploratory status for a particular subject are not identified to the instructor, and the grading standards are unchanged.

III. Motion on Prerequisite Subjects

RESOLVED:

The Faculty affirms the right of instructors to exclude from their subjects students who do not have the prerequisites previously approved by the appropriate faculty committee and listed in the subject description. The Registrar shall take the necessary actions to assist instructors in enforcing prerequisites. The Committee on Curricula will ask departments to review current prerequisites listed for undergraduate subjects in the catalogue to ensure that subjects identified as "prerequisite" should be completed prior to enrollment.

IV. Motion on Advanced Placement Credit

RESOLVED:

The Faculty endorses the proposal of the Committee of the Undergraduate Program (CUP) that oversight of advanced placement credit be the shared responsibility of CUP (for subjects satisfying the Science Requirement); the Dean of the School of Humanities, Arts, and Social Sciences (for subjects satisfying the HASS requirement); and the Committee on Curricula (for all other undergraduate subjects). As the faculty committee "exercising oversight responsibility for undergraduate education, including the freshman year," the CUP retains oversight of general policy regarding advanced placement credit.

Appendix B: Policy on the Release of First Year Student Hidden Grades

Proposed New Policy Statement

The performance of freshmen in all subjects taken during their first term at MIT (as well as during the January Independent Activities Period) is communicated on a Pass/No External Record basis; in the second term, freshmen performance is communicated on an A-B-C/No External Record basis. (Under special circumstances, a second term of grading under Pass/No External Record may be granted to a student through the Committee on Academic Performance.)

Instructors are expected to submit regular letter grades each term to the Registrar. In the first semester and in IAP, a passing grade for a freshman is permanently recorded as a P. The P appears on both the external transcript and the internal grade report. A, B, and C grades are only communicated to advisors and students at the end of the fall term and IAP in the form of two-part unofficial reports, which also include non-passing grades. These reports are retained in each student's advising folder.

Freshman non-passing grades (D, F, O, OX) appear on the internal grade report (they are followed by an N for No-Record). They do not appear on the external transcript.

Therefore, "hidden" grades include both A, B, C grades for first semester and IAP, and DN, FN, ON, OXN grades for first semester, IAP, and second semester.

As approved by the CUP, the Guidelines for the Use of Hidden Grades are as follows:

- Hidden grades exist to help student self-evaluation and academic advising at MIT.
- First-year hidden grades may not be used to prevent students from enrolling in an academic department.
- MIT recognizes a student's right under Federal law to have access to information maintained about him or her, but MIT will not send copies of hidden grades to third parties. It is not consistent with the purpose of hidden grades for faculty or staff members to release them except to the student, or to take initiatives such as suggesting that students provide first-year hidden grades to third parties.
- No MIT office or individual should provide information directly to a graduate school, company, or any other third party concerning assigned hidden grades — by phone, in writing, or by transmitting the unofficial report of the student's hidden grades. If the student requests it, a letter, addressed to the student, will be prepared by the department that gave the subject, informing him or her of the assigned grade that is in the file. (The one exception to the above is that students applying to medical school may request that their letters be sent to the Preprofessional Advising Office for forwarding to medical schools they designate.) It is hoped that students' use of hidden grades for other than intended purposes can be reduced to the lowest level possible.
- The Registrar's Office will retain a record of letter grades assigned to freshmen. This record may be used for educational research purposes only under the authorization of the Dean for Undergraduate Education.

Hidden grades are used within MIT for advising functions; that is, helping students make academic choices. It is inappropriate to use hidden grades for "evaluating" students; that is, making comparisons leading to choices among students, such as selections for student employment or UROP.

According to the *Rules and Regulations of the Faculty*, academic departments should keep the record of hidden letter grades assigned to freshmen for five years; they should then destroy the record. The Dean for Undergraduate Education is responsible for ensuring that hidden grades are used only as described above.

Revised
March 2001

Appendix C: Statement on Prerequisite Subjects

Prerequisites are used to indicate the sequence in which subjects are to be taken and the base of knowledge on which a particular subject will build. Before taking a subject, a student should complete any prerequisite(s) listed in the catalogue

description for that subject. (Co-requisites, which are listed in italics, are to be taken concurrently.)

Once prerequisites and co-requisites are included in a subject listing, it is the responsibility of the instructor to insure that the subject is taught at that level. At the first class instructors should reiterate the prerequisites and co-requisites, and describe acceptable substitutions.

Students who do not have the stated prerequisites should obtain the permission of the instructor. Instructors may request that the Registrar's Office identify students without prerequisites, and in some cases, screen them from the subjects.

If the instructor allows a student to waive or make a substitution for a prerequisite, it is then the student's responsibility to master any missing background material in a timely fashion so that the content of the subject does not change for other students in the subject.

The instructor may determine that a student does not have the required preparation and knowledge to take a subject and may, with the help of the Registrar's Office, exclude the student from the subject.

Some departments require students with a D-level performance in certain prerequisite subjects within the departmental program to do additional work or to retake the prerequisite before proceeding with the follow-on subject.

