

# opinion

Column/Andrew L. Fish

## Lack of warmth causes pain

Many MIT students find acquaintances their freshmen year through dumb luck. They wind up in a lot of the same recitations, end up sitting with each other in lecture, and become friendly.

Mark Kordos '89 was such an acquaintance of mine. We'd sit together in 26-100, talk about classes, problem sets, singing, the newspaper, and other mundane topics. I always admired Mark — he was brighter than I could ever hope to be and was also an excellent singer. On top of that, he was probably the friendliest MIT student I had ever met.

After freshman year our paths did not cross. I had almost totally forgotten about Mark — until he threw himself from his dormitory window last Friday.

When I realized it was *that* Mark who decided to take his life I was stunned — he was bright, affable, and talented. This was an incredible waste of life.

I have stood quietly by as the suicides at MIT have piled up — one the spring of my freshman year, two the fall of my sophomore year, three last fall, and now Mark. Until now I have been willing to dismiss these deaths as statistical anomalies, but I cannot believe this anymore. In addition to seven suicides, I know at least one other student who attempted suicide, and at least two others who have gone over the edge at this school. MIT should include a warning label with its offers of admission — "WARNING: The Institute May Be Hazardous To Your Health."

A large part of the problem is the lack of intimate support on the campus. Students with problems are ignored — other students are either too busy, inexperienced, or insensitive to help. One must actively seek aid from the Dean's Office; a student with too much pride, too much work,

or simply not enough initiative is left to twist slowly in the wind.

After three students took their own lives last fall, all the administration could do was send us an impersonal letter with some telephone numbers to call before we slit our wrists. The suicides of the past two autumns affected a large segment of the student body, but the Dean's Office did not deem it appropriate to hold seminars in living groups to discuss students concerns; rather, they left students to their own devices. It is no surprise that loneliness and depression thrive in this climate.

Nevertheless, while the Dean's Office is the obvious whipping boy in a situation like this, another group bears a larger part of the blame — the MIT faculty.

The faculty sets the tone of the academic environment on this campus, and that tone is generally one of scorn and disrespect. MIT has one of the most demanding curriculums in the country — there probably weren't more than 20 students in my high school who could make it through this place. Yet the message the faculty transmits to the students is that they are lazy and do not perform up to expectations.

I have never had a professor who complimented a class on test performance. But I have had many who harped on low class averages, telling students they had to study harder or pay more attention to lecture.

Along the same lines, an Undergraduate Academic Support Office study told students that most of them spend time "non-productively" during the Independent Activities Period. Dean for Undergraduate Education Margaret L. A. MacVicar '65 said she could not justify the expenses of IAP unless the time was put to good use.

Also, Kenneth Manning, the chairman of the Committee on the First Year Program, told us

that "we don't want students to use activities as an excuse for not doing well in their classes" and that "students should be held responsible for something." He implied that MIT students are irresponsible people looking for excuses to slack off.

Comments like these from faculty members tend to demoralize students, many of whom pull multiple all-nighters just to complete basic course requirements. The message is clear — you are never working hard enough. Luckily, most of faculty can abandon ship at night, leaving the deans and the students themselves to face the consequences of this never-ending pressure.

The seven suicides of the past three years do not begin to tell the tale of suffering this campus inflicts on many of its students. The compulsion to constantly work, often at the exclusion of all other activities, can warp the minds and bodies of students, sometimes with tragic results. We need a more intimate support network, a more understanding faculty, and a student body that can look beyond the next problem set, or eventually we will all know a victim.

*Andrew L. Fish, a junior in the Departments of Chemistry and Political Science, is editor in chief of The Tech.*