

UA Summary Report on Orientation 2006

UA Committee on Orientation
Massachusetts Institute of Technology
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Abstract

The UA Committee on Orientation has obtained statistical data as well as over 650 student comments from the Department of Housing. The UA conducted an additional freshman survey and an upperclassman survey in the month of October. The detailed analysis of the results from those surveys is presented in the UA Extended Report on Orientation 2006, which is released concurrently with this report. This Executive Summary Report now presents a summary of our findings, reproducing the most important discussions and highlighting the most essential recommendations. 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.*

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.

2 REX and the Housing Adjustment Lottery

Many freshmen commented positively on their experiences in Residence Exploration (REX), where they were allowed to visit other dormitories and choose where they wanted to live. When the UA gave an open-ended free response question to freshmen a month after Orientation asking what was the most important event/theme of Orientation, REX received the largest number of responses, almost double the number of the second most frequently mentioned event. In the upperclassmen survey REX and FSILG Rush had four times the number of responses as the second most frequent events. We now present a summary of the most important findings from our REX data:

2.1 Guide to Residences and i3

The highest number of student comments on the residence materials received over the summer dealt with a desire to know more about dormitory culture and personality. Although the i3 DVD and the Guide to Residences booklet are helpful resources in choosing a dormitory, they cannot replace visiting

residences in person.

2.2 Most Important Factors in Adjustment Lottery decisions

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%). These data demonstrate that the most important factors for freshmen in choosing a dorm are related to community and personality.

The large evening party events were found to be helpful in getting freshmen to visit residences, but many students said that touring the dormitories at a more leisurely time played a big factor in their decision. Freshmen sought advice both from upperclassmen and from other freshmen they had met during Orientation.

An unfortunate error in this year’s REX was that the Housing Adjustment Lottery was opened too early, resulting in a large number of N/A responses in the surveys and a lot of lost opportunity for students to explore MIT. **The Housing Adjustment Lottery should NOT be open before REX begins.**

2.3 Campus Preview Weekend (CPW)

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. 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.

2.4 Least Important Events

When asked the open-ended free response question “What do you feel was the least important event/theme during Orientation and why?”, the most frequent answer that freshmen gave was either “the Orientation groups” or an event that related to the Orientation groups. The most frequently mentioned of these was the diversity talk, but also mentioned were being required to dine with the Orientation group, discussions with Orientation groups, and the icebreakers.

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, possibly due to the increase in freshmen participating in FPOPs.

3 Residence Based Advising (RBA)

The RBA program is a great option for freshmen that provides a healthy advising environment which builds community. However, the problem that freshmen assigned to RBA are not permitted 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 students. Those people were denied the opportunity to participate in REX and try to move to a dormitory that would make them happier. On the Department of Housing’s Adjustment survey, almost half of all the 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 December 2005 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 much 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. Almost all of the residents of McCormick put McCormick as their first choice. 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 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.

4 Student Clubs/Organizations

Student organizations represent the same kind of dynamic student-generated content that embodies Residence Exploration and FSILG Rush. The strengthening of student organizations is a strong step towards making a better Orientation.

The Boston T Party was a new event this year, claiming the time slot previously held by the 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.

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 some upperclassmen expressed annoyance with ASA restrictions which prohibit groups from adding freshmen names to their email announcements lists or poster for student group events before the Activities Midway on Friday. 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 time vacated by 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. A few goals that an event could accomplish: we could try to create a student group promotion-based event to continue the trend of student generated dynamic content. If we do so, we should 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 does not serve any active purpose. 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 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 still discourages 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. Student group leaders should be asked whether they intend to use the Friday night time after the Activities Midway to hold events.

5 Fraternities, Sororities, and Independent Living Groups (FSILGs)

The Fraternities, Sororities and Independent Living Groups officially began their recruitment activities at the conclusion of the Orientation activities.

When surveyed by the UA, freshmen responded that the largest deciding factor in choosing whether to participate in IFC Rush was upperclassmen saying how fun it was during Orientation. Freshmen women who responded that they signed up for sorority recruitment cited reasons including interest in finding out more about the sororities and thinking it was worth a try or interesting at the time. Some reasons given for not signing up for Panhel recruitment were lack of interest, liking dormitory life, questioning why women had to sign up as the boys did not have to, needing more information and simply not knowing there were sign ups. Regarding the Independent Living Groups, 86% of respondents were aware of the different groups during Orientation and 14% said they were not. This recognition was mainly a factor of word of mouth and many wanted to see more publicity for them.

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). Overall students liked

the amount of information they received but wanted more information earlier on the fraternities, sororities, and independent living groups.

The UA survey established the student demand for more information on fraternities, sororities, and independent living groups earlier. 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.

6 Orientation Scheduling and the Decision Compression Problem

Between REX, Advanced Standing Exams, and looking at Learning Community alternative advising groups such as ESG, Concourse, MAS, and Terrascope, 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. Any attempt to solve the Decision Compression Problem would involve tradeoffs that generate both advantages and disadvantages. 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.

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.
2. *Some community-related events could be moved to later in the week.* In some previous years housing move-in day was on Saturday, but putting move day on Thursday provides several substantial advantages. Alternately, we could move the discussion events (alcohol, diversity, and rape) to later in the week. This would alleviate the problem by lessening the number of different events competing for time in the early Orientation schedule.
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). This would both allot sufficient time and focus for REX and allow freshmen to become acquainted with the academics, activities, and resources of the Institute without being drawn away by REX events. In order to take Advanced Standing Exams in time for grading, freshmen could arrive for Orientation a day earlier than presently and take Advanced Standing Exams before the start of REX, perhaps the morning and afternoon before.

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, moving freshmen registration a few days later adds a couple of strong advantages. Freshmen would have more time to talk to upperclassmen about classes and thus make more confident and informed decisions than if they had just talked to associate advisor. Secondly, moving back freshmen registration day gives more flexibility on when Advanced Standing Exams and Learning Community events can be held. The task of assigning freshmen to recitations becomes more difficult, but in recent years computer scheduling has made it easier to solve such optimization problems. 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.

7 Math Diagnostic Exam

Students expressed concern about the addition of the Physics Department’s Math Diagnostic Exam to Orientation week this year at a choice of two times both of which conflicted with Residence Exploration, one of which ironically conflicted with the 8.01 Advanced Standing Exam. The UA talked to Professor Thomas Greytak, the Associate Department Head for Education, who demonstrated that the distribution of scores this year was dramatically different from when the test was administered over the summer and thus that the Physics department saw benefit to holding the exam during Orientation week.

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 from taking the Math Diagnostic, as all three exams serve to gauge performance on the 8.01.

8 Conclusion and Recommendations

This UA 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 resemble a modern *video game* which features 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. The task of changing the advising groups after REX 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 freshmen registration day to 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. If unifying them 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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