

Senior House

OFFICIAL RESPONSE FROM SENIOR HOUSE

Dear Chancellor Barnhart:

I too am troubled by the statistics you shared with the MIT community this past Friday. Few people care about the health and success of Senior House residents more than myself. I know many of the stories behind the numbers you cite; where you see statistics, I see faces.

I would like to say that I am grateful that you are in support of a dedicated mental health professional for Senior House. This is something that we as a community have requested for years, and I only wish it could have happened sooner. I also applaud the expansion of S³ services, which student groups have been working towards, and I think that all dorms could benefit from this program.

However, I think some of your proposals are potentially harmful for student wellbeing. As you are aware, Senior House contains a very large queer population. LGBT freshmen and freshmen who are questioning and confused about their gender identity and sexual orientation often choose to live in Senior House because they know that they will be accepted by their neighbors. These students often come from backgrounds and high schools where they felt marginalized and isolated, but in Senior House they find a place where they are no longer outcasts. It is incredibly important for students to feel safe and accepted where they live – and Senior House has played this role for many of its queer residents. I, and many other current residents, feel it is extremely important that freshman are given the choice to live in our community. It is also essential to acknowledge that the LGBTQ population that is so integral to the Senior House community is at significantly greater risk for mental illness and substance abuse, and we must provide greater support for these students.

I share your goal of increasing academic performance among Senior House residents, decreasing drug use, and fostering supportive communities. Below is a list of proposals that I believe are well suited to reach this goal.

1. Senior House receives a dedicated mental health professional, and all consultations between students and this mental health professional will be HIPAA compliant. Many residents come to MIT with existing mental health issues; providing them with accessible medical care is crucial to their success at MIT.

2. All current Senior House GRTs are allowed to remain in Senior House GRT apartments. GRTs are an essential part of the student support structure. Many residents already have established relationships with our GRTs and feel comfortable going to them when they are struggling.

3. Senior House has S³ office hours within the dorm. Ideally this program is expanded to all dorms, as all MIT students could benefit from it.

4. Mandatory prevention programs are created and run by our mental health professional, that outline the risks of drug and alcohol use and provide information about mental health and substance abuse resources on campus. This program is required for all residents and will run annually for new residents. A committee of students is formed to work under the direction of our mental health professional, to engage in ongoing improvement of these materials and programs, with the aim of creating programs that have real impact.

5. Dedicated study spaces are created in Senior House, similar to the space that exists in Maseeh. Currently Senior House lacks this resource, and therefore, studying and socializing often occupy the same spaces. It is crucial that we provide residents with spaces designed specifically for academic use in order to promote better study practices within the community.

6. A peer tutoring program is created to run in this space, where residents volunteer to tutor other residents who may be struggling in classes where they excelled. While statistics show that Senior House residents take longer to graduate, the dorm is also home to many students who excel in some of the most rigorous courses of study at MIT. Some of these students have expressed interest in providing academic support for other residents.

7. An Alumni-Mentorship program is established with the goal of connecting successful Senior House alumni with current residents to provide them with academic and career advice.

8. Freshmen, while not given Senior House as an option in the housing lottery, will be allowed to FYRE into the dorm if they still wish to live in Senior House despite these statistics.

Upperclassmen will also be given the option to transfer into the dorm. It is crucial for MIT students, especially freshmen, to find housing on campus where they feel completely accepted by their peers, and I believe Senior House provides this for many students. I also believe that

freshmen are necessary for a successful turnaround in Senior House. In every living group, freshmen are the future. They revitalize the community, direct its growth, and are most capable of designing a positive future for the dorm.

9. A freshmen mentorship program will be established that matches freshmen with upperclassmen who share similar academic interests and have excelled in their coursework.

10. A “turnaround team” chaired by Chancellor Barnhart and consisting of faculty, campus student leaders, Senior House residents, and Senior House GRTs, will help implement these changes and establish clearly defined metrics to evaluate their success. Senior House residents will work with the Chancellor to choose dedicated members of the MIT community to serve on this committee.

11. The Chancellor’s Office and turnaround team will oversee the process of procuring appropriate funds to implement these changes. Funds should not come from the House budget or from increasing cost of living in Senior House, an MIT residence that has historically been home to many low-income students.

As troubled as I am by these statistics, I am also deeply concerned about the lack of transparency and student input in decisions that so greatly affect the lives of MIT students. I have already stated that I care greatly about the residents of Senior House. I also know their struggles and their support structures. I have long been concerned about mental health and substance abuse issues in Senior House, and I have thought extensively about these issues and how to best aid my community. I am frankly offended that I was not consulted about this matter and that my input was not valued. This process has been disrespectful to MIT student government as an institution and to the student leaders who work tirelessly for their peers. If your intention really is to engage the community, it is important that trust is built and that decisions are reached together. In the present state, students are fearful of the administration, and this fear will need to be addressed before we can start working towards our shared goals.

I want to again emphasize that I share your concern for the Senior House community. I would like to work with you and others to establish creative solutions for the unique challenges faced by the residents of Senior House.

Sincerely,

Sarah Melvin

Senior House President