

Senior House Decision Process FAQ

Because my office has received many questions about the Senior House turnaround and our recent decisions, I put together the following FAQs. I hope they provide some clarity on this year's process and the current situation.

Because they build on three recent communications that I wrote for the MIT community (available [here](#), [here](#), and [here](#)), I encourage you to read those, too.

Cynthia Barnhart
Chancellor

1. What prompted the administration to institute the turnaround in June 2016?

A 2016 analysis of [graduation rate data](#) showed that, of all the students in the MIT classes of 2008 to 2015, 7.7% had never graduated. But for those living in Senior House, the figure was 21.1%.

This naturally sparked our concern. After considering the many factors that might contribute to this outcome, MIT's other senior officers and I decided that, to meet our responsibility to provide every MIT student with an excellent education and a healthy residential experience, we needed to launch an effort to promote each resident's well-being and personal and intellectual growth: the Senior House "turnaround." It consisted of three main parts:

- Beginning a sustained dialogue and partnership between us and the Senior House community;
- Providing enhanced in-residence support and resources to residents; and
- Placing a moratorium on allowing first-year students to live in the residence.

2. Did concerns about illegal drug use factor into the decision to launch the turnaround?

A key driver for the turnaround was concern about the one-in-five Senior House residents who were not graduating at all. But this factor did not exist in isolation. MIT administrators have long been troubled by reports of illegal drug use in Senior House. In recent years, MIT has participated in third-party surveys such as the 2013 National College Health Assessment and the 2015 Healthy Minds Study, which served to reinforce this concern.

In a June 10, 2016, letter to the Senior House community, we wrote that, "We see a vital need to act based on [graduation rate] data alone. However, the seriousness of the situation is further underscored by our significant concerns about issues of illegal drug use in Senior House."

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3. How did the turnaround work and who was involved? What progress did you make? And what ultimately went wrong?

How it worked

After we announced the turnaround on June 10, 2016, I immediately started meeting with Senior House students so that together we could develop a framework for the turnaround. We talked about our short- and long-term goals, whom to involve in this effort, and how to organize ourselves in the upcoming academic year. Together we agreed on the turnaround's goals: to build on the positive aspects of the community's culture and create an environment that promoted each resident's health, well-being, personal and intellectual growth, and academic success.

The turnaround team consisted of 47 people, including 28 residents and several Senior House alums. In the fall, the team formed four subcommittees: academic and personal well-being; community; self-governance; and physical space. Each subcommittee developed a charge to guide its work. And the student and staff member co-chairs of the subcommittees provided regular reports about their progress to a steering committee, which I chaired.

Throughout the fall 2016 semester, the subcommittees and steering committee met frequently. For the spring 2017 semester, students asked that the number of meetings be reduced so that, together with other residents of Senior House, they could implement the ideas generated in the subcommittees, focus on their academics, and plan Steer Roast, an annual community celebration.

Initial progress

We invested significant time, energy, and Institute resources into supporting Senior House, and the residents who were involved in the turnaround deserve credit for the progress we made. I told the turnaround team that achieving the turnaround goals would require a sustained, multi-year effort. By December 2016, I told the residents I thought we were on the right trajectory to welcome back first-year students in the fall of 2017.

Here are a few examples of the progress we made:

- In order to strengthen the in-house support network, before the start of the 2016-17 academic year, a search committee that included Senior House residents unanimously selected a new associate head of house.
- We opened satellite Student Support Services (S3) and Mental Health and Counseling Services offices on the first floor of Senior House and tailored drop-in hours to meet students' needs.

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- New physical spaces were designed with student input and built to support residents' academic and personal well-being, including a study space with work stations and yoga, exercise, and art studio spaces.
- Residents and staff also worked together on substance use self-assessments, trainings to help residents respond to friends or peers in crisis, and a new hall chair program designed to strengthen Senior House's system of self-governance.

What went wrong

Unfortunately, in the spring 2017 semester, the administration learned that unsafe and illegal activity was occurring in Senior House during the turnaround. Given all the time that so many students and staff had invested to reestablish trust and to make the turnaround succeed, this was very disappointing.

4. In response to reports of unsafe, illegal behaviors, MIT conducted a review. How did that process work and how did you ensure that it was fair to students?

In April 2017, Senior House was placed on probation while we conducted a review of the reported unsafe and illegal activity. Before the review started, members of the review team — Division of Student Life and Title IX staff — met with residents of Senior House to provide an overview of the reported activity, to explain the review process, and to answer students' questions.

Residents were each invited to take part in a short meeting with the review team to share any information they chose to offer about the reports we received. Students were specifically told that the meetings were voluntary and that they were permitted to bring an advisor with them for personal support. Consistent with our approach to cases that come before the Committee on Discipline (COD), we did not permit lawyers to serve as advisors.

Residents were also told that they would not be asked any questions about their individual drug use, could decline to answer any question posed, and could leave the meeting at any point. The review guidelines were also read to students at the beginning of every interview. In addition, a hard copy of these guidelines was made available to the associate head of house so students could review it.

The review confirmed that serious and multiple illegal activities occurred during the turnaround and there was broad knowledge of the activity among Senior House residents. We also learned that residents of the house who knew about this behavior did not proactively address it, nor did they ask the administration for help in doing so.

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5. What individual disciplinary actions has MIT taken in response to the review's findings?

MIT does not comment on the specifics of individual COD cases. This is a longstanding Institute policy and practice to safeguard the interests of everyone involved.

6. In closing Senior House to undergraduates, aren't you punishing everyone for the actions of a few individuals?

No. In June 2016, we gave the Senior House community an opportunity to work with us in good faith toward a set of common goals: to promote each Senior House resident's well-being and personal and intellectual growth. But our formal review in the spring of 2017 made clear that multiple students had engaged in unsafe, illegal behavior on multiple occasions. Importantly, it revealed a prevailing environment that enabled and even encouraged such behavior. We also learned that some students who were troubled by the illegal behavior felt silenced by members of the Senior House community. Together these signs told us that Senior House self-governance was broken.

In other words, our subsequent decisions – to try out Pilot 2021, and then to use the building as graduate student housing – were not about punishing the community for any single incident or for the actions of a subset of students who broke the rules. We came to these decisions because we faced behaviors and a house environment that made it impossible for us to move forward constructively.

7. Why is the administration not disclosing facts about the behaviors and actions this year that led to the formal review? Doesn't the MIT community have the right to know?

In June 2016, after we announced the turnaround, Senior House residents insisted that we protect their privacy. Therefore, we have not been publicly sharing details about the issues in the house. As a result, we understand our communications can sometimes seem vague. I expect that some people feel frustrated by that and would like to know more. I am also aware that some students are now sharing information. Nevertheless, under these circumstances, we believe treating such sensitive issues privately and confidentially is the right thing to do for students.

8. Why is Senior House now being used for graduate students next year?

Once we proposed Pilot 2021, prospective new residents reported facing personal pressure from some students and alumni about how they should behave, as well as an intensive campaign to reconstitute the Senior House status quo. Undermined in this way, the reset was bound to fail, too.

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Concluding that a community of graduate students would be better able to withstand outside pressure and create a new culture of its own, we decided to use the building to house graduate students only.

The switch to graduate student housing has additional benefits. First, we were able to increase the overall number of beds available for graduate students. And second, we were able to minimize additional crowding in our undergraduate dorms by moving upperclassmen who chose to live in graduate housing.

We recognize that the process of creating this new graduate residence was extremely rushed and did not, for reasons I hope are clear, engage graduate students to the extent we would want and expect in more ordinary times.

9. Some are saying that closing Senior House to undergraduates eliminates a critical safe space for MIT's LBGTQ+ community and other vulnerable or underrepresented populations of students. What is MIT doing about that?

In my July 11, 2017 [letter](#), I brought up this important issue, and explained that we want to work with the community to find solutions.

To begin to address this concern immediately, Dean for Student Life Suzy Nelson and I established a relocation support team to help every Senior House student move to a welcoming living situation. In partnership with heads of house and house teams in undergraduate and graduate residences, the Division of Student Life will make sure that staff have the right training to meet the needs of new members of their communities. We are also starting to work with LBGTQ+ student leaders to find new ways to support their community.

10. Were there problems with the 2015 Healthy Minds Study?

The Healthy Minds Study ([HMS](#)) is a research project under the direction of researchers at the University of Michigan (UM). MIT participated in the survey to better understand attitudes around well-being, mental health, and related issues, as well as how MIT students engage with support services on campus.

MIT asked UM to include a question in the survey to identify a respondent's residence hall. UM replied that it could not add that question to the survey but told us that if we sent them the residence hall for each participant, they would embed residence hall data in the survey responses. Unfortunately, UM inadvertently did not update its consent form to reflect this additional data, and MIT did not notice this error when UM launched the survey in April 2015. The data file that UM sent to MIT included the residence hall data. However, at no time was any individual MIT participant identifiable.

In the summer of 2016, both UM and MIT learned about this problem with the consent form. At that time, MIT stopped any analysis using this data and

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consulted with UM about next steps. UM notified us that the matter was under review with UM's Institutional Review Board (IRB) and instructed us to await any further guidance.

The Chair of MIT's IRB (COUHES) has reviewed the matter. He concluded that UM should have updated the consent form, but even so, that the error did not rise to the level of an ethical breach. His reasons were: the error was unintentional; MIT did not use the data in question once it became aware of the problem; and the confidentiality of the individual survey responses has remained protected.

Lydia Snover, director of Institutional Research (IR) at MIT, said the following to *The Tech* about this inadvertent error:

“We take our failure to carefully review the consent form extremely seriously, as we pride ourselves on being clear about our protocol and adhering to it in every survey we run. And in this instance, as with all other MIT surveys, the confidentiality of individual responses was completely protected and remains so. You can see IR's Confidentiality Statement [here](#); we assure respondents that their data are confidential and disclose that for purposes of analysis, we may combine other data with responses.

“Unfortunately, while we operated under our usual protocol for MIT-run surveys, the University of Michigan used a different, more specific consent form of their own design with their protocol. Of course, we could and should have carefully reviewed Michigan's consent form. We are assessing the situation to determine what steps MIT should take to ensure that this doesn't happen again with any future third party surveys.”

11. What's happening with the murals in Senior House?

Working together, Senior House alumni and Division of Student Life staff have digitally documented the murals in the residence hall. And, this fall, the Division of Student Life will be putting together a review group of students, faculty, and staff who will work with the new student house government to determine our next steps with the murals.

12. Some people are asking if what happened to Senior House could happen to another East Campus community. Is that a possibility?

Our decision about Senior House was not about stamping out or suppressing what we appreciate are the essential elements of the MIT residential experience: student self-governance, creativity, and inclusivity. However, what it demonstrated is that self-governance comes with responsibility and has commonsense limits.