

"But it's always been this way!"

**An Examination of the Evolution of the
MIT Residence Selection Process¹**

" Time is too short, men are too few, and money is too scarce to permit diversion of university energies into mere real-estate ventures or into a program of paternalism....It is justified in undertaking the conduct of a residential system only insofar as it makes that system serve the purpose of education."

Report of the Committee on Student Housing, 1956

The undergraduate residence selection process at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology is, in comparison with traditional residence systems, rather unorthodox. Some would even claim that it is unhealthy or dangerous. However, for the vast majority of those who have been through it, the differences in the system contribute to a positive experience that few would give up. To understand this division of attitudes, one must be familiar with the culture of the MIT campus and the objectives for the residence system that have developed over the years. This document is intended to help the reader understand the history of this peculiar selection system, both in the context of MIT and of society. It will explore those situations and attitudes found at MIT that allowed this selection process to develop on such a divergent path from essentially all other colleges in the country, and perhaps the world.

At the majority of colleges in the United States, both public and private, students are either randomly assigned to a residence hall or are placed based on their responses to an often superficial survey including questions regarding smoking, noise, and sleeping hours preferences. On the whole, this system works well for these schools, and students leave these institutions pleased with their residential experience. However, often when a student from another college or university learns of what their friends at MIT got to do to choose a residence, these students realize how much better their residential experience could have been.

¹ This paper was prepared in April, 2001 by Jennifer Frank for the Harvard Graduate School of Education class "The History of Higher Education" with Professor Julie Reuben. The MIT archives were used extensively in the preparation of this document. This paper is not a complete account of the residence selection history - while many sources were used, numerous others were not explored due to time constraints.

Students at MIT choose their residence hall after having been on campus for a few days. As a result, students are choosing their residence based on the people they will be living with and the well-established culture of the hall, rather than on the physical attributes of the building, as is often the case at other schools.

Another important distinction is in the duration of students' stays in buildings; unlike at most residential colleges, MIT students can stay in the same building, and usually the same room, for their entire MIT career. Strong bonds are built primarily (though not exclusively) within halls, rather than within classes or extracurricular activities. When MIT students and alumni spy a "Brass Rat" (the affectionate name for a class ring) on a stranger, the first question they ask each other is, "Where did you live?" An individual's living group says a lot about that person, and while much of this is based on stereotypes, the majority is often true.

The current MIT residence selection process is the result of decades of evolution that has gone unchecked by the administration until recent years. Before then, students were essentially allowed to cultivate a system that suited their needs. The result is the unique system that exists today.

The Current System

The current residence selection process allows freshmen to spend a few days upon their arrival on campus looking at residences and deciding where they want to live. Their choices include three major types of housing: the institute houses or residence halls, the fraternities and sororities, and the independent living groups (ILGs). Each of these living groups has developed a distinct character and culture over the years. Freshmen arrive on campus and are assigned temporary housing in a residence hall. Killian Kickoff, an event that gathers all freshmen as well as over a thousand upperclassmen representing various living groups, is held a few days into Orientation Week. This event signifies the beginning of "Rush." During Rush, the fraternities, sororities, and ILGs (FSILGs) offer events and food in order to attract freshmen. They offer "bids" to the freshmen they like, and freshmen may choose to accept these bids and "pledge" the living group and move in immediately. At the same time that FSILG Rush is happening, the residence halls put on a series of their own events with the purpose of depicting to the freshmen the particular culture of that hall. Freshmen who do not pledge an FSILG enter a lottery for residence hall assignments. This lottery is preferential and optimized; the majority of freshmen get in their top two choices, and only a few percent receive their fourth choice or lower. Residence halls do not have any say in which freshmen are assigned to them, with the exception of suggesting proportions for the sexes of the students assigned. Upon moving into a residence hall, another selection process, which varies by hall, occurs which allows freshmen to choose what section of a residence hall they want to live in, and often whom they want as a roommate.

While freshmen do spend nearly two weeks without a permanent residence, the majority of upperclassmen and freshmen who have undergone rush agree that it

is worth this uncertainty and inconvenience to arrive at such an optimal housing arrangement. Student satisfaction with the residence hall experience is remarkably high, particularly in comparison with other colleges and universities — according to the 1996 Cycles Survey, 52.30% of MIT undergraduates are "very satisfied" with their residential experience, compared with 34.3% at other institutions. Nearly 87% claimed they were "satisfied." Roommate disputes or personality conflicts within residences are fairly rare, probably as a result of the highly specialized selection process.

To understand this process, it is necessary to know the history behind the residential system. Following are descriptions of the Institute's beginnings, as well as the evolutions of the different types of housing.

MIT: A Beginning

William Barton Rogers founded MIT in 1861 to establish a new kind of independent educational institution that would be relevant to the increasingly industrialized United States. He believed that coupling teaching and research and focusing on real-world problems was the best way to foster professional competence. His views were not uncommon at this time; beginning in the 1850s, reforms in higher education were called for by many scholars. It was hoped that the traditional classical college would be replaced with more practical institutions of learning that offered a broader range of courses and offered more flexibility to the student. These institutions, like MIT, would dismiss the doctrine of *in loco parentis* and treat their students as adults. Funding for dormitories could be diverted to building laboratories and supporting faculty. It took several decades for this vision to become a reality across the nation, but MIT succeeded on a smaller scale in the Boston area. In the early years of the Institute, no dorms were built. Students were instead left to their own devices to find housing.

Fraternities at MIT

The first fraternity chapter began at MIT in 1872, while MIT was still located in Boston's Back Bay area. It was withdrawn in 1878 and then reformed in 1890. In the meantime, beginning in March 1882, a veritable boom of fraternities popped up surrounding the MIT Boston campus. The first fraternity house was a suite of rooms rented in 1886, a pattern that became common for these early fraternities. According to former dean Samuel C. Prescott, "The fraternities, although few, were extremely useful in providing living quarters for congenial groups of men in limited numbers." By 1915, there were twenty fraternities in operation, with participation from nearly one-third of the (predominantly male) student body. Fraternities were growing in popularity nationwide, at this time, and most schools

responded either by banning them (which led to the fraternities going underground) or accepting them (which allowed the school to regain some control over their students). MIT seems to have accepted the fraternities as a welcome method for housing students, but it chose not to take control over these groups. An important theme repeated in decade's worth of MIT documents and reports is that students learn by doing, and that student government is an important method for learning. As a result, the fraternities were largely left to their own devices at this time.

In 1915, the Institute completed its relocation to the current Cambridge campus. The first MIT dormitory was constructed as part of the original campus plan. The Faculty Houses, or Senior House, as it is now known, are a set of six contiguous buildings holding approximately thirty students each. While four of these houses were used as dormitory space, the end two sections were homes to one fraternity each. The fraternities were able to house more students in the same amount of space, therefore charging cheaper rents than the dormitory sections of the building. As a result, when the Alumni Houses, now East Campus, were being built in the 1920s, several more fraternities requested to have space allotted to them. Since there would not be enough space for all to be accommodated, it was decided that none would be, and the remainder of Senior House was turned into dormitory space. In 1946, the Independent Residence Development Fund (IRDF) was established to support fraternities in their efforts to purchase new houses or to renovate their current ones. Several attempts have been made to move fraternities closer to campus; these have, on the whole, failed to have a significant impact. Fraternities have continued to exist primarily in Boston, though a few are now located on the MIT campus or further into Cambridge.

Sororities, Independent Living Groups, and Coeducational Living

While MIT has been graduating women since 1873 (the first graduating class was in 1868), until recently, women have had few living options. With the post WWII expansion of campus, 120 Bay State Road was obtained and transformed into a women's residence which held seventeen students. While there is little documentation regarding women's housing selection at this time, it is clear that the few women students there were either lived at home or in 120 Bay State Road, under a chaperone's supervision. McCormick Hall replaced this in 1963, and when completed in 1968, several hundred female graduate and undergraduate students could be accommodated on campus. Freshmen women were then required to live in McCormick.

Student House, an independent living group (ILG) was formed in 1933 to serve students who could not afford to live in fraternities or dormitories. In 1969, Student House decided to go coeducational and allow women to join. Senior House and East Campus followed suit in 1970, and slowly thereafter other dorms

chose to go coed or were designated coed as they were built. Currently, all dorms are coed, mostly by room, but some by hall or suite, with the exception of McCormick Hall, which remains a women's residence.

In 1970, the MIT chapter of Sigma Nu became coed. In 1972 they were followed by the MIT chapter of Delta Psi, known on campus as the Number 6 Club. In 1976, Pi Kappa Alpha, now known as pika after deaffiliating from their national association, also became coed. No other fraternities have become coed since. Fenway House opened shortly thereafter. The Women's Independent Living Group, or WILG, opened in 1976.

Sororities are a very recent addition to campus life. The first sororities at MIT were non-residential, beginning with one chapter in 1984 and a second in 1986. There are currently three sororities with houses at MIT, the first being acquired in 1995. As the proportion of females in the undergraduate body approaches fifty percent, there have been calls to increase the number of living options available for women.

The Institute Houses

As mentioned earlier, MIT students were primarily commuters or lived in rented rooms or boarding houses during the early years in Back Bay. In 1902, Technology Chambers was built by private investors and provided a home for many MIT students. This building was the closest approximation to a dormitory at MIT, though it was actually unaffiliated with the Institute. It was not until MIT moved to Cambridge in 1915 that dormitories were added to the student living options. Senior House opened in 1917, and was followed in 1925 to 1931 with the six Alumni Houses (a.k.a. East Campus). These buildings were in high demand until the Depression, when off-campus housing became affordable.

Up through the beginning of WWII, MIT continued to acquire new buildings from the surrounding neighborhoods. Some became graduate living groups, others were destined to become undergraduate residence halls. But before the war, dormitory space was still very limited, including only Senior House and the East Campus Alumni Houses.

After WWII, MIT began to include residential life as a key aspect of the educational mission of the school. President Karl Taylor Compton envisioned a "House Plan" for the residential system, where each unit, or dormitory, would be self-sufficient, containing dining and recreational facilities. Baker House was opened in this spirit in 1949, and Burton House in 1951. The opening of these buildings marked the beginning of expansion of residential life on the west side of campus. MacGregor House opened in 1970, followed by New House in 1975, and Next House in 1981. Random Hall opened north of the main campus briefly

in 1968, closed in 1970, and reopened in 1977. Simmons Hall is slated to open in 2002.

The Development of the Residential Selection Process

1861-1917

During the years that MIT was known to some as "Boston Tech," the vast majority of students commuted from home. Sixty percent of students were from Massachusetts, and ninety percent of these were from the Boston area. Students who did not live at home lived in boarding houses, rented rooms or apartments, or lived in the burgeoning fraternity system. It is very unclear how residence selection was handled at this time. There is little or no documentation readily available, suggesting that the process was probably very uncoordinated on MIT's part. Students probably arrived in the Boston area and looked for apartments and rooms in boarding houses, and then eventually moved into fraternities as they developed.

1917-1945

After the move to the Cambridge campus in 1916, students who had been promised space in the as yet unconstructed dormitory were allotted barracks-style space on the first floor of Building 1. Once Senior House was it appears that assignments were given on a first come, first served basis, with no weight given to class year. In 1923 the recommendations of the Joint Dormitory Board included the suggestion to change this system and divide the available space equally among the four classes. This report also indicates the desirability of having all four class years intermingled in the same space. To this day, MIT does not have an all freshmen residence hall. The establishment of a student Dormitory Committee was also a major recommendation of this report. It becomes clear in later documentation that this group eventually became responsible for the assignments of and leasing of dormitory space to students, as well as the maintenance of the building and the resolving of judicial matters. It is unclear when administrators and staff were hired to take over these functions.

In 1927, only 10.5% of students lived in the dormitories; the rest lived in fraternities (18%), with their families (40%), or off-campus (30%). This same year, a dormitory study committee chose not to make recommendations regarding housing policy. They did, however, believe that freshmen should be housed "on-campus" (in fraternities or dormitories) or at home with their families. A 1931 Report of the Dean confirms that it is still not mandatory for freshmen to live on-campus or with family at this point.

This system appears to have continued through World War II. In 1943, the residence halls were occupied by the Armed Forces, and students were forced to find alternate housing arrangements. Presumably everyone lived with family or in fraternities or apartments. Students returned to the residence halls in 1945. The President's Report in October, 1944 made recommendations regarding offering more affordable housing (in the form of another Student House which was never opened) as well as a women's house (which was purchased and opened in 1946). Shortly following the war, the Lewis Committee released a report emphasizing student life issues. Out of this report rose a commitment to offering a residential experience that would compliment and add to the academic experience.

1945-1970

Baker House was the first of the new dorms intended to support the educational experience. When it opened in 1949, it was considered to be a dorm for seniors — this class got first picks on space within the building, then juniors, sophomores, and finally freshmen. It is unclear how long this system lasted, but vestiges of it may still be seen in how residents undergo room selection in the spring for the following year.

As part of this new commitment to incorporating the residences into the educational experience, MIT wanted to be able to offer all freshmen a spot on campus, either in a dormitory or a fraternity. This was achieved in the fall of 1951, with the opening of Burton House. Even with this additional space, not everyone could be accommodated. The 1963 Committee on Student Environment Interim Housing Report, makes it clear that in the years preceding the report, it had been necessary to refuse "on-campus" (fraternity or dormitory) housing to many of the students who already lived in the greater Boston area. As new dorms were built (Baker and Burton) and the campus became more residential, the demand for residential options (particularly dormitories — fraternity pledging had stabilized at this point) grew dramatically. This report calls for an increase in dormitory space. The opening of McCormick Hall in 1963 helped to relieve this housing shortage.

In 1963 it is clear that residence hall assignments for males were handled first come, first served, and were given based on building and room preferences that the freshmen would indicate over the summer. This system allowed men who were not rushing fraternities to potentially have an advantage in getting a "better" dormitory assignment over men who were considering fraternities.

While MIT controlled which students were originally assigned to each dormitory, the residence hall governments had control of room assignments within their building. By the late 1960's, each hall had developed a unique scheme for giving room preference to residents — some by class year, others by how long an individual had resided in the dormitory. This priority system made it difficult for

large (or even moderate) sized groups of students to move from dorm to dorm. As a result, the majority of students stayed in their originally assigned residence hall for their entire time at MIT. This system continues through the present and is one of the factors that has allowed for distinct communities and cultures to form within each hall or floor of a hall.

During this time, fraternity rush was still not held during a period of time when it was mandatory for freshmen to be on campus. Rather, freshmen were strongly encouraged to arrive at the Institute a week early and spend time rushing. The vast majority of freshmen choose this option. By the end of this period, all freshmen were required to live on-campus (in a fraternity or dormitory) or at home. Freshmen would receive an application for dormitory space after being accepted to the Institute and indicate their preferences for dormitories and for rooms within dormitories. Freshmen housing was assigned first come, first served based on these preferences, and students were informed of their assignments as they were made. Freshmen who were on a waiting list for space were given temporary housing. At this point, about half of the freshmen class lived in dormitories, over a third in fraternities, and the rest commuted from home.

1970-Present

The most recent major shift in the residence selection process occurred between the 1969 and 1970 school years. MIT began to take a much more active role in the residence selection process, combining it with Institute Orientation and creating Residence and Orientation week, or R/O. While several documents I found expected a shift like this to take place in both 1966 and 1968, there is no evidence of the shift actually happening until 1969-1970.

Between 1969 and 1970 there is a dramatic change in the format and content of the booklet "Undergraduate Residence at MIT" sent to incoming freshmen by the Dean of Residence's office. In the earlier version of the book freshmen were encouraged to attend Rush week to see if they were interested in living in a fraternity. In the later version, attendance of Rush week was compulsory, as it had been combined with Institute Orientation week. The pre-1970 booklet focused on describing briefly the physical attributes of each dormitory building, including floor layouts and the cost to live in each room in each building. Students would then indicate their building and room preference and receive an assignment. This practice was abandoned with the newer booklet. Rather than choosing their residence hall and room based on a few preferences that would be sent into MIT early in the summer and being assigned on a first come, first served basis, the freshmen would now choose their residence hall and room as part of R/O week. The new booklet was redesigned to include information on residence selection at MIT, including where to get temporary dormitory assignments and how to participate in fraternity and ILG rush. It also contained information on each living group — fraternities each got one page to describe

themselves to the incoming freshmen, residence halls each got two. From 1973-1986, the Non-Resident Student Association also received a page.

R/O week began on the Friday ten days before Labor Day. Temporary housing in the residence halls was available beginning on this Friday. Freshmen would show up on campus, go to the R/O center, and be assigned randomly to a dorm room for the week. They were free to check in or out at any time. In 1975, the Institute began offering temporary housing as early as Thursday. In 1987, it became mandatory to arrive by 4pm on Thursday. In 1980, a new system was implemented allowing freshmen to indicate over the summer which dorms they would prefer being temporarily housed (temped) in. Under this system, freshmen could request temporary housing in the dorm they felt suited them best based on the information they received over the summer. Not only could a freshmen spend a few days touring dorms of interest; now they had the ability to live temporarily in dorms of interest. They could also just choose to arrive at the Institute and receive their assignment the old way. The practice of picking temporary dorm assignments was abandoned in 1996 and temporary assignments were made randomly by the housing office.

In the original 1970 version of R/O, the first five days of R/O week are reserved for residence selection and Rush. Freshmen arrival dates for this week were recommended but not mandatory. Fraternities were open to be visited Friday night (freshmen generally arrived Friday afternoon at this point) and the students running the Rush clearinghouse system were in charge of giving out temporary dormitory assignments to those freshmen who requested them. Fraternity pledging began on Monday and ended on Wednesday. Applications for dormitory space were due on Monday night and permanent residence hall assignments were given out beginning on Tuesday. Room assignments were determined internally to each dormitory in conjunction with the housing office. Placement in buildings was based on a lottery system that gave heavy weight to an individual's first choice dorm. About 80% of students were receiving their number one choice of dormitories at this time. It is unclear what choice the other 20% received, but the system was unoptimized at this time, so it is likely they were fairly low. In 1973, freshmen not receiving their first choice dormitory were placed in a randomized lottery to fill remaining spots in other halls. In 1976, lottery priorities were changed further. The new system would give priority to students who were willing to be placed in crowded rooms, especially if they have stapled with a roommate. Stapling is the practice of entering the housing lottery with another student with whom one wishes to live in the same building with. Students usually staple if they are hoping to be roommates. This practice seems to have ended in the late 1980s or early 1990s.

During the majority of these two-and-a-half decades, a fraction of freshmen seeking residence hall assignments would be placed in "limbo" on Tuesday. Limbo indicated that the housing office was unable to offer them a permanent assignment until more fraternity and ILG pledging had occurred and these

students moved out of the residence halls to their new fraternity/ILG residences. These students generally received assignments on a rolling basis through Friday. In later years the limbo period was shorted (1980), and eventually, eliminated in the mid-1990s. For the past several years, however, it has made a necessary return due to slower FSILG pledging, much to the chagrin of the housing office, and students.

A contributing factor to the elimination of limbo was the advent of better lotteries. In 1992, a new optimized lottery was introduced. A new computer algorithm was used which would assign students based on a ranking they made of all residence halls. Final assignments were delivered on Wednesday, and students could usually move to their permanent hall that afternoon in order to undergo the rooming assignment process for that dorm. The new lottery also had the feature that stapling to another freshman would now hurt one's chances of getting a highly ranked assignment, rather than help it. Variations on this lottery have been used to the present day.

The Language Houses added an additional twist to the residence selection process in this period. Russian House became the first language house at MIT c.1971. It was placed in Burton House and was a coed living group. French and German Houses were introduced in 1974, and Spanish House in 1979. Eventually all Language Houses were moved to New House in 1975. While I was unable to find much information on the early selection process for Language Houses, it is clear that by 1992 a separate process was used for their assignments. Freshmen interested in Language Houses needed to go through a rush-like process, meeting residents and making impressions. They would indicate a Language House as their first choice in the housing lottery, but instead of being assigned by the lottery, student leaders from the Language Houses would work with the housing office to choose which freshmen would live in the house. Those not chosen would be assigned to other living groups via the regular lottery.

Other changes in the format of the guidebook also indicate shifts in MIT's attitudes towards R/O week and residence selection, in particular. The most obvious is the shift to R/O week, itself. Coeducational ILG options first appeared in 1969 when Student House accepted women applicants. In 1970, the advent of R/O week and requiring first-year students of both sexes on campus during the Rush process allowed women to participate in Rush and residence hall selection (as Senior House and East Campus were piloting coeducational programs). Future switches to a coed environment by other dorms increased this participation. In 1976, dorm open houses are mentioned in the residence selection literature, in addition to fraternity open houses. There is also a new paragraph within the content explaining the importance of looking at the residence halls. In 1977, the alphabetical ordering of the living group "blurbs" was altered, placing all dormitory blurbs at the beginning of the book, and fraternity and ILG blurbs at the end. The introductory letter from the IFC and

DormCon presidents was also split into two separate letters, perhaps indicating less unity between these groups. Overall, this new arrangement seems to give slightly more weight to the residence halls than in the past. In 1980, a chart comparing the physical features of each residence hall was introduced. This chart disappeared for a few years, but has since become a staple item in the guidebook. In 1987, the book became a bit more informative about the rush process with the addition of a page indicating what freshmen did and did not need to bring with them for R/O week. In 1992 the sections describing each living group were shortened by half, making room for several sections on crime, safety, parties and alcohol, and other issues relating to residence life and campus life. It appears that at this point, MIT may have been trying to deemphasize the "R" in R/O and reemphasize the "O."

With the death of freshman Scott Kreuger in a fraternity hazing incident in 1997, MIT has taken a renewed interest in how residence selection works. It was announced in 1998 that as of 2001 (now 2002 with the delay of Simmons Hall construction) all freshmen will be required to live in residence halls. With this very limiting factor in mind, members of the MIT community went about the business of recreating the selection process so that it would satisfy the demands of the administration without removing much of the intrinsic value of the system. Students and other community members believe that delaying residence selection until sophomore year (and placing students randomly for their first year) will have a detrimental effect on house culture over the course of a few years. Others realize the negative impact this decision will potentially have on the FSILG system, which has through this time been so important to the residence system. The new system is a compromise. Freshmen will choose residences over the summer based on copious amounts of information offered by students and the residence life office. They will then have the opportunity to participate in a shortened version of rush designed for the residence halls. A new lottery will be written that allows students to squat in the halls they are assigned for the summer or to move to new halls. Internal room selection processes will then occur that again allow students to squat the rooms they are assigned over the summer or to move within the halls they are assigned to by the new lottery. FSILG rush will occur later in the first semester, and pledges may move in when they are sophomores. Four years after Scott's death, students are still trying to change the administrations' minds about housing all freshmen in residence halls. The FSILGs have been such an important aspect of the system for so many years that few can imagine MIT without them.

Theories on the Divergent Development of the System

Throughout this document I have begun touching upon some of the key reasons the MIT residence selection process developed as it did. Some of these are

broader societal reasons and influences, others are related to MIT's mission, and still others are related to MIT's attitudes and values.

The lack of dormitories and official institute sanctioned living groups for the first half-century of its existence may be partially accounted for by the reformist tendencies of the Institute's founder. *In loco parentis* was a doctrine avoided by MIT in the early years and efforts were made to improve the learning environment for students, but not the living environment. The rest of this lack of residences may be attributed largely to a corresponding lack of funds and space. MIT was not a wealthy school upon its inception, and it was located in an area of Boston that was not very friendly to expansion. Sites for dormitories were examined as far out as Brookline, but eventually abandoned. It was not until George Eastman contributed \$2.5 million to MIT that the Institute was able to build its new campus in Cambridge.

During this time that MIT was struggling financially and neglecting its residence system, students took matters into their own hands and formed the fraternities. As a major form of residence life, the fraternities eventually served as the models for the dormitories, rather than the other way around. The early dormitories were designed to house students in units approximating the size of fraternities, and the residents of the dormitories expected and received many of the same freedoms afforded to the fraternity residents across the river. The physical layouts of these buildings intentionally facilitated the outcomes that each residence hall, and floor or entry within it, would form a cohesive unit with its own strong culture and community. What MIT seems to have forgotten in recent years is that the strong communities that it is now trying to reshape are the work of its own hands. The current system remains dependent on the FSILG system to house a large percentage of undergraduate students.

When MIT finally did choose to build dormitories, freshmen were not given any priority in receiving housing. Other schools that faced similar housing shortages at this time often responded by moving upperclassmen out and freshmen in. MIT, on the other hand, valued the learning experience brought on by integrating students from different class years. Upperclassmen and freshmen were encouraged to learn from each other and to teach each other as part of their educational experience. This tradition continues through today — some students contend that freshmen would be unable to pass their first semester's classes without the support and help of upperclassmen. Upperclassmen are also known for the calming influence they have on the freshmen, a factor which may contribute to MIT's ability to treat its students as adults (at least up until recent years, as some would argue). It is also important to note that under these circumstances, freshmen would have been as hard-pressed to find housing as upperclassmen, and fraternities would have been a viable option. The administration's decision not to prioritize freshmen allowed the fraternity system to grow by attracting members early in their MIT careers and created a situation where joining a fraternity upon entering MIT was normal.

The next major transition in the system came as a result of World War II. Undergraduates were cleared out of the residence halls for several years during the war. This resulted in an even larger proportion of students needing housing, and the fraternities were able to take advantage of this. They were again the crutch the administration leaned on when it needed more housing. Also as a result of this evacuation, the dormitory system had the unique opportunity to begin with a fresh start. Any traditions or communities that had formed before the war were likely to have faded away during the war — there was room for new traditions and cultures to start. With the administration's growing interest in residence life, students had the chance to make the most of their residence halls. The applicant pool also changed as a result of the war. MIT had become more nationally recognized through the work of Karl Taylor Compton and Vannevar Bush, and the need for affordable housing expanded as students came from further away. MIT was no longer a commuter school.

Some of this renewal can be seen in how the dormitories imitated the fraternities. This is particularly apparent in residence selection. While the dormitories did not go so far as to offer bids to freshmen, there was a movement towards open houses and events in the 1950s and 1960s. These events were designed to showcase the character and personality of these quickly developing communities. Just as each fraternity had something different to offer to its members, so did each residence hall. Internal room selection often reflects a more fraternity-like quality, and language house rush and room selection certainly does.

One very important factor relates to the relative ages of the different parts of the system. By the time R/O week was instated, the traditions of the fraternities were approaching one hundred years old. The habits of residence selection had, by this time, molded to the unique characteristics of the Institute. Just as other schools had chosen to take control of the fraternities decades earlier as they were forming, so MIT finally choose to gain some control itself. Until this time, MIT had a decidedly laissez faire attitude towards residence selection and to the residence system as a whole. Bursts of energy resulted in the building of a few halls at a time, and then the system would fall into neglect for a decade or so before another burst came along. R/O week was a way for MIT gain some control during a period when students around the country were fighting for more control, themselves. MIT still allowed students to run the majority of R/O week, but the Institute now had control over residence selection. In recent years, MIT has managed to win back more and more control from the students as the process slowly becomes more centralized.

For all of its idiosyncrasies, the residence selection process at MIT has been widely successful. Students identify strongly with their living groups, both as students and as alumni. Some would use this as a measure of success. Sadly, the climate of higher education does not always allow this to be the case. As college rankings gain importance, alumni giving rates do so, as well.

Unfortunately, a residence system which fosters allegiance to small pieces of itself does not foster this same allegiance to the institution as a whole. On this and other measures the MIT residence system is seen to be falling short. As a result, MIT is trying to deemphasize the residential experience and create an emphasis on the entire MIT community, not just the communities of the residences. The new changes in the residence selection process may be seen to be a part of this shift. As students choose their residences earlier and earlier, in a manner more like that seen at other schools, it is thought that allegiance to the greater MIT community will grow. It is too bad that a school which has always prided itself on being different and innovative feels it is necessary, in this case, to be just like everyone else.

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