

# UA Extended Report on Orientation 2006

## UA Committee on Orientation

Massachusetts Institute of Technology

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### Abstract

The UA Committee on Orientation has analyzed feedback from both the Department of Housing's survey given during Orientation week and two October UA surveys aimed at freshmen and upperclassmen, respectively. We present our findings, paying particular attention to the large volume of free response comments generated from the surveys. We give two subreports on issues pertaining to the interaction between academic and non-academic events in Orientation. Compared to the UA Summary Report on Orientation 2006, this version contains more statistics, student comments, and expanded discussions.

We make the following conclusions and recommendations:

- *Place emphasis on Orientation events containing dynamic student-generated content.*
- *Residence Based Advising should be made non-binding for Next House and other dormitories that want to participate in the Housing Adjustment Lottery.*
- *The scheduling constraints implied by holding both residence move-in day and freshmen registration day on Thursday should be examined and discussed.*
- *Information on the scheduling of all Orientation events should be more readily accessible.*

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## 1 Introduction

This report is an in-depth analysis of this year's Orientation – both what went well and what went badly. It is told from both the freshman and upperclassman perspective.

Before we begin discussing what should be changed, the Committee on Orientation would like to emphasize that there are aspects of the current Orientation program that we strongly support. Orientation gives freshmen an unparalleled degree of choice that helps them invest in those around them early on in their lives here at MIT. The choice of housing and the Residence Exploration (REX) process create an immediate awareness of the community resources around the freshmen. The Math Diagnostic Exam, Advanced Placement Tests, Learning Communities, and variety of first-year subjects allow freshmen to find the right academic niche that will ease them into the challenges of getting an MIT education. All of the conclusions we reach in this report deal with allowing all of the freshmen to participate in both processes with the maximum amount of information and the minimum amount of red tape, scheduling conflicts, and frustration.

The UA Committee on Orientation has undertaken a study to collect student feedback on Orientation events. The Committee has taken data from survey given by the Department of Housing at the time of the Housing Adjustment Lottery/Housing Confirmation and supplemented results by conducting two surveys of its own. The Committee's goal is to take the issues and concerns that are the most frequently discussed by undergraduates and to present them publicly. In addition to this extended report, there is an abridged version of the report that contains all of the most important discussion and essential recommendations, but is lighter on statistics.

One of the principal features of this report is the attention given to individual student comments in both the Housing Office's survey and the UA's survey. There were 654 free response comments to the Department of Housing survey. Were it not for this report, these comments would be read only by a few people, while we think that there is substantial value in providing these comments to a wider audience.

The UA conducted a freshman survey and an upperclassman survey. The freshman survey was conducted by visiting 5 dormitories for two hours each over the course of October 9-12 and offering donuts for freshmen completing a paper survey. All freshmen were invited to attend "whichever session was most convenient." The survey questions were written by members of Dorm-

Con, IFC, Panhel, LGC, and the UA Committee on Orientation. The first page consisted of four broad free response questions. The second page was written by members of DormCon's Special Committee on Orientation, the third page by members of the UA Committee on Orientation, and the fourth page by members of the IFC, Panhel, and LGC.

The week after, the UA hosted an online survey for upperclassmen, which consisted of four free response questions very similar to the first page of the freshmen survey. The survey responses were collected during the period of October 14-18.

We now sequentially present the results of the input collected by the Housing Office and the UA in Sections 2, 3, and 4. We comment on most issues as they arise in the surveys. We present two subreports in Section 5, one seeking to find the underlying reason for conflict in the Orientation schedule and one analyzing the movement of the Physics Department's Math Diagnostic back to Orientation time this year. We conclude the report in Section 6 by concisely listing the main issues over which we hope there will be more dialogue in the future.

## 2 Housing Adjustment Lottery Survey

We analyze the results of the survey administered by the Department of Housing at the time that students are asked to enter the Housing Adjustment Lottery or confirm their current residence. The Adjustment Lottery must be entered no later than the Tuesday evening of Orientation week. In our presentation of these results, we place emphasis on summarizing the individual free response comments, since these have been less widely distributed than the multiple-choice question results themselves. For a review of the multiple-choice question results, please see the document "Adjustment Lottery Feedback, September 2006" published by the Department of Housing. We are grateful to Robin Smedick from the Department of Housing for supplying this data to us.

We now summarize the comments given on each section of the Department of Housing survey, followed by a recommendation at the end. In counting comments, we have neglected the comments that say "N/A," "No" without any explanation following it, "None," or a response that is either unintelligible or completely unrelated to any aspect of Orientation.

## 2.1 Guide to Residences and i3

The Housing survey began with two multiple-choice questions and a free response question concerning the Guide to Residences (GTR) booklet and i3 DVD that is sent to freshmen over the summer. The free response question asked, **“In looking at the ‘Guide to Residences’, was there specific information you were looking for that you felt was missing? (e.g. specific residence features)?”** 231 freshmen listed a comment under this section, an extraordinary response rate for an optional question. Out of the responses, three main themes arise:

*Dorm culture and personality.* There were 38 vague complaints that the Guide to Residences did not give a good idea of the cultures of the various dorms and how social each dorm is. Burton-Conner’s GTR message that floor culture can sometimes differ widely within a single dorm prompted 18 freshmen to ask for more information about how various dorms are organized (ie, suite, entry, hall, floor, etc), and how floor culture differs within each dorm. There were some useful suggestions as well. Freshmen probably do not know enough to be able to suggest better ways of representing dorm culture, but 13 said that more information about residents would be helpful. Five asked for lists of activities that are popular. One suggested profiling residents on blogs specific to each dorm. Four freshmen wanted to hear opinions on the dorms from residents of other dorms, so that they could get an idea of each dorm’s “reputation”. A few wanted “blunt answers” about dorm stereotypes. In general, they wanted to know more about the people living in the dorm, rather than descriptions of the dorm’s culture. Twenty-two people wrote that a dormitory could never be adequately represented on paper or that an actual visit was necessary.

*Physical attributes of the dorms.* Quite a few people wanted more information on the buildings themselves. 26 people wanted more information about what their rooms might look like, and a further 13 people were specifically interested in typical freshman room sizes. Another 10 wanted to know how many roommates they were likely to have. Many (about 10) asked for photo or video tours of the dorms to be included. Many found the given information on available facilities to be lacking as well. In particular, people wanted to know about bathroom arrangements (20 responses) and kitchens or dining halls (10 responses). Other facilities mentioned: music room, weight

room, laundry room, elevator, A/C. Finally, 8 people wanted to know how far the various dorms are from classes. There is a map included in the back of the Guide to Residences book, and the websites <http://floorplans.mit.edu> and <http://whereis.mit.edu> could answer some of those questions.

*Aspects of REX.* A handful of people found the explanation of REX to be confusing. 6 people did not understand that they might be placed in Next House despite not applying for RBA, which has led to “quite a few bitter freshmen running around campus and trapped in Next House.” There was also a bit of confusion about the lottery process.

**Conclusion.** Although the i3 DVD and the Guide to Residences booklet are helpful resources, they cannot replace visiting residences in person. This statement is consistent with the multiple-choice question results where the distribution of student responses was on the side of claiming i3 and the GTR were ‘helpful’, but centered around the ‘somewhat’ responses instead of the stronger responses. Free response comments include 22 freshmen comments specifically that a visit to the dormitories was needed to make their decision.

Although some students found the i3 or GTR to be lacking in certain areas, the task of concisely representing one’s community to all of the freshmen is challenging and the choice of most residences to move their videos in a direction that emphasizes personality rather than room sizes reflects the unique and diverse state of housing at MIT.

## 2.2 Most Important Factors in Adjustment Lottery decisions

Freshmen were asked to rate the importance of certain activities or information sources as either Very Unimportant, Somewhat Unimportant, Somewhat Important, Very Important, or N/A. Of the factors listed, “Talking with upperclass dormitory residents” had by far the most number of “Very Important” votes, with 53% of all students assigning this rating. A large number of the questions had “N/A” response rates of over 20%, which indicates that either the question was vague or (as will be discussed in section 2.3), that freshmen were filling out this survey way too early.

When asked to rate the importance of individual factors in making preferences, the responses with the most number of “Very Important” votes

were Social Atmosphere (57%), Experience Visiting (51%), Friends Made/ People You Know (40 %), and Number of Roommates You Are Likely to Have (40%). The responses with the most number of “Very Unimportant” votes were Cost (43%), Personal Identity Considerations (35%), Special Programs RBA/Cultural Houses (35%), Health/Allergy Considerations (32%), and Parental/Guardian Input (31%).

When asked for free response comments, “**Please list any other Orientation related activities and experiences which were helpful in making your decision**”, 92 freshmen gave an intelligible response.

Out of 92 comments, 28 students (30% of the responses) said that the residents of their dorms played a big part of their decision-making. About half of that number listened the advice of upperclassmen, while the other half chose their dorms mainly because of other freshmen they met. Dorm social activities, such as East Campus’ events and New House’s Extravaganza, were also a big influence on freshmen’s residence choices, having 16 comments (17%). The same number of students particularly liked and chose to stay in the dorms they were in during CPW, Pre-Orientation, and Project Interphase. Dorm tours and official events (i.e. housing panels and housemasters’ brunches) within the dorms were also useful, each having 10 students (11%) list them as important. 6 students (7%) noted that they disliked the fact that they could not switch dorms during the Residential Exploration (REX) period because of the Residence Based Advising (RBA) option. Allergy issue, physical aspects of the dorms, and dorms’ websites each had two students list as an important part of their decisions.

**Conclusion.** These data demonstrate that the most important factors for freshmen in choosing a dorm are related to community and personality. The ability to meet and talk to upperclassmen was found to be particularly useful.

### 2.3 Residence Exploration (REX)

The next question asked students to rate which REX events were the most enjoyable and informative. The numerical data is very noisy due to the fact that some people are filling out the survey before REX has ended (or in some cases before REX even began), but several patterns emerge from the comments.

In general, it seemed that the dorm parties were the most popular REX events, with some mentions of other specific REX events, and some responses

that simply said that all the events at a specific dorm were the best. Many students also said that touring the dormitories at a more leisurely time played a big factor in their decision. There was strong support among the respondents of the survey to make the schedules clearer, or to at least consolidate all the schedules of the different dorms in one place. One suggestion was to print the Hitchhiker's Guide later, as the Hitchhiker's Guide is usually printed several months before Orientation begins. Another idea is to put another insert into the freshmen Orientation folders that includes all the dorms' entire REX schedules. The feasibility of the UA helping with a unified scheduling initiative will be explored in more detail in Section 3.4.

What is most disturbing about these results was that **there were more than a few freshmen whose responses indicated that they were filling out the survey before Tuesday**. One student even wrote "I'm turning this in on Thursday, no events have taken place yet." In a previous multiple-choice question, when asked whether attending a DormCon-sponsored party was Very UnImportant/ Somewhat UnImportant/ Somewhat Important / Very Important / NA, 39% of all students listed "N/A" as their response. If the point of REX is to inform freshmen about the potential living environments at MIT, then there is no reason that they should be filling out the readjustment lottery before REX has occurred. The Readjustment Lottery should absolutely not open before REX has started.

We categorize below the responses to the question, **Was there a specific dormitory sponsored event that you really enjoyed? Was there a particular event we didn't arrange that you would have liked to attend, and do you have any general comments about how we can improve REX?** 137 students left a comment (not all categories are mutually exclusive).

<i>A specific event someone liked</i>	
Amherst Alley party	12
Random Hall party	5
East Campus/Senior House party	17
Baker House party	1
parties	1
Paintball at Simmons	4
Capture the Flag at Simmons	1
Underwear Tie-dying at Simmons	2
Live band at Burton-Conner	2
Live band at Senior House	2
Senior House Bouncy Ball Drop	6
General Senior House Events	1
General East Campus Events	8
General Random Hall Events	5
Hip-hop party at New House	2
Game Night at Next House	1
Game Night at MacGregor	1
Salsa at MacGregor	7
Recess at MacGregor	1
East vs. West Water War	2
Housemaster's Brunch	7
Dinner at Dorm	6
BBQ	2
Free Food	5
 <i>A particular someone wanted that wasn't there</i>	
Board Game Night (from CPW)	1
Ultimate Frisbee (got rained out)	1

*How REX could be improved*

Make RBA non-binding	1
Lengthen REX	5
Make schedules clearer/consolidated	7
Better events/parties	4
Distinguish between REX and in-house rush	1
West Campus needs to do more over REX	1
Have an International students REX	1
Make it easier to find tour guides	5
Make FPOPs end before REX starts	1
testing conflicts	1
Encourage people to attend more events	3
Have more upperclassmen around during REX	1

*Other answers*

I haven't gone to REX yet	8
Wasn't on campus for REX	1

*Memorable Quotes*

“Free food is nice. My pants don't fit.”

“Try assigning people randomly to dorms for REX, and then having them decide their final options for a grand lottery at the very end, combining both current lotteries. With the current system, if based on incomplete information (i.e. you didn't go to CPW, or didn't focus on the dorms in CPW) you rank highly and get assigned to a dorm it turns out you don't want, it's really hard to get reassigned – that dorm acts like a gravity well you get into. This procedure sort of levels the information field.”

“REX was very enjoyable and informative. While the Guide to Residence and i3 DVD were helpful, they do not convey the human component of each residence, and the REX activities accomplished this on some level.”

“EC house tour was very good – other dorms should follow EC's model.”

“The General open door policies of the dorms is what I liked about REX the most, and the fact that I could walk in and out of Senior Haus made the experience more worth while.”

“Amherst Alley, that was exciting. You should change REX to REX-PLORATION. I just think that sounds like a much more exciting thing than merely REX.”

**Conclusion.** Students found the Residence Exploration experience to be fun and beneficial. **The Housing Adjustment Lottery should NOT be open before REX begins.**

## 2.4 Suggested Improvements

The next block of questions asked freshmen to rate their satisfaction (Very Unsatisfied, Somewhat Unsatisfied, Somewhat Satisfied, Very Satisfied, or NA) with the following qualities of the MIT residence selection process: Opportunity to preference living environments, feeling welcomed by temporary residence hall, opportunity to squat the temporary residence hall, opportunity to request reassignment, and opportunity to participate in special programs RBA/Cultural Houses. The item “feeling welcomed by the residence hall you were assigned to over the summer” yielded the most positive responses: 52% of freshmen said they were Very Satisfied, 35% said they were Somewhat Satisfied, 8% said they were somewhat Unsatisfied, 3% said they were Very Unsatisfied, and 3% responded N/A. This shows that despite the temporary nature of summer residences, freshmen still felt welcomed into the dormitories they received over the summer. Some of Very Unsatisfied respondents can probably be attributed to Bexley Hall’s “anti-rush” policy or be explained by comments referring to a lack of upperclassmen present in certain dormitories during Orientation.

Freshmen were then asked the free response question “**For any of the above elements that you felt UNSatisfied about, do you have any suggestions for improvement?**” 65 students left an intelligible comment.

Depending on whether you count the responses where it is unclear if the resident was from an RBA dormitory or not, either 27 students (42%) or 32 students (49%) were not satisfied with the fact that the readjustment lottery was not an option for RBA dorms. Out of that number, 11 students wanted to move into the RBA dorms or to be cross-registered for the dorms with

RBA. The rest would have liked to be informed more about RBA and to have moving out as an option. 11 students (17%) would have like room squatting as an option in their dorms as they felt that there was not enough time for moving into permanent rooms and would have liked room-squatting option. A few of those felt that they were not informed enough that their temporary rooms were no theirs for the entire year. 10 students (15%) commented that their first impression of the dorms were not good because there were only a few other people in the dorm and would have liked more welcoming. One suggested that upperclassmen move in before freshmen. 6 students (9%) felt that more time for decision-making should have been given. 3 students (5%) complained that their rooms were too overcrowding. A couple of students complained about cleaning and roommate issues.

**Conclusion.** The highest number of unhappy comments came from students who were disappointed at their inability to move in or out of an RBA dormitory in the Housing Adjustment Lottery. In Section 3.2 we supplement this data with additional data from the Department of Housing and the UA's freshmen survey and make the argument that RBA should be non-binding.

## 2.5 Miscellaneous Comments

Finally, the Housing survey gave a section for miscellaneous comments. We were given 134 responses, which are categorized below (categories are not mutually exclusive).

A virtual tour of the dorm facilities during the summer	3
Room Squatting	9
RBA can switch in/out of dorms or RBA not mandatory in RBA dorms	15
More clear instructions on RBA's binding policy	8
Move into permanent rooms directly	5
The process went well	38
Upperclassmen should be on campus during REX	12
More help should be provided when freshmen are moving in	4
Requests for dorm info: floor culture, food, rooms avail)	14
i3 should be more informative than entertaining.	14
Be able to know the assigned roommate(s) prior to coming to campus	5
Put all of the events (REX and Rush) in ONE book	1
UA officers or upperclassmen give an intro talk about their dorm	2
Smoking/Nonsmoking roommate problems	2
Longer REX	10
REX should be part of CPW	2
More kosher options	1
Less overlap in night events so freshmen can go to all of them.	2

Overall, a lot of people are satisfied with this lottery system. Once again we see comments concerning RBA dorms. Many residents in RBA dorms were not aware of the no-switching rule in RBA dorms and were quite unhappy about it when they found out. See Section 3.2 for a more detailed analysis of the RBA system. In addition, a large number of people mentioned that they would like to have upperclassmen on campus during REX so they could have a better taste for the dorms, with all of their residents.

People also commented on the i3 DVD. Fourteen people requested more information describing the floor cultures, food available, number of singles and doubles available, and five people asked for a virtual tour of the dorm, showing its facilities. i3 was discussed in more detail in Section 2.1

In addition, ten people asked for a longer REX. And five people believed that it would be more helpful if they had known their temporary roommates' names before arrival on campus.

Two people mentioned that when assigning people to their temporary rooms, smoking and allergy considerations should be taken into account (apparently, this guy who was allergic to cigarettes was living in a room with a smoker).

Overall the responses to this question were merely a scattered restatement of what had been written previously.

## 2.6 Campus Preview Weekend (CPW)

We now take time to comment on the relation between CPW and REX. A common sentiment expressed in student feedback was that Campus Preview Weekend has begun to play the role of a pseudo-Orientation, particularly with when it comes to housing choice. Although CPW is not under the purview of this committee, the nature and focus of CPW currently have a strong effect on Residence Exploration (REX) and Orientation. The following are some of the many reasons why this relationship ought to be investigated:

- The partitioning and shortening of time devoted to REX appears to have resulted in living groups running *ad hoc* residence exploration activities during CPW. Anecdotally, living groups may not approve of this, but they feel forced to make use of what time they have. Freshmen are not oblivious to this; a common sentiment was that many freshmen were thankful they'd had the chance to explore living groups during CPW, since they did not have sufficient time during REX.
- This focus on residence exploration is not necessarily good for potential freshmen. Most freshmen attending CPW have not yet decided on which college they will attend. This committee believes that housing choice is an exceedingly important aspect of student life. However, while the increasing emphasis on individual living groups may give freshmen a more complete understanding of a certain aspect of student life, excessive focus on living group recruitment may overemphasize housing choice at a time when potential students need to first consider the more general character of the Institute in order to decide whether or not to attend.
- The focus on residence exploration during CPW results in dilemmas for upperclassmen. CPW occurs during term, and the increase of REX-like activities requires time and energy that often end up being taken away from academics. Additionally, upperclassmen spend this time and energy on students who may not even choose to attend MIT. Finally, as the focus of REX and REX-like activities is shifted to CPW, there is less of a personal reason for undergraduates to return early and help

with REX and Orientation, a trend perhaps indicated by the number of freshmen who found few upperclassmen in their dormitories upon arrival.

- The focus on residence exploration during CPW may not be good for the Institute as a whole. Student volunteers are the lifeblood of both CPW and Orientation; without their time and energy, both sets of events would be impossible. The perceived need for REX-like activities during CPW may mean a decrease in emphasis on all-Institute activities when a focus on the overall character of MIT is necessary.

In summary, changes made to the nature of REX over the past half-decade have been accompanied by an increase in REX-like activities during CPW. This shift may affect both CPW and Orientation, and it is not clear whether or not the overall effects are positive. This committee recommends that this phenomenon be investigated, and that consideration be given as to how this trend might be reversed. We do NOT currently see sufficient reason to implement additional CPW regulations. However, we do support the development of measures to ensure adequate time for Residence Exploration during Orientation, negating the need for REX time during CPW.

### 3 UA Freshman Survey

The week of October 9-12 five UA freshmen Orientation Feedback Sessions were held at McCormick, Random Hall, MacGregor, Next House, and East Campus. Freshmen from all dormitories were encouraged to go to “whichever session was most convenient,” although naturally the dormitories at which the sessions were held had a higher response rate. 104 responses were received: 1 from Baker, 2 from Burton-Conner, 1 from Bexley, 24 from East Campus, 32 from MacGregor, 16 from McCormick, 13 from Next House, 1 from New House, 13 from Random Hall, and 1 from Senior House. This 10% response rate is comparable to that obtained by the UA Student Committee on Educational Policy (SCEP) in their December 11, 2005 *Report on the Advising Policy at MIT*, although in that report SCEP sampled all undergraduates and not just freshmen.

The survey consisted of four pages. The first page consisted of four free response questions on broad general-view topics. The second page addressed the interaction with Residence Exploration and Residence Based Advising.

The third page sought feedback about the Boston T Party event held in the Stata Center. The fourth page concerned fraternities, sororities, and independent living groups. We present the results section by section.

### 3.1 Free Response Questions

#### Question 1. **What do you feel was the most important event/theme during Orientation and why?**

The most frequent answer to this question, mentioned nearly twice as much as the next most frequent answer, was REX, with 26 votes. If anyone gave a reason for writing in REX, it was usually that they felt that being part of a living group they were comfortable in was necessary for them to be successful at MIT. The next most frequent answers were the Academic Expo and Activities Midway, at 14 votes each. Here, people felt that these activities had given them a good idea of what academic and extracurricular options were available at MIT. Next were the Core Blitz, with 13 votes, and the sex signals talk, with 12 votes. Students felt that the Core Blitz helped them with choosing which classes to take their first term. As for the sex signals talk, the few reasons given were that it was “interesting” and “effective”, but no specifics were mentioned. The sex signals talk this year was different than the speaker Katie Koestner for the previous few years, who was generally not well received. Last, many freshmen wrote that they just enjoyed meeting lots of new people and learning about MIT, but gave no specific events.

#### Question 2. **What do you feel was the least important event/theme during Orientation and why?**

For the second question, the most frequent answer was either “the Orientation groups” or something related to the Orientation groups. While 13 freshmen answered with just “the Orientation groups,” another 35 answered with an event that related to the Orientation groups. The most frequently mentioned of these was the diversity talk, but also mentioned were sex signals, being required to dine with the Orientation group, discussions with Orientation groups, and the icebreakers. In fact, one respondent wrote of the icebreakers, “We did  $1000 \times 10^{23}$  (though I exaggerate a bit)!”

Many of the Orientation leaders work very hard and enjoy their jobs, and the UAAP puts a considerable effort in selecting them and training them. Perhaps the Orientation groups were disliked because of an association of

meeting with the Orientation group usually being “filler time” before, between, or after other events. Generally, the reasons given indicated that the freshmen felt that their Orientation groups were irrelevant. One freshman wrote that since she would never see the rest of her Orientation group again, what was the point of doing activities with them? Others characterized the discussion events as being ineffective at getting them to think. One freshman’s answer was simply “Diversity event – I am already a sensitive person!” Most seemed to find the diversity discussion in particular to be redundant, in the sense that they did not learn anything new about diversity from the discussion or video. Many other events were mentioned once, but the Orientation groups were clearly the least liked out of all the events.

**Question 3. If you went to Campus Preview Weekend (CPW), International Orientation, or a Freshman Pre-Orientation Program (FPOP), is there any characteristic that you liked about one of those periods that you would think Orientation could learn from or vice versa?**

The third question had two frequent answers. The first was a general “I loved my FPOP!” with the reason that their FPOPs involved a small group of people who were all interested in the same thing, creating a comfortable, educational environment. While it would be difficult and probably counter-productive to make FPOPs part of Orientation, it seems that what freshmen would like is an Orientation group with events that are relevant to them. The suggestion exists that making the Orientation groups residence-based would make freshmen feel that they were more relevant and increase attendance at the Orientation group events, but this has been tried in the past with mixed and mostly negative results.

The other frequent answer to the third question was that CPW had far more time than Orientation to explore the dorms. Many freshmen wrote that they had enjoyed CPW because it was relaxed – they had very few mandatory events to attend, and much more time to explore the MIT campus and dorms and meet people. While about two people wrote that they thought CPW moved too fast and they preferred the pace of Orientation, overall it seems that the freshmen would prefer an Orientation with more time to explore the living groups available at MIT. This is especially true when combined with the statistics from the first question, which show that the freshmen feel that the most important Orientation event by far is REX. Some respondents also mentioned that they very much enjoyed being con-

nected with an upperclassman over CPW, as that gave them a chance to talk one-on-one with an upperclassman who was interesting and helpful, and they would like to have an analogous practice over Orientation.

**Question 4. Is there any insight that you would like to share that you did not know when you filled out the survey in the Housing Adjustment Lottery but you have since realized after having been at MIT for some time?**

The fourth question had few respondents with far more varied answers than any of the previous questions. Many of the respondents wrote that the atmosphere of their dorms had changed after REX – partly because many upperclassmen were not around during REX, and partly because the upperclassmen themselves did not usually act the same way they did during REX. Some respondents also mentioned that they had not previously realized that different floors, entries or halls of their dorms had different personalities. A few people commented on RBA – one freshman wrote that she was “FORCED to live in a dorm with RBA”, while another wrote, “I really like my dorm, but I don’t like that we have to be RBA to be here.”

### **3.2 REX and RBA**

*Raw data from UA freshmen survey:*

**Did you participate in REX events? (Yes/No.) If no, why not?**

25% overall did not participate in Rush (26 responses out of 104)

54% of Next (7 responses)

81% of McCormick (13 responses)

8% of everyone else (6 responses)

Most said that they didn’t because they couldn’t move.

**What impact did RBA have on your summer lottery choice of dorm? (No Impact / I wanted to live in an RBA dorm / I did not want to live in an RBA dorm)**

46% No Impact (48 responses)

4% I wanted to live in an RBA dorm (4 responses)

50% I did not want to live in an RBA dorm (52 responses)

**Why? Circle All that apply.**

38% I did not like particular dorms involved with RBA

37% There was a non-RBA advising seminar or program I wanted to be in

44% I wanted to participate in REX

54% I did not like the RBA program

**Did you know (at the time) that if you were placed in an RBA dorm in the summer lottery, you could not enter the adjustment lottery? (Yes/No)**

60% Overall said YES (63 responses out of 104)

59% of people in the RBA program said YES (17 out of 29)

**Did you feel that the housing website was unclear with regard to RBA? (Yes/No)**

33% Overall said YES (34 responses)

29% of people in the RBA program said YES (9 responses)

**(If you live in an RBA dorm or Cultural House) If you had had the opportunity to move, would you have tried? (Yes/No)**

38% of people in Next House would have tried to move if given the opportunity (5 responses)

6% of people in McCormick would have tried to move if given the opportunity (1 response)

**(If you live in an RBA dorm or Cultural House) How much did you interact with your advisor, RAA, and advising group over the summer or during FPOPs? This can include outings, emails, meetings, etc. (not at all / a little / a lot)**

61% not at all (17 responses)

32% a little (9 responses)

7% a lot (2 responses)

*Supplemental Data from Robin Smedick, Department of Housing*

There are 62 freshmen who put Next 3rd and were put there. That's 83% of the overall students who received their third choice.

Of the students who received their 1st choice in the summer lottery (707): 10.6% (75 freshmen) of those students entered the adjustment lottery.

Of the students who received their 2nd choice in the summer lottery (229): 31.4% (72 freshmen) of those students entered the adjustment lottery.

**Of the students who received their third choice in the summer (75): 6.7% (5 freshmen) of those students entered the Adjustment Lottery.** However, only 13 of the 75 students who received their 3rd choice in the Summer were eligible to enter the Adjustment Lottery. The rest were in Next House.

27 freshmen answered Q7 on the housing adjustment lottery survey complained about how RBA doesn't allow movement in or out during the adjustment period (see Section 2.4).

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*UA SCEP Report on Advising Dec 11, 2005*

[http://web.mit.edu/ua/www/committees/scep/SCEP\\_Report\\_on\\_Advisingpolicy.pdf](http://web.mit.edu/ua/www/committees/scep/SCEP_Report_on_Advisingpolicy.pdf)

“The Residence Based Advising program is currently in place in two dorms, Next House and McCormick Hall. About 6% of the surveys commented on the RBA Program, with almost all of them coming from freshmen or sophomores from Next House. The overall advising satisfaction level expressed by these students was 6.04, much less than the overall freshmen average [of 6.7]. The most frequent response was that students dislike the restriction on their ability to switch dorms once they choose RBA. Students feel limited because they cannot participate in DormRex, and they lose the privilege of making the final selection on where they live. While it is true that most students had chosen RBA knowing that they could not move after coming to campus, the selection was made with only the information presented during CPW and in the literature sent over the summer.”

*Commentary and Conclusions*

The RBA program is a great option for freshmen that provides a healthy advising environment which builds community. However, the problem that freshmen, once assigned to an RBA dormitory, cannot choose to enter the Housing Adjustment Lottery is presenting a significant problem in Next House. It is particularly acute because the popularity of Next House has dwindled, so that 83% of total freshmen that got their third choice in the summer lottery were placed in Next House – a total of 62. Those people were bitterly resentful of the fact that they were not allowed to participate in REX and try to move to a dormitory that would make them happier. On Housing’s Adjustment survey, nearly 50% of all free response comments in response to the question “For any of the above elements that you felt UNsatisfied about, do you have any suggestions for improvement?” were complaints about this policy. The Student Committee on Educational Policy’s Report on Advising showed that students’ satisfaction about their advising at Next House was much lower than campus average, and the report attributed this principally to “the restriction on their ability to switch dorms once they choose RBA.”

**The most startling statistic of all can be represented by the following table:**

Preference received in Summer Housing Lottery	1st	2nd	3rd
Percentage students entering Adjustment Lottery	10.6%	31.4%	6.7%

By itself, the table seems to indicate that students who got their third choice in the summer housing lottery were more content than students who received their first or second choice. The ‘hidden’ statistic that explains this counter-intuitive behavior is that only 13 of the 75 students who received their third place choice in the Summer Housing Lottery were eligible to enter the Housing Adjustment Lottery during Orientation (and 5 freshmen, or 38.5% of those who were eligible, did).

There is evidence that removing the policy for Next House that requires freshmen to stay in Next will actually increase Next House’s popularity and greatly ease the burden of the freshmen who do not like the dorm that they have been placed in. Of freshmen who filled out the UA’s survey on Orientation, 50% said they had not wanted to live in a RBA dorm (as compared to the 4% that wanted to and the 46% who said RBA had no impact on their choice in the lottery) and of that 50%, 44% said one of the reasons was that they wanted to participate in REX.

When asked about whether they would favor their respective dormitories making Residence Based Advising non-binding, Next House President Franklyn Lau stated that he would favor allowing residents of Next House to participate in the Housing Adjustment Lottery. McCormick President Petra Barron stated that she believed that there could be advantages to the current system such as being able to contact definite freshmen earlier and that McCormick should decide how it should deal with RBA. The UA recommends that each dormitory participating in RBA should be allowed to choose for itself whether or not RBA's housing decisions are binding. Making RBA non-binding would require moving freshmen around after events with the advisors are supposed to have occurred, but a 61% majority of the RBA freshmen in the survey reported seeing no contact with their advising group before Orientation and only 2 of the 29 RBA respondents (7%) reported spending 'a lot' of time with their advising groups. Making RBA non-binding would greatly ease the unfair resentment that the RBA system now has, and allowing RBA students to participate in the Housing Adjustment Lottery would be both manageable and implementable. Were one to make RBA non-binding, one would not have to move around 62 students, only a number of students equivalent to the number wanting to move into Next House.

### 3.3 Boston T Party

*Raw data from UA freshmen survey:*

**Did you find the Boston T Party event worth attending? (Yes / No / Did not attend**

55% YES (59 responses)

18% NO (14 responses)

27% Did not attend (30 responses)

**Do you feel that either of the following detracted from the event? (A / B / C as written below )**

36% A. Student groups did not say enough about who they were. (26 responses)

0% B. Student groups said too much about who they were. (0 responses)

64% C. I did not notice a problem with either A or B. (47 responses)

**Do you think that student groups that did not participate in the Boston T Party found it more difficult to attract students at the Activities Midway? (not at all / a little / a lot)**

76% not at all (53 responses)

23% a little (16 responses)

1% a lot (1 responses)

**Should an event like this be run next year? (Yes / No)**

86% YES (67 responses)

14% NO (11 responses)

### *Results With Free Response Information:*

Regarding the Boston T Party, most freshmen seemed to have opinions that were similar. They generally considered the party fun but not informative. 55% of respondents found the Boston T Party worth attending, while 18% did not. The remaining 27% did not attend. Several (about 4) people commented that the party was too small, and that it got boring quickly. 8 people said the party was fun. 5 people wanted better free food.

36% of freshmen felt that student groups did not say enough, while 64% saw no problem. No one stated that groups were saying too much. In addition, 10 people left a separate comment saying that they found it difficult to find information about student groups they were interested in. Despite the complaints, 86% of freshmen say that the T Party should be held again.

When asked a free response question on the comparison between the T Party and the Activities Midway, the general trend was that the Midway was more informative while the Boston T Party was more relaxed. 37 of 77 free response comments (48%) say that the Midway was more informative, while 29 (38%) said that the T Party was more fun and more relaxing. One freshmen commented that the T Party “enabled students to get a quick glimpse at what activities there are without feeling obligated to sign up for a mailing list,” and that it was useful for “just exploring the options.” Another commented that it was hard to find out information about student groups at the T Party because the groups were not allowed to talk about themselves and freshmen were simply told to ask again at the Midway. Freshmen also apparently like free stuff: 9 freshmen stated in free response comments that the

“T Party was more about the free food” compared to the Midway, which was more about “free non-edible stuff.” 76% of respondents stated that groups that did not participate in the Boston T Party were not disadvantaged in the Activities Midway, while only one student said that the disadvantage for such groups was “a lot.” Overall, the Midway was about actually learning about the groups, whereas the T party was one big hectic party with lots of free food and people.

### *Commentary and Conclusions*

The Boston T Party was a new event this year, claiming the time slot previously held by the generally unpopular PlayFair event in previous years. The Boston T Party drew both student groups and local restaurants to the Stata Center where freshmen could consume free food and talk to upperclassmen. The Boston T Party was meant to supplement the Friday Activities Midway, the official Orientation kickoff event for student groups, by giving students a chance to preview a sample of student organizations without having to commit to signing up for anything. Overall, students did not think that groups that did not participate in the Boston T Party were at a disadvantage in the Activities Midway.

For a first-time event, the Boston T Party was very successful. Student organizations represent the same kind of student-generated dynamic content that embodies Residence Exploration and FSILG Rush. There has generally been less vigorous discussion of student organizations in years past because the scheduling concerning student organizations has not changed as much as REX and Rush. The strengthening of student organizations is a strong step towards making a better Orientation.

The event was overall a good idea (86% of freshmen surveyed stated that they would like to see an event like this occur next year), but the execution did suffer from a lack of being able to secure a large enough event planning team. This resulted in the call for student groups to participate in the event going out with only a couple of weeks notice. A few upperclassmen commented in the UA Upperclassman survey (see Section 4) expressing annoyance with the interaction between their presence at the event and ASA restrictions which prohibit groups from adding freshmen names to their email announcements lists or postering for student group events before the Activities Midway on Friday. One upperclassman wrote “Without being able to

talk to the freshmen about your organization, there was no incentive to participate and the event was worthless to us.” Groups were willing to participate this year because the event was new, but in order to secure upperclassmen participation for future years the UA needs to work with the ASA to clarify or possibly even relax some of the pre-Activities Midway restrictions on student groups. This year the UA has already found a member of the Committee on Orientation who would be willing to work on a successor to the Boston T Party if a similar event were held next year.

Should an event like the Boston T Party happen again next year, it must take a goal-based approach. Last year, the T Party was designed to be a filler for the missing PlayFair, and its only goal was to be an event to keep students busy during that night. The subcommittee planning the Boston T Party cleverly brought student groups into the event, but groups and upperclassmen complained that it was not worth their time because they could not talk about their group. If there is to be another event, there are a few goals that it could reach for: we could try to create a student group promotion-based event to continue the trend of student generated dynamic content, but we would have to remove some parts of the “gag rule” that reduce incentive for student groups to participate. We could try to create just a party, a relaxing event for freshmen, but this would likely be overshadowed by living group activities. On this point, we could also allow the night to be filled in by living groups, and give freshmen a night off from institutionalized activities. With the knowledge that there is no competition in their midst, living groups may very well take the opportunity to increase highly-desirable student generated dynamic content. We must consider, based on what goals we have for our event and the likeliness we will be able to meet these goals, whether we want to fill the slot with an institutionalized event at all.

Another issue concerning student groups, which also came up later in the upperclassmen survey, was the role of balancing student group freshmen recruitment with FSILG Rush. The addition of a Friday night official Orientation event the last two years has forced student groups to compete with FSILG Rush when attempting to draw students to events in the first week. Some of the time in the Friday night Orientation event is given to a Student Center “block party” where student organizations can have walk-in type office hours, but this does discourage groups from having a normal first meeting immediately following the Activities Midway. During the SLOPE meetings planning Orientation, it has generally been thought by both students and administrators that holding an official Friday night event gives

upperclassmen a break between hosting Residence Exploration and FSILG Rush events. However, student groups have no direct representation on the SLOPE Committee, and it is unclear whether UA or ASA or any other organization directly represents them. Student group leaders should be asked whether they intend to use the Friday night time after the Activities Midway to hold events.

### **3.4 Fraternities, Sororities, and Independent Living Groups (FSILGs)**

*Raw data from UA freshmen survey:*

**Did you participate in Rush? (Yes / No)**

81% YES (51 responses)

19% NO (12 responses)

**Did any formal Orientation events affect your decision to participate in Rush? (Yes / No). Please Explain.**

8% YES (4 responses)

92% NO (47 responses)

**Did any informal Orientation events affect your decision to participate in Rush? (Yes / No). Please Explain.**

30% YES (17 responses)

70% NO (40 responses)

**Did you notice a Greek presence on campus during Orientation? (Yes / No)**

68% YES (32 responses)

32% NO (15 responses)

**Were you aware that Panhel is the umbrella organization for the five sororities? (Yes / No)**

70% YES (35 responses)

30% NO (15 responses)

**Did you receive any information during Orientation about sororities at MIT? (Yes / No)**

60% YES (27 responses)

40% NO (18 responses)

**How well informed do you feel you are about sororities at MIT? (not at all / a little / a lot)**

21% not at all (8 responses)

77% a little (30 responses)

3% a lot (1 responses)

**Did you attend Panhel's Spa Night? (Yes / No). What did you like/dislike about the event?**

33% YES (16 responses)

67% NO (32 responses)

**Did you sign up for sorority recruitment? (Yes / No). Why or why not?**

14% YES (7 responses)

86% NO (43 responses)

**Were you made aware of Independent Living Groups during Orientation? (Yes / No)**

86% YES (63 responses)

14% NO (10 responses)

*Results With Free Response Information*

The Fraternities, Sororities and Independent Living Groups officially began their recruitment activities at the conclusion of the Orientation activities. All FSILGs participated in their own individual activities including Rush events held by the fraternities and independent living groups and general information sessions and activities held by Panhel on behalf of the sororities. The FSILG portion of the Orientation survey asked the men to answer only the fraternity related questions, some women received a survey asking them to skip these questions and some received a survey that gave them the choice on if they wanted to answer the fraternity questions or not. With both types

of surveys there were both males who answered both the questions aimed at the women and vice versa.

When asked if they participated in fraternity rush, 81% of students responded they had and 19% responded they had not. Formal Orientation events affected 8% of participants but most (92%) were not affected. The freshmen who were affected by the formal Orientation events primarily said they were because everyone they spoke to said that Rush was fun and a good experience. More students were affected with informal Orientation events with 30% being affected and 70% not being affected. Those who were affected stated they were mainly affected from talking to different people and seeing fraternity members on campus. 68% of students noticed the Greek presence on campus during Orientation, while 32% did not.

In response to the questions regarding the sororities, 70% of respondents students understood that Panhel is the umbrella organization encompassing the five sororities while 30% did not. 60% of respondents report receiving information regarding sororities, while 40% did not. Information was available during the ASA Activities Midway and Panhel's Spa Night. 21% of girls felt that they were not informed about the sororities at all, 77% felt they were informed a little, and one respondent (3%) felt like she was a lot. For the Panhel Spa Night, 33% of respondents attended the event, and 67% did not. Those who attended generally enjoyed the activity liking the opportunity to relax, eat, and services provided. Others wanted to have more information about the services MIT medical provided, and more about Panhel and the individual sororities. One commented that the selection showing Sex and the City might not have been the correct choice in shows as it did include scenes of drinking, graphic sex, and other items. Most enjoyed the selection provided however. Of the people polled 7 (14%) signed up for recruitment and 43 (86%) did not. Of the total population 93 students registered for recruitment during the Orientation week. Reasons given for not signing up were lack of interest, liking dormitory life, questioning why they had to sign up as the boys did not have to, needing more information and simply not knowing there was sign ups. Some reasons given for signing up for recruitment were interest in finding out more about the groups, and thinking it was worth a try or interesting at the time.

Regarding the Independent Living Groups, 86% of respondents were aware of the different groups during Orientation and 14% of respondents said they were not. This recognition was mainly a factor of word of mouth and many wanted to see more publicity for them.

Students also provided general comments about FSILG's and Orientation at the end of the survey. Some students wanted to see more of an FSILG presence during Orientation instead of the current secrecy, and also wanted to see all rushes held concurrently (which will be implemented next year). Some stated that Rush was definitely not for them and did not interest them, while others stated they loved them and the experience. One student commented that there were too many events on some days and too few on others and that these events prevented him from meeting up with his parents as they did not have activities to go to and often times the student would only be notified of the event a few hours before it occurred. Overall students liked the amount of information they received but wanted more information earlier on the fraternities, sororities and independent living groups.

### *Commentary and Conclusions*

The UA survey established the student demand for more information on fraternities, sororities, and independent living groups earlier. This will become even more important next year when the recruiting events of IFC, Panhel, and LGC all align on the same time frame. Additionally, there were more student comments in previous DormCon REX-related sections desiring the REX schedule and the official Hitchhiker's Guide booklet to be unified. The UA believes that it can help address both of these concerns by taking the initiative to post a master schedule on the UA website.

Currently DormCon, UAAP, IFC, LGC, and Panhel each publish their schedules independently and have different deadlines for finalizing events. Each group also legitimately sees value in publishing a separate schedule focusing on that group's events. An upperclassman would obviously know the respective websites of each organization and be able to obtain the schedules without difficulty. However, we have seen freshmen report that they were not aware of the websites of each of these organizations and thus missed out on events that they desired to attend. The UA could gather all events into a single schedule, working on a later timetable than any of the individual groups, and use the class mailing lists which the UA has access to in order to send an announcement. Organizations would be given the option of opting out of the UA scheduling website and instead having a link be posted to their website. Having a master schedule would be beneficial in integrating the different aspects of Orientation and it would especially encourage participation in FSILG events by giving continuity to Orientation and FSILG Rush.

## 4 UA Upperclassman Survey

Knowing that getting a statistically large sample size of upperclassmen is difficult, the Upperclassman survey was made entirely free response. We attempted to draw patterns on the basis of multiple people saying the same things when prompted with a completely open-ended question. A total of 62 people took the survey. All 11 dormitories were represented, as well as members from fraternities, sororities, independent living groups, and off-campus apartments. The respondents identified their living group as follows: 4 from Baker, 3 from Bexley, 8 from Burton-Conner, 12 from East Campus, 3 from fraternities (all different), 2 from independent living groups (both different), 3 from MacGregor, 1 from McCormick, 1 from New House, 3 from Next House, 2 living off-campus, 8 from Random Hall 3 from Senior House, 2 people in Senior Segue at Sidney-Pacific, 4 from Simmons, and 3 from sororities (all different).

### 4.1 Results

**Question 1. What do you feel was the most important event/theme during this year's Orientation and why?**

Out of the total 45 people who entered a valid answer for this question, there were 22 who thought that the most important event was REX (or dorm rush), 5 thought that the Stata T Party held this spot, and 5 felt that Activities Midway was most important. The rest were specific events including the parties in various dorms, the diversity talk, salsa dance, tech theater, City Days, and Dinner at the Dorms. Note that some people put two items in this category. Many students gave explanations for the importance of REX, saying that it was important that the freshmen get a really good look at the place that they will call home for the next 4 years.

**Question 2. What do you feel was the least important/useful event/theme during this year's Orientation and why?**

Out of the 20 people that answered this question, 9 people thought that one or more of the academic events (like Core Blitz, Advanced Standing Exams, Math Diagnostic, etc) were either unnecessary (like Core Blitz) or badly scheduled over REX (diagnostics). The other complaints were scattered around dinner at the dorms, UAAP events which overlapped with REX,

and the diversity talk. People re-emphasized the importance of REX over other Orientation activities.

**Question 3. Do you think that the organization and execution of this year's Orientation was better or worse than previous year's? Please Explain.**

Overall, a majority of the participants in the survey thought that Orientation was well organized, with the exception of the scheduling of UAAP (ARC) events and Advanced Standing Exams over REX. Other complaints included the fact that student groups were not given enough early notice about events such as the Boston T Party, and that the Cruise for freshmen seemed to be poorly organized. The Orientation website was well received. One of the things that upperclassmen were happy about was the removal of Playfair. For a more detailed analysis of the Boston T Party, see Section 3.3.

**Question 4. Is there anything else you want to tell us to help make Orientation/REX better in the future?**

Responses included suggestions to

- Hand out HTGAMIT books with Orientation package plan earlier and give student groups earlier notice about the events.
- Enable early returns (at least rush chairs) to return earlier.
- Schedule advanced standing exams so that they do not conflict with Rush.
- Try not to put too much emphasis on academics, and put more emphasis on REX.
- Consider revisiting the Housing lottery algorithm (listing an unpopular dorm 2nd or 3rd tends to get one automatically placed there).
- Having Friday night event-free so that freshmen could either mingle more on their own time without any formal events. A student group leader also expressed dismay that student organizations could effectively no longer hold events Friday night following the Activities Midway since the cruise now conflicted with it.

## 4.2 Selected Quotes

Many of the responses we received from the Upperclassmen survey showed signs that a lot of effort had been put into writing them. Overall, the upperclassmen responses are more certain and emphatic than those taken from freshmen. Some responses were quite long, and we have selected ten representative excerpts to give an idea of pieces from the responses that were written. The complete set of survey responses can be obtained by emailing [ua-orient-chairs@mit.edu](mailto:ua-orient-chairs@mit.edu).

“I believe that having the opportunity to choose where you live is one of the most defining things about MIT - that students are encouraged to take responsibility for their futures right from the start. It allows us to surround ourselves with people who share our passions, foster our ambitions, and help us grow mentally and emotionally.”

“I don’t think that the ARC-sponsored events at all emphasize the importance of REX at any time. I also think that the events such as “Core Blitz” and the like are pointless. This information should not be delivered in an auditorium full of half-asleep students, especially when most students are skipping the event anyway.”

“The biggest barrier for students in my mind is finding a group of people they are comfortable with before the onset of classes; that’s what gets you through MIT, not packets of information handed out by the UAAP etc.”

“I was very unhappy to find out that freshman had advanced placement exams in the middle of rush.”

“The current proposal to shift it towards ‘intellectual’ experiences, and away from housing experiences, is wholly without merit. We have innumerable opportunities to have ‘intellectual’ experiences; however, we only have one opportunity to decide on our choice of residence, a choice that may well impact the course of our entire year.”

“The frosh should be spending the first week meeting upperclassmen from around campus, because relations between classes are much more important

than relations in a single class. The upperclassmen are the support system that keeps the frosh from getting freaked out in their first term here, so by dragging all the frosh away to frosh-specific events, it keeps them from meeting upperclassmen.”

“The elimination of PlayFair, an unpopular event, showed Orientation is moving in positive directions.”

“99% percent of the housing choice is getting to know the current residents, and that doesn’t happen in 2 hours in between an advanced standing exam and lecture on the differences between 8.01X, 8.01T and 8.01whatever.”

“The Stata Event was new, different, and exciting. A good sign of things to come.”

“Complacency about living groups leads to less coherency of that dorm’s culture, fewer and weaker ties between residents. Dorm communities are a hugely supportive environment for most undergraduates, and undermining their integrity is detrimental to everyone. If freshmen do not consciously buy-in to their dorm—not just the publicity, but the \*people\*—they have fewer incentives to interact with, trust, and seek advice from their housemates.”

## 5 UA Subreports

In addition to analyzing the survey results in the previous sections, the UA would like to address two issues related to the intertwining of both academic and community-related events in Orientation. The first concerns a topic which had been brought up a couple of the free response comments from the UA surveys and again at a DormCon Special Committee for Housing and Orientation meeting that the current state of Orientation leaves a state of competition between academic and community events rather than a supportive balance. We have named this problem the Decision Compression Problem. The second issue fulfills the student demand that the UA investigate the effects of the Physics Department’s Math Diagnostic being moved to Orientation week. In the previous few years the exam had been taken by mail over the summer.

## 5.1 Decision Compression Problem

Over the last several years, many in the MIT community have expressed concern that the emphasis on residence selection during Orientation detracts from an introduction to the academic and other resources of the Institute. On the other hand, many students have expressed the viewpoint that residence selection is crucial for an undergraduate student's experience and emotional well-being at MIT, and that the myriad other programming during Orientation detracts from the process of residence selection. Traditionally, these viewpoints have been considered opposing, but we believe it is possible to reconcile them.

Under the current structure, Residence Exploration (REX) occurs during the first few days of Orientation, while academic and student life programming activities occur throughout the week, both during and after REX. The details of the schedule vary from year to year, and with them, which activities occur during REX and which occur after. In recent years CityDays and Advanced Standing Exams are examples of activities that have overlapped with REX days (CityDays did not overlap with REX/Standing Exams last year). This structure is problematic for everyone – freshmen and upperclassmen are unhappy that other activities are interfering with the residence selection process, and Orientation staff are unhappy that residence selection is drawing freshmen away from their activities.

Between REX, Advanced Standing Exams, and looking at Learning Community alternative advising groups such as ESG, Concourse, MAS, and Terascope, it can be said that many of the important decisions come in the first couple of days of Orientation. The 'Problem' being described in this section is that Advanced Standing Exams and the Physics Department's Math Diagnostic naturally need to be scheduled with enough time for them to be graded before freshmen choose their classes, and the deadline for declaring an alternate advising group must also fall before this time. This scheduling feature tends to cluster too many weighty decisions/tests on Monday and Tuesday, while leaving Wednesday, Thursday, and Friday comparatively light except for the actual act of choosing classes. With the return of the Physics Department's Math Diagnostic to Orientation week and the proposed GIR changes eliminating the acceptance of AP credits except for 18.01, the number of people taking Advanced Standing Exams and the number of exams being taken per person are likely to increase in the future and thus the Decision Compression Problem will only get worse.

This scheduling constraint that many academic activities must occur prior to Thursday's registration is perfectly legitimate, nevertheless it squeezes the remainder of the Orientation schedule. There is no adjustment to the scheduling structure which is strictly more convenient for everyone – any attempt to solve the Decision Compression Problem would involve tradeoffs that generate both advantages and disadvantages. We recognize that this issue is contentious and refrain from making a single recommendation on how to best tackle it, but we believe that a lot of the 'tensions' in Orientation scheduling are tied to this issue in some way. Therefore, we list a series of possibilities for how this Decision Compression Problem could be relieved, along with the tradeoffs that come from each. We want to emphasize that the way in which Orientation is currently planned by writing off many of the events as fixed or "set in stone" before the end of the fall term prevents the discussion of more creative solutions that could be of benefit to students. We hope that this begins a serious dialogue on Orientation scheduling and that the structure of Orientation really be thought through rather than dismissed without discussion.

1. *The number of days in Orientation could be lengthened.* This is the most direct solution to spacing out the major decisions and tests in Orientation, but it has the disadvantage of pushing up the date at which students participating in International Orientation or FPOPs must arrive at MIT. Since the number of students participating in FPOPs has greatly increased over the last five years, this could prove impractical. One thing that went well this year compared to last year was that the pre-Orientation program end time was set at Saturday night instead of Sunday night. A lot of freshmen last year found themselves tossed into the most hectic part of Orientation with even less time to make decisions.
2. *Some community-related events could be moved to later in the week.* In some previous years housing move-in day was on Saturday, which gave students time after Advanced Standing Exams before having to announce their living location. The current transition to put move day on Thursday provided several substantial advantages - Freshmen were settled into a non-temporary dorm before the weekend, freshmen were not as attached to their temporary dorms since they were moving sooner, the earlier move date allowed for a smoother transition from

Residence Exploration to FSILG Rush. The alternative to moving REX later would be to move the discussion events (alcohol, diversity, and rape) to later in the week. This does not itself solve the Decision Compression Problem, since the talks are not themselves decisions that must be made, but it would alleviate the problem by lessening the number of different events competing for time in the early Orientation schedule. And this would probably be enough.

3. *REX could be given its own exclusive time.* Three to four consecutive days could be designated as exclusively for REX, and the rest of Orientation set as an academic and student life programming introduction to the Institute, with the exception of an evening for in-house rush and a move-in day similar to what currently exists (with upperclassmen helping freshmen move throughout the day at the individual freshmen's convenience, and freshmen attending Orientation activities throughout the day). Not only would this allot sufficient time and focus for REX, but it would allow freshmen, during the later part of Orientation, to become acquainted with the academics, activities, and resources of the Institute without being drawn away by REX events and allow them to focus without being distracted by concern about residence selection.

One potential concern with this plan is that freshmen need to have taken Advanced Standing Exams, and those exams need to have been scored before the freshmen choose their fall term classes. A possible solution to this issue is to have the freshmen arrive for Orientation a day earlier than presently, and take Advanced Standing Exams before the start of REX, perhaps the morning and afternoon before. There may be other solutions as well; this one is presented to illustrate that the problem is not intractable.

We believe that allowing residence selection and other aspects of Orientation to conflict with and detract from each other is demeaning to both, and that this plan would promote both as important experiences which should be taken seriously.

4. *Freshmen registration could be moved to Reg Day, or at least to later in the week.* Moving freshmen registration to Reg Day would complicate scheduling for advisors who advise both freshmen and non-freshmen. However, the idea of moving freshmen registration a few days later offers many potential advantages. First of all, it gives freshmen more

time to talk to a variety of upperclassmen about what classes they should take and allows students to make more confident and informed decisions than if they had just talked to associate advisor. Secondly, moving back freshmen registration day gives much more flexibility on when Advanced Standing Exams and Learning Community events can be held. There are tasks such as assigning freshmen to recitations that become more difficult when freshmen registration day is moved back, but in recent years computer scheduling has made it easier to solve such optimization problems. The scheduling task may prove difficult, but we highly encourage a look into the feasibility of this idea, since it carries some strong advantages.

It would be unacceptable to ‘fix’ the Decision Compression Problem by eliminating student choice and thus making there be fewer decisions. We value both the ability to choose a residence, which represents a unique community only available at MIT, and the ability to pursue one’s academic dreams by testing out of classes for which one already knows the material. We hope that any new policies will remember that both of these interests, although currently in competition with each other for the same block of time, are highly valued by MIT students.

In conclusion, **the scheduling of both freshmen registration for classes and freshmen moving day for Thursday sets in motion two competing chains of events in days prior to Thursday.** There is plenty of time on Thursday itself for both moving and registering for class, and Wednesday is generally not stressful. However, both the moving process and registering for classes require events to be scheduled on Sunday, Monday, or Tuesday.

## 5.2 Math Diagnostic Exam

The addition of the Physics Department’s Math Diagnostic Exam to Orientation week this year was not greeted well among upperclassmen, many of whom were disappointed that the switch to a time during Orientation that conflicted with Residence Exploration had occurred with little discussion. Previously, the exam had been administered by mail over the summer. Students were given a choice on whether to take the diagnostic on Sunday or Monday, but the scheduling of the exam was particularly problematic for

students taking either the 18.02 or 8.01 Advanced Standing Exams, as this effectively forced students to take the exam over Sunday.

The UA talked to Professor Thomas Greytak, the Associate Department Head for Education. He emphasized that the best indicator of how well a student would do in 8.01 was their basic math skills. The purpose of the exam, therefore, is to determine which flavor of 8.01 would best suit the student in question.

Professor Greytak also emphasized that administering the exam over Orientation was actually a reversion to the way the exam was given in years past. The Physics Department had previously agreed to move the Math Diagnostic to help free up time during Orientation. However, the test was moved back to Orientation this year because the department had concerns about a certain trend they noticed. The normal distribution the department used to see every year was suddenly “bunched up at the very top,” according to Greytak, when the exam was mailed over the summer. This meant that the distribution of scores was not wide enough to successfully predict where the cutoff scores should go for the various flavors of 8.01. Greytak was reluctant to give reasons for why the distributions were so different.

Asked about trends in this year’s exam, Greytak noted that the original wide distribution had again returned. He also said that they might have set this year’s cutoff scores slightly too high (so some students recommended to take 8.01L would have been fine in 8.01), but that it was too early in the term to be certain.

Greytak said that as of now, the Physics Department is planning to give the exam again during Orientation, since the summer exams proved useless for determining the student’s math ability. He did say he would be willing to work with the Committee on Orientation to find a more convenient time for the exam, but that he would be reluctant to mail the exams over the summer. It does appear that the distributions are indeed different enough to merit holding the exam during Orientation week.

The UA also spoke with Assistant Dean of Freshman Advising Donna Friedman in the UAAP, who was in charge of all the logistical issues surrounding the Math Diagnostic. She said that giving the Math Diagnostic during Orientation meant more work for her staff, but the exam went very smoothly this year and they were able to get the results to the Physics Department quickly. The UAAP oversees administration and grading, but the decision of when and how the exam is given is left up to the Physics Department working in coordination with UAAP Assistant Dean of New Student

Programming Elizabeth Young. Friedman seems eager to work the UA on Orientation. She suggested that we speak with her again after IAP, when the Physics Department and the UAAP will be discussing the math diagnostic in more detail and correlating the results on the exam to how freshmen performed in 8.01x.

The UA recommends that the scheduling of the Math Diagnostic next year be calibrated to minimize conflict with Residence Exploration. The UA also recommends considering exempting students who take the 8.01 Advanced Standing Exam or come in with AP credit for 8.01 from taking the Math Diagnostic, as all three exams serve to gauge performance on the 8.01.

## 6 Conclusion and Recommendations

This UA Extended Report on Orientation has sought to gather the input of a multitude of voices responding to unconstrained questions. Over and over again these voices emphasized the need to focus on community-related events during Orientation. At first, it sounds counter-intuitive that non-academic items would become the most celebrated events at a place like MIT, but on further investigation we find the one thing that both academics and community events share in common – the rich and unique atmosphere at MIT is precious because it exists in very few other places in the world. Having a strong community facilitates the interchange of academic ideas and encourages sound mental health. We now conclude the report with the following recommendations which summarize the issues and opinions brought up in the preceding pages.

1. **Place emphasis on dynamic student-generated content.** When planning Orientation events, many organizations in the planning process have been working in the framework of Orientation as a *theater* – freshmen come into the theater and see one big performance after another. However, student input strongly indicates that a more desirable framework for Orientation would be to resemble a modern *video game* with features of nonlinear exploration and peer interaction. Most students cite Residence Exploration or FSILG Rush as an example of such nonlinear content, and adequate time should be given to both. The role of student clubs and organizations should also be examined. The Boston T Party was a first attempt this year to introduce student

organizations into Orientation. The UA should work with the ASA to clarify the interaction of pre-Activities Midway events and ASA regulations and define a clear purpose for the Tuesday night Orientation event. Student group leaders should be asked whether an official Friday Night Orientation event provides a welcome break for upperclassmen running an otherwise hectic week or whether it interferes with the ability of student organizations to hold events before FSILG Rush begins.

2. **Residence Based Advising should be made non-binding for Next House and other dormitories that want to participate in the Housing Adjustment Lottery.** The Residence Based Advising system is a fine advising system, but it currently does not allow students the option of participating in the Housing Adjustment Lottery. Given that 62 students were placed in Next-House as their third choice, this is a severe distortion to the MIT housing system. Dormitories should have the option to allow their residences to participate in the Housing Adjustment Lottery. Although this does involve changing some advising groups after a few days of Orientation, the task of doing so is perfectly manageable. A student does not need to be guaranteed of being able to be moved out of an RBA dorm, only that they will be able to move out of an RBA dorm according to market demand in the Housing Adjustment Lottery.
3. **The scheduling constraints implied by holding both residence move-in day and freshmen registration day on Thursday should be examined and discussed.** Both the moving process and the process of registering for classes require certain prerequisite events to take place two or more days before (e.g. REX, Advanced Standing Exams, Physics Department's Math Diagnostic, Learning Communities). Although Thursday itself has plenty of time to accommodate both the actual acts of moving and registration, the chain of events that must take place before both moving and registration creates an unhealthy competition between academic and community activities early in the week and forces a disproportionate share of the difficult decisions and tests to be made within the first couple days of being at MIT rather than spaced out over the week. As the number of AP credits that MIT accepts decreases and the number of Advanced Standing Exams taken increases, a good look should be given at the tradeoffs in moving fresh-

men registration day to the direction of upperclassmen registration day or moving non-REX non-academic events to Wednesday or later so as not to conflict with Advanced Standing Exams and REX. We want to encourage the discussion of more creative solutions to planning Orientation rather than considering a large portion of the schedule to be set in stone before the end of the fall semester.

4. **Information on the scheduling of all Orientation events should be more readily accessible.** Currently DormCon, UAAP, IFC, LGC, and Panhel each print different schedules of their events and post their events their respective websites separately. These schedules are printed at different times of the year. If unifying them all into the Hitchhiker's Guide proves impractical or unfriendly, then the UA should take the initiative to make available either online or in print a master schedule of events. The UA has access to class mailing lists and could therefore announce a master schedule later than any individual organization. Having a master schedule would be beneficial in integrating the different aspects of Orientation and it would especially encourage participation in FSILG events by giving continuity to Orientation and FSILG Rush.

MIT has a unique Orientation system that can be a big help in drawing admitted students to choose MIT over other schools. With the advent of the Admissions Department's MITblogs and other communications advances, it is even easier than ever for students to learn about what makes MIT different from other schools. The UA Committee on Orientation hopes that MIT will be continue to be a leader in Orientation trends and not a follower.

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