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

DAYTON, Ohio — The packet of information sent to incoming freshmen at the University of Dayton contained 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 UD e-mail accounts.

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

Freshmen wasted no time in linking up.

“I feel like I already have friends at UD, and I haven’t even started school there yet,” said Shannon Stapleton, who’s coming to campus from Naperville, Ill. “I originally wasn’t all that excited about going to school in the fall because I was afraid that I wouldn’t know anyone. Because of this virtual room, I am able to get to know people before school even starts, and I think that is the coolest thing ever.”

“The idea is to start building community two months before the students even get here,” said Brian Young, assistant director of 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. In the virtual room, 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, an instant chat system for private messages, a checklist of suggested items to bring to campus and information on the computer that will be waiting for each freshman this fall in his or her room. The reading list for UD’s first-year experience is provided, 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.

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.

"In the virtual room, my favorite thing is the message board," said Cecilia Reeder, an incoming freshman from Cincinnati. "That is the first way I contacted my roommates. One of them e-mailed me after that, and now I feel like I know her. She told me all about her family and friends, and we have talked about setting up a time to meet, too."

The virtual room has an added benefit. "All of this helps me feel much more at ease with the whole college thing," Reeder said. "The more info I have about anything, the more secure I feel. Now I have loads of information at my fingertips."

As the system grows, Young expects more and more interaction to occur before 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 move in, they will be the second class to find in their rooms computers fully loaded with the same Microsoft and Lotus software their professors 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 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. **Shannon Stapleton** can be reached at (630) 904-1894 or Sstaple13@aol.com, and **Cecilia Reeder** can be reached at (513) 731-6706. To make arrangements to view a virtual room online, contact **Pam Huber** at (937) 229-3256 or huber@udayton.edu.