Review of the Undergraduate Withdrawal and Readmission Practices
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
Fall 2015-2016

Summary

In September 2015, Chancellor Cynthia Barnhart charged the Committee on Academic Performance (CAP) and the Office of the Dean for Undergraduate Education (DUE) with reviewing MIT's withdrawal and readmission processes. During the Fall Semester of 2015, the CAP conducted this review. In the process, it met with nearly twenty stakeholder groups, conducted a survey of recently readmitted MIT undergraduates, reviewed corresponding policies at peer institutions, and met nine times to discuss its findings and recommendations.

We found that those responsible for implementing MIT's withdrawal and readmissions processes do so in a caring, organized, and professional manner. Many students report positive experiences with withdrawal and readmission, even when withdrawals have been required due to poor academic performance. Approximately 130 students withdraw from MIT each year and approximately 100 are granted readmission, which indicates that students who withdraw, even under difficult circumstances, generally return and finish their degrees.[1]

Nonetheless, we also found that policies related to withdrawal and readmission are often misunderstood and that communications are ineffective. Students expressed confusion, fear, and anger about certain aspects of the withdrawal and readmission processes. Some students were reluctant to withdraw when it was appropriate, out of fear they would not be readmitted. Students expressed concern that decisions about their withdrawal and readmission applications are made without due regard for their particular circumstances. The Office of Student Support Services (S3) was seen as playing conflicting roles, as both a support for students and arbiter of their return.

Because of findings such as these, we make a series of recommendations, with the expectation that they will make these processes more open, less uncertain, and easier to navigate for students. Among the many recommendations made in this report, the following are the most fundamental:

1. All undergraduate students, once admitted by MIT, remain members of the MIT community and are presumed to be eligible to return as students, even when they withdraw. When a student departs MIT in the middle of a semester because of a medical crisis or because the student's academic performance warrants a time away to regain his or her bearings, MIT still expects the student to return (if he or she wants) and finish the degree. The Institute must communicate this clearly to all students, both those registered and those who have taken withdrawal.

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[1] Approximately 150 students apply for readmission annually. Student undergoing the readmission process for the first time have a success rate of 65-75%, and most students are readmitted on subsequent attempts.

2. The Institute should no longer speak of "withdrawal" and "readmission" but of "leave" and "return." These changes of nomenclature not only better communicate these policies to students and the outside world, they reflect better the philosophy that should guide how MIT thinks about taking time away from the Institute.

3. The Institute should create a status of "leave of absence" that would allow students to interrupt their studies for up to two years and then return without substantial bureaucratic barriers. The leave of absence, which could be taken once during a student's academic career, may be used for a variety of reasons, including partaking in meritorious opportunities, fulfilling personal obligations, or simply clearing one's head.

4. The CAP should move toward a model of decision making about returns following leaves that clearly separates the student-support role of S3 from the decision making role of the CAP. The logistical hurdles to achieving this goal are substantial, and will require the CAP to experiment with new modes of operating to make this happen.

5. Policies about invoking involuntary medical withdrawal and psychiatric hospitalization are unclear and should be reviewed by a committee charged by the Chancellor. Independent of that review, involuntary medical withdrawal should never be used to coerce students into taking a voluntary leave. This attitude must be communicated and reinforced throughout the Institute.

Charge to the Committee from the Chancellor

In September 2015, Chancellor Cynthia Barnhart wrote a letter to the MIT Community outlining new steps to enhance mental health and wellness support at MIT. In this letter, the Chancellor stated "…students have expressed concerns about the clarity, transparency, and fairness of existing (withdrawal and readmission) policies, and about the level of support for students who take time away and transition back to MIT." The Chancellor listened to feedback from the community about the policies during informal conversation with students and from a formal report by the Committee on Student Life, who engaged in an extensive conversation about this topic during the 2014-2015 academic year. She charged the CAP and DUE with gathering feedback from students and faculty, and recommend changes to bolster and clarify our policies, which had not been formally reviewed since 2010.

Process of Our Review

The CAP and the DUE received the charge of Chancellor Barnhart in September 2015. The Chair of the CAP (Professor Charles Stewart III) and the dean (Professor Dennis Freeman) agreed that the CAP would be directly responsible for implementing the charge of the Chancellor. The review itself began at a meeting of the CAP at the end of September 2015; this report was finalized in March 2016.

In addition to the outreach activities outlined below, the CAP had nine meetings on the topic, beginning in the Fall semester and ending at the beginning of the Spring term, in which the critical issues were discussed. Because the withdrawal and readmission processes are complex and intersect with many people and offices across the Institute, the CAP decided at the onset of its review to consult with a broad variety of stakeholders, including the following:

- All readmitted students currently at MIT
- Committee on Student Life
- Chair of the Faculty
- Former Chairs of the CAP
- Housemasters
- MIT Medical Department
- MIT Mental Health and Counseling
- Office of Minority Education (OME) Faculty Advisory Committee
- OME Student Advisory Council
- Panhellenic, Interfraternity Council, and Dorm Con (two representatives from each group)
- Senior leaders in the Division of Student Life (DSL)
- Students at MIT Allied for Student Health (SMASH) board
- Student Support Services Deans
- Undergraduate Administrators
- Undergraduate Advising and Academic Programming (UAAP) Student Advisory Board
- Undergraduate Association's Wellness sub-committee
- Undergraduate Officers

In most cases, feedback from these stakeholder groups was gathered in a face-to-face meeting with members of the CAP. Generally, at least one student and one non-student member met with each group. Feedback from readmitted students currently at MIT was received in three ways. First, all currently-enrolled readmitted students were sent an anonymous survey (23% response rate). Second, every student was invited to a focus group discussion about his or her experiences led by a faculty and student member of the CAP. Third, any MIT students who wanted to share their opinions privately were offered the opportunity to meet with a member of the CAP.

In addition to the formal interviews listed, students' opinions and experiences were solicited, and students were consulted on the final recommendations. The CAP Chair Stewart and Dean Freeman co-wrote two articles in the *The Tech* about the review process. The community was invited to share their ideas via email. The committee listened to student leaders, students who had been through the withdrawal and readmission processes, and students who had no direct experience with withdrawal or readmission, but still had an interest in the issue. As part of our newly formed partnership with the Jed Foundation,[2] the committee also consulted with them about general best practices regarding leaves and return.

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[2] The Jed Foundation is an organization dedicated to promoting emotional health and prevent suicide among college students.

It should be noted that information gathering with students began long before this review was announced. The 2014–2015 academic year was challenging for the MIT community, with three undergraduate student suicides, and concerns about the withdrawal and readmission processes. Many conversations were had with groups of students, including an Active Minds event on March 2015 in which the community was invited to learn and ask questions about the withdrawal and readmission processes. The faculty Committee on Student Life also conducted a review of the withdrawal and readmission process during the academic year and issued a report that emphasized the importance of communicating with students who had withdrawn in a more sensitive fashion.
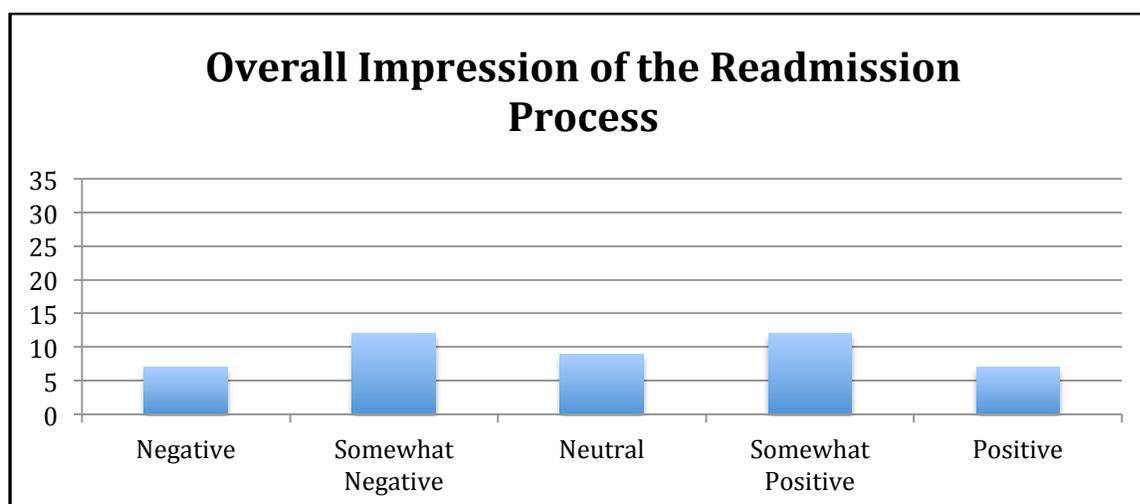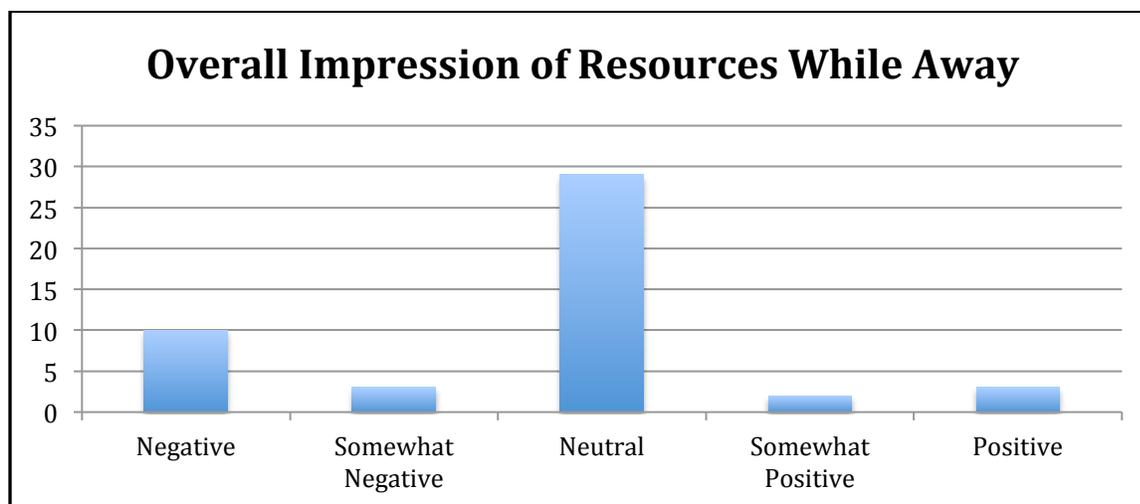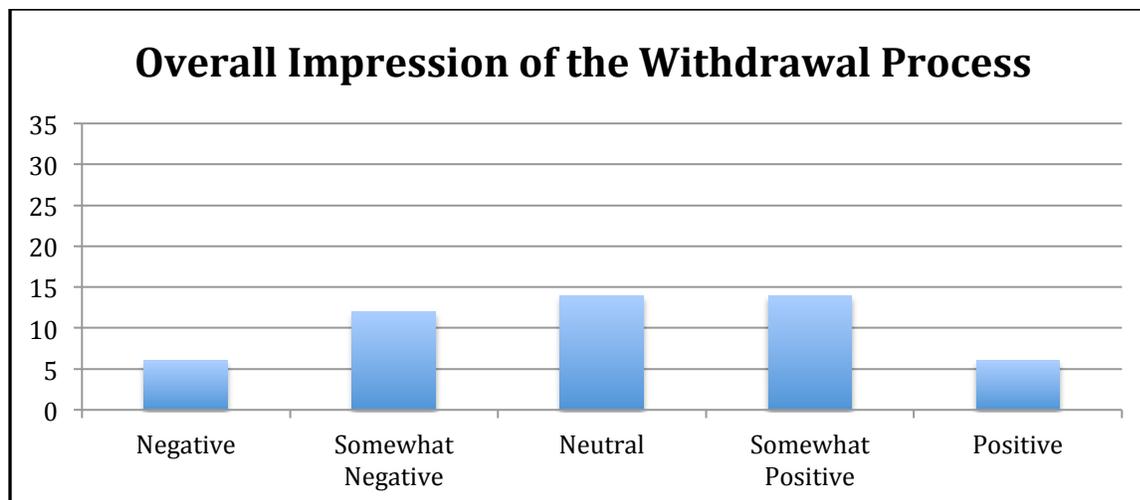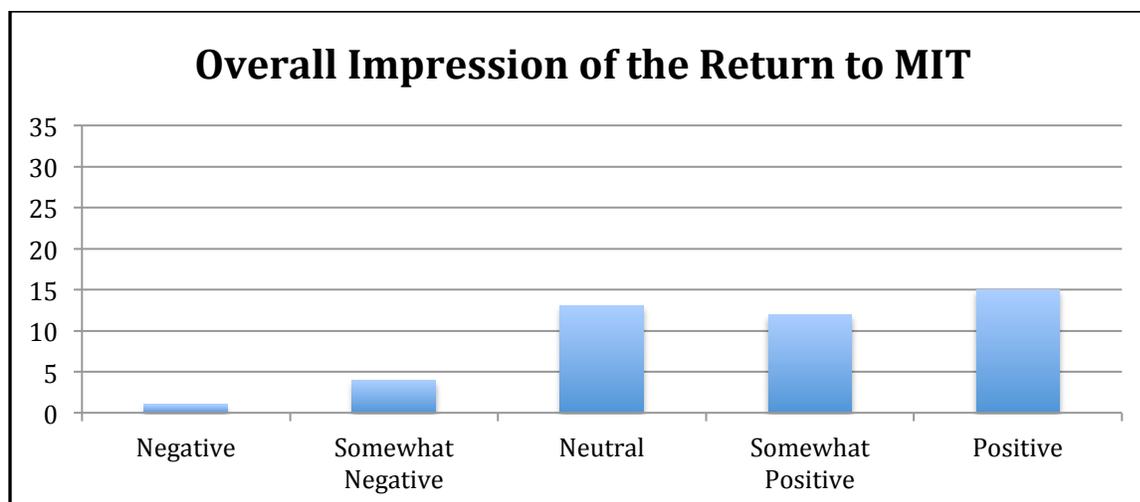
Survey of Readmitted Students — Summary of Results

The CAP believed that it would be important to survey all recently readmitted students, to gain their perspectives on how the process is currently functioning. It was felt necessary to conduct a survey both to give a voice to students who would feel reluctant to share publicly their experiences with the withdrawal and readmission process, and to provide a baseline against which to evaluate these processes in the future.

Therefore, a survey was sent to all currently enrolled MIT undergraduates who had at some time in the past been readmitted to the Institute. The survey consisted of 17 questions (4 Likert-style questions, 10 open-ended questions, and 3 demographic questions), and was divided into four sections: the withdrawal process, time away from the Institute, the readmission process, and the return to MIT. It was sent out via e-mail to a listserv of 194 current students who have returned from withdrawals; 45 students responded (response rate of 23%). Sixteen of the respondents had been on voluntary withdrawal, 20 on medical withdrawal, and 9 on required withdrawal.

While the response rate was relatively low, which means we cannot treat the responses as being representative of all returned students, the responses did provide important insights about withdrawal and readmission, as they are currently experienced. Answers to the open-ended questions in the survey have been incorporated into the feedback given during the meetings, and are included in the "Findings and Recommendations" section below.

We have reported details about the closed-ended questions in the appendix to this report, but we have included the graphical summary of the results below. Please note that the numbers to the left of the graphs are actual numbers rather than percentages of student respondents.

Overall Impression of the Withdrawal Process

Category	Value
Negative	6
Somewhat Negative	12
Neutral	14
Somewhat Positive	14
Positive	6

Overall Impression of Resources While Away

Category	Value
Negative	10
Somewhat Negative	3
Neutral	29
Somewhat Positive	2
Positive	3

Overall Impression of the Readmission Process

Category	Value
Negative	7
Somewhat Negative	12
Neutral	9
Somewhat Positive	12
Positive	7

Overall Impression of the Return to MIT

Information from Peer Institutions

In addition to receiving feedback from members of the MIT community, particularly students, we concluded that it was important to survey peer institutions, to learn how they handle what MIT calls withdrawal and readmission. Although MIT is a distinct learning environment among elite universities in the United States, much can be learned from how our peers handle these processes, since the students at those institutions face many of the same pressures and opportunities confronting MIT students. There were two major goals in this survey: first, to benchmark MIT against the practices of peer institutions and, second, to ascertain whether there were best practices at these institutions from which we could learn.

The survey of the practices at peer institutions was conducted by the Associate Dean for S3, Dr. David Randall, who reviewed their policies online and spoke by phone to knowledgeable staff.[3] Furthermore, we took an especially close look at Yale University, which recently conducted similar student and administrative reviews when concerns arose about their withdrawal and readmission processes.[4]

This research revealed that there is no one single way that withdrawals and readmissions are handled at institutions we regard as our peers. Our policies tend to be on the conservative end of the spectrum, that is, MIT tends to be much more restrictive in setting expectations and requirements for return. On the other hand, our health insurance policy is generous in comparison. Furthermore, while we readmit 65-75% of all applicants who apply in a particular year, most of our peers readmit all students, with rare exception.

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[3] This review included Caltech, Chicago, Harvard, Yale, Stanford, and Princeton.

[4] Student report: http://www.ycc.yale.edu/files/2015/06/YCC-Withdrawal-Policies-25ncxs2.pdf
Administration's report: http://yalecollege.yale.edu/faculty-staff/faculty/policies-reports/report-yale-college-withdrawal-and-readmission-review

However, we did learn that at our peer institutions, the term "withdrawal" tends to imply a permanent separation from the university, while the term "leave" is used to indicate a temporary departure. This, of course, is contrary to MIT's current practice, in which the term "withdrawal" applies to all separations, permanent or temporary.

Most of the schools we spoke to involved a faculty committee and a dean's office in the withdrawal and readmission processes, and most have an involuntary withdrawal policy that is overseen by a dean. Moreover, prorating tuition is standard practice, as is an expectation that students who leave the university during the term have 72 hours to vacate student housing.

Most schools require there be separation from the school upon withdrawal. That is, students generally are not allowed to live, work, or participate in student activities on campus.

<center>Background of Current Policies</center>

We begin the substance of our report by reviewing current withdrawal and readmission policies. This overview is based on a review of documents that describe the policies, in addition to oral reports given by those involved in the implementation of these policies.

<u>Withdrawals from the Institute</u>

There are currently seven categories of actions used by the Institute for students who leave before receiving their degree: voluntary withdrawal, medical withdrawal, academic required withdrawal, failure to register ("no shows"), involuntary medical withdrawal, disciplinary suspension, and disciplinary expulsion. The no show, suspension, and expulsion processes were outside the charge of our review. However, in the interest of describing the full set of reasons why MIT students leave the Institute before graduating, we briefly describe each category here, noting where responsibility lies for the administration and oversight of these processes.

1. <u>Voluntary withdrawals</u> are intended for students who wish to take time away for non-medical reasons, such as participating in an educational or personal growth experience (e.g., internship, service experience, or religious mission) or attending to personal or family circumstances (e.g., death of a parent). Under the terms of a voluntary withdrawal, a student must generally take at least one full semester away from MIT and must be readmitted to MIT by the CAP before registering again.[5]

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[5] A "full semester" is defined by add date. That is, if a student withdraws on or before add date, they are eligible to request return for the following semester. If they withdraw after add date, they need to remain out of MIT for the following semester. Students are able to withdraw up until the last day of the semester. About 45 voluntary withdrawals are processed every year.

2. Medical withdrawals[6] are intended for students who, because of reasons pertaining to physical or mental health, are unable to make satisfactory progress towards meeting Institute graduation requirements. Under the terms of a medical withdrawal, a student must generally take at least one full semester away from MIT (defined in the same way as voluntary withdrawal), and complete the prescribed course of treatment before being considered for readmission. As with voluntary withdrawals, students who have taken medical withdrawal must be readmitted to MIT by the CAP before registering again. About 55 medical withdrawals are processed every year.

3. Required withdrawals for academic reasons are based on a vote by the CAP taken at its end-of-term meetings at the end of the Fall and Spring terms, as part of its responsibility to "review the academic records of undergraduate students and to take appropriate action in the name of the Faculty."[7] Under current practices, students who are required to withdraw for academic reasons must generally be away for at least one academic year (two regular terms) before they are permitted to apply to the CAP for readmission to the Institute. Under the terms of a required withdrawal, a student is generally expected to take at least two consecutive semesters of challenging courses at another college or university, receiving grades of B or better. The CAP votes to require an average of 20–30 students to withdraw for academic reasons each year.

4. The no show designation is reserved for students who do not register for the semester by add date, but who are otherwise eligible to register. This is a category that allows the Institute to account for the status of all students who are eligible to register. Generally, fewer than 5 students are designated no show each term. Students who are designated as no shows must be readmitted to the Institute by the CAP before being allowed to register again.

5. Involuntary medical withdrawal is intended for a student who poses a significant risk to the health or safety of self or others, and/or when it is established that a student is unable to function academically or participate in campus life.[8] The circumstances that could lead to the involuntary medical withdrawal include, but are not limited to, an inability to complete or make satisfactory progress towards academic requirements. In addition, a student may be placed on involuntary withdrawal for medical reasons, if a student does not cooperate with efforts, deemed necessary by the Institute, to determine if the student poses a significant risk to the health or safety of self or others. To date, MIT has never processed an involuntary withdrawal. However, as we discuss below, the circumstances surrounding other withdrawal processes give the impression that involuntary medical withdrawals are

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[6] The juxtaposition of these two withdrawal categories — "voluntary" and "medical" withdrawals highlights one unfortunate consequence of the terminology currently used to label types of withdrawals at the Institute, to the degree that it is incorrectly implied that medical withdrawals are involuntary. We revisit this important point below.

[7] MIT, *Rules and Regulations of the Faculty,* §1.73.5.c.
[8] http://mit.edu/uaap/s3/withdrawals/medwithd_policy.html.

common, or if they are not common, the status is used to coerce students to withdraw voluntarily.

6. The final two categories are overseen by the Committee on Discipline (COD). These disciplinary withdraws, as well as the entire COD process, have been subject to regular review over the years. The last comprehensive review of the discipline system was done in 2005 and was published in the Gibson Report.[9] The review of suspensions and expulsions were outside the scope of our charge, and we have no further comments to make about the processes.
   a. A <u>disciplinary suspension</u> is the removal "of a student from the Institute for a defined period of time" for disciplinary reasons, through a vote taken by the COD.[10] Students who are suspended from MIT must be readmitted to the Institute through a process overseen by the COD.
   b. <u>Disciplinary expulsions</u> is the "permanent separation of a student from MIT" for disciplinary reasons, through a vote taken by the COD.[11]

The DUE is responsible for overseeing all withdrawals, even when decisions about the status are made by the CAP (required withdrawals). The DUE has delegated the day-to-day administration of withdrawals to S3. Suspensions and expulsions are overseen by the COD, and the Dean of Student Life (DSL) has delegated the administration of suspensions and expulsions to the Office of Student Citizenship (OSC).

<u>Readmission</u>

As noted previously, there are seven ways that a student can leave the Institute before receiving a degree. In all cases, the *Rules of the Faculty* require that a student who has interrupted his or her studies apply for readmission to the Institute. In this section, we describe the readmission process. Because the charge to the CAP excluded disciplinary suspensions and expulsions, we do not address readmissions following disciplinary actions here.

The MIT *Rules of the Faculty* provide that the CAP "shall act with power . . . on applications for readmission at the undergraduate level after a voluntary, medical, or required withdrawal."[12] The CAP has exercised this authority for many decades in close cooperation with S3 and its predecessors. The readmission process has been reviewed regularly in that time. The last review of

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[9] The full text of the Gibson report can be found here: http://web.mit.edu/faculty/reports/pdf/disciplinereport.pdf. More recently, the COD issued a comprehensive report concerning the handling of student sexual misconduct complaints. The COD's recommendations may be found here: http://cod.mit.edu/sites/default/files/documents/COD-Task-Force-Recommendations-Summary-4-17-2015.pdf.

[10] MIT, *COD Rules and Regulations,* §11.C.i.

[11] MIT, *COD Rules and Regulations,* §11.D.i.

[12] MIT, *Rules and Regulations of the Faculty,* §1.73.5.b.

the readmission process occurred in the Spring 2010. The following description of the readmission process reflects procedures that have been in place since then.

The readmission process has been designed to verify that students are ready to resume successful work at MIT. This means that students must demonstrate that they fulfilled the requirements discussed during their withdrawal process, which may include medical treatment, rigorous coursework, or meritorious work. General requirements for readmission vary by the category of withdrawal; the requirements faced by any individual student may be modified on a case-by-case basis, but the process for readmission is the same for all withdrawals.

Students on withdrawal must complete the undergraduate application for readmission. The readmission application is composed of an essay and timeline about time away, a detailed plan for coursework in future semesters, input from the academic advisor or department, transcripts, letters of recommendation, and medical letters (if applicable). In the process of filing the application, students also discuss the circumstances of their withdrawal and plans for return with the relevant S3 dean. For students under medical withdrawal, the application is also reviewed by a representative of the MIT Medical Department.[13]

The application deadlines for readmission are June 15 for readmission to the Fall term and November 15 to the Spring term; students are informed that they will be notified of the readmission decision no later than August 10 and January 10 respectively. Despite these deadlines, applications for readmission are considered on a rolling basis.

Under the process established by the readmission review that occurred in 2010, the Readmission Committee reviews all applications for readmission and makes a recommendation to the CAP, which ultimately approves or denies the applications. The Readmission Committee consists of three deans in S3 and is chaired by the head of S3. The Readmission Committee must seek consensus on its decision whether or not to recommend readmission of an applicant to CAP. In rare cases, the Readmission Committee may forward a divided recommendation to the CAP for a decision.

The Chair of the Readmission Committee is granted the authority to expedite consideration of readmission applications when the initial review indicates that the decision is clear, given the readmission guidelines and the specific expectations for return associated with a student. For instance, if a student had voluntarily withdrawn to pursue a one-year internship at Apple, the Readmission Chair can expedite the recommendation without a committee review. On the other hand, the Readmission Chair may recommend an expedited denial of an application for a student on academic required withdrawal who did not successfully complete coursework while away from MIT.

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[13] As a general matter, students whose withdrawal was related to issues of mental health (the vast majority of medical withdrawals) are reviewed by clinicians in MIT Mental Health and Counseling, whereas all other cases of readmission after medical withdrawal are reviewed by the Director of Student Health.

All readmission recommendations are forwarded to the CAP for final approval. Under the plan established in 2010, the CAP has delegated to the Chair of the CAP the authority to approve unanimous recommendations by the Readmission Committee and to make the final decision in the case of a non-unanimous Readmission Committee vote. The CAP Chair also reviews expedited recommendations for approval or reference to the full CAP. The Chair of the CAP may overturn a unanimous recommendation of the Readmission Committee only after review by the full CAP.

S3 receives approximately 150 applications for readmission every year. About half of these are from students on medical withdrawal, and a quarter each are from students on academic required or voluntary withdrawal. Roughly 65-75% of these applications are approved, and 25-35% are denied with recommendations for how to reapply successfully and return to MIT. Students whose applications' were denied typically demonstrated inadequate academic performance at school away from MIT or had not been cleared medically to return.

The CAP and S3 take great care in the readmission process and believe MIT is distinct in this regard. For many schools, the return process is an administrative matter and does not fully take into account a student's readiness to return. At MIT, the goal is to readmit someone when he or she is truly ready to return. We believe this is appropriate for two major reasons. First, MIT's intense academic environment makes it difficult for a student who is not prepared to re-enter at a high level of performance. Second, if a student returns and struggles again, the associated shame and pain are tremendous. Thus, the MIT process is aimed at trying to ensure that a readmitted student will do more than just get by, but will succeed.

The CAP in recent years has endeavored to systematically track the academic performance of students who have withdrawn and then been readmitted. The data collected suggest that the current process leads students who have withdrawn under difficult circumstances to succeed once they return. For instance, on average, students who were on academic required withdrawal see their GPAs improve one full point (from 3.0 to 4.0 on average) upon their return to MIT.

Findings and Recommendations

We found that there were many parts of the withdrawal and readmission processes at MIT that work quite well; they are organized, thoughtful, and well connected. The goals are to help students transition smoothly away from MIT and then return to the Institute when they are ready. The deans in S3 work closely with students, most of whom request withdrawals on their own, to determine a plan for their readmission and the best path back to MIT. The process includes important stakeholders across the campus including academic advisors, academic departments, MIT Medical, Mental Health and Counseling, DSL, the Registrar, Student Financial Services, Student Disability Services, the International Students Office, and the Office of Minority Education.

We also uncovered several areas that could benefit from changes. Some of the areas of change arise because this review has simply suggested ways to accomplish the goals of the withdrawal and

readmission processes more effectively. But, we must also note that some of the changes we recommend arise because of the heartfelt expressions of concern we heard from students about these processes, which sometimes extend to outright widespread distrust. While we recognize that the nature of withdrawal and readmission decisions will always generate negative feelings and misunderstandings, it is undoubtedly true that as the level of distrust goes up, the effectiveness of MIT's student support system goes down, as does trust that decisions are being made wisely and fairly about important aspects of students' lives. Therefore, the recommendations we developed are aimed at making the withdrawal and readmission decisions not only more *effective*, but also more *open* and *understood* by the MIT community.

We organize this section along the lines of the most important themes that emerged in the feedback we heard from the community, especially the students, about the withdrawal and readmission processes. In developing these recommendations, we were guided by three goals:

1. The withdrawal and readmission processes should be easily understood; outcomes about decisions should be communicated clearly and directly.

2. While the decision is MIT's, students who are most directly affected by the withdrawal and readmission processes should feel they have a meaningful say in the processes.

3. All students who withdraw are expected to return to MIT (if they want to) and receive their degree. This includes those who are required to withdraw or who voluntarily withdraw because they face profound personal and medical challenges.

The recommendations in this section are organized along five major themes:

1. <u>Openness of communication.</u> Despite dedicated efforts by everyone at MIT who is involved in withdrawal and readmission, information about how these processes unfold is ineffectively communicated to the community. All at MIT who are involved in the withdrawal and readmission processes must redouble their efforts to communicate information about the process openly, clearly, and directly.

2. <u>Terminology.</u> The terms "withdrawal" and "readmission" impose a significant barrier to student understanding of the processes associated with leaving and returning. MIT must change its language about these processes. We must emphasize that time away from the Institute does not constitute a permanent severing of its relationship with a student; return to the Institute should not make students feel that their initial admission to MIT was a mistake.[14]

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[14] In these findings and recommendations section, below, we recommend a significant change in terminology. From this point forward, "withdrawal" will be replaced with "leave" and "readmission" replaced with "return." Moreover, we will refer to "readmission application" as "request to return." The notable exceptions will be when discussing students who have already gone through these processes, and when discussing historic experiences with the process.

3. <u>Normalization of taking leave from the Institute.</u> The culture and practices of the Institute stand in the way of students stepping away from MIT, when doing so would be to their benefit. We must lower the barriers to MIT students taking time away, not only to pursue distinguished business, economic, and social endeavors, but also to allow students to clear their heads and to assess their trajectory through MIT.

4. <u>Support while on leave.</u> Many students who have withdrawn express that they feel like they have been abandoned by the Institute; many caring and dedicated faculty and staff at MIT feel hampered from reaching out to withdrawn students to help them navigate a path back to readmission. MIT must develop new ways to engage with students while they are on leave from the Institute.

5. <u>Transition back to MIT.</u> Some students express frustration with the timing of decisions made about their request to return — not only about the return decision itself, but also about related decisions, such as housing. If the goal of the return process is to ensure the successful reintegration of students on leave into the MIT academic community, then many administrative practices at the Institute, both those overseen by the DUE and by the DSL, must be reconsidered and revised.

As well, there were three items that arose during the consideration of our charge that this report has recommendations about. They are (1) involuntary medical withdrawals, (2) psychiatric hospitalizations, and (3) issues related to graduate students.

We consider these broad categories of recommendations in order.

<u>Openness of Communication</u>

There is confusion about the processes and expectations of leave and return. While comprehensive, clear information is available on the S3's website, the community, from faculty members to students, seem to be unaware of it. Better efforts need to be made to disseminate information, and make the community aware of the policies for leave and return.

Many students who have withdrawn also expressed confusion about the expectations upon them during their time away, and what requirements they needed to fulfill to return to MIT. Moreover, it appears that the student body is unaware of the accurate percentage of students who are granted return.

We recognize that the environment in which leave and return policies are communicated is challenging. Students who are required to leave for academic reasons or who face serious medical crises are often not receptive to the information provided about these policies, or even in a condition to discover it. Even with these limitations, we believe that efforts could be undertaken to

communicate more effectively with the MIT community, and especially students, about the policies associated with leave and return.

1. Overall efforts need to be made to communicate actively about how the processes operate, expectations concerning return, and results of the leave and return process.
    a. The CAP and DUE should report annually about the number of students seeking leave and return, the rates of return, and measure of academic success among students who return from leave. The CAP and DUE should also regularly communicate with the faculty and administrative staff about how these processes work, and about the resources available to students, faculty, and staff who come in contact with leave and return.
    b. The CAP and DUE should work with *The Tech* and other communications resources at the Institute to ensure that this same information is reported on a regular basis to the community.

2. S3 should undertake a review of the sections of their website that communicate information concerning leave and return policies, to ensure that the information is communicated clearly and effectively. It should create and regularly update a FAQ section on their website that addresses common concerns about leaves and return.

3. A physical or virtual book of student experiences while on leave should be made available to students considering leave.

Terminology

Students have clearly expressed a fear and distrust of the current withdrawal and readmission processes. Both processes communicate a sense of rejection by MIT. The term "withdrawal" connotes that students have been permanently separated from the Institute — a sense that is reinforced by the fact that this term is generally used by universities when the relationship is in fact permanently severed. The term "readmission" likewise connotes that the initial admission was mistaken, therefore the student must prove all over again that his or her initial admission was valid. Even in cases where return seems like a foregone conclusion, students report that they must relive the stress of their initial application for college admission to MIT, since readmission to MIT is not guaranteed.

Also, the current categories send unintended messages about the reasons for the withdrawals. The labels associated with two frequently-used categories — "voluntary withdrawal" and "medical withdrawal" — communicate the mistaken impression that all (or most) medical withdrawals occur involuntarily.

The nomenclature surrounding the status of students who have withdrawn from MIT can be unclear and embarrassing to students who must explain their status to the outside world. To allay

this sense of shame, the Institute should encourage the use of a better term to describe the status of students when they are withdrawn.

1. The terms associated with the current processes of withdrawal and readmission should be changed.
    a. The term "withdrawal" should no longer be used; the corresponding processes should be termed "leave."[15] Implementing this change will involve amending the Rules of the Faculty.[16]
    b. The categories of leave that the Institute maintains should be the following:
        i. Personal leave
        ii. Medical leave
        iii. Involuntary medical leave
        iv. Required academic leave
    c. The term "readmission" should no longer be used and instead be called "return from leave" or just simply "return."
    d. The term "readmission application" should not be used. Students are not applying to MIT, they are "requesting to return from leave."

2. Students should be encouraged to use the generic description of being "on leave" when they interrupt their studies at the Institute for the reasons outlined in this section of the report.[17] The categorization of the types of leave (personal leave, medical leave, etc.) is strictly for internal purposes, and should not be reflected on the transcript, in keeping with current practice related to withdrawals. We encourage the registrar to use the terminology "leave of absence" rather than "withdrawal" on the external transcript when students take leave in the middle of the semester. [18]

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[15] We recognize that Federal regulations require the Financial Aid Office to use the term "withdrawal" on their materials. However, MIT's financial aid materials should make every effort to indicate that their continued use of this term is due to federal requirements, and not MIT policy.

[16] The Rules of the Faculty would need to be amended at the following places:
- §1.73.4 (pertaining to the jurisdiction of the Committee on Undergraduate Admissions and Financial Aid). The following phrase would be deleted from this section: "except in cases of students applying for readmission," This phrase is the strongest language in the Rules of the Faculty that equates readmission with admission.
- §1.73.5 (pertaining to the jurisdiction of the CAP). This section would be rewritten as follows: "The Committee shall act with power on petitions from individual undergraduate students relating to exceptions to established academic standards, and establish regulations related to the return of students at the undergraduate level after a personal, voluntary or involuntary medical, or required academic leave."

[17] Students who have been suspended or expelled should not identify themselves as being on leave from MIT.

[18] The committee supports continuing the current practice of not noting a withdrawal (or leave) on a student's transcript when study is interrupted between semesters, simply leaving a gap in the dates on the transcript.

Streamlining the Processes of Leaving and Returning to MIT

In addition to the fear students experience about the prospect of leave, there are also logistical issues pertaining to both leaving the Institute and returning that were raised by students, faculty, and staff. As a general matter, many students who leave in the middle of the term or who are required to leave for academic reasons report feeling like they are rushed out the door. At the point of return, students often express frustration at the conditions placed on them and the return process.

The committee recognizes the value of having students who are on leave depart from the Institute as soon as arrangements can be made, both for the benefit to the student and to the larger Institute community. However, leaves often occur under difficult circumstances, and it is appropriate to allow a small amount of additional time to depart. Students whose leave is unplanned must make a series of life decisions in an extremely brief period of time under very stressful circumstances. They must vacate Institute housing and find new lodging. They must navigate complex and confusing rules about financial aid to receive refunds, and figure out issues like health insurance when they are no longer covered by MIT's policy.

The time crunch associated with unplanned leaves is particularly salient in the case of vacating Institute housing, where the current expectation that students depart within 48 hours of a leave causes a hardship for many. The additional time we recommend is not very much — an extra day. We believe, however, that in many cases giving a student 72 hours to check out of Institute housing would ease some of the anxiety often associated with leaving, and also help with the administrative details.[19]

Currently, every student who seeks a leave is given a set of expectations to meet before return. Setting these expectations for all students is consistent with the philosophy that has governed return policy for many years, which is that the Institute has wanted to ensure that everyone who takes time away from the rigors of MIT's academic environment is ready to return — even students who in the past showed no signs of struggling with the environment.

Students who leave to pursue an exciting educational opportunity or to fulfill a personal commitment are expected to follow through on their announced plans, complete essays that account for their time and reflect on what they accomplished while away, assemble letters of recommendation, and plot out a detailed academic roadmap before they are readmitted. Students who leave under medical leave are generally required to spend at least one semester away from the Institute undergoing treatment. In applying for return, not only must they assemble a dossier that parallels that of students who take voluntary leave, their treatment must also be documented by healthcare providers and verified by MIT's Medical Department. Students who are required to leave

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[19] The CAP recognizes that there will be rare cases where it will be appropriate to require a student to vacate Institute housing in less than 72 hours, especially in circumstances in which the safety to the student or community are at issue. These are not typical cases, however, and the committee believes that departure policies should not be determined primarily by atypical cases.

for academic reasons are expected to spend at least two semesters away from the Institute, generally taking rigorous college-level classes and getting A and B grades; these students, too, must also complete an extensive application that requires letters of recommendation, transcripts, and reflective essays.

Students who leave MIT meet with a dean from S3 to help mold expectations to meet the specific circumstances of the students. However, all students who take leave must still reapply, and the expectations for time away (i.e., one semester for medical leave and two semesters for required academic leave) are rarely relaxed.

In the minds of students who have taken leave from the Institute, the request to return process often appears to create barriers to returning, and may seem arbitrary and unrelated to educational purposes. Setting detailed expectations about returning seems extraneous for those taking time to explore an exciting educational opportunity (a prestigious internship, developing a start-up, or volunteering internationally) or fulfill a personal commitment (family member's illness, military service, or religious mission). Moreover, the expectation that students who are required to leave for academic reasons pursue a full year of college-level study as a non-degree student at another college can be an insurmountable obstacle for students of meager financial means.

Also, the prospect of having to surmount the barrier of return looms large when students consider whether to leave in the first place. After all, if even a junior with a 5.0 average who leaves for a year to pursue an internship with Microsoft is not guaranteed return to the Institute, what is a student who is struggling academically to think?

All these considerations together lead us to recommend a series of policy changes to ease the processes of temporarily leaving the Institute and returning after a hiatus. The committee particularly urges the adoption of the first recommendation that immediately follows.

1. The Institute should create a flexible category of leave, the "leave of absence," that would be available to all students who are eligible to register in the following semester. This category should be flexible, both as it relates to the purpose of the leave and the administrative processes related to claiming the leave and returning from it.
    a. This status would be reserved for students who are eligible to register in the upcoming semester. Thus, it would not be available for students choosing to withdraw in the middle of the semester or to avoid review by the CAP at the end-of-term meetings.
    b. Students taking a leave of absence would be permitted to return to the Institute within two years from the date of the leave without formal review.
    c. Students would be allowed to take one leave of absence over their undergraduate career.
    d. The administrative process to take a leave of absence would be minimal, but still require students to consult with their advisors and with a dean at S3. It is appropriate to require students taking a leave of absence to discuss their plans and

receive advice from their academic advisor and S3 dean, but these consultations should not be considered part of a process to approve the leave.

   e. The leave of absence and return processes would be managed by S3 and involve very little effort on the part of the student. Students would not need to submit a formal request to return, although it would be appropriate for students to notify the DUE (via S3) of their intended return date according to a published deadline.

2. Letters sent to students taking leave for medical or required academic reasons should be revised to more clearly delineate expectations for student return. Leave letters issued by the CAP and S3 should be reviewed and modified to be supportive in tone.

3. Students should be permitted 72 hours to move out of Institute housing at the time of leave. S3 should carefully coordinate with Housing to ensure that students have adequate ability to move out in this time frame.

4. Student Financial Services and the Registrar's Office should continue to prorate tuition for students taking leave from the Institute. However, there should be a ten day grace period at the start of the semester so that students may decide to take a leave and still be given a full tuition refund.

5. Tuition insurance should be more prominently advertised by Student Financial Services.

6. More flexibility should be allowed for personal and medical leave processes; S3 deans, in consultation with appropriate campus colleagues, should have the ability to decrease the required minimum amount of time away or provide fewer expectations.

7. Required academic leave should still be for a full year but students should be asked to demonstrate academic readiness over the course of one semester rather than two.

These recommendations largely relate to the actions taken by the Institute on behalf of the Faculty, or in administering leave policies. These recommendations do not address the internal procedures of the CAP as it acts on behalf of the Institute Faculty in determining whether students are prepared to return to the Institute following personal, medical, and required academic leaves.

Support While on Leave

The separation of a student from the Institute, especially when it is unplanned or unwanted, can result in a great deal of confusion, even in the best of circumstances. We recognize that there will always be misunderstanding, anger, and disappointment associated with leave and return. However, this reality does not exempt the Institute from seeking to minimize friction that is associated with leave.

The first step in easing the negative feelings surrounding leave (and the associated return) process is to make one fact clear: The Institute intends to welcome back the student, in the future, who is leaving, and ultimately to see the student graduate.

Because the forms of leave that are reviewed in this report are temporary, not permanent, it is imperative that the relationship between the Institute and the student reflect this fact for the period when the student's studies have been interrupted. For a variety of legal and administrative reasons, there must be distinctions between students who are registered and those who are on leave. However, a student who goes on leave remains part of the MIT community and is expected to return to MIT as a student.

In making this statement, we note that sturdy barriers have been erected in the past between withdrawn students and the Institute, and that some of those barriers have been necessary. In particular, in the not-too-distant past, the Institute had a difficult time ensuring that unenrolled students had vacated Institute housing and that the small number of withdrawn students who were disruptive to the community had left. However, it is our belief that problems associated with "ghosting" in the dormitories are under much better (if imperfect) control. And in any case, policies that govern the Institute's relationship with students on leave should not be governed by the behavior of a small number of people.

While it is standard practice across universities to prohibit students on leave from using university services, the language and practice associated with the use of services during a student's leave causes a great deal of confusion across the MIT community. Departmental administrators expressed to us uncertainty about whether they are allowed to contact those who are on leave, housemasters expressed concern about the support of students while away, and students communicated that they feel isolated by the policies that seem to restrict their contact with their support community. This confusion across the Institute results in inconsistent communication between those who are away with staff and faculty, which leads to greater feelings of isolation.

With these considerations in mind, we recommend the following.

1. It should be made clear to students when they take leave from the Institute, especially if the leave is required or unplanned, that their admission to MIT has not been withdrawn, they are still a part of the MIT community, and that we are eager to see them return and graduate.

2. An action plan should be developed for every student who takes leave from MIT, regardless of the reason for the leave. This action plan — which should be shared and developed with the active participation of the student — should not only record expectations about what the student will be doing while on leave and what is required to re-register in the future, but should also explicitly identify MIT contacts for students at time of leave for while they are away.

3. Better efforts should be made to clarify to students and departments that students on leave are strongly encouraged to be in contact with their dean, academic advisor, and department for support and guidance.

4. The Institute's Suspension of Services statement[20] should be reviewed to make clear to students both the support available, as well as the limits of what they may do in the community. It is appropriate that students on leave not live in MIT owned or affiliated housing, attend classes, participate in UROP, or have an activated MIT card. However, as a general matter, students on leave should not be precluded from activities on campus any more than members of the local community. In other words, it should generally be appropriate for students on leave to be employed at MIT and participate in campus activities that are open to non-students.[21] The committee agrees that students should be permitted to retain their MIT email address through sponsorship. The committee acknowledges, however, that for many students, physical distance from MIT is exactly what is necessary to address the issues that were causing problems at the Institute.

5. S3 should extend its robust and lauded program of support for returning students to students on leave, by developing an extended mentorship network with returned students, alumni, and interested faculty members.

6. The MIT Medical Department should investigate the cost involved to offer MIT Health Insurance to all students who take leave and were on the MIT Extended Plan. This would extend a policy that currently applies to students who take medical leave to all students on leave. For students who do not purchase the Extended Plan, every effort should be made by the MIT Medical Department to educate students about the health care exchanges and the importance of adequate health insurance coverage.

7. MIT should establish a fund to help support students with financial hardships who are on leave, to relieve the burdens that are often imposed, especially when students are required to withdraw for academic reasons. The funding requirements to fulfill this recommendation are not trivial, and could approach $500,000 a year. However, we believe that such an effort is critical if we are to make our commitment to students on leave a reality.

Returning to MIT

The Committee heard consistently from students that the return process is daunting, and challenges presented by the prospect of confronting it were at the center of their decision whether or not they should withdraw. The survey results from returned students showed that those on

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[20] http://web.mit.edu/academic-guide/section_13.html

[21] This is the general expectation that we would recommend, recognizing that there will be cases where a student would appropriately be required to be absent from the MIT community, either in whole or in part. However, such a requirement should rarely be imposed, and should only be a condition of return to MIT after approval of the CAP.

voluntary leaves were the most dissatisfied with the process. Many students on all types of leave reported that the expectations of the Institute were unclear; this leads to anxiety about the strength of their return case. Students who had withdrawn also expressed concerns about the timing of notification of return. Students applying for return can be notified of the decision just a couple of weeks before the beginning of a semester, which causes logistical difficulties related to housing, financial aid, and the reactivation of the MIT ID card.

Students on medical and required leave often expressed the opinion that there was a conflict of roles with S3, which provides support during the time the student is on leave, but then is seen as making final return decisions.

Housemasters questioned whether the current process facilitated the placement of students in appropriate housing to ensure community support, and stated that they were even unsure of which students in their dormitories were returning. Academic departments also stated that they were unsure of timelines for return, and that they wished to be kept informed about decisions, especially in those cases in which a student returned to the Institute as a major in another department.

Of all these concerns, the one that seemed the most fundamental was the problem of the dual, seemingly conflicting, role of S3 in the process of return. The role of S3 is to support students in all phases of their relationship with the Institute. Although the role of S3 in the return process is advisory, the clear impression past withdrawn students get is that S3 is the sole arbiter about whether or not a student may return.

As noted earlier, return decisions are made by the CAP, but from the perspective of students applying for return, S3 makes the decision. This confusion is reinforced by the practice of having the letter that notifies the student of the return decision come over the signature of the head of S3. This source of misunderstanding is easily remedied. How to provide a more meaningful "airlock" between S3 and the CAP has been one of the most complex matters which the committee wrestled with.

The design challenge is that the deans of S3 are the most knowledgeable MIT employees when it comes to the specific circumstances of students who are on leave, and yet the CAP, which by its nature will always have less intimate knowledge of students' specific circumstances, must make the decision. Therefore, a way must be found to apply the insights of S3 about individual students to the final decisions about return that must be made by the CAP.

However, the calendar presents further problems that prevent the full CAP from considering applications for return. For return in the Fall semester, grades that are relevant to return cases are generally not available until the Spring semester has ended and the CAP can no longer be convened as a full body.[22] For return in the Spring semester, grades are made available during the winter

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[22] Current CAP student members confirm that their summer commitments to end-of-term grades and deferred action meetings already make it difficult to navigate with summer internships and employment. Furthermore, faculty members are either not employed by the Institute during the summer, or grant

break and during the period when S3 and the CAP are intensively engaged in end-of-term assessments of currently enrolled students.

Because of these calendar constraints, the return process described at the beginning of this report puts heavy emphasis on S3 forming a recommendation about each student's application for return that is then presented to the CAP Chair for ratification or referral to the full CAP. This way, the full CAP only needs to be involved in the most difficult of decisions. The fact that the process is weighted heavily in favor of intensive S3 deliberation and less intensive active involvement of the full CAP, other than by the Chair, easily leads to the students' impression that decisions are in fact made by S3.

Other universities deal with these same calendar constraints in ways that avoid some of the problems that the current MIT return process is prone to, but in ways that seem alien to MIT's culture. Many universities, for instance, leave the faculty out of the return decision altogether, putting the decision in the hands of a single dean who may, or may not be, a member of the faculty. MIT, on the other hand, values the primacy of faculty in all fundamental academic decisions, including decisions about whether students are prepared to engage in classes. Some universities only have one deadline for applications to return, during the school year, which constrains return to the university to occur only in the Fall semester. By setting the deadline early enough in the spring, it allows fuller involvement of faculty and staff in return decisions, but it also creates a big gap in time between the classes that a student might take to demonstrate their being ready to return to MIT and recommencing study at the Institute.

After careful deliberation of all the issues surrounding the return process, the CAP has concluded that a way must be found to make it clear that the primary role of the deans who work for S3 is to support students while on leave from the Institute, not to decide whether they are ready to return. S3's role in the return process is to provide advice to students who are on leave about how to prepare to return, and to advise the CAP about the progress that students have made along the path to return. The decision must be in fact, and in appearance, made by the faculty CAP.

1. To position S3 and the CAP to do their respective jobs, it is absolutely critical for there to be clear and explicit expectations at the time of the leave (see recommendation #2 in the "Streamlining the processes of leaving and returning to MIT section"). Indeed, the leave needs to be connected closely to the return and this starts with specific expectations. Recommendations from MIT Medical need to be clear, and the CAP also needs to clarify a standard set of expectations for students on academic required leave.

2. With a clear set of expectations it is our hope that the Readmission Committee in S3 could be dissolved. S3's role would transform from being a decision maker in this process to being a coordinator and supporter. We anticipate that there will be a transition period to get to

restrictions prohibit them from performing administrative duties unrelated to their sponsored research over the summer.

this state, and that the CAP and S3 will collaborate with S3 to make the change as quickly and smoothly as possible.

  a. S3 would be responsible for assembling the return materials, shepherding the students through the process, and providing the CAP with information about whether or not the concrete expectations for leave were met.

  b. MIT Medical and Mental Health would be asked to provide clear guidance about medical clearance and academic departments would be asked to do the same about academic readiness to return.

  c. Our vision is that the CAP Chair can make decisions on behalf of the committee, but would consult with additional members of the CAP before denying someone the ability to return.

3. Since the CAP will have much more direct oversight of the return process, ensuring the committee is well informed and trained will be critical. The full CAP will review (after the fact) all denials and a sample of acceptances, for the purpose of providing oversight to the process and helping S3 calibrate the advice it gives to students who apply for return in the future .[23]

4. Decision letters, both denials and acceptances, will go out over the signature of the Chair of CAP.

5. In addition to this significant alteration of the return process, we recommend the following ways to improve the process of the return for students:

  a. S3 should develop an online return application portal that would make it easier for students to submit their materials in a timely fashion. This will require significant technical and financial support.

  b. All students living on campus at the time of their leave, and who have not used their eight semesters of eligibility for housing, should be guaranteed housing upon return. The Housing Office and S3 should consult every semester about the likely return cases to be considered early enough, so that rooms can be set aside for students returning from leave. Furthermore, this planning should prioritize returning students to their previous dormitory assignment, if that is their wish.

  c. It is critical that DSL forward on to the housemasters the list they receive from S3 about returning students, so that housemasters can prepare to support those students as they reintegrate into the community.

  d. The following should occur as soon as practicable after the decision to return:

      i. Reactivation of the MIT ID card

      ii. Assignment to housing

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[23] This recommendation will be implemented immediately in the Spring 2016 semester for the most recent set of readmission applications. The remaining experiments pertain to readmission applications for Fall 2016 and beyond.

          iii.   Decisions about financial aid[24]

    e. If a student switches majors upon return to the institute, notification of the return should be provided to both the student's new department, as well as the original department.

<div align="center">Other Recommendations</div>

Throughout this review, the Committee heard concerns about MIT policies and practices that are outside the CAP's purview, or not in the charge of the committee, but which nonetheless affect the leave and return issues we have reviewed. They should be addressed by the Institute without undue delay.

The related set of issues we wish to flag are the following:
- Involuntary medical leave
- Psychiatric hospitalization
- Graduate student leave and return

We briefly consider these in order.

<u>Involuntary Medical Leave</u>

As mentioned earlier, involuntary medical leave is a process intended for the rarest of cases, when a student is a danger to him- or herself, the community, or both, and when the student refuses to voluntarily commit to a course of action to address the student's condition that has created the situation. Students, faculty, and staff were often incredulous to learn that the policy of involuntary medical leave has never been invoked at the Institute.

We heard from students the frequent claim that the threat of invoking the involuntary medical leave policy has been used to coerce students into taking a leave "voluntarily." This must stop. If there is, in fact, a belief that the policy should be invoked, it should be invoked, not threatened. This attitude must be communicated and reinforced throughout the Institute.

> Therefore, we urge the Chancellor to assign the Medical Department, the DUE, the DSL, and the Dean for Graduate Education (ODGE) the task of reviewing policies related to involuntary medical leave, and that the review be conducted in such a way that widespread engagement with the community occurs.

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[24] It is particularly important for international students to be made aware of their financial award well in advance of their return to MIT.

Psychiatric Hospitalization

Between 40 and 50 undergraduate students are hospitalized during an academic year, owing to concerns about the student's mental health. We were not charged with reviewing psychiatric hospitalizations, nor did we have the expertise to conduct such a review. However, student concerns about the hospitalization process were universal. The concerns raised included issues of emotional support while in the hospital, communication, coordination among the different offices involved in working with the student and the hospital, and feelings that hospitalized students often feel coerced to take a leave. These concerns loom so large that they are major impediments to the smooth operation of current leave policies.

The concerns we heard were often precisely the same ones that have been expressed for decades around the Institute. This suggests two possibilities. One is that they are inevitable consequences of the circumstances that often lead to hospitalizations and MIT's decentralized administrative culture. The other is that the Institute has devoted insufficient attention to this set of problems, and has been inattentive to working to achieve a community consensus about how to deal with hospitalizations.

> We urge the Chancellor to sponsor a review of MIT's policies concerning student hospitalizations that engages the entire Institute. We believe this review would be a natural fit and could occur together with the review mentioned previously on involuntary medical leaves.

Graduate Student Leave and Return

The Chancellor's charge to the committee confined this review to processes that affect undergraduate students. As the length and complexity of the report suggests, simply focusing on undergraduates is a substantial task. Several times during our review, we were reminded that many of the issues we encountered also pertain to graduate students. Because of the different administrative context of graduate education at MIT — namely, graduate students are admitted by departments, not by a centralized admissions process, and support for graduate students is focused in ODGE (along with graduate administrators in the departments) rather than with S3 — the precise details of the issues we wrestled with differ when it comes to graduate students. Nonetheless, the issue of leaves from and returns to graduate programs causes distress among graduate students and confusion among graduate departments.

> We therefore urge the Dean for Graduate Education to sponsor a review of these issues as they relate to graduate education at MIT.

Committee on Academic Performance
Academic Year 2015--2016

Voting members
- Prof. Charles Stewart III (Chair), Political Science
- Prof. Arnold Barnett, Sloan School of Management
- Prof. Robert Berwick, Electrical Engineering & Computer Science
- Prof. Tanja Bosak, Earth, Atmospheric & Planetary Sciences
- Prof. Scott Hughes, Physics
- Prof. Kristala Jones Prather, Chemical Engineering
- Ms Jeannette Maisano-Brown '17, Physics
- Mr. Obasi Onuoha '17, Computer Science & Engineering
- Ms Amelia Trainer '18, Nuclear Science & Engineering

Ex-officio members
- Ms Leslie Bridson, Director of Financial Aid (Designee of Student Financial Services)
- Dean DiOnetta Jones Crayton, Director of the Office of Minority Education/DUE (Designee of the Dean of Undergraduate Education)
- Dr. Haleh Rokni, MIT Medical Department (Designee of the Medical Director)
- Dean Kathleen Monagle, Director of Student Disabilities Services
- Dean Julie Norman, Director of the Office of Undergraduate Advising and Academic Programming, DUE (Designee of the Dean of Undergraduate Education)
- Dean David Randall, Director of Student Support Services
- Ms Ri Romano, Associate Registrar (Designee of the Registrar)

Staff to the committee
- Mr Stephen Pepper, Staff Associate of the Office of Undergraduate Advising and Academic
- Ms Kimberly Benard, Assistant Director in Global Education and Career Development

Appendix A

Results of Readmitted Students Survey

The returned students survey was designed to gather feedback directly from students who have been through the withdrawal and readmission process, but who might not wish to participate in-person. The survey was sent out via e-mail to a listserv of 194 current students who have returned from withdrawals. The survey consisted of 17 questions (4 Likert-style questions, 10 open-ended questions, and 3 demographic questions), and was divided into four sections: the withdrawal Process, Time Away from the Institute, the Readmission Process, and the Return to MIT. Seventy students began the survey and 45 completed it for a response rate of 23%. Sixteen of the respondents had been on voluntary withdrawal, 20 on medical withdrawal, and 9 on required withdrawal. While the response rate was low, we felt this was an important part of our review process because it would allow students most affected by the process a way to share their feelings anonymously. Answers to the open-ended questions in the survey have been incorporated into the feedback given during the meetings, and are together in the "Findings and Recommendations" section in the body of the report.

The Withdrawal Process

The survey included three questions about the withdrawal process, beginning with students' overall impressions: "Using the following scale, indicate your overall impression of the withdrawal process, taking into account all the MIT offices you worked with." Overall responses were normally distributed with most of the responses clustering around a neutral impression. In general, students who took medical withdrawals reported a more negative experience (43% negative or somewhat negative) and those who took required withdrawal had a less negative experience (18% negative or somewhat negative). Students who took voluntary withdrawals generally had a neutral impression of the process. See the graph in the body of the text for more information.

Time Away from MIT

Students were asked four questions about resources during their time away from MIT, beginning with their overall experience: "Using the following scale, indicate your overall impression of the resources MIT provided during your time away from MIT." Overall, very few students reported a positive impression (10% positive or somewhat positive). The students on required withdrawal portrayed a negative experience (44% negative or somewhat negative, 0% positive or somewhat positive) as did the students on medical withdrawal (33% negative). Most of the students on voluntary withdrawal reported feeling "neutral" about resources while they were away (78%).

The Readmission Process

The next section of the survey focused on the readmission process. It included three questions, beginning with asking students to rate their overall impression of the readmission process. Students on required withdrawal had a more positive experience (55% somewhat positive or positive). Students on voluntary withdrawal reported a more negative experience (50% somewhat negative or negative). Students on medical withdrawal were more mixed (45% negative or somewhat negative and 40% positive or somewhat positive).

Returning to MIT

The survey continued by asking about students' experiences coming back to MIT: "Using the following scale, indicate your overall impression of the return process, taking into account all the MIT offices you worked with." Students were more positive overall (60% somewhat positive or positive). None of the students on required withdrawal reported a negative or somewhat negative impression, with the majority reporting positive experiences (77% positive or somewhat positive). As is shown in the graph in the body of the report, there were very few negative impressions overall (19% of students on voluntary withdrawal, 10% of students on medical withdrawal).

Appendix B

Summary of All Recommendations

Openness of Communication[25]

1. Overall efforts need to be made to communicate actively about how the processes operate, expectations concerning return, and results of the leave and return process.
    a. The CAP and DUE should report annually about the number of students seeking leave and return, the rates of return, and measure of academic success among students who return from leave. The CAP and DUE should also regularly communicate with the faculty and administrative staff about how these processes work, and about the resources available to students, faculty, and staff who come in contact with leave and return.
    b. The CAP and DUE should work with *The Tech* and other communications resources at the Institute to ensure that this same information is reported on a regular basis to the community.

2. S3 should undertake a review of the sections of their website that communicate information concerning leave and return policies, to ensure that the information is communicated clearly and effectively. It should create and regularly update a FAQ section on their website that addresses common concerns about leaves and return.

3. A physical or virtual book of student experiences while on leave should be made available to students considering leave.

Terminology[26]

1. The terms associated with the current processes of withdrawal and readmission should be changed.
    a. The term "withdrawal" should no longer be used; the corresponding processes should be termed "leave."[27] Implementing this change will involve amending the Rules of the Faculty.[28]
    b. The categories of leave that the Institute maintains should be the following:
        i. Personal leave
        ii. Medical leave
        iii. Involuntary medical leave
        iv. Required academic leave

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[25] For full recommendation, see pp. 13-4.
[26] For full recommendation, see pp. 14-5.

   c. The term "readmission" should no longer be used and instead be called "return from leave" or just simply "return."
   d. The term "readmission application" should not be used. Students are not applying to MIT, they are "requesting to return from leave."

2. Students should be encouraged to use the generic description of being "on leave" when they interrupt their studies at the Institute for the reasons outlined in this section of the report.[29] The categorization of the types of leave (personal leave, medical leave, etc.) is strictly for internal purposes, and should not be reflected on the transcript, in keeping with current practice related to withdrawals. We encourage the registrar to use the terminology "leave of absence" rather than "withdrawal" on the external transcript when students take leave in the middle of the semester. [30]

Streamlining the Processes of Leaving and Returning to MIT[31]

1. The Institute should create a flexible category of leave, the "leave of absence," that would be available to all students who are eligible to register in the following semester. This category should be flexible, both as it relates to the purpose of the leave and the administrative processes related to claiming the leave and returning from it.
   a. This status would be reserved for students who are eligible to register in the upcoming semester. Thus, it would not be available for students choosing to withdraw in the middle of the semester or to avoid review by the CAP at the end-of-term meetings.
   b. Students taking a leave of absence would be permitted to return to the Institute within two years from the date of the leave without formal review.
   c. Students would be allowed to take one leave of absence over their undergraduate career.
   d. The administrative process to take a leave of absence would be minimal, but still require students to consult with their advisors and with a dean at S3. It is appropriate to require students taking a leave of absence to discuss their plans and receive advice from their academic advisor and S3 dean, but these consultations should not be considered part of a process to approve the leave.
   e. The leave of absence and return processes would be managed by S3 and involve very little effort on the part of the student. Students would not need to submit a formal request to return, although it would be appropriate for students to notify the DUE (via S3) of their intended return date according to a published deadline.

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[31] For full recommendation, see pp. 16-8.

2. Letters sent to students taking leave for medical or required academic reasons should be revised to more clearly delineate expectations for student return. Leave letters issued by the CAP and S3 should be reviewed and modified to be supportive in tone.

3. Students should be permitted 72 hours to move out of Institute housing at the time of leave. S3 should carefully coordinate with Housing to ensure that students have adequate ability to move out in this time frame.

4. Student Financial Services and the Registrar's Office should continue to prorate tuition for students taking leave from the Institute. However, there should be a ten day grace period at the start of the semester so that students may decide to take a leave and still be given a full tuition refund.

5. Tuition insurance should be more prominently advertised by Student Financial Services.

6. More flexibility should be allowed for personal and medical leave processes; S3 deans, in consultation with appropriate campus colleagues, should have the ability to decrease the required minimum amount of time away or provide fewer expectations.

7. Required academic leave should still be for a full year but students should be asked to demonstrate academic readiness over the course of one semester rather than two.

Support While on Leave[32]

1. It should be made clear to students when they take leave from the Institute, especially if the leave is required or unplanned, that their admission to MIT has not been withdrawn, they are still a part of the MIT community, and that we are eager to see them return and graduate.

2. An action plan should be developed for every student who takes leave from MIT, regardless of the reason for the leave. This action plan — which should be shared and developed with the active participation of the student — should not only record expectations about what the student will be doing while on leave and what is required to re-register in the future, but should also explicitly identify MIT contacts for students at time of leave for while they are away.

3. Better efforts should be made to clarify to students and departments that students on leave are strongly encouraged to be in contact with their dean, academic advisor, and department for support and guidance.

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[32] For full recommendation, see pp. 18-20.

4. The Institute's Suspension of Services statement[33] should be reviewed to make clear to students both the support available, as well as the limits of what they may do in the community. It is appropriate that students on leave not live in MIT owned or affiliated housing, attend classes, participate in UROP, or have an activated MIT card. However, as a general matter, students on leave should not be precluded from activities on campus any more than members of the local community. In other words, it should generally be appropriate for students on leave to be employed at MIT and participate in campus activities that are open to non-students.[34] The committee agrees that students should be permitted to retain their MIT email address through sponsorship. The committee acknowledges, however, that for many students, physical distance from MIT is exactly what is necessary to address the issues that were causing problems at the Institute.

5. S3 should extend its robust and lauded program of support for returning students to students on leave, by developing an extended mentorship network with returned students, alumni, and interested faculty members.

6. The MIT Medical Department should investigate the cost involved to offer MIT Health Insurance to all students who take leave and were on the MIT Extended Plan. This would extend a policy that currently applies to students who take medical leave to all students on leave. For students who do not purchase the Extended Plan, every effort should be made by the MIT Medical Department to educate students about the health care exchanges and the importance of adequate health insurance coverage.

7. MIT should establish a fund to help support students with financial hardships who are on leave, to relieve the burdens that are often imposed, especially when students are required to withdraw for academic reasons. The funding requirements to fulfill this recommendation are not trivial, and could approach $500,000 a year. However, we believe that such an effort is critical if we are to make our commitment to students on leave a reality.

Returning to MIT[35]

1. To position S3 and the CAP to do their respective jobs, it is absolutely critical for there to be clear and explicit expectations at the time of the leave (see recommendation #2 in the "Streamlining the processes of leaving and returning to MIT section"). Indeed, the leave needs to be connected closely to the return and this starts with specific expectations. Recommendations from MIT Medical need to be clear, and the CAP also needs to clarify a standard set of expectations for students on academic required leave.

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[35] For full recommendation, see pp. 20-4.

2. With a clear set of expectations it is our hope that the Readmission Committee in S3 could be dissolved. S3's role would transform from being a decision maker in this process to being a coordinator and supporter. We anticipate that there will be a transition period to get to this state, and that the CAP and S3 will collaborate with S3 to make the change as quickly and smoothly as possible.
   a. S3 would be responsible for assembling the return materials, shepherding the students through the process, and providing the CAP with information about whether or not the concrete expectations for leave were met.
   b. MIT Medical and Mental Health would be asked to provide clear guidance about medical clearance and academic departments would be asked to do the same about academic readiness to return.
   c. Our vision is that the CAP Chair can make decisions on behalf of the committee, but would consult with additional members of the CAP to deny someone the ability to return.

3. Since the CAP will have much more direct oversight of the return process, ensuring the committee is well informed and trained will be critical. The full CAP will review (after the fact) all denials and a sample of acceptances, for the purpose of providing oversight to the process and helping S3 calibrate the advice it gives to students who apply for return in the future .[36]

4. Decision letters, both denials and acceptances, will go out over the signature of the Chair of CAP.

5. In addition to this significant alteration of the return process, we recommend the following ways to improve the process of the return for students:
   a. S3 should develop an online return application portal that would make it easier for students to submit their materials in a timely fashion. This will require significant technical and financial support.
   b. All students living on campus at the time of their leave, and who have not used their eight semesters of eligibility for housing, should be guaranteed housing upon return. The Housing Office and S3 should consult every semester about the likely return cases to be considered early enough, so that rooms can be set aside for students returning from leave. Furthermore, this planning should prioritize returning students to their previous dormitory assignment, if that is their wish.
   c. It is critical that DSL forward on to the housemasters the list they receive from S3 about returning students, so that housemasters can prepare to support those students as they reintegrate into the community.
   d. The following should occur as soon as practicable after the decision to readmit a student:
      i. Reactivation of the MIT ID card
      ii. Assignment to housing

        iii.   Decisions about financial aid[37]

    e. If a student switches majors upon return to the institute, notification of the return should be provided to both the student's new department, as well as the original department.

Involuntary Medical Leave[38]

Therefore, we urge the Chancellor to assign the Medical Department, the DUE, the DSL, and the Dean for Graduate Education (ODGE) the task of reviewing policies related to involuntary medical leave, and that the review be conducted in such a way that widespread engagement with the community occurs.

Psychiatric Hospitalization[39]

We urge the Chancellor to sponsor a review of MIT's policies concerning student hospitalizations that engages the entire Institute. We believe this review would be a natural fit and could occur together with the review mentioned previously on involuntary medical leaves.

Graduate Student Leave and Return[40]

We therefore urge the Dean for Graduate Education to sponsor a review of these issues as they relate to graduate education at MIT.

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[38] For full recommendation, see p. 24.
[39] For full recommendation, see p. 25
[40] For full recommendation, see p. 25