

Option 2 – Delayed Start

Between May 21 and May 31, 2020, MIT community members were invited to provide input into decisions about the 2020-2021 academic calendar via a Community Feedback Survey on the Team 2020 community engagement website (among other opportunities). We received roughly 900 complete and another 900 partial responses, including more than 27,000 comments in response to open-ended questions.

Team 2020 is deeply grateful for the expertise and efforts of Jonathan Schwarz, Andrew Bell, and Ayn Cavicchi from MIT's Office of Institutional Research. They created narrative summaries of the option-specific comments from undergraduates, graduate students, staff, and faculty which are presented below.

Undergraduates: 616 Respondents

Option 2/UG: Are there particular aspects of this option you find appealing or compelling?

Option 1, full return to campus, is highly desirable to many students due to the desire to engage socially and academically with the community. Some of the students shared that Option 2 had the "same benefits of option 1"; however, there were additional aspects that appealed to them not present in the earlier option. Students indicated that Option 2 provided greater flexibility in managing a "second wave" of COVID infections allowing the "*possibility of a 100% return with no restrictions.*" Other students shared that starting later would "*allow MIT to have more data on the virus's progression and make more informed decisions.*" Additionally, students believed that the increased time before the start of the semester would allow for "*more time to prepare testing capabilities*" and "*potentially a vaccine.*" Students also shared that more time would "*increase the chance of a safer return,*" one student stating that it was a "*good compromise between public safety and educational experience.*"

Many students also saw option two as an equitable way to return everyone to campus and ensure a measure of normalcy. As one student describes the situation: "*the possibility of having two near-normal semesters is amazing.*" Many students communicated that a strong appeal of this plan was its impact on education. One summarized their sentiment well, stating that Option 2 "*best maintains educational quality.*"

Option 2/UG: Are there particular aspects of this option you find challenging?

A common challenge shared by students regarding Option 2 was the uncertainty associated with the delayed start. One student shared as a succinct description of the concern, stating that Option 2 "*relies on the virus no longer spreading, but that's hard to know;*" going on to ask if semesters would be "*crammed into a shorter space?*". Other students presented concerns that, due to the current uncertainty, Option 2 might be "*inviting [everyone] back when the second wave would, in theory, be starting.*" Another common concern was related to how Option 2 would affect break periods., one student stating that "*having no breaks*" would cause "*students to burn out.*" Another shared that "*not*

having REX or IAP sounds problematic for undergraduate's mental health." Other students shared that they had concerns about how Option 2 might affect their "work and research opportunities" as well as "take away internship opportunities," which were "already affected this summer."

Finally, one student shared a comment that encompassed many of the other common concerns expressed by students:

I think having a high level of uncertainty about when the fall semester would start would be very difficult, especially for first-year students planning for the transition to college and international students planning their safe and legal return to campus. It could also prove challenging for final-year undergraduates if fall and spring semesters are significantly delayed, as their graduation date would be uncertain, impacting job/graduate school dates.

Option 2/UG: How would you improve this option?

- **Maintaining public health best practices**

While I think this option offers more safety if the second wave hits when expected, the same challenges arise with regards to social distancing as in the first option. I would perhaps even consider opening even later and extending further into the summer to give more time to advance coronavirus fighting technology while still maintaining the same amount of time on campus.

- **Preserving IAP/Breaks/Internships**

Have a virtual IAP during the time that the start of the school year is delayed.

Do a virtual IAP at the beginning of the semester to offer academic opportunities so [that the] time is not wasted.

I would consider an earlier start with a potential break from Thanksgiving (November) to January/February (remove IAP). While that does not deal with a second spike that could be caused by reopening and loosening restrictions, it does avoid a potential spike due to cold and flu season.

Make the portion that falls into summer flexible so that those with internships can still work and do classes (perhaps allow partial remote)

- **Communication**

Although the semester is starting later, it is still imperative that you let students know what classes will be offered, so that they can plan for graduation, and that you let graduates student know, so they can plan for funding.

- **Option for remote**

I recommend keeping the option to move to a partially- or fully-online fall semester that starts earlier open as much as possible in case the pandemic does not decrease in severity, so that we don't end up wasting the fall.

Graduate Students: 201 Respondents

Option 2/G: Are there particular aspects of this option you find appealing or compelling?

While most respondents disliked Option 2, a plurality of them believed it was a good idea. They identified a number of aspects of the plan that were appealing. As one graduate student put succinctly, *“This plan is more of a wait and see approach so it gives MIT more time to see what the pandemic situation will be before bringing undergraduates back to campus.”*

Another appeal of Option 2 was it provided flexibility and reduced risk associated with COVID transmission. As one respondent states, it *“buys MIT time to think, plan, and learn”* adding that there could be a benefit to observing the *“actions of other institutions.”* Other respondents echoed the idea that a *“delay could help gather more information for a better guided response”*

Other graduate students stated that they thought a *“delayed start will give more time for students and faculty to plan for the semester.”* By delaying the start of the semester, the Institute would have *“more time to understand if a second wave will happen or not”*, adding that if there is a second wave of infection *“the semester will not be disrupted.”* Others focused more on the public health aspect:

There's no hurry to bring students immediately on campus, which would reduce the possibility of a second wave in the fall in the area for other staff and graduate students who are already on campus.

Still other graduate students expressed that Option 2's similarity to normalcy was appealing, as was its flexibility to address a changing environment, one stating:

Semester schedules (besides literal dates) are unaltered so students don't have to reconfigure their graduation plans, it's a flexible plan so the decision would be made specifically with students' best interest in mind

Others identified benefits for stakeholder groups, in particular international students. Respondents stated that a delayed start *will allow international students to obtain [the] necessary visa and arrive in the US.*

Finally, although many graduate students expressed that this was a bad idea, there was a substantial proportion who stated otherwise. As one graduate student shared – *“It gets people on campus in some form or fashion. It uses temporal space as social distancing measures. It's the second-best option.”*

Another summed up their position clearly:

I find this appealing because you make the best decision with the data you have. Furthermore, there is an option to simply offset education by half a semester but continue with the normal routine and length of schooling.

Option 2/G: Are there particular aspects of this option you find challenging?

A large number of the graduate student concerns regarding Option 2 were related to uncertainty in relation to the academic calendar. One graduate student shared that *“it's challenging to not have certainty about the timeline - for example, will classes start in October or January? Will they end*

significantly later in the summer?” Another stated “This option is not compelling because it is based on the hypothesis that an additional 2 months will somehow change the course of the school year.” Others were concerned about how the shift in start time would have ripple effects across the academic calendar – “This will ruin all internship opportunities for the following summer. Many already had internships cancelled this summer. This will make job hunting extra hard for upper classmen. Overall, it is not a good idea.”

Graduate students also shared concerns about distinct stakeholder groups that are a part of the MIT campus community and how they might be affected. Some graduate students expressed concern for at-risk populations:

Many students depend on MIT and MIT campus for income, housing, support networks. Moving off campus has been difficult enough, but delaying the start of the school year may be even more difficult for these students. Seniors and other soon-to-be graduating students may have a difficult time with job searches or grad school applications remotely.

Others shared concern for the non-student population on campus. One respondent shared that Option 2 might be “*more difficult for staff, if there is more of a delay for them going back to work.*” Another echoed this sentiment, going into more detail and addressing all employee stakeholders: “*The change in the time line for this year might be a challenge for the administration, the faculty and the students till things get normalized.*” One graduate student provided a response which summarized the populations concerns well:

Shifting to summer 2021 would mean that a lot of undergraduates will not be able to participate in summer opportunities and internships. Shifting a semester also prevents faculty and staff from operating effectively, given that many may have children in the public-school system which will NOT likely get "shifted". To me this approach seems like a random bet on when the second wave is expected, when in reality bringing back undergraduates to campus - at all universities at the same time in the fall - will likely cause a months-long second wave.

Option 2/G: How would you improve this option?

- **Academic Calendar**

I would not make a decision on a January start date this early; rather, the start date could be postponed to hopefully January, but no solid date needs to be given.

I would make it even more flexible with the potential to stretch until end of summer 2021. There may be enough demand for in person teaching and community interaction for students to be willing to delay their degrees.

I think in order to be remotely viable, you'd have to guarantee a start time no later than October so that students can be in a more firm place when applying to jobs, internships, or grad school. Overall though, I think option 1 seems like a much better idea.

If classes start in January 2021, I suggest to carry out four semesters and graduate in December 2022. This way students may be able to do two internships (which is not a bad a idea). There may also be the option for students to either start in September 2020 or in January 2021 - as there may be students who prefer to start online even if remote (i.e. have quit their job).

- **Risk Mitigation**

Since there is a delayed start, I would assume people have more time to visit a medical facility and get a COVID-19 antibody test. I would have students attach their blood test results before entering on campus and attending classes. And similar to my previous answer, mask/gloves/sanitizer should be necessary when students enter. Perhaps giving each student a small kit of essentials would be useful.

- **Remote Option**

You could run classes with a remote / hybrid option? Keep the same start date, but run things remotely so student's summers are not encroached upon, spreading out the impact of the virus and destroying their opportunity to pursue summer internship opportunities.

This option only seems safer if we have a very high likelihood of improving testing and vaccination or other anti-COVID measures between September and October. As a TA, this would be difficult to plan around, as the timeline will be different from every previous semester. The burden on the staff and students to change all of their plans doesn't seem worth it. I would prefer to have a partially remote semester, where classes are remote for the first 6 weeks but stay on schedule.

Staff Members: 133 Respondents

Option 2/S: Are there particular aspects of this [delayed start] you find appealing and compelling?

A great many of the staff respondents found this option quite **appealing**, with those viewing the **delay** as a means of adding time for **logistical planning** and possibly an opportunity to see the results of the path **other institution** chose to take. Others thought time would allow the virus to be brought under control.

This option is more appealing than bringing all undergrads back physically in the fall, because the virus might be more under control by next January. Delaying allows for more information gathering and better planning by learning from our peers who bring students back earlier in the fall

Learning from other schools and seeing what they do with the fall semester. Waiting to see if there is a second wave to determine if it is safe to return to campus

Staff also suggested the delay would provide **time for faculty to prepare** for the inevitable changes that will be necessary to prevent infection spread.

A delay benefits faculty and instructional staff by keeping their course load/curriculum as close to normal as possible, while also giving them more time to prepare for a robust online learning experience for those classes that do not have a physical component

And finally, there were a few who shared their thoughts that this would give the opportunity for all students to **return to campus**, if only eventually.

I like this idea because students would get to experience a full in-person school year, even if pushed back by a few months. I believe in-person learning is essential

Option 2/S: Are there particular aspects of this option [delayed start] you find challenging?

We heard from several staff who had concerns about the affect this option would have on both their **work life and personal life**. In particular some expressed worries about their health due to **increased workloads**.

For staff there are many off cycle projects we need to get done, when we are less prone to diversions from faculty and students. I am concerned about the psychological impact of effectively writing off 2 consecutive summers (2020 and 2021) in terms of effective downtime/vacations for staff. We are pushing the physical resilience of staff by having many work in suboptimal conditions (basements, attics on laptops in uncomfortable chairs) - the ergonomic time bomb. Adding to that the psychological impact of 2 consecutive no-vacation summers, is a further serious health risk.

And some raised considerations for staff with young children.

Staff with young children enrolled in K-12 schools will have difficulty working on campus to support students if they cannot send their own children to the public schools

Staff also brought up concerns for students' who typically take advantage of **summer employment, internships and research**, being adversely affected by the change in the academic calendar.

I think the summer term impacts all students' summer employment and research plan. Some summer activities could be impacted for students who may have summer internships or jobs that begin in the summer

We also received comments of concern for how the students would be chosen and more so worries about **equity** and students' **mental health**.

How do you choose which students are on campus at a given time and how do we address the equity issues for those who are not on campus at one time; how will students fare with a potentially cramped and accelerated "year" of school stuffed into 6 or 7 months--MIT is already extremely rigorous for students under normal circumstances--does this option push our students too far?

Option 2/S: How would you improve this option [delayed start]?

One suggestion was to allow students the ability to choose whether they **feel safe returning to campus**. A few staff suggested **priority** should be given to certain student groups, in particular **international students** and those **students in need**.

Give the option to students to assess their willingness to come back and if they feel safe. Perhaps, allow students with Visa's to come back first as they might have the most difficult time to push off their arrival to campus. OR, if they are able to push their arrival, perhaps, put them in 2nd phase to arrive after IAP to assess fall student arrival and if virus appeared in 2nd wave

Priority of coming back to campus should be given to students who are low income, don't have great wifi or connectivity, have to share a laptop at home with a sibling, don't have a quiet place to study, are in abusive situations at home, are experiencing homelessness, etc.

Many staff advocated for a *remote start* with online learning beginning in September.

I would start classes remotely in September like normal. Balance the year by allowing students to take some virtual courses even when it's not their turn to be on campus so they can spread out their studies over a longer period of time

Faculty Members: 67 Respondents

Option 2/F: Are there particular aspects of this [delayed start] you find appealing and compelling?

The option of delaying the start of the academic year was appealing to many faculty. Some of their comments included, “allows flexibility,” “extra time to determine a path” and “it allows us to delay a decision on the reopening model.” In addition, a few liked the idea of observing “the challenges other institutions face in opening.”

Many found the appeal of a delayed opening to be beneficial to dealing with the risk of the virus, “since time might be helpful to develop vaccines and remedies.” Another agreed with the concept of patience and tied it to the identity of MIT. “Learning and being patient with science to find the answers is refreshing and seems in line with MIT ethos.” And finally,

*The fact that **more information will be available before opening**, enabling us to make decisions based on the best possible information. There will also be more time for development of vaccines and treatments*

Some faculty viewed a delay as an opportunity to “**improve instruction**, by allowing extra time for planning,” and “more time to make plans and adjustments for the first semester back.” Another furthered this aspect of appeal. “It preserves the quality of the educational program.”

While the majority of comments for a delay in opening were positive, nevertheless, a few faculty did not agree with opening at any time. “I do not like this option. Everything points out to seasonal correlations.” And

*This really makes no sense. We are basically **timing the semester to coincide more with the seasonal flu**. There is no realistic chance that the extra month of two will bring major benefits in terms of treatment or vaccine*

Option 2/F: Are there particular aspects of this option [delayed start] you find challenging?

Most of the comments on challenges were in relation to **impact on student plans beyond and separate from their time at MIT**. This varied from concerns about internships, IAP, summer employment and research to travel for any purpose. “If the second semester ran too far into summer, it would interfere with job and internship opportunities for students, summer research projects for everything.”

And some were concerned about those who must work during summer breaks to be particularly hindered. “Extending the school year will put students who need to work during the summer at a severe disadvantage.”

Other challenges were concerns about “delays leading to more delays” and the “**uncertainty**” of the progression of the virus and a second wave.

Uncertainty: It's not clear when or if it will be safe to reopen. Delay could end with a rolling cancellation of the fall term. We would need to have a triggering plan for resumption of an online approach

Faculty also commented on the additional work required of them if this option is enacted and many brought up the issue of increased **compensation**. “Would MIT pay us to put in the time it would take to prepare and support students before they return”? And the question of how to handle adjunct faculty was introduced.

This will be terrible for adjunct faculty, who will likely can't put off a semester of pay until January. I also worry for students' mental health and safety if they have an extended break and then are expected to complete 3 semesters in the usual span of two in

Option 2/F: How would you improve this option [delayed start]?

There were many comments on suggested improvements. The issue of **increased workload** was brought up by many faculty.

One consideration that is high on my list is not asking faculty and instructors to make a herculean effort to deliver content to students. Running into summer feels hard for faculty research/conferences, instructors who have other summer plans

Others suggested incorporating a “**pre-start curriculum**.”

For first-year students, do a pre-start curriculum. Give extended guidance on the skills and knowledge they need for classes. Teach study skills and other fundamentals they need in order to succeed in their majors. Do a really good job of designing blended instruction

While a few cautioned that students should **remain on campus** throughout the semester.

Best not to have students return home during the semester, remain in session through all fall holidays possible and release as early in December as possible to prevent spread

Other Selected Comments on Option 2

The comments below are excerpts selected by Senior Associate Dean Kate Trimble and First-Year Experience Coordinator Kate Weishaar to present a range of diverse community viewpoints in the words of community members. The excerpts have not been altered or edited from the original submissions.

Appealing

- I think it's a great idea. It would allow those of us who are grad students and only get 2 years to still have an MIT experience before we graduate.
- It begins to "think outside the box" by delaying the beginning of an academic year -- that's an interesting process.
- having time for int'l students to get visas straightened out, allows access to campus
- This is the only option under discussion that actually stands to improve instruction, by allowing extra time for planning. I know that struggles of instructors are not a priority in this decision-making process, but they do have implications for the quality of classes in the fall, and likely all next year.
- On the whole, this is the best option because it is basically option one but with more time to figure out logistics. I would very much prefer a delayed start to a remote fall.
- As a rising senior, I am OK if my fall semester is significantly impacted, but look forward to spending a final semester on campus. Delaying a start would make it more likely for me to have the senior year I want.
- I like how it accounts for the U.S. lack of addressing this pandemic.
- No, just seems lazy, indecisive, procrastinating, and very un-leader of MIT if they did this
- I like that we can wait and see what happens when students return to other colleges/universities -- this gives students with preexisting conditions/health risks the most information in deciding if it's safe for them to return.
- Definitely better than the pipe dream of having everyone come back in the fall.
- We could start to offer instruction/support through distance education. Some things like prerequisites or background concepts could be offered before the start of the year.
- No undergrads in fall means that research could gear up faster. More information is better. Everyone but undergrads benefits.
- Deals realistically with the likelihood that Cambridge, Boston, and New England will still be in a state of logistical chaos.

Challenging

- Not having IAP and possibly extending the academic year into the summer may be difficult for students who are accustomed to an extended break in January and who may have summer internships or jobs that begin in the summer

- This will be terrible for adjunct faculty, who will likely can't put off a semester of pay until January. I also worry for students' mental health and safety if they have an extended break and then are expected to complete 3 semesters in the usual span of two in 2021.
- It would be challenging to have two semesters back to back without an IAP break. I find MIT really stressful and IAP helps me recharge.
- I don't know how others think but I think students find IAP to be a *huge* part of what makes MIT MIT. Its loss would be incalculable to my experience. I willingly pull several all nighters for IAP for fun (i.e. for the MIT Mystery Hunt).
- This may pose as a challenge for TAs, GRAs, and seniors who may already have set post-graduation plans that start early summer 2021, as well as challenges for the rest of the undergraduate population as summer opportunities may conflict with the end of the new prolonged semester. Additionally personally the thought of having to go through nearly half a year in quarantine at home without classes and therefore few things to keep me occupied, I would have a very hard time getting by.
- This option doesn't go far enough when thinking "out of the box".
- Might find hard getting back into a study routine after approx 4 months
- students with difficult familial circumstances will need to be together for longer
- This would be incredibly challenging for me, as I have to finish my MEng by December in order to start my job in January as planned, and I have to take a class.
- International students (class of 2021) visa ends early June
- if classes extend into the summer it may put students at a disadvantage for summer internships. Also most dorms don't have air conditioning and studying in 80 degree heat or higher is not conducive to learning. It also creates a lot of stress and uncertainty since we won't know when we will be returning to campus. Fall sport athletes will most likely not be able to compete in their sport.
- Students may grow restless with having such a long summer break this year, and may struggle with having no break between semesters next year.
- I am concerned about the typical flu season layering on top of covid infections. Less opportunity for outdoor gathering (which is safer than indoors).
- As a student coming from industry, this situation would be disastrous. I currently have plans to resign from my position over the summer. I cannot have 2-6 months where I have no source of income when I could have stayed at my position.
- The population that got the short end of the stick would have to endure it for another few months, if they can. (And this population always gets the short end of the stick.) Students who had absolutely nowhere to go were allowed to stay on campus, but you'd hate to be in the shoes of the runners-up. As weeks of surfing your friend's auntie's couch turns to months, you might start to wonder what it all means. Students with limited resources had exactly one thing going for them: they're young, and so very unlikely to experience severe coronavirus symptoms. But we forced them to live in strange and unworkable places anyway, because we didn't trust them to act sensibly and protect the Cambridge community. Postponing their return to campus wouldn't exactly make it up to them.
- IAP is one of the things that distinguishes MIT from other elite universities--removing it would be a huge mistake, in my opinion.

Improvements

- Create a small IAP like term in September to have some students on campus.
- Many of us would like to be working on COVID related problems. Is there a way to provide substitute grants, research projects and fellowships for working on COVID issues with organizations in the area in Fall while students are away from school.
- Improve social distancing/air purification, especially during the winter when everyone remains in buildings with the same air circulated through central heating.
- TREN in Course 1 is a required course offered over IAP. Not sure if other courses have similar. That would need to be worked out.
- Clarity on how this would impact people who were planning around starting a paid position at MIT in the fall (e.g., I selected dates for a summer contractor position based on the assumption I would begin receiving a stipend from MIT in September)
- A weird idea: modularize the semester, especially for first year students: have a half-term intensive, two course online start with those GIRs that most lend themselves to virtual classrooms and collaborations. And/or maybe one GIR and a program of social engagement with various aspects of MIT for first years in that Sept-Oct time frame. Be prepared to offer a similar second half-term online experience if the epidemic does not permit a return. Then resume with a full two-semester year, no IAP, etc. with 1st years having received a head start on their education and inculcation into the MIT experience.
- Offer more ASEs during this summer to help some students make up for the lack of IAP, allowing them an extra slot for classes. The current ASEs don't have that many options, plus from what I hear they are so hard they are so hard and impossible to pass that it has really unmotivated to do more than a couple. While this is usually a good thing because students will take more classes on campus (and probably learn more), in this situation, making them slightly easier might help make up for the lack of IAP.
- Have a tiered approach, with graduate students on a regular semester schedule and delay undergraduates.
- I would take it a step further and not only space out the semester but the class times as well. MIT has these building all day and night and yet really only uses them for what 10 -12 hours a day 4, maybe 5 days a week for instruction. There's nothing preventing the institute from stretching the duration of the school day to later in the evening (yes requiring tenured professors to maybe hold a few extra classes in these "unprecedented times" where there's no tuition drop) . Going from a 0830 ~ 1730 general class schedule to 0730 - 2230 (or later frankly) would allow for more people to cycle through campus while being socially distant and for cleaning crews to spend time doing their important work. Sidenote, since a lot of the cleaning would have to happen during the "graveyard" shifts ..this would allow for those contract employees probably very much affected by the COVID recession to earn more than normal by virtue of working weird hours. Finally, I would also get rid of fridays only for recitations and make that a class day as well. Moreover, I think the institute also has the legitimate right if it offers in person classes to hold them on Saturdays and Sundays (with carveouts of course for religious services) . Recap: Why stop at changing the time around for semesters, let's get into the semesters and change our days IOT allow for social distance AND in person instruction vice doing it over zoom. I (along with many other classmates) would rather go to class in person 6 days a week than do 4 days virtually. Also, all of this would have to have a virtual option for those not comfortable/unable to attend in person (but I suspect they would be in the minority of all MIT students). Submarines literally change the day while out at sea going from a standard 24 hour schedule we're familiar with to a 18 hour 3 by 6 hour shift day to meet

their missions. Not saying MIT should do this but they can incorporate the same creativity used their in these times until things level out .

- MIT could offer a few common classes with heavy enrollment/GIRs online in the fall if the curriculum of these courses allows, potentially in a manner similar to Interphase.
- Losing IAP would be significant - undergraduates need not only the academic opportunities available at MIT, but the social and other enrichment opportunities as well. I would honestly prefer shorter semesters, with a potentially shortened, but still existing, IAP as well. Some students are reliant on being able to get housing at MIT - can that be made an option even if the school is not open academically? Seniors acquire recommendations for graduate school or attend job fairs in early fall, and postponing those things could cause problems. Will this delay or otherwise affect funding sources like UROPs for students who rely on them? What are students supposed to do for this chunk of the fall, where they can't sign a long lease, or get a job, because they'll have to leave and come back to school?
- I would bifurcate this option and allow graduate students this choice while focusing on bringing back the undergraduate population first. I believe this is one of the best choices for graduate students that can remain employed for the interim period while ensuring they keep their families healthy without posing additional risk by coming to the MIT campus.
- For first-year students, do a pre-start curriculum. Give extended guidance on the skills and knowledge they need for classes. Teach study skills and other fundamentals they need in order to succeed in their majors. Do a really good job of designing blended instruction.
- I still don't like this option. One consideration that is high on my list is not asking faculty and instructors to make a herculean effort to deliver content to students. Running into summer feels hard for faculty research/conferences, instructors who have other summer plans, outreach K-12 summer programs, and undergrads who want summer internships