Pursuant to your charge to examine all aspects and activities associated with first-year student Orientation and to make recommendations intended to improve MIT’s orientation experience/process, we are pleased to submit this report. What follows are separate sections on the guiding principles adopted, the process followed, and the conclusions reached. The report also includes recommendations that follow from the committee’s work. For the purposes of this report, “Orientation” refers to the period from the arrival of the first students on campus in August until the beginning of classes after Labor Day. Campus Preview Weekend (CPW) and other important events that occur outside this period are not subjects of this report.

A. Guiding Principles:
Throughout our proceedings our primary concern has been to make Orientation the best possible experience for entering first-year students. In addition to that primary guiding principle, we also believe that the most important operational goals of Orientation are to ensure that by the end of the week, all first year students should:

- Feel welcomed and comfortable in their residential communities and the larger MIT environment
- Know how to connect to other people and how to live safely at MIT and in the surrounding community
- Be settled in their selection of a residence and first-semester classes
- Be aware of issues likely to confront a young person living on her/his own in a college environment for the first time
- Know how to get help when the inevitable academic pressures of MIT begin to mount
- Know how to get help in case of illness, personal issues, and other related concerns

With these principles in mind, RCO believes that Orientation for first-year students should be an ongoing process that extends throughout the first year, and not simply a week-long event in August. Thus, the design and coordination of this student transition process needs to be intentionally developed throughout the first year experience. The Welcome Week Orientation Program is a key point on the continuum of an entry and transition process that for many students begins with CPW and extends throughout much of the first year.
B. The Process Followed:

The committee began its deliberations in March 2011 and, since then, has dedicated significant time to gathering background information and data from key Orientation stakeholders. During the spring term, we met with the Director of the International Students Office, Director of Housing, Assistant Dean of FSILGs, faculty overseeing the Advanced Standing Examinations and Math Diagnostic (biology, physics, chemistry, and mathematics), sponsors on behalf of a suite of Freshman Pre-Orientation Programs (FPOPs), the DormCon Vice President for REX, and students representing the residential community. These initial discussions gave the Committee an understanding of the underlying challenges and goals of the diverse components of Orientation. We completed our information gathering by subsequently meeting with the Director of the Office of Minority Education, the president of the International Students Association, and a group of interested housemasters.

In June we established sub-committees to undertake a substantial and deep review of specific aspects of Freshman Orientation. Each sub-committee included faculty, senior administrators, and student members. The sub-committees addressed:

- Orientation Programming
- Freshman Pre-Orientation Programs (FPOPs)
- Residential Exploration (REX) and Housing
- FSILG Recruitment

Over the summer, these subcommittees gathered survey and assessment data, sponsored focus groups, spoke with content experts, and reviewed best practices at other universities. Each subcommittee summarized its findings in a report to the full Committee.

A special sub-committee on Data Gathering and Assessment was created to collect and analyze data that would help us better understand the impact of MIT’s Orientation on first-year students. Headed by Professor Charles Stewart and Dean Elizabeth Young, the sub-committee surveyed a subset of incoming freshmen before, during, and after Orientation to evaluate their immediate transition problems, levels of anxiety, and knowledge of resources available to them. In addition, the full Class of 2015 was asked to complete a comprehensive survey during the first week of classes. Responses to this survey were compared to a similar freshman survey conducted in 1997, as well as to a national benchmark survey administered to first-year students at other public and private 4-year universities.

When the committee of the whole reconvened in September, it discussed the sub-committee reports at some length, making sure that members had adequate information to understand and evaluate/appraise each component of the Orientation process. In order to keep our deliberations as transparent as possible, the chair of RCO met with the Committee on Undergraduate Program and, on behalf of the Committee, also sent letters explaining our work to the undergraduate community and to the MIT faculty. In these letters, we announced that the Committee would hold two public forums to gather additional student perspectives on Orientation. These forums were held on November 10 and November 21, with the latter especially well attended. While all members of the MIT community were invited, the
ensuing questions and discussions reflected a substantial interest in seeing that no changes be made in FSILG recruitment. On the whole, the Committee deemed the forums a success.

Once the public forums were held, the Committee entered upon the most difficult stage of its work: an analysis of the data with an eye to discovering synergies and complementarities while eliminating and/or reducing possible conflicts, overlaps, and redundancies in the orientation process. Drawing upon the Committee’s previous discussions during the fall term, the chair circulated a list of “possible recommendations” for further discussion and assessment. This work began in late November and continued until the Committee’s last meeting on January 24. The resulting discussions proved very fruitful, with valuable input coming from virtually every member of the committee. The RCO also established an online “Idea Bank” for students, alumni, and staff to provide comments and suggestion to the committee. It is upon those discussions and feedback, as well as the comments from committee members that the following section draws.

C. Findings, Conclusions, and Recommendations

As indicated earlier in this report, the Committee divided its research and discussions into five categories: (1) Data Gathering and Assessment, (2) Orientation Programming, (3) Freshman Pre-Orientation Programs [FPOPs], (4) Residential Exploration [REX] and Housing, and (5) FSILG Recruitment. Each component will be discussed in that order.

(1) Data Gathering and Assessment

The Stewart/Young sub-committee analysis of student surveys conducted in 1997 and 2011 yielded very instructive results. It reveals, for example, that first-year students surveyed in 2011 are more satisfied with orientation than those surveyed in the 1990s. It also indicates that first-years are more connected with MIT because of orientation than students elsewhere. Moreover, both the perceived and ideal balance between academics and residential selection has come into much closer alignment since the 1990s. On the whole, Orientation is most successful in helping first-years meet other first-years, getting first-years settled with their first-semester subjects, and introducing first-years to information about campus activities. In short, the Stewart/Young analysis indicates that Orientation has made significant gains over the past decade in welcoming first-year students onto campus, reducing anxieties about fitting in, and reducing the confusion related to the choice of housing.

That said, it is also clear that MIT cannot become Pollyannaish about these findings. The responses to the survey also suggest challenges that remain in the design and execution of Orientation. For example, first-year students still report high levels of uncertainty about their selection of classes, compared to a decade ago. Compared to first-year students at other universities, MIT students are no more informed about the resources available to them, and they are less informed about the mechanics of education (registration, using online resources, etc.). In addition, the survey data suggest that the experience of women with Recruitment is not uniformly positive – an issue that is independent of when Recruitment occurs.
(2) Orientation Programming

Orientation embraces a large number of activities that, from an institutional standpoint, require careful coordination and oversight. Trying to schedule these activities in a workable manner (without conflicts) is a daunting task because, like Topsy, Orientation continues to grow. With this concern in mind, RCO devoted considerable time to the discussion of the organization and scheduling components of Orientation in an effort to determine what activities are essential and which ones could appropriately be moved to another time slot in the academic year. A primary concern was to seek ways of better coordinating and streamlining Orientation.

Our discussions were framed by the Report from the Sub-Committee on Orientation Programming which provided an essential guide to orientation programming. The criteria for evaluating each activity/program within Orientation are defined in the sub-committee report and summarized below:

- Critical or fundamental to an orientation based on national research; must be a part of orientation
- Institute Priority
- Academic preparation and information
- Programming that must be offered to the full class
- Need to know to “survive”

The following recommendations are based largely on the discussions and email exchanges that flowed from that report as well as other documents circulated among the committee:

i. We would encourage the development of models that would continue the discussion of diversity beyond Orientation by moving the subject into the dorms and continuing the discussion throughout the school year. The focus of these discussions should be expanded to include issues of social justice as well as diversity. The First Year Experience (FYE), working in concert with GRTs, RLAs, and housemasters, would be a good vehicle for these conversations. Consideration should also be given to extending/sustaining Orientation programming on alcohol, drugs, sexual harassment, and hazing into the residential community.

ii. The faculty keynote should be reevaluated, especially in view of the redundancies that exist with the President’s Convocation (which also includes faculty presentations).

iii. The Math Diagnostic Exam for Physics helps place entering students in the most appropriate physics GIR option. The Physics Department has found that this exam only yields reliable results when it is given under proctored conditions. The present recommendation is to continue to offer the exam on-campus early in the orientation Period. However,
iv. The RCO also considered adjustments to the timing for Advanced Standing Examinations (ASEs). Unlike the Math Diagnostic, which is advisory, the ASEs confer academic credit. The RCO recommends that a faculty committee, including representatives from the departments involved, be formed to look into options and timing of the examinations. Moreover, this committee should develop advice and guidance to help students contemplating sitting for ASEs to assess whether or not to do so.

v. Core Blitz and the Academic Expo need to be re-evaluated; comprehensive, multi-media resources that provide advice from GIR faculty instructors should be developed.

vi. Academic integrity is a critical program and must be addressed through a multi-pronged approach including Orientation, the First Year Experience (FYE), and by every faculty member during the first day of class.

vii. The Health and Wellness Fair does not meet the criteria for a dedicated time during orientation. However, the fair should occur no later than Registration Day. It is valuable for first year and new graduates students to be aware of the resources promptly and before classes begin.

viii. City Days does not meet the above, established criteria; it is recommended that the service program be offered during the academic term when there is the opportunity for full community engagement.

ix. Eliminate the Tuesday evening SLOPE event in favor of dorm-wide community-building activities, planned and/or overseen by DormCon with support from Student Life as required. Retain an event similar to the Friday night SLOPE event (large social event, preferably off campus) at some point near the end of Orientation programming. The goals of this event are for first-years to get to know each other in a more relaxed environment and to promote class identity.

x. International student orientation should be more fully integrated into Orientation. Because international students originate from so many countries, a full and vibrant International Student Orientation is essential for the successful transition of this group of students to MIT. Although international students must participate in a small number of federally mandated programs during Orientation, we do not believe that this requires international students to be precluded from the opportunity of
participating in FPOPs and other opportunities afforded new students. Basic programming that will introduce them to Boston is also imperative.

xi. RCO recommends the establishment of a small Strategic Orientation Advisory Committee consisting of faculty, staff, and students that would report regularly to the Deans of Undergraduate Education and Student Life.

xii. RCO also recommends that all aspects of the Orientation period be continually assessed against the guiding principles of Orientation. Continuous feedback is important in order to insure that the goals of Orientation are being met. RCO has seen fine examples of how particular programs are assessed – such as the orientation surveys and the housing survey. However, these studies have not been widely disseminated. Nor have high level questions pertaining to the overarching goals (as opposed to everyday tactics) of Orientation been regularly assessed. Therefore, we recommend that assessment experts from DSL and DUE staff join together to create a comprehensive assessment program, that allows Orientation to be assessed against its goals, both across time, and with other universities.

xiii. Finances/Orientation Costs
The committee also examined and discussed at some length the cost of Orientation to the Institute and determined that, given the potential fiscal implications, an in-depth cost accounting study be conducted. In our review, the committee noted that academic departments funded some FPOP programs while others charged a nominal fee to participants. The committee found that the costs for feeding first year students and orientation leaders were sizeable. In part, the Office for Undergraduate Advising and Academic Programming (UAAP) covered the cost of all Orientation programming, speakers, AV, supplies, materials and fed first year students and OL’s during the actual orientation program. However, meals DSL provided on the days outside of the program were unallocated costs paid through MIT Dining’s operating budget. In addition, an examination of costs for REX programs and the loss of revenue could only be estimated. After an initial review, the committee approximated that the costs of REX activities, meals, lost housing revenues, and operating costs of the dorms was in excess of $600,000. This number does not include the Orientation operating budget, nor does it quantify the cost of the FPOPs (discussed below). The Committee therefore recommends that the Institute charge incoming students an orientation fee that covers the direct costs of the actual orientation program, as well as, housing and meal costs during this period.
(3) **Freshman Pre-Orientation Program (FPOP)**

Since its establishment in 1997, the Freshman Pre-Orientation Program has enjoyed considerable popularity and success among first-year students. RCO’s FPOP Sub-Committee reports that 585 students (54% of the freshman class) participated in FPOPs last fall. In addition to providing a variety of experiences with markedly rich academic content, FPOPs play an important role in connecting first-year students with one another, forming friendships, and putting freshmen in touch with participating faculty, advanced undergraduates, and graduate students. What is more, they serve effectively in orienting students to the intellectual life and larger culture of MIT and thus are an important component of the Orientation experience.

In order to strengthen an already strong program RCO recommends that:

i. Common end dates should be defined for all FPOPs.

ii. FPOPs need to provide some basic information for participating students about resources at MIT regarding safety and well-being.

iii. FPOP programs should be required to specify how students will be engaged during the evenings, and should be reminded that this is their responsibility.

iv. The cost of FPOPs to the Institute needs to be defined, specifically the academic FPOPs. Given the articulated value of the FPOPs, the Dean for Undergraduate Education should develop plans to help provide for their long-term financial sustainability.

(4) **Residential Exploration (REX) and Housing**

Supported by the research of the Sub-committee on Residential Exploration and Housing, RCO devoted considerable attention to REX/Housing. Satisfaction with REX is high. Students most enjoyed/appreciated meeting people and making friends. What many considered most important was finding the right culture and fit of a living group/community. The most common problem was overlapping or conflicting REX activities with Orientation programs. Based on these findings, RCO believes that REX needs to be better integrated with Orientation. Less emphasis should be placed on the adjustment lottery and more placed on acclimating freshmen to life and learning at MIT.

With these considerations in mind, RCO recommends that:

The original goals of REX be re-articulated, that is, the purpose of REX is to welcome first-year students to campus, both to their individual dormitory communities and to the campus residential community as a whole. In the process of recalibrating expectations about the purpose of REX, it is important for residential life staff to work with organizers of housing events to ensure that the focus is on community building; it is also important for the Housing Office not to communicate any special significance to the existence or timing of the adjustment lottery.
i. Continue to have a residence exploration program (REX), with a primary focus on community building and sustaining diverse dormitory cultures.

ii. REX events may be scheduled at any point during the orientation period; their timing need not be dependent on the housing adjustment process. Organizing REX events is optional for each dorm, but care must be taken to make the process inclusive to avoid having residents of any living group feel excluded.

iii. Beyond community-wide REX events, individual dorms may choose to have a process for in-house room assignments.

iv. Housing should retain a process for students who wish to move to another dorm other than the one they were originally assigned.

v. The Housing Strategy Group should be assigned the task of reviewing in-house “rush” and room assignment procedures, to ensure that all procedures and events are welcoming, and that no actions violate MIT policies.

vi. Significant attention should be paid to the careful alignment and coordination of REX events with academic Orientation events, paying particular attention to organizing a sufficient number of evening social programs/activities for students to engage in.

vii. The Housing Strategy Group should investigate policies related to the early return of upper class students, not only for Orientation events, but also for all early programs in which Institute housing is currently provided for free (REX organizers, ASA volunteers, associate advisors, FPOP leaders, orientation leaders, ROTC, varsity athletics, etc.). A clear rationale must be developed that distinguishes why some upper class students receive early return housing without charge, and why others should pay. Students who are returning early for REX and ASA activities need to have someone to hold them accountable for their obligations to the Institute.

viii. Students should not be put in a position of monitoring people fulfilling their responsibilities in return for free early return housing. This is a task that should be handled by house managers, in a uniform and consistent fashion.

(5) FSILG Recruitment

No subject generated more discussion, contention, and disagreement than the timing of FSILG Recruitment. One school of thought holds that Recruitment occurs too early in a student’s first year (giving him/her too little time to make a well-reasoned decision) and thus should be delayed at least to IAP or the beginning of the student’s second year. The other school holds that the current Recruitment system is working just fine, students receive critical support they need and have adequate time to decide, and, as a consequence, no change is needed. Proponents of this latter view believe that it is beneficial for freshmen to get settled into their social circles early on in the year before academic pressures build and that moving Recruitment to any other time in the academic calendar would pose serious academic/social difficulties for freshmen.
and upperclassmen alike. The former position is held primarily by faculty, particularly housemasters, who believe that the Recruitment period is currently is too “rushed” and tiring for first-year students, not allowing them adequate time to make a decision. The latter position is frequently voiced by current FSILG affiliated students, as well as by MIT alumni who come from the fraternity/sorority community. Not surprisingly, the RCO itself is divided on this subject.

One thing RCO has learned from its discussions of FSLIG Recruitment is that adequate hard data is lacking. We therefore recommend that another group be charged with investigating the question at greater depth. Among other things more focused surveys and analysis of comparative data are needed, more stakeholder consultation (alumni as well as students) must occur, and the senior administration needs to be involved in the discussion. An important question that should be asked is “what are the financial and social implications of moving rush/recruitment to another time?”

Independent of the question of when rush occurs is the matter of allowing fraternities, sororities, and independent living groups to be involved during Orientation in events such as Activities Midway. Because of the important and positive role these groups play on campus, we can see no reason for a blanket ban against their participation in Orientation and recommend that all such bans be lifted.

The preceding report and recommendations conclude RCO’s work between March 2011 and January 2012. We believe that the execution of our recommendations will help to substantially improve MIT’s Freshman Orientation which, as stated at the outset of this report, is our primary objective. This report provides an overview of our deliberations.

The successes of MIT’s Orientation are many, but a more cohesive holistic approach to it would communicate to first-year students that MIT offers them a healthy balance of academic, social, cultural, and personal growth opportunities.
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