



MIT Presidential Task Force on Student Life and Learning

Reports

Final Report of the MIT Advisory Group on Orientation and Residence

December 5, 1997

submitted by

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Introduction

The charge to the committee from President Vest (October 31, 1997). This committee was given the charge to advise MIT's senior administration on potential decisions "regarding orientation, residence selection and associated matters affecting the admission, introduction to the campus, and housing of the Class of 2002." We were tasked with providing a small number of principles and options for consideration. In responding to this charge we have considered the input from a wide range of sources, including the proposals from the faculty and the Inter Fraternity Council (IFC), and ideas from the

community Forum on November 5th addressing the question, "Should freshmen be housed on campus?" and survey results from parents, students and faculty. We reviewed information from the Planning Office and the Office of Admissions and volumes of input from alumni, students, staff and faculty.

The Feasibility Of Dormitory-Based Housing For All Fall '98 Freshmen

Our first goal was to determine if it was feasible to house all freshman on campus for the fall of '98. This required creating approximately 360 additional beds on campus for freshmen. This is possible if one were willing to accept a human cost measured in additional crowding of undergraduate dorms and displacement of approximately 200 graduate students along with a host of secondary problems. We concluded this was not in MIT's best interest for the Fall of 1998. The Institute should anticipate the possibility of a temporary jump in the demand for on campus housing next fall. With the recommendation decided to not attempt to house all freshman on campus next fall we turned to the opportunities presented by considering the orientation of students to campus and improvements to our system of residence selection.

Strongly Conflicting Points Of View

Our endeavor to understand the key issues revealed a problem that if left unaddressed would likely derail any attempt to improve the residence and orientation system. That problem is a fundamentally different point of view between the faculty and the students with respect to what is broken in the present system of introducing freshmen to campus. We grossly simplify the issues here with the intent of naming the problem, not making evident all of its nuances. On the one hand many faculty believe that the current residence system obstructs the academic orientation of new students to the university and leads to a singular loyalty to the living group at the expense of a lack of substantive intellectual connection to the academy. On the other hand students widely believe that faculty put little effort into building relationships with students, and furthermore, fail to understand that living groups provide the support network essential to students, beginning in the fall of the freshman year. As a consequence, students are highly cynical of attempts by the faculty to "fix" the problem by attacking the present residence selection system. It is the conclusion of this committee that real improvements to our system of orientation and residence selection will only come about if both students and faculty come to accept commonly shared principles and goals and make a commitment to working towards those goals.

The credibility of the faculty and the administration will depend upon real commitment to engaging students in substantive orientation programming, including working with students inside and outside of the residence system. The faculty need to become familiar with the residence system from firsthand experience in order for their attempts to change it to be credible.

The students must show commitment to real progressive change within the residence system, both in day to day operation and particularly in the process of residence selection. The students must support the efforts of the faculty to put new orientation programming in place. Upperclassmen damage their credibility with staff and faculty when they undermine attendance at orientation activities.

A Spirit Of Experimentation

There is widespread agreement that the present system is flawed and needs improvement. There is considerable variety of opinion on what will work and what will not. In many cases we must make our best judgement as to what will work and give it a try, with the understanding that we continually assess the results and make the necessary adjustments. A goal of this committee is establish an expectation in the community for experimentation, assessment and change. This is a departure from recent practices which often emphasized a protectionist attitude and stymied attempts to try new ideas in residence selection and orientation practices.

A Shared Enterprise

Success will require that students, staff, alumni, and faculty will be required to work toward common goals. Everyone will need to contribute, but with different emphasis for different groups. Students will have to bear much responsibility for fulfilling expectations for change in the residence selection system and in establishing and maintaining year round standards of conduct in the housing system. Faculty and administrative staff will carry much of the burden with respect to developing new initiatives in the orientation of students to MIT. Success in both dimensions, R and O, is required to build trust in the community.

A commendable step has been taken by the IFC Presidents' Council. They recently approved the proposals of the IFC Committee on R/O Proposals, chaired by our committee member William Shen. The IFC R/O proposals have been reviewed in the preparation of this final report and in many places we used language from their proposal. Except where significant no attempt is made to trace the source between the IFC proposals and our own, because there was much cross-fertilization of ideas between the two groups over the last three weeks. The IFC proposal should be preserved as a separate document, because it demonstrates the willingness of the FSILG's to work on improving the system. The work of the IFC has put the faculty in the position of playing catchup. The [IFC report](#) is attached as an appendix.

The first step that we believe should be taken is to appoint an ORIENTATION '98 POLICY COMMITTEE, composed of faculty staff and students. This committee would begin work immediately to plan orientation for next fall, and would be separate from the orientation implementation team. In appointing that committee, rename R/O, Orientation.

The remainder of this report is divided into two main sections, one dealing with [residence selection](#) and the other with [orientation](#). Guiding principles are described and suggestions for specific actions and improvements are given.

- **Orientation**

Guiding Principles for Introducing Students to MIT

Suggestions for Improving Orientation '98

- **Residence Selection**

Guiding Principles for Improving Residence Selection

Suggestions for Improving Residence Selection

- **InterFraternity Council (IFC) Committee on R/O Proposal Report**

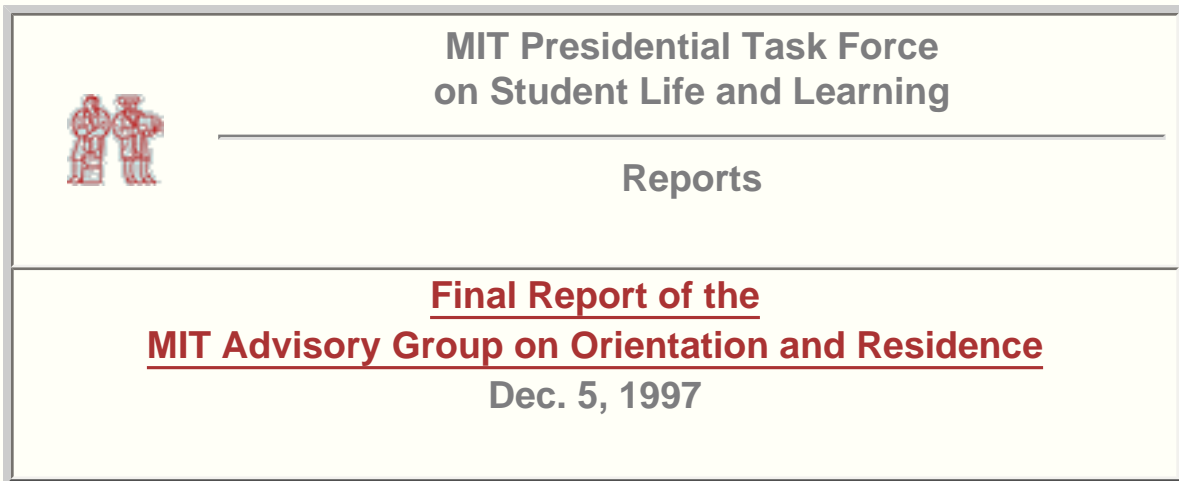


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Orientation

Guiding Principles For Introducing Students To MIT

There is general consensus that in recent years orientation activities have languished, in part because of the difficulty of competing with the intensity of the residence selection component of R/O. There is a strong consensus in the community that we should put much more emphasis on the orientation component. A more extensive orientation effort for freshmen is not likely to succeed without commitment from a broad cross section of the community, including faculty, staff and upper-classmen.

1. Increase early and lasting interactions between faculty and students. One of the attractions of coming to MIT is the opportunity to work with and get to know its faculty. Early reinforcement through contact with enthusiastic faculty will help preserve the students commitment and enthusiasm.
2. Emphasize the intellectual excitement and academic reality of MIT. Freshmen come full of enthusiasm and expectation for intellectual growth and excitement at a university famous for its contributions to science and technology. Orientation should attempt to keep up the enthusiasm but also help the students to make realistic choices of freshmen year subjects and activities.
3. Focus on the development of the "Whole Person". In a variety of surveys of alumni, alumnae and current students it is clear that there is both a need and genuine desire for opportunities in the undergraduate years to develop better social skills, communication skills and leadership abilities. Such opportunities may be created both inside and outside of the classroom. Participation in activities that teach these skills is often rewarded by increased self-confidence and self-esteem.
4. Recognize that Orientation Week is only the beginning--follow through. A few days of Orientation is not a sufficient introduction to the academy. Mentoring relationships require regular reinforcement. Modest efforts begun during Orientation that continue throughout the year will be more effective than brief activities characterized by a large splash but no follow-through.

Suggestions For Improving Orientation '98

1. Rename "R/O" to "Orientation".
2. Appoint an Orientation Policy Committee, composed of faculty staff and students. It should begin work immediately and should be separate from the Orientation implementation team.
3. Every freshman to receive a phone call from a faculty member in the summer time. This could be coupled with earlier faculty recruitment efforts coordinated by the Office of Admissions.
4. Hold the most important orientation activities before rush.
5. Examples of Orientation events and activities:
 - (a) Expand upon current programs (e.g. Core Blitz, Meet the Profs, lab tours).
 - (b) Introduce new events (i.e. Faculty Panel.) to stimulate intellectual excitement.
 - (c) Workshops on issues facing today's college student (e.g., diversity, harassment, alcohol awareness, etc.).
 - (d) Opportunities for developing social and personal skills. Orientation "Charm School" and mini-IAP activities with staff, upper-class students, faculty and alumni.
 - (e) A presentation on the counseling and support services available to students (i.e. Deans Office, MIT Medical, MedLinks, Nightline, Campus Police, etc.).
 - (f) Design orientation events that center around multiple small group settings (MOYA group, advising group, temporary residence assignment group). Repeated contact between freshmen within a small group setting is the best way for them to meet faculty and staff and others in their class.
6. Present Orientation as an introduction to great traditions, such as hacks, perhaps presented by a student panel.
7. Expand opportunities for student/faculty interaction:
 - (a) Early FAS meetings
 - (b) Activities in temporary residences
 - (c) Panel discussions
 - (d) House Fellows throughout the year
 - (e) Faculty at the opening night dinner
 - (f) Fun hands-on activities
8. More alumni activities:
 - (a) Summer receptions in home towns of alumni and students.
 - (b) Increase the excitement of attending a world-class institution. Assemble an Alumni Panel of notable MIT graduates each year to discuss with freshmen their

post-graduation experiences and the benefits an MIT education affords.

9. Develop a year-long program of faculty-student dinners along the lines of the "Keyser faculty dinners".
10. Encourage faculty-run experimental academic programs within living groups.
11. Change the academic default setting from an emphasis on early failure to early rewards. Use the diagnostic exams as the basis for qualifying for more advanced subjects, such as 8.012. Have subjects such as 8.01, 8.01L, and writing be the norm for freshmen.
12. Better core subject advice - including sample classes.
13. Create an Advising Center as a resource to advisors and students. The intent is to centralize information and expertise so that advisors and students have one place to go to get answers to the most commonly asked questions.
14. Expand opportunities for freshmen to come early to campus. Examples include, Interphase, ROTC, athletics, summer UROPs and the Freshman Leadership program.



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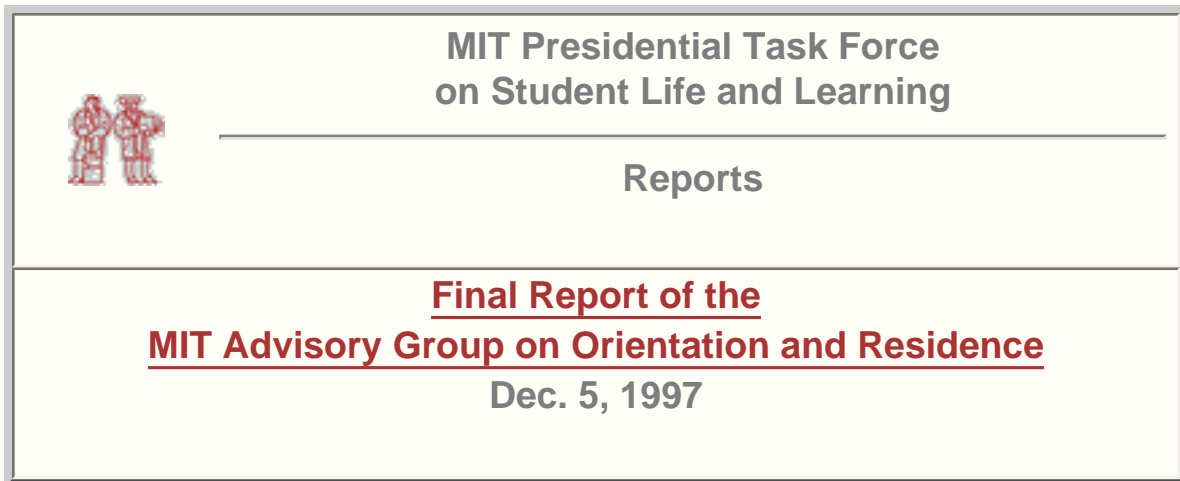
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Residence Selection

Guiding Principles For Improving Residence Selection

1. Primary focus on the best interests of the incoming students rather than the interests of the living groups.
 2. Early, objective and accessible residence information.
 3. Equitable and diverse housing choices for all students.
 4. Better informed and less stressed students and parents.
 5. High standards of conduct and responsibility in living groups.
 6. A better informed faculty and staff, with better connections to the residences.
 7. More opportunities for students to explore the residence system before rush, coupled with a reduction in hype and intensity during rush.
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Suggestions For Improving Residence Selection

1. Restrict unsolicited summer mailings and telephone calls to freshmen.
2. Prepare a comprehensive guide to residences, with contributions from the Deans office and from all living groups. Create a positive competitive environment for living groups in which houses seek to become more attractive to students and parents by having better supervision and objective measures of performance such as those suggested below.

The following ideas have been endorsed by the IFC Presidents' Council.

Each living group's entry in the Guide will include four components:

- (a) Fact sheet including house GPA, majors represented, cost/year, meals provided, length of pledge period, hours per week commitment, police incidents within the last 3 years (one-line summaries), faculty advisor & graduate resident tutor, awards received (MIT or national organization awards), etc.
- (b) Objective entry written by RCA covering a house's surveyable qualities including, but not limited to, participation in varsity/intramural athletics, campus organization officers, extracurricular activities represented, etc.
- (c) Subjective entry submitted by the FSILG recruitment chairman.
- (d) FSILG members' parent contact information (name & phone number).

3. Provide visitation opportunities to living groups during the pre-frosh spring. Include opportunities to stay over night, as is currently the practice for pre-frosh weekend.
4. Put residence information on the web and give incoming freshmen athena accounts as soon as possible.
5. Lengthen the time for residence selection and have dorm visitation occur simultaneously with FSILG exploration.
6. Greater participation by dorms in rush activities.
7. Reduce the incidence of rejection, such as caused by the practices of hard flushing and anti-rush. Anti-rush includes practices in dormitories which are intended to discourage freshmen from selecting a particular dorm. The intention is to preserve a particular dorm "culture" or to reduce the probability of crowding.

The [IFC Report](#) has made suggestions for eliminating hard flushing, which are quoted below.

"Eliminate hard flushing. IFC has taken significant measures over the years to ensure that individual FSILG's treat each freshman with respect. Toward that end the IFC has implemented many initiatives to curb the mostly archaic practice of 'flushing.' These initiatives include the drafting of an IFC Policy on Referrals, the yearly compilation of a Referrals Guide, and mandating that every FSILG retain a Referral Chair during Rush whose sole responsibility is to match freshmen up with more compatible houses. To continue to ensure that 'flushing' practices are effectively removed from our system, a post-residence selection survey should be administered to all freshmen (within their advising seminars) that specifically prompts for (1) the name of the house which practiced questionable treatment of a freshman and (2) a detailed description of the incident."

8. Hold residence selection workshops. The [IFC Report](#) provides some useful detail, including:

A Comprehensive Residence Selection Primer

This workshop, hosted by RCA, will take place before the start of residence selection each fall. Its purpose will be four-fold:

- (1) Explain the residence selection system, the schedule, the bid process, and key questions to ask members of a living group.
- (2) Review IFC and DormCon residence selection rules (i.e. Clearinghouse, no badmouthing, etc.) and how they help freshmen make informed decisions.
- (3) Inform freshmen of the resources (e.g., Rush Central, JudCom, RhoChis, etc.) available during residence selection so they know where to direct their questions, and how to report complaints.
- (4) Inform freshmen of the options they have available to them after residence selection if they are unhappy with their choice (e.g., roommate problems, hazing complaints, etc.)

9. Hold a Residence Midway, similar to the Activities Midway and including all FSILG's and dormitory living groups.

Quoting from the [IFC Report](#), "The Residence Midway will take place at a specified time before the start of residence selection. Each living group would maintain a booth where a freshmen could approach and talk with members of the living group or request printed information. All upperclassmen-freshmen contact at this event would be initiated by the freshmen. The event would help freshmen (especially those who did not benefit from Summer Rush) get a feel for the various houses in a non-"hectic" environment."

10. Periodic review of "Institute approved housing" status for all living groups, including dorms. The intention here is to put teeth into standards for all living groups. A possible sanction would be loss of such status for the following year. The construction of more on campus housing would provide more options for the administration to act.
11. Devise a messaging system so parents can maintain contact with sons or daughters during orientation: e.g. voice mail, pagers and email.
12. Combine and expand the functions of R/O Central and Rush Central.
13. Create more single sex housing opportunities for women. These options could be in the form of more co-ed living groups, all-female living groups and dormitories, and residential sororities.

Building Trust In A Period Of Experimentation

We have an opportunity to begin a period of experimentation, assessment and change in our orientation and housing practices. Success will require that students, staff, alumni, and faculty work toward common goals. Students will bear much responsibility for fulfilling expectations for change in the residence selection system. They must also support the efforts of the faculty and staff to put new orientation programming in place.

The Faculty and Administration will carry much of the burden with respect to developing and following through on new initiatives in the orientation of students to MIT. However, the faculty must also become familiar with the residence system from firsthand experience in order for their attempts to change it to be credible.



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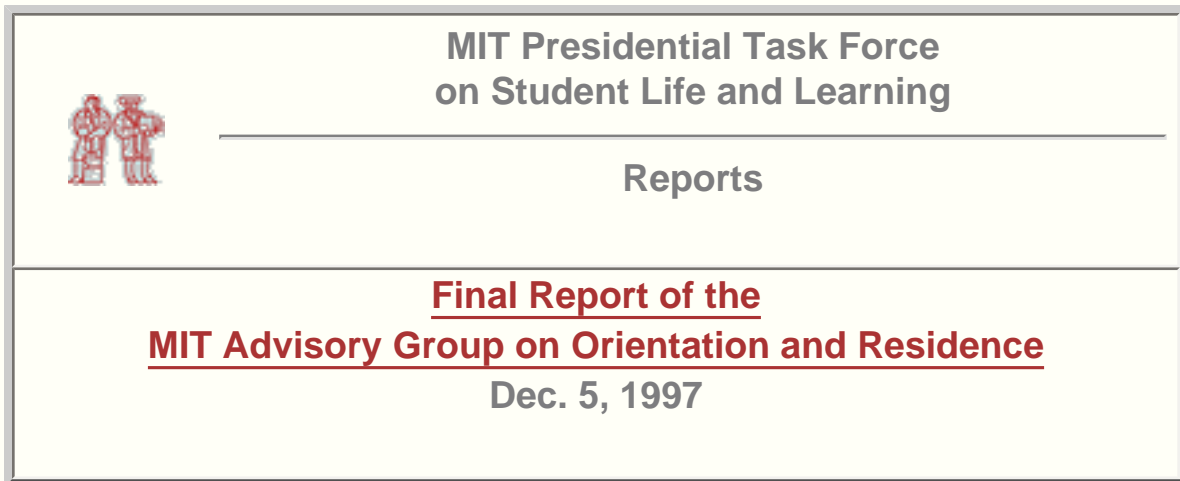


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