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NEWS RELEASE

AWKWARD AND UNCERTAIN ROOMMATE MEETINGS
SOFTENED BY 'VIRTUAL ROOMS' AT UNIVERITY OF DAYTON

DAYTON, Ohio — The packet of information sent to incoming freshmen at the University of Dayton will contain a new feature this year — an invitation to visit an online "virtual room" to link up with roommates, get a head-start on summer readings and fire up their UD e-mail accounts.

The packets will be mailed to about 1,800 incoming freshmen June 15. Orientation will begin Saturday, Aug. 19, with classes starting Wednesday, Aug. 23.

"The idea is to start building community two months before the students even get here," said Brian Young, assistant director of UD's Learning Village, the term used to describe the University's technology-enhanced learning environment. "We know that 82 percent of our incoming freshmen have e-mail, so they have access to a computer. With this virtual room experience, roommates can connect with one another and the resident assistants who will live in their building. They can also browse the resident roster and learn about some other people in their residence hall."

Each interactive room features contact information on the roommates (linked to the graphic of a telephone), an instant chat system for private messages (the message board), a checklist of suggested items to bring to campus (beanbag chair graphic) and information on the computer that will be waiting for each freshman this fall in his or her room (computer graphic). The reading list for UD's first-year experience is linked to the bookshelf in the virtual room, and a profile search allows incoming students to search for other residents with similar interests.

The students will edit their own online profiles and decide how much information to make visible to others in the virtual building.

"Roommates can look at the list of standard items that students bring for their rooms, check off what they intend to bring and then e-mail that to their roommates. Mom and dad won't have to lug a TV up four flights of stairs only to find that the roommate already has one in the room," Young said.

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UD's Webmentors, students with expertise in Web applications and design, developed the virtual room project from their base in the Williams Web Development Lab in the Ryan C. Harris Learning Teaching Center on campus. Michael Potts, a senior, was the major database manager for the project.

For fine tuning, the Webmentors brought in a small group of first-year students from 1999-2000 and had them test an early version. They suggested it would be nice to get to know other students in the building before they arrived at UD, and so the virtual building profiles were included. The Webmentors made it searchable, so that if your passion is reggae music or water polo, for example, you can find others who share your interests.

As the system grows, Young expects more and more interaction to occur before the freshmen step foot on campus in the fall. Resident assistants can begin discussions on issues that students face and build a community from their roster of individual freshmen. Faculty members and campus ministers could begin to meet students online, and freshmen could even contact previous residents of their room to link to older students.

"The whole idea is huge," Young said. "Freshmen can be a part of UD's learning and teaching process two months early."

The University's achievements in creating a technology-enhanced learning environment have earned accolades. The University of Dayton has been named the top wired university in Ohio and the most wired Catholic university in the nation. Overall UD ranked 21st in Yahoo! Internet Life's annual "Most Wired Colleges" survey of universities and colleges.

UD is among a fraction of universities (11 percent nationally) that requires students to own computers. It's a plan that is being instituted incrementally. When this fall's freshmen class moves in, they will be the second class to find in their rooms computers fully loaded with the same Microsoft and Lotus software their professors will use. And 90 percent of faculty members are using the basic tools of technology — e-mail, Web sites, threaded discussions and list serves –– in their classes.

All University-owned housing on the highly residential campus — space for 5,645 students in residence halls, apartments and 350 houses in a 25-block campus neighborhood — is fully wired for direct high-speed Internet connection as well as the University's 78-channel cable television system and telephone network. The University provides free dial-in connections to the campus computer network for the small percentage of undergraduate students who live off campus or in non-University housing.

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For media interviews about the new "virtual room" service for incoming freshmen, contact **Brian Young** at (937) 229-4806 or via e-mail at bay@udayton.edu. For more on UD's technology-enhanced learning environment, contact **Tom Skill**, assistant provost for academic technology, at (937) 229-4898 or via e-mail at skill@udayton.edu. To access a prototype "virtual room," go to http://webmentors.udayton.edu/gateway/gateway.php3. Log in using "pottsjam" as both your username and password, then enter the virtual room.