



# Students respond to announcement of Senior House turnaround

Data sources, lack of student involvement prompt concerns

By [Karleigh Moore](#) | Jul. 6, 2016

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Since the announcement on June 10 that Senior House will not house freshmen during the 2016–2017 school year, many students have penned blog posts and open letters to Chancellor Cynthia Barnhart PhD '88.

The authors opposed the new policy, expressing concerns about the decision-making process and citing positive experiences they had at the dorm.

## Concerns about data sources

The chancellor says that the change was “data-driven” but will not publicly release data beyond graduation statistics the registrar provided.

No confidential information from MIT Mental Health and Counseling has been used, and any confidential data that has been used will not be published or shared, said Barnhart in an email to *The Tech* last Friday.

This is in light of a [petition](#) that has collected signatures from current and former Senior House

signatures from current and former Senior House residents calling for the MIT administration to disclose any use of confidential medical data in their decision-making process.

“[I]n recent years, MIT has participated in surveys that asked questions about drug use on campus,” the chancellor said.

“The administration’s surveys are conducted ethically, following our internal institutional research board (COUHES) protocol and consistent with the practices among our peer institutions.”

Some students pointed out that a recent MIT survey, the 2015 Healthy Minds survey, asked about drug use but did not ask participants to disclose the dorm or specific residence they lived in, and wondered where the administration derived the dorm-specific information, if that survey was used.

The chancellor did not confirm the use of any specific survey, but MIT’s Institutional Research website hosts information about two recent surveys: the [Healthy Minds survey \(results\)](#) conducted in 2015 and the [National College Health Assessment \(results\)](#) conducted in 2013. Both surveys had questions about drug use and questions about mental health.

“I would support the administration releasing the names and dates of surveys that influenced this decision. I think the MIT community deserves to know how these surveys are being used,” Melvin said.

However, Senior House president Sarah Melvin ’18 says, the “purpose of MIT student life and mental health surveys is to inform administrative decisions that aim to improve student life and build better

support structures on campus.”

Melvin also added that she is concerned that students might be less honest on future MIT surveys in light of the actions taken based on these previous surveys.

“The problem is that while many residents see the administration’s actions as punitive, the administration views the changes to Senior House as student support,” Melvin said.

Indeed, Barnhart told *The Tech* that the policies being implemented at Senior House are intended to improve learning and living environments, “not hurt or punish ... residents.”

The administration will offer no further public comment on drug use, the chancellor said stating that Senior House leadership agrees that “[a] public debate is not helpful or productive for” students.

Melvin agrees. She explained, “It seems that the administration has long been concerned that Senior House actively encourages drug use and that the data is an excuse for intervention rather than a deciding factor. Therefore I don’t think it’s productive to focus future conversations on the data.”

Melvin does not want data to be released publicly. She worries that it could “be used to draw false conclusions about individual residents,” and she again emphasized that it is “not productive to focus [the] discussion on how data was gathered and used.”

### **The community responds**

Shortly after the announcement was made, John Hinsdale '86, who lived in Senior House, initiated a

petition opposing the moratorium on freshman in Senior House this fall. It has since gathered nearly 500 signatures from current and former residents as well as students across campus.

Some students were displeased that MIT emailed the MIT community, Senior House parents, and Senior House residents at the same time. Some students felt it inappropriate to email parents implying that drug use is a particular problem in Senior House.

Students voiced concerns that other dorms with lower graduation rates would face similar action in the future, notably, the “east side” dorms had the lowest graduation rates. Apart from having the lowest graduation rate among the dorms, Melvin says that Senior House has a “more negative reputation than the other East Side dorms” and says that she believes that this reputation was a “contributing factor in this decision” to ban Senior House from having freshmen this fall.

“I’m concerned in general for East Side culture at MIT. East Campus and Random are old buildings, and I fear that MIT won’t put in the time and money to preserve their cultures if the buildings need major repairs ... I worry that the administration doesn’t place the same value on dorm culture and history that students and alumni do,” Melvin added.

### **Concerns about lack of student involvement**

Many students have expressed concerns that student leaders and GRTs appeared to have little to no warning about this decision, let alone a voice in the decision-making process.

No student leaders were consulted during the

decision-making process. DormCon leadership found out about the decision from the emails sent to the MIT community, and had no prior warning, DormCon president Kate Farris '17 told *The Tech* in an email.

“[Chancellor Barnhart] has been frank about her concerns that student leadership would have blocked the process or breached confidentiality rather than work with the administration,” Melvin said, explaining the lack of student involvement.

Melvin said that Barnhart has since apologized for “her lack of faith” and has assured student leaders that they will not be “left in the dark again.”

“I think this was handled incredibly poorly and that this process was offensive to student government. It is not enough for administrators to apologize for not including students, going forward they must actively work to reestablish trust and ensure this doesn’t happen again,” Melvin said.

Melvin went on to underscore her disappointment with the chancellor by referencing an [interview](#) *The Tech* had with Barnhart when she was first appointed chancellor. In the interview, Barnhart emphasised that the “culture of student self-governance” on campus was important and “anything ... that [MIT does] has to include students, has to include a grassroots effort with the students.”

“I think it’s important for the chancellor to remember what she said when she first took the position,” Melvin said. “It seems that she has strayed from this initial intention, and I am greatly saddened by this.”

“The chancellor has reassured us that students will not be left out again, but why was our input initially

disregarded if she truly believes in the importance of self-governance at MIT?” Melvin said. “It’s hard to feel included in a decision if the decision has already been made without your consultation.”

Like Melvin and other Senior House student leaders, DormCon was not included in any decision making regarding Senior House. Farris said that DormCon will help Senior House in whatever way it can and that if other dorms are interested in receiving additional support services like Senior House, DormCon will work with the dorm presidents to do so.

Farris echoed Melvin’s concerns about student involvement and transparency saying that DormCon “wish[ed] that students had been consulted and included in the process sooner.” Farris also said that the Chancellor promised that going forward, the process will be more transparent and that “the residents of Senior House will be fully involved in it.”

### **Going forward**

“Senior House residents have responded to this call to action with a commitment to moving forward rather than debating how we got here. I’m grateful to them for that,” Barnhart said.

Melvin said that the turnaround efforts should focus should be on providing better support for Senior House in order to make positive change so that the dorm can take freshmen in the future. Additionally, Melvin said that MIT needs to ensure that students have input on similar decisions in the future and to make sure that “student voices are not neglected at any stage.”

“[T]he administration needs to establish clear goals

and metrics for what the community needs to accomplish in order to welcome freshmen once again,” Melvin said.

Students and GRTs from Senior House will work with faculty and staff on a search committee for the live-in members of the house team. The chancellor hopes to complete the search process over the summer so that the enhanced house team will be in place to support Senior House residents by the start of the fall.

All GRTs who were slated to return to Senior House in the 2016-2017 school year have accepted their return offers.

The new members of the house team will live on the first floor of the dorm, and MIT is working with the Senior House community to create and improve other spaces in the building such as study rooms, meeting spaces, and rooms for the drop-in support services.

“[W]e are going to do our very best to ensure that major construction is wrapped up before classes start in the fall,” the chancellor said.

Barnhart has identified several areas of focus for the Senior House turnaround team, including “academic wellbeing, mental and physical wellbeing, community, safety, self-governance, and turnaround progress.”

Moving forward, Melvin says that Senior House needs to work on gaining the “trust and respect of the administration” by sharing the positive aspects of their community while pushing back against negative misconceptions that have “historically enshrouded” the dorm.

Melvin worries that the reputation of Senior House was factored into recent decisions, saying that the rumors rarely reflect reality.

“Some think Senior House today is like the wild parties described in the stories of nostalgic alumni. I’ve also heard Senior House described as a ‘drug den’ by non-residents, and I doubt that these individuals have actually spent much time in our home.”

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