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MIT

# MIT, responding to Aaron Swartz report, proposes ways to improve electronic records policies

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By Matt Rocheleau, Boston.com Staff

MIT administrators, responding to questions raised by its internal investigation into the Aaron Swartz case, have proposed steps to improve the school’s electronic records policies and commitment to open access.

MIT said Thursday it already is moving to implement several recommendations, including forming a committee that will develop an online data privacy policy and a set of principles, policies, and procedures around access.

MIT said it will build a “gateway website” that will “provide, in a single location, easy access to documentation concerning policies and procedures [pertaining to electronic records and online data privacy], helpful resources and guidance materials, and links to documentation maintained in various offices across MIT.”

The school will also send an email each year to the campus committee to highlight relevant policies and procedures and the institute will train those who have access to and oversight of sensitive electronic records.

“The work here is not finished, but I am pleased that we have concrete results,” [statement](#) MIT President L. Rafael Reif said in a statement. “We now have a lasting mechanism in place to consider the critical issue of how we collect, provide, and retain electronic records, and MIT will soon have an online data privacy policy.”


The [feedback and recommendations](#) unveiled Thursday were developed over the past several months by working groups of administrators, faculty, staff, and students in response to eight questions posed at the conclusion of a [182-page internal report](#) MIT released in July.



The author of the internal report, computer science Professor Hal Abelson, told the Globe's Marcella Bombardieri on Thursday that he believes MIT will make a number of changes.

“I do sincerely, deeply, deeply believe that Rafael Reif cares about this,” he said. But he added, “If I’m grading this as a faculty member, the MIT grade is incomplete.”

The report [found](#) that campus administrators did not commit any wrongdoing, nor did they press authorities to prosecute [Swartz](#), a 26-year-old Internet activist who took his

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own life in Jan. 2013 as he faced federal felony computer charges for allegedly hacking into MIT computers and illegally downloading millions of academic journal articles.

But the report raised concerns and questions, including about existing MIT policies around electronic records, open access, and intellectual property. There were also broader questions posed about ethics in the digital domain, MIT's obligations to extended members of its community, and lessons the institute can draw for its hacker culture from the Swartz case.

Responses to those questions released by MIT Thursday included feedback from a working group that reviewed the question: "Should MIT strengthen its activities in support of open access to scholarly publications?"

The group suggested that MIT should create a new faculty body to lead the school's effort to govern open-access. That new body would replace an existing committee who plays a limited role on the issue.

"A restructuring of some sort could allow for broader issues such as exploring new models of journal publishing to be addressed more effectively," the institute said.

The group also provided several other suggestions, including that MIT should advocate more forcefully for open access and should consider expanding its own open-access policy to include graduate students, postdocs and research scientists, and to expand what is being shared to include not only journal articles, but also data and educational works.

MIT said that group's feedback is being considered in a pending review of the school's open access policy.

MIT also released Thursday feedback it has received so far about broader questions posed in the July report, including: "Should an MIT education address the personal ethics and legal obligations of technology empowerment? What are MIT's obligations to members of our extended community? [and] How can MIT draw lessons for its hacker culture from this experience?"

Administrators so far have discussed the questions in meetings with faculty and graduate students and will soon hold meetings for undergraduates and staff, campus officials said.

"The views were divergent enough that no sense of a 'right' takeaway emerged, but there was a shared feeling that ongoing discussion of these issues is important, and that MIT should be a leader in the relevant academic areas," the institute said in a statement.

Suggestions included that MIT should: teach students about ethical and legal boundaries, particularly around hacking, and the consequences for violating those boundaries; increase its internal expertise around computer crime and policy issues; limit data sharing with law enforcement; and strengthen its support for open access.

"Others argued that [MIT] ought to have made a public statement characterizing Swartz's access to the MIT computer network as authorized," the school said in a statement Thursday. "Some participants suggested that MIT was too conservative in its handling of the Swartz case and that it ought to have honored the spirit of risk taking and experimentation that they felt Swartz's actions represented."

Swartz's suicide shocked and saddened many fellow Internet activists, while some blamed his death on MIT and prosecutors. Numerous memorials, rallies and hackathons have been held in his honor, including [protests calling](#) for more humane prosecution of federal computer laws.

MIT's statement Thursday said that at the recent meetings with faculty and grad students, "Other participants raised concerns about the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act and whether students at MIT are at risk of violating it; some participants expressed a desire for clarity from the administration about where it stood with this law and whether it would help protect students who might become targets of criminal prosecution."

MIT said that after administrators hold meetings with undergraduates and staff, campus leaders will decide if further action should be taken.

Reif said he looks forward the further input on the July report's broadest questions.

"The issues around hacking, personal ethics, and the extended MIT community are important and merit the ongoing discussion taking place on our campus," he said in a statement. "MIT's leadership will continue to listen for, and act on, good ideas."

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