

Freshmen Room Retaining Policy

1 Objectives

We would like to bring to your attention an issue regarding the new first-year housing policy to be implemented in fall 2002. This issue regards a part of the policy, described in "The Design of the New Residence System" by former Chancellor Bacow, that guarantees that every freshman is assigned a room during the summer which they can elect to keep throughout their freshman year.

The implementation of this policy rests largely upon Room Assignment Chairs, student officers within a specific residence who manage the placement of all students in rooms within that residence. Each residence has a different system for the placement of freshmen, depending on the internal characteristics of that residence. The process of placing freshmen is typically done only after they arrive at the residence in person and have a chance to meet upperclassmen living in different parts of the building. The policy currently derived from the Bacow report would force Room Assignment Chairs to make assignments before the freshmen arrive to campus.

While working on the implementation of the new policy, Room Assignment Chairs and members of the Dormitory Council have expressed concerns with its possible effects on life in the residences. The following is an explanation of some of these possible adverse effects.

Students would also like to suggest an alternative to the current policy, which would guarantee that freshmen can stay in the residence hall to which they are assigned over the summer, but that they must go through an internal room assignment process within that residence after arriving on campus, at the end of the Orientation week. Students feel that this would address the issues with the current policy, and that they can take additional measures to achieve the policy's fundamental goals.

1.1 Mutual Goals

Many goals are shared by the administration and the student body. Both the administrators and the students are working towards providing a happy and healthy living environment for every undergraduate student. Therefore, we have a number of mutual goals, including:

- Ensuring that the freshmen are comfortable during Orientation as well as the rest of the year.
- Ensuring that the freshmen feel welcome and accepted by the student community.
- Ensuring that Freshmen have a positive experience during the housing and room assignment process

- Ensuring that freshmen are treated fairly in the process and are assigned rooms throughout the individual dormitories
- Providing all undergraduates with a happy and healthy living environment.

In order to achieve our mutual goals, it is vital that the housing system foster healthy interaction between freshmen and upperclassmen. The upperclassmen provide advice, support and informal tutoring in both academic and social settings. These communities depend on the formation of friendship and trust between the freshmen and upperclassmen. Therefore, it is imperative that the freshmen and upperclassmen are provided the opportunity to meet potential neighbors and roommates, so that they are more likely to form a close and supportive community.

2 Proposal

We propose that the new residence system allow incoming freshmen to be assigned a room in a dormitory over the summer based on their preferences. They will be given the appropriate contact information well in advance. Upon arriving on campus, freshmen will have a chance to look around, see the dorms, and meet other students—both freshmen and upperclassmen. They will then indicate their preferences again, but will have the option to stay in the dorm to which they were assigned over the summer.

In contrast to the current working policy, freshmen will not be guaranteed to be able to stay in the room assigned over the summer. Instead, all freshmen will take part in internal rooming procedures. These procedures vary from dorm to dorm, but in all cases allow for input by both freshman and upperclassmen. This process may well result in freshmen staying in the rooms they were assigned over the summer, but this will not be guaranteed. The anticipated benefits derived from this alternate policy are detailed below.

3 Problems with the Room Retaining Policy and How Our Proposal Solves Them

We feel that room retaining would negatively impact the community in the following ways/for the following reasons:

3.1 Single Squatting

Freshmen who are assigned a ‘good’ room over the summer may chose to stay in a dorm in which they are unhappy for fear of getting a room that is worse somewhere else. Regardless of the truth of this, it may dissuade freshmen from entering the Orientation Adjustment Lottery. If freshmen who get singles or good double are dissuaded from entering the lottery then freshmen who *do* enter the lottery are at a disadvantage in getting good freshmen rooms. This will discourage freshman from entering dorm lottery. Consequently, freshmen will choose their dorm for the room, not the community. We want that decision influenced more by the cultures and attributes of the dorm than by the type of room they were assigned.

3.2 Roommate selection

The room retaining policy presents a number of logistical problems with regard to roommate selection.

- What happens if both roommates want the room, but do not want to live together?
- Freshmen have less of an opportunity to select their roommates due to pre-assignment, which is likely to lead to more instances of roommate problems

This puts freshmen who want roommates and enter the orientation adjustment lottery at a disadvantage. Freshmen only have the opportunity to meet potential roommates during Orientation. In order to live with a roommate of their choice, they will have to enter the lottery with this person.

Good rooms will be taken by freshmen who choose to remain in their room. Many of these freshmen may choose to live with someone acceptable in a good room, rather entering the orientation adjustment lottery with someone they prefer, and taking the chance that they will be assigned to a worse room. Some freshmen may choose to remain alone in a multiple-occupancy room, making it unavailable for pairs or groups who know that they want to live together. The net result is that there will be more conflict between roommates.

3.3 Information Availability and Accuracy

The system that we currently have (as was seen this past year) allows upperclassmen the ability to express the desire for freshmen to participate in our various communities (MIT over CPW, a particular dorm over Orientation, a particular area, during in-house selection). It provides separate times for each.

In the room retaining system, the last two are combined into one time. This means that if we are to adequately inform freshmen of the communities they could live in and allow them to choose (as has been done in the past), we would have to present them with upwards of 80 options. This presents a logistical problem of getting all of the information onto one CD. This would require shorter time to present each option. The nuances of communities are difficult to capture, more so when the time is short. This goes against the principles of informed choice outlined in the Bacow Report.

Moreover, small communities don't form until it is too late to get information to the freshmen. There are suites in Senior House, for example, that are filled by a group of friends who have similar interests. These people have not been assigned the suite until after the information for the I3 CD is due. Thus these small but important communities are not presented as an option.

Additionally, all of this information would overwhelm a freshman, who would become frustrated at not knowing what or how to choose and who could stop looking at the information all together.

If we do not give them information on subsections (thus not overwhelming them), this means the freshmen do not choose the subsections, but rather that upperclassmen choose the freshmen based on superficial answers from their questionnaires.

Our proposal again splits these times so that we don't overwhelm the freshmen, while giving them the choice of which subsection they would best fit. This gives them more overall choice when taking into account the "Prisoner's Dilemma" of choosing to keep a room for fear of getting a 'worse' room described above.

3.4 Meeting the Needs of Upperclassmen

It is important that all the members of the undergraduate community, not simply the freshmen, are happy with their living environment. Room retaining allows for situations to exist in which upperclassmen have no choice in who they live near.

Some upperclassmen will inevitably feel frustrated and powerless in this situation, and may resort to negative social pressure to encourage the freshmen to move. This is a highly undesirable effect, yet one that is likely to occur if upperclassmen are not provided with an official way of choosing their freshmen neighbors.

The current system deals with this very smoothly through the Room Assignment Chairs (RACs). RACs are familiar with the sections of the dorm and are therefore able to match freshmen to areas during RO, with upperclassmen and freshmen input. The room retaining policy does allow RACs to assign freshmen over the summer based on their basic information. However, there are a few problems with this:

- No true upperclassmen input
- There is no substitute for meeting in person. Paper information is not adequate, nor an accurate reflection of the person.
 - Freshmen may not be completely honest on their questionnaire, knowing that their parents may review it. Freshmen who smoke or who have alternate sexualities may be unwilling to admit to this on paper, as their parents may not know.
 - Parents may even fill it out for their child.

In any dorm, the current working plan interferes with RAC's ability to create a happy living environment freshman have all the choice of where they want to live, upperclassman have no control over who they live near. This is undesirable, as freshmen contribute substantially to the support network and well being of upperclassmen.

3.5 Parents

- Some parents try to retain a lot of control over student's lives, may pressure or force students into staying put.
- Especially because parent's weekend is before orientation, and parents will want to bring their kid's things and set up their room. This will also make the student less likely to want to move, as they will have to move a lot of stuff and set a new room up.
- Moving within a dorm is much easier, will cause far less stress than moving across campus.
- Our current system allows freshmen who have always been under the thumb of their parents to make an individual choice and begin their adult lives. In the new policy, many freshmen will still follow their parent's wishes, not necessarily their own.
- this is detrimental to both the freshmen and the communities they will be joining.

3.6 Mutual Selection

Neither freshmen nor upperclassmen have the opportunity to meet potential neighbors, which will have negative results.

3.6.1 Love thy Neighbor

With the room retaining policy, freshmen will not have the opportunity to meet their potential neighbors before they are assigned. Therefore, there is a much lower chance of them being placed with people that they get along with. This will lead to weaker communities and a weaker support system for all students.

3.6.2 Clustering

Most upperclassmen do not have the opportunity to meet their potential neighbors. Rather than risk being assigned a neighbor or roommate that they can not get along with, they will instead try to fill up their area with upperclassmen that they can tolerate, thus separating the freshmen from the existing community. This will seriously damage the existing support network for freshmen.

4 Evaluation

This new process is to be an experiment which we will evaluate in early October 2002, we being members of RLSLP, DormCon and UA-CHO. The evaluation will be based on the 5 principles noted above and will involve input from the freshmen, from the current residents, from the house governments, and from the housemasters as well as the RACs and staff in RLSLP. As each dormitory has a different system for attracting and rooming freshmen, all dormitories will be evaluated.

5 Conclusion

We understand the need for freshmen to feel secure in their new environment. However, the immediate and long-term negative effects which will result from the room retaining policy far outweigh any temporary benefit.

We propose that, in accordance with current policy, freshmen be allowed to remain within the dorm they are initially assigned if they so choose. However, they should not be guaranteed to be able to remain within specific rooms. This will provide freshmen with security if they wish it; ensure that freshmen who enter the orientation adjustment lottery are not at a disadvantage; and will allow both freshmen and upperclassmen to be placed with neighbors that fit them best. The result is a housing policy which creates a happy and healthy living environment during Orientation and beyond.