



NEWS

Senior House turnaround will address low graduation rates

No freshmen will be placed in the dorm as admins address graduation rate, drug use

By [Emma Bingham](#) and [Karleigh Moore](#) | Jun. 10, 2016

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Chancellor Barnhart PhD '88 announced Friday that no freshmen will be housed in Senior House this fall, citing a comparatively low four-year graduation rate and ongoing problems with illegal drug use. The dorm will receive new live-in staff and mental health resources, and a turnaround team will work to address perceived problems.

The chancellor [released statistics](#) she called “alarming”: Senior House has a four-year graduation rate of 59.7% compared to MIT’s overall 83.7% rate, and 21.1% of students who have lived in Senior House have not received a degree; MIT-wide, that number is 7.7%.

Each of the four “east side” dorms (East Campus, Random, Senior House, and Bexley) had lower graduation rates than any West Campus dorm.

For the purpose of these statistics, students were categorized by where they lived the first semester of their freshman year.

When asked in an [interview](#) whether selection bias may be contributing to this data, Barnhart said it is “something [they] will look at” and that she anticipated that students



Barnhart outlined a three-part plan for Senior House: the dorm will open in the fall with an enhanced house team, a turnaround committee will be formed, and no freshmen will be permitted to live in the dorm this fall.

The house team will include additional live-in staff and new student support services, including a dedicated mental health clinician and an SΛ3 dean.

In the future, Barnhart said, they might work on providing additional “satellite” mental health resources that dorms can share. She has already been talking about this with Head of East Campus Rob Miller '95, who asked if East Campus could share Senior House’s new resources.

“I think one good outcome of [the plans for Senior House] will be that we will brainstorm about what things we can do, they’ll apply to many of the living residences,” the chancellor said.

The turnaround committee, which Barnhart herself will chair, has not been assembled yet, but the chancellor said it will include “a strong representation of Senior House students” and a number of faculty, particularly those faculty who were undergraduates at MIT.

However, she said she sees the turnaround team as just “the nucleus of the activity ... [just] a piece of the overall group of people who will be involved in this.” She said that “suggestions will certainly be welcome.”

In addition, she hopes faculty, especially faculty who are former Senior House residents, will help bridge the gap between the administration and current Senior House residents. Senior House is known for its opposition to the administration — for example, its strong resistance to



Regarding the decision not to place freshmen in Senior House in the fall, she said she feels it is the administration's "responsibility to provide students with an environment where [they] can succeed academically," and that Senior House was not providing such an environment. Therefore, the decision was made not to allow new freshmen.

She said it was "difficult to say" whether freshmen will be allowed to live in Senior House in 2017-2018. However, she added: "The whole purpose of this effort is to think about a plan for success. This is not a plan for closure."

The chancellor estimates that there will be around 30 empty slots in Senior House come fall, as the dorm generally receives around 30 freshman each year. Barnhart said that specific plans for the space have not been decided, but mentioned that the empty rooms could be used for space where mental health practitioners and SΛ3 deans could hold office hours for residents. Some of the rooms might even be appropriated for art studio space, Barnhart said, citing that data shows that Senior House residents have an "especially strong appreciation for the arts."

As for whether or not upperclassmen can transfer into Senior House given the empty rooms, the chancellor says that in order to "double down on support" for residents, "it might make sense to keep the community the size that it is" instead of bringing in more students. However, the chancellor doesn't have a definite answer to this question.

The main issue Barnhart cited in her letter to the community besides graduation rates was the amount of illegal drug use that occurs in Senior House. She told *The Tech* that "MIT doesn't condone" drug use, saying that it



she has “seen firsthand how destructive drug use” can be for a community and that MIT “cares about the wellbeing” of its community.

She said she sees efforts to curb illegal drug use at Senior House as attempts to help students “be both well and academically successful” and “if that is seen as cracking down on drugs, then I guess that’s cracking down on drugs.”

The chancellor emphasized that clarifying the help-seeking policy (also called the Good Samaritan policy) will be a top priority, saying that the policy is “critical to moving forward.” She and incoming Vice President for Student Life Suzy Nelson will work together to revise the policy. They aim to release the new policy by September 1, before students return for the fall semester.

Immediately following the chancellor’s email to Senior House residents, students began to voice concerns about future dorm crowding and claimed that the moratorium on Senior House gaining freshman constituted an attack on dorm culture.

The chancellor states that this is not a punitive measure; rather, it is a move to support dorm residents and foster academic success and community wellbeing.

“I think one thing I’d like to say about this is I hope that students don’t hear this and say ‘oh here’s the first step to kill culture at MIT.’ That is not at all what we are trying to do,” Barnhart said. “There are great aspects of culture at Senior House. We want to bolster those aspects of the culture. [But] if the culture is one that doesn’t lead to academic success and wellbeing, yeah, true, we do want to end those cultures.”



the fact that we have dorms with different cultures that we celebrate,” she said.

Barnhart also wanted to emphasize a collaborative approach to problem-solving. She said abrupt decision-making was “not the way we [at MIT] approach problems.” She discussed her plans for Senior House with the heads of house in every dorm as well as a number of faculty and staff around campus. She wants to “engage the community.”

“Do I think there are things we can do at MIT that might be good for student life? Yep, I do. What I can say is the plan is to work with [students]. I figure you have some ideas too.”

William Navarre contributed to reporting.

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John Hinsdale ▾

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Barry Klinger · 11 days ago

Recent discussion on Facebook highlighted at least two issues with this decision: (1) Someone at MIT might have heard that correlation does not prove causality. In other words, it could be that people more prone to not graduate in 4 years are more likely to sign up for Senior House as freshmen. MIT should have the data to check this, because SH freshman include those who lost the housing lottery and were assigned to Senior House at random; if SH is just collecting people who would not have graduated in 4 years no matter where they lived, then the voluntary SH residents would have a smaller graduate-in-4-years rate than the involuntary ones. (2) In a year in which Harvard drop-out Matt Damon is the commencement speaker, one might ask whether a lower graduate-in-4-years rate is necessarily a bad thing.

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William → Barry Klinger · 11 days ago

Interesting! Your link doesn't seem to have come through, though.

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concerned student · 12 days ago

The graduation rates by dorm correlate with cost of living in said dorm (if you factor in mandatory meal plans.) How is economic background a factor? We won't know until they make any of the data public.

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anonymous · 12 days ago

What has the trend been for senior house graduation rates over the past 8 years? Releasing just the average is unhelpful. No point blaming current residents for the graduation status of people who lived there for one semester in 2008.

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James K Herms · 8 days ago

Every July, MIT reports data on drug-related disciplinary actions to the Department of Education. The data in last year's report suggest that MIT has been significantly "cracking down on drugs" since 2010.

Disciplinary Actions for Drug-Law Violations

2008–10: 17

2012–14: 39

MIT Police, *Annual Safety Report* (2011; 2015).

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anon10 · 9 days ago

The Chancellor learned a lot at Slippery College Administrator School. This is the best possible time to make unpleasant announcements like this. The academic year is done, alumni have just finished their reunions and the associated donations, and everyone's mind is on their summer plans.

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anon10 · 9 days ago

"As for whether or not upperclassmen can transfer into Senior House given the empty rooms, the chancellor says ... 'it might make sense to keep the community the size that it is'"

Um, prohibiting freshmen from moving in and prohibiting upperclassmen from transferring wouldn't keep the community the same size. It would make it smaller, because, you know, undergraduates tend to move out of their undergrad dorms when they finish college, and need to be replaced by new students to keep the community the same size.

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corrective action. Academic success of students must take first priority. These statistics are alarming. Only 3 out of 5 Senior House students graduate on time, and probably lower median g.p.a.'s. This doesn't destroy the culture at all. Some students need to gain some real MIT maturity before deciding to live in a place like Senior House and avoid getting "lost." I would advocate this policy being implemented permanently if deemed necessary. Parents pay tuition, MIT awards grants, and the government offers loans for students to graduate and preferably on time.

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John Hinsdale · 10 days ago

It's highly unfortunate that incoming freshmen who ARE destined to do very well will not be able to enjoy Senior House. Many people do well (and graduate in 4 years) at Senior House BECAUSE of Senior House, not despite it. That point seems lost. Current and former Senior House residents should sign this: <http://tinyurl.com/SHFrosh2016>

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Ignorance is Strength · 11 days ago

Here's the email sent to Senior Haus alums: <https://docs.google.com/docume...>

Here's the letter sent to the SH residents: <https://docs.google.com/docume...>

Here's the letter sent to parents of students in SH: <https://docs.google.com/docume...>

Does anybody have the letter sent to all parents?

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Incognito Jones · 11 days ago

Cynthia Barnhart needs to resign.

<https://medium.com/@incognito....>

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Rick Kovalcik · 11 days ago

"Letter to the community"? What letter to the community? I'm an Alum living in Newton Centre and active (for now) in the Alumni Association. I'm getting really tired of hearing about this sort of crap through the grapevine. -Rick Kovalcik '79 (Bexley)

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617.253.1541

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