

# Option 4 – 3 Semesters, Students On-Campus for 2 Semesters, 25-50% On-Campus in Fall

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 4/UG: Are there particular aspects of this option [3 Semesters] you find appealing or compelling?

Option 4 was viewed as inferior by most students, but there were several appeals outlined by respondents. Once again, "returning to campus" was a primary appeal. Students also stated that Option 4's flexibility was appealing:

*The flexibility in this option is very appealing compared to the other options that only bring back a portion of the undergraduates. Starting with a portion of the undergraduates in the beginning and having the option of adding more for the next two semesters offers a very attractive option that most undergraduates would be happy about.*

Other respondents shared that they felt the 3-semester model allowed for "a less dense campus while still having people on campus." Students also shared that it provided a safer public health environment, as one student stated clearly – "it seems to cover all the bases for maintaining MIT academics while protecting health."

### Option 4/UG: Are there particular aspects of this option [3 Semesters] you find challenging?

Many students found Option 4 to present significant challenges with regards to restructuring the academic calendar and adapting curriculum to a new schedule. Some students felt that "rescheduling the academic calendar might be challenging for the administration" and that changing the semester structure seemed "like a logistical nightmare." Another student shared that, from their perspective, "the biggest challenge is the rescheduling. It would be a hassle; multiple programs would have to be rethought and reimaged."

Concerns about scheduling also intertwined with fears of logistical difficulties in implementing Option 4 – *"the scheduling challenges seem overwhelming, as well as the practicality of moving students in and out of campus at two points during the semester."* Finally, students expressed concern over changes to the academic calendar, stating, *"extending into July could be problematic for people that have summer internships."* Additionally, because this change in the academic calendar may not provide parity with other educational institutions, students could find it *"hard to find internships."*

## **Option 4/UG: How would you improve this option [3 Semesters]?**

- **Travel/Going Home**

*Don't send possibly infected students home to elderly family*

- **Choice of Return**

*If classes will be offered during enough slots, maybe let people have some say into which semesters they'll be back on campus?*

*Allow students to give their preferences as to which semesters they spend on campus*

- **Restructure Semesters**

*Potentially shorten each semester to end by the normal time. This would put a strain on each individual class schedule but could address the issues of staff and faculty working at unusual times of the year. This is not necessarily an improvement over the original plan but could trade one problem for another. We would need to look into which problem is worse for the community as a whole.*

- **Curriculum Changes/Academic Scheduling**

*Lower full-time class load to 24 units to accommodate tightened time frame to learn material*

*I think it would need to be very carefully managed to ensure that students have access to the other opportunities they need (for example, many fields only offer summer internships, not ones during the fall; would a student in a winter + spring/summer allotment not be able to get the job experience they need?) This also seems complicated financially. Would students who opt to continue to take classes during their third remote semester have to pay more tuition? If students are taking fewer classes in each semester, then the criteria for a "light load" might need to be changed; presumably tuition would not increase with the increasing number of semesters; etc. Additionally, the faculty would need a great amount of support in designing the academic plan, and this would likely require undergraduate input as well. Would we keep all class units the same, but encourage students to take one fewer class (so 3/3/3 instead of 4/4?) It seems impossible to suddenly make every class fewer units, especially preset series of classes like whatever .001, whatever .002 where the material is crucial to the next class. Moreover, this could have an impact on ABET-accredited majors. I think it would be ideal to have the first, fall semester end no later than when the typical fall semester ends. That would allow for a pivot to a normal spring semester in the case that things seem promising.*

*It might make help to convert to the three-semester model if departments, per each major in the department, determined pairs of classes that are related and students typically take in the same year (this could be done by examining past registration data). Then, per each pair, the professors*

*who typically teach those two classes could decide how best to divide that two-class pair into three sequential semesters. To help students learn remotely for 2/3 of the year, MIT could mail some students routers to improve their home WIFI (this would be one very piece of the issue about equity for this situation). To help students pursue internships, MIT should somehow end in June, not July, if possible.*

*Students who plan to pursue summer internships or study abroad would need priority for the early two academic semesters*

*Adjusting the 2021-2022 academic calendar may be necessary to accommodate the later end date.*

# Graduate Students: 201 Respondents

## Option 4/G: Are there particular aspects of this option [3 Semesters] you find appealing or compelling?

Graduate student respondents indicated that Option 4 was a feasible plan, and found it appealing for a number of reasons. As with other plans, returning to campus was highly appealing. One graduate student shared that *“It feels generous because it gives everyone a chance to hopefully be on-campus”* and it appealed because it allowed *“substantial access to campus”*. Another appeal was that it allowed *“students on campus for a longer period of time.”* Students spending any time on campus was seen as *“generally better”* and would provide *“more opportunities for people to get a fuller MIT experience.”*

Option 4 was also seen by some graduate student respondents as ensuring the “rich educational experience” expected of MIT. One graduate student succinctly explains:

*Students get the experience they paid for - in person learning and community interaction*

*I like the flexibility and that it allows the aspects of on-campus learning which can't be made remote to be preserved somewhat.*

## Option 4/G: Are there particular aspects of this option [3 Semesters] you find challenging?

### Logistics

Although popular, some graduate students explained that it could be *“a complex option to implement, both from the point of view of faculty preparing classes, and coordinating who will be allowed on a campus.”* Addressing the switch over to a three-semester model, another shared a similar sentiment - *“scheduling of the academic calendar will be a challenge.”* Still another pointed out the risk of such a significant change - *“This option requires the most reworking of the academic calendar, which can lead to disorganization and confusion if badly handled.”*

A number focused on the difficulty of restructuring curriculum from a two semester to a three-semester model, *“Restructuring schedules would be difficult for everyone, especially faculty.”* One respondent states clearly:

*This would require professors to restructure curricula to fit into this model and would be extremely challenging for undergrads who had to move (especially international students and the undergrads who had the first and last "semester" on campus).*

Others focused on increasing uncertainty by straying from the norm:

*Spread of the semesters introduces additional uncertainty. Incoming students will have a more difficult time to adjust and seniors will suffer from the longer academic year during summer when they may need to work full time.*

## Option 4/G: How would you improve this option [3 Semesters]?

- **Academic Calendar**

*Making sure the third semester ends on the regular timeline to ensure students can pursue internships in summer 2021. Half UGs per each half semester is still better option.*

*Make the 3rd semester optional so students can take internships if they get them. Otherwise, seems a great plan.*

*Extend thesis deadlines. Open programmed opportunities of engaging with community and ecosystem for people harmed by this situation protecting the institution equity.*

- **Housing**

*There would need to be ways to address living off-campus and leasing options for students. There also needs to be consideration of internships and how companies would respond to a different internship program than typical summer programs.*

*This option should be accompanied with the option for students to elect to spend all their time in person (with the option of living out in town if housing is at max). Hotels in the area rely on universities for a lot of their business and they can be a part of the housing solution seeing how other forms of travel will be depressed for a while. Matching occupancy demand with supply would take a community wide response bringing in all the schools in the area with the hotels as well. A sort of consortium where there's a win-win for the schools, students, hotels, landlords that cater to students come together and match need with supply and their operating requirements.*

*It wouldn't fix it but would be mildly better if they let undergrads leave their things in their room for the entire year (especially for the undergrads who would otherwise have to move in and out twice).*

- **Support**

*Give students choice in semesters. Find ways to be more flexible as circumstances change through the year.*

*I'd just advocate in any partial-UG-return scenario that we allow the individual UGs the choice of whether they'd prefer to be on campus or not, and at what time, given the circumstances*

- **Logistics**

*This seems like an inordinate amount of restructuring for a problem that may or may not exist through the Spring. It's beneficial to make a decision for the Fall that does not bind MIT into a decision for the Spring and Summer as well.*

## Staff Members: 133 Respondents

### Option 4/S: Are there particular aspects of this option [3 Semesters] that you find appealing or compelling?

Staff were generous in their praise of this option. Words like “*creative*,” and “*out-of-the-box thinking*,” occurred repeatedly. Staff comments highlighted the design of this option placing **value on students** being back on campus and the ability to balance that with **safety on campus** through decreased density.

*Greater flexibility, more students get some time on-campus to complete classes with physical requirements. This would create a feeling of “equal time” to the students on campus*

*This also seems low risk, in that social distancing can be maintained, and students will get an on-campus experience for part of the year*

*I think this is the best option - decreases campus density while maintaining teaching and community*

### Option 4/S: Are there particular aspects of this option [3 Semesters] you find challenging?

Staff comments about the challenging aspects leaned toward this being very **difficult to implement** and maintain due to the **increased workload** for many groups on campus including housing staff, staff, faculty and administrators. In addition, many thought the amount of **travel is risky** and could possibly contribute to the **spread of infection on campus**. Some also expressed concern for **students’ families** how might also be at risk for increased exposure due to their child traveling so frequently to and from MIT. In addition, staff were concerned for their own **families** as the **frequent movement in and out** of campus might expose them, putting them at **risk**.

*Very challenging. Too much logistical nightmare potential: imagine changing everything to 3 semesters, students moving 3 times (meaning 6 times back and forth) and worst of all -- all the plane rides that will result in more transmission of the virus*

*Now you would be bringing three different groups to campus which is exposing staff and faculty to new groups every semester*

Staff shared many concerns about the amount of work that would need to be done to revise the academic calendar and course work to plan for a trimester system. Many highlighted the fact that some faculty and staff already **feel overwhelmed** with all the **changes at this time**.

*It would be a ton of work for staff and faculty to rearrange and extend the academic year with more duplicate offerings, with much work required by faculty and academic calendar planners. Extending the year for faculty and staff could be a hardship on folks who are already overextended by the current environment and working experience*

And finally, concern for **upending students’ families** who would be asked to **adjust their lives** to accommodate the **trimester system** when they have planned on a 2-semester one might be difficult.

*Will be challenging for families/those who need to adapt to different academic calendar next summer*

## Option 4/S: How would you improve this option [3 Semesters]?

Suggestions for improvements to this option were varied. A few prioritized **safety of the community** when allowing students back on campus, advocating for a **quarantine period** to be factored into the window after students arrive and prior to their stepping into public spaces.

*I would ensure that there is adequate time between terms for students to isolate on campus before their classes begin. Carefully monitor the situation, keeping in mind MIT may need to go virtual again in the near future*

Others encouraged consideration for those students who might need **repeat access to campus** throughout the year, but outside of the trimesters they have been assigned due to their studies.

*Grant exceptions for students who need to be on campus all year or need to be remote more than one trimester. Students who need more consistent access to campus should be allowed back full time first*

Another suggested an improvement to specifically **choose class offerings for the summer** to accommodate students who wish/need to work (job) or participate in an **internship** while also continuing their studies.

*Carefully select which topics are covered in the "summer" trimester -- offering perhaps lecture-only and elective classes -- something that students could take while at an internship or co-op. Conversely, offer pre-req classes in as-close-to-normal timing basis*

And one additional suggestion was to **assist faculty and staff** who might be in need of support due to the **increased workload**.

*Provide additional support and perhaps compensation for faculty and staff who will be especially burdened by this approach. Hire additional staff as needed to support the transition to trimesters and hybrid in-person/remote teaching*

## Faculty Members: 67 Respondents

### Option 4/F: Are there particular aspects of this option [3 Semesters] that you find appealing or compelling?

Many faculty respondents did not find this option appealing, with most of them simply saying it is “**bad**.” However, slightly more respondents shared comments that found appealing aspects in it. What was appealing is the option “**returns all students to the campus**” and treats students “**equally**.” Further some mentioned the “**MIT experience**” of being on campus as appealing as well.

*All students are invited to campus for equal amount of time throughout the year. This is compelling because it also deals with inclusion/exclusion issues in a way that is more equitable. It tries to provide a complete MIT educational experience to all students*

### Option 4/F: Are there particular aspects of this option [3 Semesters] you find challenging?

The overriding challenge presented by respondents was concerns about **increased workload**. In addition, some wondered about pay **compensation** for the increase in work. And still others commented that hiring of **additional instructors** would be necessary if this option was to be chosen.

*It creates a significant increase in workload in several teaching scenarios*

*My department does not determine when some classes are scheduled, and these are usually lab or project-based classes, which would be meeting live in this scenario. Thus, our instructors would be possibly at risk and overburdened, with almost no break, well into the summer, when they are only paid for 9-months. In two words, that is Not Equitable*

*Workload for instructors and TAs will overwhelmingly increase and goes beyond the contract*

*This will increase the load on faculty, so we should hire more people*

Another concern and challenge raised was the dealing with an outbreak of infections on campus due to the **increased numbers of students moving in/out**, and students traveling from various points.

*It ensures the first term will be as risky as any of the other significant-on-campus options, which, increases the chances we will have to shut down abruptly if a new outbreak occurs, on or near campus*

### Option 4/F: How would you improve this option [3 Semesters]?

Few comments were offered to improve option 6, instead, we received several remarks **suggesting the option should not be used**. There was one offer though to have a **quarter system** rather than the trimester.

*Consider going farther - use the summer - try 4 quarters, each with 50% of the students in residence. Consider reducing breaks, but allowing 2 quarters on and 2 quarters entirely off within each year*



## Other Selected Comments on Option 4

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

- 3 semesters allows for more flexibility without requiring too much travel
- Maintains de-densification of campus
- Students get the experience they paid for - in person learning and community interaction
- Distributed teaching over a longer period of time. The availability of a "third" semester opens a lot of options.
- I think this would be a good way for people to speed up their path to a degree or to just take more classes in general.
- It allows everyone equal access to an on-campus experience
- a term for summer internship!!! international students that cannot return to campus due to travel ban may have a chance to go back in the third term
- This option seems to be a fair way to preserve campus access, and I appreciate that students can use the semester off-campus in a variety of ways. I especially appreciate that this option would include remote degree progress as an option for the off-campus semester, for students who don't have internship or work opportunities but are able to learn well remotely. I also like the flexibility of this option.
- It guarantees that every undergraduate student will be on campus at the same time as every other undergrad student for at least one trimester
- Again for me and the other first years, it helps us in our transition to life at MIT and getting to know each other. Also, everyone spends an equal amount of time at campus (and with this most-flexible-option, there's a possibility to maximize this time on campus by inviting all the UGs back for the last semester if the situation gets better) while applying social distancing measures.
- Having students on campus is always good! This option is by far the most social distancing (other than the fully remote) and therefore the safest. MIT wouldn't have to get hotels. Lab classes would be able to proceed, and students would be able to learn. Mental health benefits from being on campus cannot be overstated.
- Honestly I initially hated this option, but it's grown on me.
- I like that this plan allows students to be at MIT for 2 semesters. It also allows students to have in-person interactions with everyone in the MIT community because they will overlap for at least 1 semester. Additional benefits of this plan include flexibility. This plan allows for MIT to adjust based on how the pandemic develops. Since there will be a low percentage of students on campus in the fall, the risks will be lower. Then in the winter/spring, MIT can adjust the plan based on how the pandemic has progressed. This plan also allows students to take advantage of the 3 semesters (without paying for more than 1 normal year's worth of tuition). Students who want to get ahead can take additional classes during their off-campus semester. Students who want to spread their classes out can take fewer classes each semester (2-3) to make each semester easier.

## Challenging

- way too much change at once
- It creates a significant increase in workload in several teaching scenarios. It ensures the first term will be as risky as any of the other significant-on-campus options, which, inter alia, increases the chances we will have to shut down abruptly if a new outbreak occurs, on or near campus. If, as we've been told everything that can be done remotely will be, it offers no real pedagogical advantage over less disruptive options. If it may be blunt: this is an engineer's solution to a human problem, and the human factors have not been fully thought out.
- implementation challenges, staff burnout - it's already been a hard year and then moving it to this model will make this summer even harder with planning, and then implementing it will make it even harder with less breaks. Faculty, staff, and administrators aren't machines and we're exhausted.
- I believe that this plan would produce a considerable amount of "wear and tear" on our resources, both the physical space of the actual campus as well as the people who are charged with keeping the lights on, the trash removed and every single surface disinfected and every machine running. The natural rhythm to an academic year gives time for maintenance, upgrades, etc. This seems less possible in a plan where we run every institute resource through the wringer without cessation.
- The more semesters, move-in/move-out days etc you create, the more people are coming onto and off of campus to get their children--which exposes us. The U-Haul trucks and unfamiliar drivers in Boston is bad enough one weekend a year. Do not do this to on a continual rotating basis.
- Finding housing if I need to be off-campus for "winter" semester
- International students should not be required to fly home more than once.
- This would require professors to restructure curricula to fit into this model and would be extremely challenging for undergrads who had to move (especially international students and the undergrads who had the first and last "semester" on campus).
- There will again be issues with coordinating professors and students to ensure the necessary classes are offered when specific students are on campus (especially those in their final year). Graduating seniors would also likely not be able to participate in the term that pushes into summer.
- This would completely destroy students' schedules regarding internships. We would not have time to find internships for fall this late into the year!
- Students have lost their summer work experiences this summer. Therefore, next summer will be of even greater importance in building their CV's and work experience to enable a smooth transition to the work force after graduation.
- What would happen to popular and historic IAP traditions, like Battlecode, web.lab, and Mystery Hunt? How would classes adjust from being 1/4 or 1/2 of a year long to 1/3?
- Cohort selection can fracture social groups and generate feelings of isolation or fomo
- Just like all of the other options offering only half of the undergraduate students to be on campus at one time, team and club activities will be disrupted and varsity athletics may not be able to happen unless the entire team is allowed on campus for the semesters in which their team is in season.
- This is the worst option that has been proposed. It will demolish MIT culture. Clubs cannot be run. Summer programs (like Camp Kesem) cannot be properly prepared for. Lab classes that are made for

collaboration will not be able to run. 2.009 cannot run. This is a ridiculous idea that is logistically a nightmare, as well—how can I be expected to Potentially return, leave, and come back, risking spreading anything to my family or to the greater outside world? People will take the year off. People will not pay for this option. I did not come to MIT to have my semesters On campus decided by a lottery or however you think that will work. This is the worst option, and you will see crucial parts of MIT culture collapse if this is chosen.

## Improvements

- you should only allow people to do back-to-back semesters to ease the housing allocation process and enlist students to aid the repurposing of material after each semester to make the next one better. As much as possible, have same offerings too.
- I think this one is pretty spicy. Go for it. (But make me aware of what I'm doing so I can plan ahead)
- Ensure that international students have the option to be on campus back to back for two semesters so they don't have to travel back and forth. I also would not decide cohorts based on social group or major. Community diversity and network expansion is a key part of the undergraduate program.
- split undergrads by major-class year (e.g. all 6-3 juniors stick together). splitting by social group is too subjective and can be hurtful
- I would let students have a say in which semesters they attend
- Regarding the challenge of allowing for the continuation of the varsity athletics seasons, students who are involved in varsity athletics could be allowed to be on campus during the semesters in which their sport is in season, allowing the entire team to be together and allowing for community building even when all of the undergraduates are not on campus.
- Work on remote MISTI, IAP, Externship, options so that students who are off campus for 1 of the 3 semesters could take part in the activities they might normally take part in during their IAP or summer.
- Offer full-time UROPs to those not on campus
- It might be helpful to start the first semester earlier in order to move everything up, since having the third semester extend into July is detrimental to students trying to obtain summer internships. These summer internships will be vital, since hiring is bound to be more difficult in the upcoming years, and getting an internship during other times of the year, like when our off semesters would be, is less likely.
- Students who are on campus for the third semester would not have a big break between the end of the year and the start of the next year as well as lack of internship opportunities because they'll have be taking classes into July. If there were a way to make it so that internships of equal caliber would be available to students in each of the semesters that would be nice but at the same time, students who have taken the useful classes would be at a better advantage. For example if the class of 2023 was all remote for the first semester, most of us would still have the same skill level and classes as freshman year that wouldn't make us attractive to internships. There is also the worry about which classes are offered in which term - you could put out a survey to see what classes students are planning to take and which term they would prefer to take it in to decide.
- It would be great to allow students to take online classes (like Spanish I, German 1 and so on.) when they are out of campus (one of the three semesters). It allows students who have planned to take HASS classes over IAPs to save space for technical classes for semesters to not change their plans.

- Try to stay consistent with other universities and company recruitment schedules
- This option is only reasonable if students are not charged more tuition for the academic year. I think this plan would be better with shorter semesters that do not extend into July. I think this is achievable if students are expected to "participate" in all three semesters. Students could then take an average of three classes per semester instead of 4. The material for the three classes could then be condensed into less weeks, keeping the overall workload the same.
- Potential for an optional summer semester (June - August) to people who either took a gap semester in the fall in addition to two-semester model (not this model of three semesters; two-semester with optional summer semester in addition)
- This could work - we should absolutely abandon IAP this year, it's not a priority. Focus on our mission and maybe even redefine it in this unusual time. It would probably work fine for staff - we're here all the time. For TA's say in 3rd semester - might have hard time getting them to stick around if they're on their way to Grad school? If we went this route, have 2 weeks between semesters at least so we have time to regroup. Maybe even 3-4 weeks.
- Make the fall session much shorter and then double the load, similar to some universities' summer sessions. For example, make it typical for students to take only two classes to be finished in 6 weeks. This would accommodate both remote options for some classes as well as intensive, physical lab classes. All classes that could be offered remotely should still be offered remotely. Students should have the flexibility to opt for fewer semesters on-campus. Financial aid should be given for all three semesters.