4 April 2006

To Whom It May Concern,

We, the members of the Course VI Education Committee, are writing to request feedback from your department and student groups about a proposal to create a Pass/D/Fail option for graduate students, which currently does not exist on an Institute-wide level. If there is significant support for the proposal, we would like to approach the appropriate Institute committees to examine it and implement its recommendations.

There is an issue with the options available for graduate students interested in taking subjects beyond their degree requirements. Currently, a graduate student may register to take classes only on grades (A/B/C/D/F) or as a listener, unless the class is listed as being P/D/F only for all registered students. Although juniors and seniors at MIT may take up to two classes beyond their requirements on P/D/F, there does not exist such an option for graduate students.

The evaluation process for students should vary with the level of study. We have found that limiting our graduate students to grades or listener status regardless of their level of study has led to a number of difficulties for both the students and departments:

1) The current departmental course requirements for the doctoral program are typically completed by at least the end of the second year of graduate study. Many graduate students in Course VI, and especially post-Masters students, opt not to take additional classes that interest them because of the amount of time it would take away from their research if they were to take the subject on grades and do all the work they believe would be needed to earn an "A".

2) Students interested in exploring tangential fields may not have all the background for a subject, but would still benefit from the material covered. Anxiety about grades may deter students from signing up for the subject in the first place.

3) Students who wish to maintain a certain GPA currently tend to drop subjects mid-term if they do poorly on exams. Thus, their learning in that subject is cut short prematurely. Having a P/D/F option would encourage more stable enrollment as the term progresses, which would benefit the students' education and also better enable teaching staff and departments to forecast their workload.

4) Most subjects at MIT rely on problem sets or other assignments as a significant portion of the learning process. Even if a listener is motivated enough to do the work (which is rare), they do not receive feedback nor does the subject show up on the external transcript (even though it counts against the student's course load). It would benefit students if their potential employers had a better sense of the student's background due to a more complete transcript.

5) Classes and office hours may become overcrowded with listeners, and departments may not supply the correct amount of support staff to some subjects because of inaccurate student counts.

6) Graduate seminars and classes end up getting cancelled because there are not enough students taking them for credit, even though there are often many students who want to learn the material.

We think that having a P/D/F option for graduate students would allow students to learn material beyond their requirements without the burden of grades. The students would have to do the majority of assignments, but would not have to worry about the sometimes extremely time-consuming details that do not always provide much additional insight into the material. In addition, having a P/D/F option would help the department provide more appropriate resources.

As a graduate student at an institute such as MIT, research is eventually the focus of graduate study. However, learning new material in classes is still an important part of the process. With various fields overlapping more and more, it is important for students to have the ability to explore and learn other subjects. As the system currently stands, there is an unnecessarily high cost for such exploration.

We are also aware of some potential ill effects of the proposed system:

1) Increased enrollment may produce more work for professors and TAs if enrollment increases.
    Solution: Better appropriation of resources, with a load that is more visible and accounted for.

2) Fewer students may opt to take the class on grades as more choose the P/D/F option.
    Solution: Perhaps limit the number of classes a graduate student can take on P/D/F per term or over the duration of his/her studies.

3) The average scores in a subject might go down, as there are more students who desire nothing higher than a P. This may make subjects "easier" for those on grades.
    Solution: Perhaps allow instructors to define the required work differently for the two groups (as currently already happens in the not infrequent case where undergraduate and graduate classes share common lectures, for instance).

4) Some subjects have group projects or assignments. Members of groups who are on P/D/F might do less work than students who are on regular grades.
    Solution: Put all the P/D/F students in the same group(s) (at the discretion of the instructor).

Although we are aware of the potential drawbacks of implementing a P/D/F system, we still believe the benefits to graduate students and teaching staff will outweigh the difficulties.

Please let us know if any of the issues we have described are apparent in your department as well. Also, we would like to hear about any other pros or cons we have not addressed.

Thank you,

EECS Education (VI-Ed) Committee
vi-ed@csail.mit.edu