

5/10/88

# opinion

## feedback

### **Globe portrayed MIT unfairly**

(Editor's note: The Tech received a copy of the following letter addressed to The Boston Globe.)

To the Editor:

The May 5 headline and article at the top of page one in *The Boston Globe*, regarding suicides at MIT, create the impression that MIT has more suicides than other universities and that the rigor of its educational philosophy drives more students to that tragic act.

Neither impression is correct.

The *Globe* reported the national average for suicides per 10,000 college age students is 1.4 per year. The current enrollment at MIT is 9,565. Over more than 24 years, suicides at MIT have been somewhat below that average.

Even one suicide is one too many. They are tragedies for the families, friends and teachers of these students, and for the university. The *Globe's* alarmist headline ("Cost of Excellence?"),

and prominent placement of its May 5 article, compounded the sorrow and raised groundless fears.

The tragic death of Mark Kordos on April 8 was the third suicide at MIT since October 1, not the fourth as the *Globe* article said. It was the 10th suicide since the beginning of 1978. Over more than 24 years, since 1964, 26 students have died by suicide at MIT. During this period there were eight calendar years when there were no suicides, and one year, in the 1970s, when there were four. In years when there were no suicides at MIT and in years when there were suicides, the MIT educational experience has been the same — demanding, intensive and rewarding.

An authority on student suicide, Professor Leon Eisenberg, MD, of the Harvard Medical School, wrote in the January 1984 *Pediatric Annals*:

"In a coeducational university

with as many as 10,000 students, no more than one or two suicides would be expected in a given year at current national rates for comparable age cohorts."

"The statistical properties of such distributions will result in years with none and others with as many as four or five deaths simply by random variation. In consequence, the assessment of changes in rates at a single university from year to year is extremely difficult."

News coverage of the subject, without sensationalizing it, is difficult. Sensationalized treatment can be dangerous. Dr. Eisenberg, in the *Pediatric Annals* article, said that several studies of the impact of media, particularly television, in reporting suicide "indicate the importance of minimizing sensationalized reporting of suicides."

The studies have indicated that there is a "copycat" syndrome in which unstable persons who read, hear, or view stories about suicide may themselves then commit suicide.

The *Globe's* reporter generally tried to be balanced, although the error in numbers distorts the situation. But the editors made an inappropriate decision in placing the article — about an event nearly a month ago — as the left-hand lead story of a newspaper with only two articles in the newsstand display, the top half of the front page. The placement of the story represents a sensationalism which seems out of place in the *Globe*.

The death of any student is one that saddens all of us at MIT. Such matters need to be reported, but they also need to be presented and placed with sensitivity, whether on a newspaper page or a television or radio broadcast.

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