



MIT UNDERGRADUATE
ASSOCIATION
COMMITTEE ON COVID-19
2020-2021

Recommendations to MIT Team 2020 Regarding Fall 2020 Options

June 2020

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I. Objective

The objective of this document is to present the primary considerations of the Undergraduate Association (UA) Committee on COVID-19 regarding the return of undergraduate students to MIT's campus in fall 2020.

MIT's strength comes from its diversity, and with that diversity comes the considerable challenge of deciding how to return undergraduates safely and equitably to campus. As the main representative body for MIT's undergraduates, the UA seeks to highlight some of the most salient considerations that come with each option and their potential effects on our community. This reflection is crucial to supporting undergraduates and predicting large scale compliance with COVID-19 protocols.

The **primary goals** that the UA Committee on COVID-19 believes should be accomplished in the option selected by MIT include:

1. Preserving the quality of the educational experience
2. Providing a viable and equitable population strategy
3. Designing a depopulation strategy in the event of a second wave that captures the diversity of personal experiences
4. Optimizing the quality of the social and living experience
5. Prioritizing health and welfare of the MIT community, as well as Boston/Cambridge at large
6. Providing flexibility in fall options that is fair socially and academically

This review is by no means exhaustive of all opinions of undergraduates, but seeks to express the wide-ranging experiences of our student body and give a voice to their unique needs.

For clarity, we **define** recurring terms in this document as follows:

- **Equity**: The consideration of the diversity of our student body and the differences in disadvantages, privilege, and access of students when choosing the final option.
- **"The MIT experience"**: Everything that makes an MIT education powerful and distinctive, from connections to professors, collaboration, world-class research through UROPs, student groups, living groups, and staple undergraduate classes (ex. 2.009, labs, freshman learning communities).
- **Flexibility**: Flexibility encompasses both (1) ensuring students have some degree of agency in choosing their fall experience and (2) optimizing MIT's ability to pivot easily and quickly in the case of a second wave. Students should not feel pressured to attend in-person classes nor take a gap year, especially with regard to grading options, and support must be provided to students for whichever decision they make.
- **Health, safety, & welfare**: The decision made by MIT must comply with all national and state guidelines but should not shy away from enforcing stricter policies if doing so is in the best interest of the health and safety of both our campus and the local community.

II. Review of Fall Options

These options are pulled from the [Team 2020 MIT Community Engagement](#) website, with updates from the PowerPoint slides presented on the June 5th 8 A.M. call hosted by Vice Chancellor Ian Waitz.

Key Calendar Assumptions

1. The first week of all in-person semesters is remote only. Students are tested upon arrival, quarantined for seven days, then retested.
2. Residences require a two-week change-over time between semesters, with four days to move out, seven days to clean, and three days to move in.
3. Semesters that extend into the summer are shortened by one week.
4. Breaks that typically involve travel are removed.

Feedback on Calendar Proposition to begin classes ~1 week early and end classes the weekend before Thanksgiving:

This timeline would be incorporated into options 1, 3, 4, and 6.

This calendar plan preserves IAP virtually, minimizes travel risks, and decreases some of the time people are on campus during flu season. By removing breaks where students typically leave campus, safety is improved, but if these breaks are still removed during the spring semester, scheduling must provide down time for students in some form. This could be mitigated by incorporating several one to two day breaks throughout the semester in the place of a week-long spring break.

Quality of education will likely mirror that of all options that provide a full, on campus semester, except during the remote learning periods. If remote learning is conducted after Thanksgiving, MIT will have to be mindful of inequitable learning environments and be prepared to adjust final exams and projects to reflect that.

Inequity can be seen in this plan when considering students with financial insecurity. Loss of on-campus jobs and being forced to return home earlier in the semester than normal can be distressing and financially strenuous on them and their families. Additionally, students may be thrown back into dangerous or abusive home situations for a longer period of time. As in other plans, we believe this option should include exceptions for students with specific needs, allowing them to remain on campus.

Final verdict: This timeline is **recommended**. When coupled with options 1, 3, 4, or 6, it strikes a good balance between community health and safety and the benefits of on-campus learning.

Option 1: 100% of undergraduates on campus

This option retains some sense of normalcy through access to on campus resources (e.g. professors, study spaces, MIT Mental Health Services), peers, and labs. Students who work on

campus may be able to continue their employment and all students have access to similar academic and technological resources. This option is the best for the mental health and wellbeing for students, as well as continuity and growth of the campus community.

This option presents the greatest challenge to the health and safety of our community. It requires the biggest testing and contact tracing effort from MIT, as well as a high degree of compliance from all community members. A robust strategy for containing the spread of COVID-19, and depopulating if necessary, is paramount for this option. Having all undergraduates on campus risks a repeat of the turbulent depopulation that occurred in March of this year. Providing apartment subsidies or renting out nearby hotels could alleviate concerns about housing in compliance with public health recommendations.

Having all students on campus mitigates the technological disparities that rise from learning at home and simplifies grading schemes. It is difficult to assess how quality of life will be impacted. While students will be able to cohabit in dorms, there will be strict social distancing rules that will change the typical campus dynamics we are accustomed to. Even with this consideration, there are ways to create safe, socially distant in-person interactions.

In evaluating this option, MIT will need to look candidly at the degree to which this option increases the risk to community health and safety over an option with a lower density of students.

Final verdict: We **recommend** this option if it can be implemented safely. On campus, socially distant learning comes the closest to recreating the classic MIT experience, both academically and socially. This is one of the most equitable options because it affords all students the opportunity to be in a safe learning environment with adequate resources. Additionally, it allows access to and continuation of our campus community, both of which are highly valued by our students. However, if this option is chosen, MIT must be able to provide socially distant and safe living and learning spaces, have effective COVID-19 testing and contact tracing, and have a suitable contingency plan in the event of another wave of COVID-19 infections. If these conditions cannot be met, and a safe campus environment cannot be ensured, this option should not be chosen. It is also important to note that in any option that returns students to campus, there is the risk of decreasing compliance to public health guidance over time.

Option 2: Delayed start for two regular semesters (with experiential learning in fall, semester beginning in January 2021, and stretching the academic year into the end of July 2021)

The benefits of this plan are largely dependent on the amount of students that it ultimately allows to return to campus and the landscape of the virus in late 2020. If implemented, this plan allows students to have in-person, on campus interactions as discussed in option 1. This option is less desirable when considering that it returns students to campus during the peak of flu season, which will complicate COVID-19 testing efforts.

Student quality of life will be greatly affected by delaying the start of the semester. A later start creates a ripple effect by pushing all timelines back. Some examples of this include interfering with summer internships, removing IAP, postponing graduation and employment plans,, and prolonging the time that students with unsafe home environments are off campus before classes begin. Because of the uncertain nature of this pandemic, there should be minimal disruption to the summer. Additionally, from an equity lens, students who depend on campus jobs would be left without a source of income for the months they are home before classes begin.

Some of the educational losses of this plan are mitigated by providing experiential learning, but these opportunities would need to be offered unilaterally to avoid introducing inequity. It will not be equally feasible for all majors to develop substantive experiential learning content, and access to UROP opportunities will face the same challenges of remote work that currently exist. If this option is selected, there should be no financial barrier to students to participate in these activities.

Final verdict: We **do not recommend** this option. Allowing students to be on campus in some capacity would improve mental health and decrease deferral rates, but the modified timeline would unequally impact undergraduates. IAP and summer are vital opportunities to gain work experience and industry connections through UROPs, internships, and more. In this delayed timeline, one or both of those opportunities, critical to generating income and improving post-graduation employment prospects, would be lost. A remote experiential learning semester is a good idea, but these activities will likely not be equally substantive for students in different disciplines.

Option 3: 50% of undergraduates for two, six-week periods

This plan requires a lot of logistical planning to move students fluidly, accommodate international students, and offset costs. Depending on the progression of COVID-19 throughout the semester, there may be a difference in the health risk of returning for students in the first and second six-week periods.

Quality of education will be difficult to maintain between the in-person and online portions of the semester, and the strain that this imposes on students should not be discounted. The workload will likely not be consistent between students who are on or off campus, especially if in-person content is being rushed into six weeks. Students may be on more equal footing when they are on campus, but the inequity seen during remote learning this past semester will continue in the off campus sessions. This plan also introduces questions around tuition - students who spend the entire semester on campus, entire semester remotely, or a mix of the two, will not have the same experience. Regardless of the option that is ultimately selected, because the MIT experience will not be the same, tuition for all students should be lowered.

This plan will definitely be interpreted differently by different students - for some, it will make them less likely to defer since it allows them some time on campus; for others, the hassle of moving in and out, as well as the difficulties associated with a changing learning environment,

will be too arduous to be worth the effort. This is exacerbated for low income and international students. The ease of moving will likely draw clear lines of privilege between students (e.g. ones who live closer, have family that are available to help, financial access to storage units, etc.).

Final verdict: We **recommend** this option, although it is logistically challenging and academically disruptive, because allows for all undergraduates to have at least some time on campus in the fall. If students with additional needs are allowed to remain on campus through the transition period, and support is provided in easing the move in/out process, this option could be implemented.

Option 4: 60% of undergraduates in fall, 75% in spring

If this plan continues using a model based around 60% or 75% of undergraduates, then the capacity to house these students must be clearly demonstrated. This model includes housing provided by FSILGs, so MIT's jurisdiction to offer these spaces to non-affiliates must also be justified. Providing apartment subsidies or renting out nearby hotels could alleviate these concerns.

Deciding which students should be allowed to return will be discussed in a later section. Students who are not selected to return in a given semester will have a higher likelihood of taking leaves of absence. The importance of prioritizing students based on need, both personal and academic, is clear when considering the possibility of the pandemic worsening in the spring, forcing campus capacity for undergraduates to be lowered.

Logistically, this option makes sense, as lower densities of students makes social distancing measures easier to facilitate. Running an in-person semester allows for students to still participate in integral in-person classes where necessary. All of the benefits of being on campus, as presented in previous sections, still apply.

Final verdict: This option is **recommended** as it allows most if not all students to return at some point in the year, offering benefits to community continuity and support among the students that return. This option will likely incur high deferral and leave of absence rates from students that are not selected to return in a given semester, so care should be taken in selecting and justifying which students can return.

Option 5: Undergraduates are 100% remote

This option must have exceptions for international students and students with unsafe/insecure home environments - MIT will utterly fail to care for its students in need without such exceptions. Students who lose on-campus employment opportunities are also left particularly vulnerable in this option.

The greatest harm from this plan is the damage to social life and continuation of campus culture. Although physical student safety is a primary consideration, social life is an integral component of mental health and wellbeing. The continued mental strain of forced isolation should not be

discounted. Depending on whether or not students are allowed back in the spring, the Class of 2024 risks having to complete their entire first year online. This is highly undesirable considering the class unity built during the first year and the necessity of strong support systems when transitioning to college life. The campus as a whole, from living groups to student associations, will suffer from the lack of continuity.

This plan will likely lead to the highest rate of students taking leaves of absence, which raises concerns about overcrowding and housing insecurity in future years.

The quality of education from remote learning is immediately called into question when considering this option. The student body has not yet seen results from the end-of-semester surveys about general views on the success of remote learning, but questions have already been posed regarding lab classes, tuition, and scope of courses. Planning a fully virtual semester gives instructors the greatest ability to prepare and refine their online curriculum, but some classes simply cannot be virtualized while still accomplishing their learning goals. Many MIT students chose to attend MIT specifically to participate in our remarkable project and lab classes, and although we all must make concessions in light of the pandemic, effort should be made to provide some version of these courses in-person. In this option, that would require pushing these classes to the spring semester, and hoping that the status of the pandemic allows for increased undergraduate capacity. Students should not be expected to pay the same tuition for a fully online semester, as they will not be able to benefit from the resources their tuition money typically funds.

The obvious benefit of this plan is that it removes the risk of a large-scale community outbreak, poses no danger to the surrounding community, and avoids the need for a depopulation strategy.

Final verdict: This option is **not recommended**. MIT would stand out from peer universities if it admits no students to campus in the fall. The quality of the MIT experience is at its lowest when it is fully virtual for a multitude of reasons, from students missing out on valuable time to learn lab skills, to the inequity of the remote learning experience, to the lack of a supportive community. These conclusions are supported by the results of the Remote Experience Survey.

Option 6: Three semesters spanning fall, spring, and summer

The main benefit of this option is that it allows all students to complete two semesters on campus. Having $\frac{2}{3}$ of students on campus makes social distancing efforts in classrooms more feasible, but increases housing density above the “preferred arrangement” of one student per room and three to four students per bathroom. Spreading the academic year out over a longer period of time incurs risks by having students on campus during winter months, and pushing the semester into the summer is generally undesirable.

This plan can increase quality of education by maximizing on-campus learning, but the impact of pressure on teaching staff and disparities between different departments’ abilities to accommodate three semesters remains to be seen. In selecting students for each semester, care

would need to be taken to match students with the plans of their departments and to minimize the disruption to internships and graduation.

Lack of community for students separated from their friend groups by differing on-campus semesters is a difficult challenge to compensate for. There is an additional move in/out cost for students that have discontinuous semesters, so assistance should be provided to account for this where necessary.

Final verdict: This option is **not recommended**. Because MIT currently operates on a two semester model, this option is highly disruptive and requires the largest adjustment from staff and students alike. The status of the pandemic in winter and summer cannot be known, and this plan risks removing the possibility for students to pursue other opportunities during summer if a vaccine has been developed or social distancing guidelines are relaxed. These opportunities have high priority and importance for undergraduates.

III. Recommendations on Returning Students

A. Emergency Housing Exceptions

We begin this section by affirming the necessity for a fair assessment of student need when deciding who is allowed to remain on campus. We encourage the MIT administration to develop a clear list of guidelines determining qualifications allowing a student to remain in MIT housing. If a student's application to remain on campus is rejected, they should be provided a clear explanation that references this list. Furthermore, including undergraduates in both drafting this list and in the decision process of evaluating need (where appropriate), will show a commitment to a holistic approach to student support.

Potential qualifications to include in this list include, but are not limited to:

- Financial burden
- Students for whom getting to a safe place would require extensive international travel
- Lack of access to adequate educational resources (technology, Internet access, food security, work space)
- Mental health & access to Student Support Services
- Safety of home life

In the most recent projections for student capacity, 500 students have been accounted for remaining on campus based on need. Because ~400 applied to stay in March 2020, this projection is reasonable, but an estimate of how many students would apply to remain during the 2020-2021 school year is not currently available. MIT must be flexible and prepared to increase this number if necessary.

B. Protocols for Selecting Returning Students at Reduced Campus Capacity

In both of the proposed options, we assume 500 undergraduates requiring emergency housing will also be allowed on campus as described in the previous section. These options are adapted from those presented on the June 3rd, 8 A.M. Zoom call hosted by Vice Chancellor Ian Waitz.

Proposed Option 1: Fall - Juniors & Seniors; Spring - First Years, Sophomores, & Seniors

This option requires the clarification of how student year will be determined, the two options being by degree audit or by class year. Selecting by class year is the most straightforward and equitable way to group students, as it both prevents students being placed on a case-by-case basis and doesn't disadvantage students who were not able to skip introductory classes based on their experiences before MIT. Depending on circumstances in spring, a protocol could be developed to allow non-seniors who would be eligible to graduate in June 2021 pending an on-campus course to remain for both semesters.

This plan strikes a balance between both preserving community and retaining academic support from peers within a major's cohort with providing campus access to those with the most pressing academic needs. It simplifies academic options for classes that are mostly taken at the same time within a degree progression, but presents challenges for core classes taken by students of all

years. This plan is detrimental to incoming first year students that would have to complete their first semester of college virtually – hindering their ability to meet new communities, explore campus opportunities, and receive invaluable academic support – but allows them to join a campus with upperclassmen in the spring.

Final verdict: We **recommend** this option over option 2. Seniors have the most pressing need to finish degree requirements and have the least ability to change degree plans once a proposal is announced. This option accounts for that need while simultaneously providing an on campus experience for all class years. Importantly, it prevents students from attempting to change course number, enrollment, or other aspects of their education in an attempt to be allowed to return. It also has a designation for first year students, none of whom would be considered lab students, and thus would ensure that they are on campus. Additionally, it would minimize deferrals, as everyone will be on campus at some point throughout the year. In a similar vein, this plan better preserves the MIT community within class year. This does however, run the risk of leaves of absence in the semester students are not invited back to. While we recognize that this option is not ideal for students in lab-heavy majors when compared to option 2, the overall value to the student body should not be discounted.

Proposed Option 2: Students whose majors most require in-person instruction

This plan mitigates a lot of planning disruptions that come from removing students of specific years from campus, and allows many majors to continue with lab classes as currently scheduled. It better serves the goal of ensuring a timely graduation for all students qualified to receive a degree in June 2021. It greatly improves the quality of education for students with lab and project based classes, and allows these students to use the valuable time on campus to develop professional skills through UROPs and hands-on projects. Bringing students back by major in this fashion would address the academic inequity between majors that can be effectively adapted virtually and those in which in-person experiential learning cannot be replicated remotely. It also addresses the inequity within majors and across class years in which lab classes could potentially have both remote and in-person participants.

A drawback of this plan is that it disrupts campus communities, which are often not based around major. Additionally, it minimizes the likelihood that students in majors that do not require labs – a very significant portion of the student population – get any time on campus in AY 2020-2021, increasing leaves of absence. It continues to disadvantage first year students, many of whom do not take lab classes, and removes any opportunity for them to form new in-person connections with faculty, staff, and peers.

Final verdict: This option best provides for students with academic need by prioritizing the need for the physical resources of in-person instruction. It is, however, more susceptible to students trying to “game the system” by enrolling in lab courses to gain access to campus. It does not account for first year students, and is less fair to students who do not take lab courses but still value our campus community. This could lead to very high deferral rates along major lines. This option is entirely reasonable, but is more detrimental to campus community than option 1.

C. Social Life & Extracurriculars

It is no question that MIT is not MIT without its undergraduate communities. While being on campus will be a significant improvement from our current forced separation, it is apparent that a new normal will not include many of the cherished social activities we are accustomed to. Restrictions on social distancing will limit the benefits of being on campus, and the weight given to the social aspects of campus in choosing a return option should consider this. This reality highlights why student input on shaping the next academic year will be integral moving forward.

There are student groups that, without continued campus presence, will not be financially feasible and will have to end. Additionally, communities such as fraternities, sororities, and sports teams, that rely on new students to build their population, will struggle. A plan to repopulate students should address these concerns and present methods to mitigate these repercussions.

D. Depopulation Procedures

In the event of mandatory depopulation, we believe the same standards should apply as mentioned in the beginning of this section when determining which students remain on campus. If possible, depopulations should be planned as staggered departures from campus, and students should be given as much lead time as possible that they will need to leave. Of course, MIT cannot predict the course of the pandemic, so this “lead time” could take the form of an update on the status of campus safety, included in a newsletter such as the MIT Medical Patient Newsletter or MIT Forward.

E. Deferrals and Leaves of Absence

MIT has historically been ineffective in providing adequate support to students during a leave of absence. In the coming months, MIT is likely going to see the highest rates of deferral in its history. In this light, it is imperative that rigorous plans to support students taking leave are developed well in advance of the fall semester.

It is an unavoidable fact that the decision to take a gap year is not available to all students. Reasons for this vary greatly - some majors would be negatively impacted by the gap in their academic record, financial burdens may require students to stay enrolled in classes, and not all majors have ample internship opportunities outside of summer months. As MIT prepares to support students that are on leave, this support should consider the broad scope of challenges incurred by taking a semester off.

F. Grading

Grading will play a large role in determining whether students choose to take leaves of absence in the coming year. Although this does not specifically relate to the fall options, we emphasize the necessity of student input before a decision is made on grading schemes. It is no surprise that many of the same disparities and challenges to learning will exist for our students in the coming year. Grading schemes must be an ongoing and open conversation with undergraduates.

IV. Summary

Because the UA Committee on COVID-19 did not have the opportunity to directly survey undergraduates, we reiterate that there is no way for this document to be wholly representative of all concerns. This committee was formed by selecting students intertwined in a wide range of communities at MIT. Despite this, it should not be weighed over the direct input obtained from the charrettes and other methods of community engagement.

Ultimately, we recommend options 1, 3, and 4 as fall options, implemented on the timeline outlined at the start of section II. These options are most in line with our primary goals and strike the best balance between preserving campus culture and the safety of our student body. We also recommend utilizing the first option for determining which students are allowed on campus at reduced capacity, but recognize the benefits that exist in both proposals.

As MIT moves into the next phase of fall planning, continued undergraduate input will be invaluable. While we are grateful for the level of engagement MIT has opened for undergraduates surrounding this fall decision, there is much room for improvement and involvement. This engagement will be central to encouraging and understanding student compliance with public health practices in the fall. The UA Committee on COVID-19 is committed to engaging in these conversations, hearing and conveying the interests of undergraduates, and promoting opportunities for students to become directly involved in planning efforts.