

Why did Evan Chen transfer from Harvard to MIT?



E. Chen, Gold medalist TWN2 at IMO 2014

Updated Jun 30, 2015 · Upvoted by Joe Wezorek, MIT Class of 1994, Math with Computer Science (18C) and Katie Sedlar, MIT class of 2017

There were plenty of reasons (and anti-reasons). I should say some anti-reasons first to give due credit -- the Harvard math department is fantastic, and Harvard gives you significantly more freedom than MIT to take whatever you want. These were the main reasons why transferring was a difficult decision, and in fact I'm only ~70% confident I made the right choice.

Ultimately, the main reason I transferred was due to the housing.

At MIT, you basically get to choose where you live. All the dorms, and even floors within dorms, are different: **living on 3rd West versus living on 5th East might as well be going to different colleges**. Even if for some bizarre reason you hate 90% of the students at MIT you can still have a fantastic social experience if you're in a dorm you like.

This is not true at Harvard, which shoves you in dorms **more or less at random**. Specifically,

- In freshman year, you are assigned a random dorm, and eat in a segregated dining hall (Annenberg) exclusively with freshmen. All students are placed on a mandatory unlimited meal plan, I guess to discourage them from eating out.
- After freshman year, you get a random House, and eat in a dining hall built into the House. There are restrictions that make it deliberately difficult to eat at other Houses.

The result of this random mixing is that (a) you only know people in your own year, and (b) zero dorm culture. Lounges are deserted, doors are shut, and people are unfindable -- in fact I still don't know the names of the students who lived next door to me. This is a bigger deal than people give it credit for: students are busy and campus is large, so **you don't really see someone unless you share a class, live near them, or date them**. For example, I rarely talked to James Tao, even though we'd known each other for three years beforehand and had plenty in common.

Put more harshly ☹️: "Harvard's dominant typical social tone is superficial, inane, and too frequently alcohol-drenched to be interesting. It actively thwarts any attempts to escape this atmosphere, by assigning groups of students to dorms randomly -- thus guaranteeing all students a more-or-less uniformly superficial, inane and alcohol-drenched experience."