First Year Housing Assignment Process
Data Brief
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First-Year Residential Experience
Focus Group Sessions

Summary

First-Year Focus Group Session Project Purpose: The purpose of the First-Year Residential Experience Focus Group Session Project was to solicit feedback regarding students’ residential experience, particularly during the first few weeks of school. The information collected will inform the larger discussions that Dormcon, house leaders, house teams, and the Division of Student Life (DSL) are having about enhancing the room assignment and move-in experience. The project sought to address four questions: (1) How was your move-in experience? (2) What about the current in-house room selection process is working well? (3) What changes or improvements could be made to the in-house room selection process? and (4) How does living in a residence hall contribute to your interpersonal skill development? The set of questions was co-developed by the Undergraduate Association, Dormcon, and DSL staff.

Design: Three focus sessions were conducted in January 2019 and were designed to be small group discussions to facilitate an exchange of ideas and opinions. A total of 120 students were invited to participate in the three focus sessions (40 students invited per focus session). The ideal size of a focus session is five to eight participants; ours had six to nine students per focus session. Information about the participants, methods and procedures, data analysis, and focus session results are included in an appendix beginning on page five.

Note about Qualitative Research: The purpose of qualitative research is to gain a deeper understanding of an experience or complex issue from a small group of individuals that experienced it. Thus, results drawn from qualitative research are not designed to be generalizable. While quantitative research yields numbers and statistics, qualitative research results are presented as emergent themes with narrative descriptions.

Insights

The themes that emerged from the focus groups reveal several key insights into the first-year residential experience:

1. The early arrival experience needs to be improved. Many early arrivals (e.g., those who came for FPOPs) described the residence halls as lonely and boring, with few other students around when they moved in over the summer. When thinking about the move-in experience, care should be taken to ensure all students feel welcome when arriving on campus, as well as connected with other students in the residence halls prior to orientation.

2. There were mixed feelings about the in-house room assignment process. Overall, many students expressed satisfaction with their current in-house room selection process; however, others expressed a desire to be able to opt-out of the process entirely. Many referenced finding their community as a result of going through this process, while others expressed feelings of confusion, stress, and rejection. It is evident the in-house room selection process works well for some students, but not others.

3. Focus group participants liked the process they experienced. Those students who had the option to stay in their temporary room liked that option and were happy with the outcome, while most of the students who participated in the in-house room selection process were happy with their final assignment.

4. The current in-house room selection process leads to stress and confusion for many students. Some participants expressed confusion about the process and not knowing that they would be required to move out of their room, while others had to leave belongings in common areas because they were unable to move into their new rooms on schedule. Many participants reported the short timeframe to explore all of the different wings/floors/entries of the residential hall was a source of stress.

5. Upper-level student involvement is critical to the first-year residential experience. In all sessions, upper-level student involvement was described as a positive aspect of the residential housing experience, whether this came from upper-level students having a voice in room selection or helping new students navigate MIT.
6. **Mutual selection was described in both positive and negative ways.** Some reported mutual selection allowed them to find their best-fitting community and was a way to preserve floor culture, while others expressed knowing students who felt rejected during the process.

7. **Students like having a voice and personal agency in room assignment decisions.** Overwhelmingly, students report liking having a part in their housing placement decisions — whether that is to move to a new building or room, or to stay in their temporary assignment.

8. **Living in a residence hall provides opportunities for interpersonal skill development.** Many students reported developing or enhancing interpersonal skills (e.g., leadership, organization, and teamwork) as a result of living in their residence hall. They gained these skills by participating in house government, leading cook-for-yourself groups, and working with students who were different from them.

**Themes**

**How was your move-in experience?** (Research Question 1)

- **Quiet:** The residence hall being “quiet” during move-in was a theme across all focus sessions. Students described feeling alone in their residence halls when they first arrived on campus and described the initial days as boring, quiet, and lonely, seeing very few other people in the residence halls. One student described the residence hall as “sad and empty” at first, but that it got better as more people arrived for orientation. Another stated the first four days in the residence hall were “unsettling” because no one was around. **Note: students who arrived early for FPOP or International Student Orientation felt more strongly about their residence hall being “quiet” than students arriving for orientation in August.**

- **Confusing:** The initial move-in experience was described as confusing or difficult by students across all focus sessions. Some referenced confusion regarding the order of getting their student ID versus checking into the residence hall, while others were given incorrect directions about how to get to their rooms. One student described having to try their key in numerous doors on the floor in hopes of finding the correct room. Another referenced being “not sure where to go” and that “not a lot of people were around.” **Note: students who arrived early for FPOP or International Student Orientation felt more strongly about their move-in experience being “confusing” than students arriving for orientation in August.**

- **Stressful:** Some students described their move-in experience as stressful or overwhelming, largely related to difficulties finding their rooms, carrying their belongings across campus, and not having help to move into the building. One student described feeling very fortunate to have a group on campus to help them move into their building, as this lowered the student’s stress level. **Note: students who arrived early for FPOP or International Student Orientation felt more strongly about the residence hall move-in being “stressful” than students arriving for orientation in August.**

- **Welcoming:** Across all sessions, many students referenced feeling welcomed by upper-level students and members of the house team with things such as names on doors, themed floor decorations, and help moving personal belongings into the building. **Note: students who arrived closer to orientation in August, rather than early arrivals for FPOPs, felt more strongly that their experience was “welcoming.”**

**What about the current in-house room selection process is working well?** (Research Question 2)

- **Forced Exploration:** Across all sessions, students referenced being forced to explore different areas of the residence halls (floors, wings, entries, etc.) as a positive aspect of the current in-house room selection process. Many participants reported that by being forced to see other areas of the residence hall, they found the best fit for them. The exploration period also allowed students to interact face-to-face with students in different parts of the building, which allowed them to have a better sense of the community (as opposed to reading online descriptions only).

- **No Squatting Rights:** Students in all sessions reported that “squatting rights” should not be permitted as allowing first-year students to stay in their temporary rooms disrupts the culture/community in the building.
Participants explained that if first-year students squat in the temporary room, upper-level students in the residence hall do not have the option to select or move around first-year students. This means there is a possibility of upper-level students feeling a first-year student does not fit well with their floor’s community.

- **Upper-level Student Involvement:** Across all sessions, students referenced the importance of involving upper-level students in the room assignment process. Some students indicated that upper-level students have a better sense of the floor/wing/entry cultures and can better place incoming students than they could place themselves. One student reported that upper-level students “know what’s best” for the students and culture/community.

- **Mutual Selection:** The theme of “mutual selection” as a positive aspect of the in-house room selection process was referenced in all focus sessions. Several students reported mutual selection is positive because first-year students have a voice in where they live (ranking preference), and upper-level students know what is best for the first-year students and hall culture because they’ve lived in the building and gone through similar processes. Many students reported mutual selection builds a stronger culture/community because the upper-level students know the first-year student really wants to be there and the upper-level students really want that first-year student to live there. One student stated there’s a feeling “they do want me here” after receiving their room assignment, which makes mutual selection better than being randomly assigned a room because with a random placement, students might not be sure if the other people on the floor want them there. In other words, the students felt that going through the mutual selection process leads to feelings of acceptance for many first-year students. Another student reported that mutual selection is necessary and randomly assigning students to halls/rooms will “destroy the [house] culture.” Focus session participants acknowledged that not everyone gets their first-choice floor/wing/entry/room selection but explained that those who did not get their first choice were happier with where they ended up. One student stated they would not have “been as happy in my first choice.” *Note: Mutual selection was also described as a negative by some participants, which will be explored further in the next section.*

- **Strong Culture:** Across all focus sessions, students reported that the strong hall cultures present at MIT was a draw for them when applying to college. Students valued the sense of community that is built in the residence halls and like that the houses are able to determine a room selection process that works best for them and their culture.

- **Optional Process (Only One Hall):** In one focus session, students referenced the unique system in their residence hall that does not require first-year students to move from their originally assigned room (i.e., first-year students are allowed to “squat” in their temporary room). Some students reported liking knowing that there was the option to participate in the in-house room selection process if they did not like their original room, but they liked that moving was not required. One student reported it was “nice to fully unpack.” *Note: Making in-house room selection an “optional process” was suggested in two of the focus groups and will be discussed in the next section.*

### What changes or improvements could be made to the in-house room selection process? (Research Question 3)

- **Lengthen Exploration:** Across all sessions, participants referenced a desire to have a longer in-house exploration period. Many felt there was not enough time to fully explore all areas of the building and make an informed choice when asked to rank/select their living group. Some reported feeling stressed with the short time period to explore, especially when buildings required students to see all floors/wings/entries and when trying to find a new roommate.

- **Improve Communication:** In all focus sessions, participants referenced a desire for more information about the in-house room selection process in their building. Some students reported not knowing that their originally assigned room was a temporary assignment and felt “kicked out” when forced to move. One student reported completely unpacking their room and living in the room for several weeks before being “forced out.”

- **Optional Process:** Participants in two of the three focus sessions suggested the in-house room selection process should be optional. Some felt that people who like their temporary room assignment should have the option to
stay in that room and not be “kicked out,” while providing for the option to move if the temporary room assignment is not the best fit.

- **Mutual Selection:** In one focus session, participants reported negative feelings related to mutual selection processes, noting it can cause hurt feelings or feelings of rejection for new students. One participant referenced another student in their building crying when they learned of their new room assignment and learned they were not selected to live where they wanted to. Another student referenced a friend feeling “rejected” by a cultural house; this was particularly upsetting because the rejection occurred before students arrived on campus, and it felt personal, rather than being based on rankings or lottery numbers.

- **Improve Coordination:** There is a desire for better coordination during in-house room switching. Students in one focus session described difficulties moving into their final assigned room because the students temporarily housed in this room did not move out on time. One student referenced others in the residence hall leaving their personal belongings in the common areas because they had to leave their temporary room, but they were not yet able to move into their final room.

How does living in the residence hall contribute to your interpersonal skill development? (Research Question 4)

- Due to extended discussion of the first three research questions, only two of the three focus sessions were asked this question. Several students indicated developing interpersonal skills as a result of living in their residence hall including:
  - **Leadership Skills** – Many students referenced being encouraged by upper-level students to take an active role in house government opportunities, which, in turn, led to enhanced leadership skills.
  - **Organization Skills** – Some students described opportunities to enhance their organization skills through events or programs in the residence hall. For example, one student referenced living in a cook-for-yourself community and described how the experience of organizing and leading a cook team contributed to their organizational skill development.
  - **Working with Others** – Several students mentioned living in the residence halls was the first time they have lived with other people, aside from family members, and that this new living situation brings with it the need to learn how to solve in-house problems in a constructive, respectful manner. For example, one student referenced being in a cook-for-yourself community and having to work with others on the floor to create a system to ensure the kitchen area remains clean and organized.
Appendix

Participants: A stratified random sample was drawn to generate a pool of potential participants that was diverse in terms of residence hall. First, a list of all first-year students, organized by residence hall name, was obtained from Housing and Residential Services. Each residence hall was then treated as its own population. Starting with residence hall 1, the list of names of students living in that hall were sorted by MIT ID number, with the lowest MIT ID number being assigned Participant ID number 1. A random number generator was then used to identify a total of 12 Participant ID numbers, with the first four Participant ID numbers being for Focus Session 1, the second set of four numbers for Focus Session 2, and the final four for Focus Session 3. This process was then repeated for each of the ten undergraduate residence halls. The halls were treated as individual populations from which to draw a sample to ensure an equal number of students from each hall were invited to participate in the focus sessions. The students identified were then emailed an invitation to indicate interest in participating in the applicable focus session, with a sign-up link attached. Those who participated in the focus session were compensated with lunch and $25 TechCASH.

Methods and Procedures: Consent and confidentiality forms were created for review and acknowledgement by focus session participants prior to the start of the session. The session facilitator also shared how confidentiality would be maintained and how the data would be used prior to the start of the session. Staff from DSL’s Assessment and Research was used to facilitate the focus sessions to reduce bias and encourage an open and honest discussion among participants. A facilitator script was created for use by staff to ensure questions were asked consistently across sessions. A notetaker was present to capture information shared by participants. The sessions were also audio-recorded for reference purposes. Notes and audio recordings are stored on a password protected MIT Dropbox accessible only to DSL staff responsible for focus session administration and data analysis.

Data Analysis: A general inductive approach was used for this study to condense focus session data into a brief summary that could be used to answer the project’s research questions. Each focus session was treated as a bounded case and was analyzed separately. Notes from each focus session were read and coded, a process for summarizing segments of text. Next, the codes were analyzed and grouped into categories and themes. After each focus session was analyzed separately, identified themes were compared across all sessions, revealing the main themes and trends across all focus sessions.
First Year Housing Assignment Process

2018 Orientation Survey
(Administration Date = September 2018; Total Invited = 1,117, Response Rate = 65%, N = 732, ~250 commented)

Please comment on your experience when you arrived at your residence hall

Themes from Positive Comments:
• Positive house team spirit
• Welcoming
• Efficient and simple
• Helpful staff
• Friendly upper-level students

Themes from Negative Comments:
• Felt lonely and isolated
• Confusing and secretive processes
• Stressful
• Not welcoming
• Unnecessary and exhausting
Questions Related to In-house Room Selection and Assignment Processes

In-house Room Selection and Assignment Insights:

- Nearly half (45%) of respondents described the in-house room selection and assignment process in their residence hall using positive words; nearly half (49%) described it using negative words. Frequently used positive words include “fun”, “fair”, “exciting”. Frequently used negative words include “stressful”, “overwhelming”, and “confusing”.
- Respondents reported liking the opportunity to experience the different wings/floors/entries during in-house room selection and that the process allows individuals to find the “best fit” for them.
- Respondents reported wanting the option to stay in their orientation room, the desire for more information about the process and rooms available, and more time to explore the different residence halls and floors to make an informed choice during in-house room selection.
- 389 respondents (93% of respondents to the question) reported participating in their residence hall’s in-house room selection process.
- 79% of respondents report being satisfied (39% Very satisfied + 40% Generally satisfied) with the in-house room selection and assignment process.
- 22% of respondents reported wanting to stay in their initial room assignment but were required to move to another room because of the residence hall’s in-house room selection process.
- 63% of respondents agreed (26% Strongly agreed + 37% Agreed) they felt pressure to explore other floors or entries during room selection.
- 85% of respondents agreed (43% Strongly agreed or 42% Agreed) they felt welcomed by the floors/entries they visited/expressed interest in joining, 74% agreed (43% Strongly agreed + 31% Agreed) they are happy they went through the in-house room selection, and 70% agreed (39% Strongly agreed + 31% Agreed) that participating in the in-house room selection helped them end up in the best part of the building for them.
- 49% of respondents agreed (19% Strongly agreed + 30% Agreed) that participating in the in-house room selection process was stressful for them, 16% agreed (7% Strongly agreed + 9% Agreed) they would have preferred to not participate in the in-house room selection process but were required to, and 25% agreed (9% Strongly agreed + 16% Agreed) that the number of events during room selection was overwhelming.
Questions Related to In-house Room Selection and Assignment Processes Continued

If you could use 2-3 words to describe the in-house room selection and assignment process in your residence hall, what would they be?

Most Frequent Positive Words:
• Fun
• Fair
• Easy
• Quick
• Exciting
• Informative

Most Frequent Negative Words:
• Stressful
• Overwhelming
• Hectic
• Confusing
• Long
• Rushed

What are 2-3 ways the in-house room selection and assignment process in your residence hall is working well?

Themes:
• Getting to experience the different wings/floors/entries
• Roommate matching processes
• Allows individuals to find the “best fit” (wing, floor, entry, room)
• Like that it is optional to participate [In select halls ONLY – reported by McCormick, Baker, and Maseeh residents]
• Students “seem happy” with their final assignments
Questions Related to In-house Room Selection and Assignment Processes Continued

What are 2-3 ways the in-house room selection and assignment process in your residence hall could be improved?

Themes:

- Want the option to stay in their orientation room
- Want more information about the process, rooms available, residence halls, etc.
- Want more time to explore different residence hall, floors, etc. to make an informed choice
- Want a more organized, less stressful/chaotic system
- Want a more automated (computerized, rather than human) system to assign their rooms
- Want improved roommate system (either move with original roommate -OR- better matching based on preferences)
- Feel the assignment process is biased

Did you participate in your residence hall’s in-house room selection process? (N = 419)

- Yes: 93%
- No: 7%
Questions Related to In-house Room Selection and Assignment Processes Continued

How satisfied were you with the in-house room selection and assignment process? (N=389)

- Very satisfied: 39%
- Generally satisfied: 40%
- Neither: 8%
- Generally dissatisfied: 4%
- Very dissatisfied: 0%

Which situation best describes the outcome of the in-house room selection process in your residence hall? (N = 386)

- I stayed in the same room I moved into when I arrived for Orientation: 6%
- I wanted to stay in my initial room assignment but had to move to another room because my residence hall’s in-house room selection process required it: 22%
- I chose to move to a new room: 73%

I felt pressure to explore other floors or entries during room selection. (N = 386)

- Strongly agree: 26%
- Agree: 37%
- Neither: 22%
- Disagree: 11%
- Strongly disagree: 4%
Questions Related to In-house Room Selection and Assignment Processes Continued

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements regarding the in-house room selection process:

- Participating in the in-house room selection process helped me find the right roommate(s) (N = 384)
- Participating in the in-house room selection process helped me end up in the best wing/floor/entry/part of the building for me (N = 379)
- Participating in the in-house room selection process was stressful for me (N = 381)
- I wanted more time to explore more room/entry/floor options before providing preferences for my in-house rooming assignment (N = 384)
- I would have preferred to move with friends but was not able to (N = 380)
- I felt welcomed by the floors/entries I visited/expressed interest in joining during the room selection process (N = 381)
- I wish I had been given more information about the in-house room selection process (N = 380)
- I would have preferred to not participate in the in-house room selection process in my residence hall but was required to participate (N = 383)
- The in-house room selection process in my residence hall helped me get a sense of the character and culture in different parts of the residence (N = 379)
- The in-house room selection process in my residence hall was fair towards first-year students (N = 378)
- I am happy that I went through the in-house room selection process in my residence hall (N = 376)
- The number of events during FLEX / room selection was overwhelming (N = 380)
Questions Related to the Inter-house Assignment Processes

Inter-house Assignment Insights:

- 531 respondents (77% of respondents to the question) reported visiting other residence halls during or after REX.
- 28% of the respondents agreed (5% Strongly agreed + 23% Agreed) they felt pressure to explore other buildings during REX.
- When thinking about REX, 93% of respondents agreed (41% Strongly agreed + 52% Agreed) they enjoyed the REX events they attended in other buildings, 85% agreed (36% Strongly agreed + 49% Agreed) they felt welcomed by the residence halls they visited during REX, and 74% agreed (25% Strongly agreed + 49% Agreed) REX allowed them to get to know different residential communities at MIT.
- 52% of respondents agreed (18% Strongly agreed + 34% Agreed) the number of REX events was overwhelming and 20% agreed (4% Strongly agreed + 16% Agreed) participating in REX was stressful for them.
Questions Related to the Inter-house Assignment Processes Continued

Please indicate how much you agree or disagree with the following statements about REX:

- **I enjoyed the events I attended during REX in other buildings** (N = 521)
  - Strongly agree: 41%
  - Agree: 52%
  - Neither: 5%
  - Disagree: 4%
  - Strongly disagree: 1%
  - Not applicable: 1%

- **Participating in REX was stressful for me** (N = 520)
  - Strongly agree: 4%
  - Agree: 16%
  - Neither: 19%
  - Disagree: 36%
  - Strongly disagree: 24%
  - Not applicable: 2%

- **REX allowed me to get to know the different residential communities at MIT** (N = 515)
  - Strongly agree: 25%
  - Agree: 49%
  - Neither: 19%
  - Disagree: 5%
  - Strongly disagree: 1%
  - Not applicable: 1%

- **I felt welcomed by the residence halls I visited during REX** (N = 516)
  - Strongly agree: 36%
  - Agree: 49%
  - Neither: 13%
  - Disagree: 2%
  - Strongly disagree: 1%
  - Not applicable: 1%

- **The number of events during REX was overwhelming** (N = 516)
  - Strongly agree: 18%
  - Agree: 34%
  - Neither: 22%
  - Disagree: 19%
  - Strongly disagree: 6%
  - Not applicable: 2%

- **I got to know a lot of other first year students during REX** (N = 517)
  - Strongly agree: 24%
  - Agree: 42%
  - Neither: 20%
  - Disagree: 10%
  - Strongly disagree: 3%
  - Not applicable: 1%

- **I got to know a lot of sophomore, junior, and senior students during REX** (N = 518)
  - Strongly agree: 15%
  - Agree: 34%
  - Neither: 24%
  - Disagree: 23%
  - Strongly disagree: 4%
  - Not applicable: 1%
2017 Student Quality of Life Survey
(Administration Date = February 2017; Total Invited = 10,812; Response Rate = 42%; N = 4,541)

Insight:
• 25% of respondents reported that their residence hall’s in-house room selection process is slightly to very stressful.

“My residence hall’s in-house room selection process”
(Asked of Undergraduate Students Only; n = 1,540)