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IWU Roommate Matching System Eases Transition to College

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. - From lectures to laundry, students entering college face a variety of challenges and opportunities, not the least of which is learning to share limited living space with another person, often a total stranger.

In fact, Matt Damschroder, Illinois Wesleyan University's director of residential life, reports that 20 percent of incoming first-year students consider living with a roommate one of their top five concerns about starting college. "We know most of the students coming to us have never shared a room," he said.

In order to ease the transition to residence hall living, the staff in IWU's Office of Residential Life (ORL) matches each pair of first-year roommates individually after a careful reading of their files and responses to a survey. The system is generally successful: of the 472 members of the University's class of 2006 who were paired by ORL in their first year at IWU, 96.4 percent stayed with their assigned roommate all year.

Pairing approximately 500 first-year students each summer begins with a letter to the members of the incoming class requesting that they register online for university housing. The registration includes a survey composed of questions falling into two basic categories: students' lifestyle preferences and their interests.

The completed surveys are converted into one-page summaries of each student's responses and sorted by computer based on lifestyle preferences, such as whether students intend to study in the room or elsewhere and how they would react to a roommate using their belongings. This step of the process groups students who share a common "rhythm of life," said Damschroder.

The hand-matching process can take up to two days. Damschroder and other ORL staff lay out hard copies of the student profiles, eight to 10 at a time, on long tables in an empty classroom. By comparing the students' interests, descriptions of themselves and special needs or requests, the ORL staff members make every effort to place like-minded individuals together.

When two summaries are paired and removed from the table, staff members fill the empty spaces with two new profiles.

"It's interesting how well you get to know the students by reading over their bios and putting them together," said Damschroder, who, when he encounters students on the campus, often remembers the hobbies mentioned on their surveys.

In addition to pairing roommates, ORL uses the information from the surveys to build entire floor communities. Each floor in a first-year residence hall houses between 20 and 38 students under the guidance of one first-year resident advisor. Ideally, the group will include some residents with common interests, as well as individuals of contrasting backgrounds and values, who are likely to challenge and learn from one another's beliefs and behaviors.

By no means flawless, the matching system is subject to constant refinement and improvement. ORL staff members take note of the issues that consistently cause disagreements among residents and adjust the initial survey in order to address those common points of conflict.

In the last few years, such additions have included how deeply students sleep and whether a roommate's friend is welcome to spend the night in the room. "We're thinking seriously about adding 'what temperature do you like your space?'" Damschroder said of the latest update under consideration.



John Maloney (left) and Dan McCarthy, both members of the Titan football team, move in to their first-year residence.