

Residence Hall Security Policy and Student Discipline

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Background:

On October 28th, 29th, and 31st I entered my residence hall, Random Hall, without tapping my ID, and on September 19th and October 30th I allowed other residents to enter the building without tapping their IDs. In response to these security infractions, I was referred to the Department of Student Citizenship for disciplinary meetings with Mary Kathryn Juskiewicz. As a result of these meetings, the Committee on Discipline determined that since I had not realized that these were serious infractions, I should not severely punished for them. Instead, a warning letter has been placed in my file for reference in any further disciplinary matters and I am required to write this essay on MIT's guest and ID policies for residence halls.

Accordingly, I have researched and summarized MIT's current guest and ID policies for residence halls. I have also reported on how the guest and ID policies are applied in practice, what failure modes they exhibit, and what changes could be made to improve them, both in terms of security and impact on dorm culture. Finally, since the essay prompt specifically requests it, I provide advice to students who are considering violating the ID or guest policy.

The Committee on Discipline also invited me to provide feedback on the student disciplinary process. Rather than use the official feedback form, I have provided my feedback as an addendum to this essay to better link it to my experience. I plan to share this essay (along with the feedback) with a few other groups and individuals besides the Committee on Discipline so others can learn from it as well.

The current guest and ID (security) policies

The information about residence hall security policies in this section comes from the Student Life website, either from <http://studentlife.mit.edu/studentlife.mit.edu/reslifeanddining/news/residencehallsecurity> or from a policy document linked to from that page. These policies exist to monitor students' and guests' movements around residence halls. These surveillance policies are intended to reduce undesirable events (thefts, vandalism, etc.) by keeping people who do not belong in residence halls out of residence halls. They are also intended to discourage legal visitors of residence halls from causing undesirable events by logging their presence in the building. Finally, I've been told that the tracking policies are intended to help the administration find a student in case of an emergency, even though the policy does not give them any precise or certain information about the student's location. I have my doubts that this last justification is a real motive, though, since I suspect that the same (or more) information could be obtained by calling the student's cell phone or contacting the Housemaster.

In this section I originally hoped to give an overview of the minimum security policy required for all undergraduate dorms and the specific policies of Random Hall and East Campus (EC). Unfortunately EC has no guest policy listed online. Instead the main residence hall security page just says "*Important note: East Campus requires an ID for access and visitors must follow the house's current guest policy.*" In lieu of reporting on EC's non-public guest policy I decided to report on Random Hall's policy and points where policy seems to differ between dorms. I have found a handful of policies that tend to differ between dorms:

- The minimal requirements for residence hall security dictate that security workers must record the phone number of guests not on guest lists and whether or not they are staying overnight, but only Baker, McCormick, Next, and Simmons echo this requirement in their residence hall policies
- Some dorms define when each of their entries will be locked/unlocked in their policies
- Dorms allow residents to keep guest lists of different sizes, ranging from 3 (Maseeh, Next, and Senior House) to 20 (Random Hall)

Random Hall’s guest and ID policy

Residents must tap their MIT ID (or show a security worker government-issued photo id) to enter their residence hall. Residents are allowed to maintain a guest list of up to 20 people. Guests on this list are allowed to enter the dorm unaccompanied any time from 8am to 12:30am after showing the security worker their MIT ID, government-issued ID, or ID from another school. The security worker will record the guest’s name, host, and time/date of entry in a visitor log. The Department of Residential Life and Dining keeps this log for at least one year. Residents are also allowed to have guests who aren’t on their guest lists, but they must accompany these guests from the time they enter the building to the time they leave. Non-listed guests are otherwise checked into the building by the same procedure as guests on guest lists. Residents are allowed to keep guests over night at most three times in any given week. Finally, when there is an event in Random Hall, event visitors are allowed to check in as if they were on a guest list. These guests are checked against a list created specifically for the event.

The guest and ID security policy in practice

Unfortunately, as is the case in any system with rules, not all dorm security rules are followed all the time. I entered my residence hall three times without tapping my id card before I realized that this was an important security infraction and corrected my behavior. I am now aware of many similar incidents in which other students have violated the security policy (mostly without any consequence) and incidents in which Allied Barton security workers have failed to uphold the security policy. Given this record of past security policy infractions, it is only reasonable to expect similar infractions in the future. In the interest of optimizing dorm security, it is important to examine these incidents so we can address the most important failures and alleviate the causes of unnecessary violations. Below I have enumerated a few incidents of security failures that I feel are representative of the full set of common violations. My examples focus on Random Hall, since that is where I have seen violations first hand, but other students have assured me that all dorms experience these problems.

Security worker failures

- Security workers neglect to uphold the policy. For example, when my sister visited me last semester, she was able to gain access to my residence hall just by claiming that she was my sister. She was not asked for her ID, and since the security worker had never met her before he couldn’t have known that she was telling the truth. There have been additional incidents where the incorrectly admitted “guests” did not belong in the building.
- Security workers enforce the policy incorrectly. Guests visiting Random Hall have been repeatedly put on guest lists only to be denied entry by the Allied Barton worker.

Student violations

- In light of my disciplinary meetings, I’ve asked around and heard countless reports of students (both in my dorm and around campus) entering their residence halls without tapping their IDs. Sometimes they receive email warnings from their RLADs, but more often they receive no feedback.

- Some students frequently have guests stay over night for more than three nights in a week. Typically these guests are significant others who don't live in that residence hall or visiting siblings and friends who are in town for more than three nights. I believe that most students are unaware that this violates the security policy and most students who are aware ignore the policy anyway because it is extremely inconvenient for them to follow it.
- No one distinguishes guests on guest lists from non-listed guests once they're in the building. In particular, "Resident Hosts" do not typically surveil their non-listed guests for the duration of their visit.

Balancing security with a welcoming dorm culture

On the whole, this paints a pretty dismal picture of residence hall security. Students are effectively told by means of the security policy that they can't be trusted to let their own friends and dormmates into their homes. Instead of being trusted with this responsibility, students are forced to check themselves and their guests in using an impersonal system reminiscent of security systems used in important government buildings. And despite the destruction of the formerly welcoming feel of residence halls, the system still has major security flaws.

Of the classes of security incidents listed above, I am by far most concerned by the security worker failures. Under our new residence hall security system, these people are the primary (or arguably the only) barriers to entry to residence halls and we need to be able to trust them absolutely to perform their jobs correctly. At present this would clearly be unwise – what if the person claiming to be my sister wasn't telling the truth and just happened to know my name and where I lived? Or worse, what if she were a stalker who knew (via social media or some other widely-used means of sharing personal information) that my sister was going to visit me and decided it would make a great cover story for trying to gain access to my home? The official security policy is that we should report our security workers when they make mistakes like this so they can be fired and replaced, but I strongly doubt that this is beneficial to dorm security on average. While some workers are surely somewhat worse than others, many errors are made because security workers are insufficiently familiar with MIT's security system or with the specific rules that change between dorms. If we immediately replace security workers when they make errors, we are only worsening the problem by replacing them with security personnel who don't know the dorm residents by sight and are unfamiliar with MIT's security policies.

In contrast, most of the student violations seem more like indicators that the security system isn't meeting residents' needs than *actual* security vulnerabilities. For example, guests who are permitted to stay over night are typically the most trusted guests who visit the building – why is it a security problem if they stay for 4 nights in a row? Similarly, the focus on identifying guests who residents bring into the building seems misplaced. In order for a residence hall system to work at all, residents must have a reasonable level of trust in the integrity of their dormmates. Isn't part of trusting your dormmates trusting them not to willingly bring criminals into your home? Instead of policing guests who are intentionally brought into the building by residents, it seems like it would be more productive to focus efforts on preventing uninvited "guests" from following residents into the building or talking their way past security workers.

Advice to students who are considering not following the policy

Despite my obvious disapproval of and lack of faith in the security policy, I recommend that students follow it. The most productive way to improve the system is to provide feedback to administrators through existing student feedback channels. While violating the security policy is often the most convenient way to get people who belong in a dorm into the dorm, bypassing the security system does not improve security.

Addendum: feedback on the student discipline process

Being shepherded through the student discipline process was an uncomfortable, harrowing experience. I committed a very minor infraction (or as I have come to think of it, a very minor “crime”), but at every turn I was confronted with either implicit or explicit threats to put my registration on hold or remove my housing privileges. I often had words forced out my throat, with everything from relatively mild “you do regret your actions, don’t you?” to “perhaps now that you’ve had time to reflect you would like to remember things differently” (in that case I took the words back out of my mouth and chose *not* to remember things differently). On the whole I felt like I was treated more like an Evil Wrongdoer in Need of Discipline and Correction than like a reasonable human being who entered his place of residence without following the mandated procedure. I understand that by necessity disciplinary procedures are not friendly and welcoming, but even in that light my experience leaves much to be desired.

Now, at what I sincerely hope is the tail end of this disciplinary process, I am reflecting on my experience. What was the point of the disciplinary process? Was it to teach me how I can best live my life? To show me how I should act as a good “Student Citizen”? To encourage me to live in fear of the power others have to punish me? While I certainly hope this wasn’t the intent, it certainly felt like a display of power designed to intimidate me into obedience. And this leaves me wondering: is this really the best way to address discipline issues? Or does it just lead students to shut up and distance themselves from the administration as much as possible? While I certainly haven’t shut up, I find that I have much less trust in administrators I used to be friendly with.

It is this line of reasoning that led me to write this essay. I could have ground out 750 words about how I regret my actions and that it will never happen again. I think most people in my place would have done just that; after all, it felt like those 750 words were being put in my mouth. But that essay wouldn’t have done anyone any good. The flaws in our dorm security system (both security and convenience flaws) would be left untouched. The student discipline system would remain unjustifiably harsh on even the most minor offenses. And other students like myself would be forced through the same harrowing process for making similar minor mistakes. So instead of cranking out 750 easy, mindless words of remorse, I decided to honestly evaluate our security and disciplinary systems as I have experienced them. I hope this honest feedback will be taken seriously, since I think most students in my position wouldn’t have dared to provide it, no matter their feelings.

Several of my friends did me the favor of reading my first draft. They told me everything from “Please don’t mention X, if the administration finds out they might actually start enforcing the policy and it will make life so much more difficult for us” to “You need to rewrite this. If you submit this you will get in a ton of trouble.” I am worried that they are correct on all accounts. But a couple of them also told me “It’s definitely not in your interest to submit this, but I’m glad someone is saying it.” No one has told me they think it is even remotely in my interest to submit honest feedback instead of just any 750 words that meet the prompt. I have edited the essay in response to some of their critiques. While a few of these words were just put in my mouth, this essay is still primarily honest feedback. I hope you will take this feedback in good faith and not use it as a reason or means to punish me further.