

**2008 SACUBO BEST PRACTICES ENTRY:  
THE DAWG HOUSE: ONLINE ROOMMATE SEARCHING TOOL**

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## **Abstract**

*The Dawg House, the University of Georgia's online roommate searching tool, was developed in response to student concerns regarding the lack of a method to meet and communicate with potential roommates prior to attending classes. The Dawg House provides an online outlet for students to create a personal profile and an "ideal roommate" profile and to search for potential matches with other students using the Web site. Research examining student roommate satisfaction in several areas indicates that students who used The Dawg House are more satisfied than those who knew their roommates prior to living on campus or those who were randomly assigned.*

## **Introduction of the Organization**

The University of Georgia (UGA), established in 1785 as the nation's first state-chartered university, is the flagship institution among the 35 colleges and universities in the University System of Georgia. With nearly 34,000 students, approximately 9,000 faculty and staff, and an annual budget of \$1.4 billion, UGA is the largest and most comprehensive educational institution in Georgia and a driving force in the state's economic growth.

The University of Georgia's academic reputation is on the rise, and admission is increasingly competitive. More than 17,000 applicants applied for the Fall 2007 class of approximately 5,000 freshmen. For the past nine years, the University of Georgia has been ranked among the nation's top 22 public universities by *U.S. News & World Report*, and the institution is consistently recognized as one of the best values in American higher education.

The Department of University Housing delivers comfortable, affordable and secure on-campus housing options to approximately 7,000 students living in 20 residence halls on the University of Georgia campus. Located within each residential area are lounges, kitchens, study/meeting areas, TV rooms, laundry rooms and mail facilities. All rooms are furnished with a bed, dresser, closet space, desk and chair, as well as cable TV, local telephone service and a high-speed Internet connection for each resident. Most residence halls feature centrally located, shared bathrooms, though many suite options exist with semi-private baths. In addition to the amenities common to other residence hall rooms, four apartment-style buildings which house residents in private bedrooms in two, three or four bedroom units also feature a full-size refrigerator, microwave, a dining area,

and private or semi-private bathrooms in each unit. Highly trained professional and student staff in every community help student residents maximize their personal, academic and social development through design and implementation of a wide variety of social, educational and recreational programs and activities.

The Family and Graduate Housing community houses approximately 1,300 undergraduate and graduate students from all over the world. These on-campus apartments are designed to provide convenient and comfortable living at minimal cost.

### **Statement (Restatement) of the Problem/Initiative**

For traditionally-aged students transitioning from high school to college, one of the biggest questions about college life is university housing accommodations. The major concern surrounding on-campus housing typically revolves around the roommate: who the roommate will be, if a roommate will be assigned, and how much influence the student has on the assignment of a particular roommate. As was typical of many universities, the University of Georgia's Department of University Housing did not provide a mechanism for newly admitted students to interact with other students to begin conversations about finding a roommate. Prior to 2004, all roommate preferences were made as a result of personal relationships, family referrals, and occasionally as a result of students meeting at Orientation.

Several studies over the years have examined the roommate assignment process (Nudd, 1965; Pace, 1970; Perkins, 1977; Garb, 1978; Jones, McCaa, & Martecchini, 1980; Stanley, Werring, & Carey, 1988; Fuller & Hall, 1996). Most provide inconclusive results with respect to the success of any roommate matching program. In general, asking

students questions on a form about study habits, musical interests, smoking preferences or other lifestyle issues does not yield a higher level of satisfaction with roommate selection. The research does indicate, however, that the more input students have in the process, the more satisfied students are with the results of the assignments.

Staff in University Housing began discussions with student leaders in the Residence Hall Association (RHA) and the Student Government Association (SGA) in Fall 2003. Students wanted a format online that would allow newly admitted students to interact with one another long before arriving on campus to begin classes. Social networking Web sites such as *Facebook* were rising in popularity, and students wanted a similar format exclusive to the UGA community. In response, an online roommate searching tool called The Dawg House was initiated.

### **Design**

Design work began through several discussions with students in RHA and SGA about the types of questions that should be included in The Dawg House. University Housing staff also attended an information technology workshop sponsored by the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International to learn more about similar programs at several universities in the Midwest. Programmers with the Application Support Group of UGA's Enterprise Information Technology Services (EITS) also were involved in the planning process to develop the Web site.

Designers compiled several questions for students to consider as they developed their personal profiles. The list evolved to include:

- Smoking status

- Sociability
- College/major
- Wake-up time
- Bed time
- Study habits (how and where a student studies)
- Estimated hours planned for work and study
- Exercise and fitness
- Guests and visitors
- Interest in Greek life affiliation
- Estimated number of times to travel back home
- Sports interests
- Special academic program participation
- Summer enrollment status

Students also were given the opportunity to write a brief paragraph about their interests or other facts they wanted to share that were not formally included in the questions. In addition, concerns about student safety and privacy were discussed, and a log-in process was developed to ensure that only admitted students who had registered for housing at the University of Georgia could log in and create a profile. As a result, this site is not open to everyone, but only to newly admitted UGA students.

These elements remain standard features of the Web site today. Another key feature is the “ideal roommate profile.” Students create their own profiles by responding to the items noted above, but each student also has the opportunity to create an “ideal roommate profile” in the database as well. A student will then complete the same survey

as each would hope his/her “ideal roommate” would respond. Once both the individual profile and “ideal roommate profile” are created, students can search in the database for other students by weighting each of questions according to their own values. For instance, if it is very important for a student to live with a non-smoking roommate, then the student can weight that question heavily. On the other hand, living with a roommate with the same major is less important, so that question could be weighted lightly. Every student can choose the weights of the questions in conducting searches for both matches to his/her own profile or to the “ideal roommate profile.”

Students communicate with one another via email, and they can decide whether to share other personal contact information such as phone numbers or home addresses. When a student decides to contact one of his/her “matches,” the system generates an email to the “match.” The student initiating contact does not know the email of the individual with whom communication is being requested, so the student receiving the request may choose not to respond. Furthermore, each student creates a UserID for The Dawg House; this UserID is intended to be anonymous so the student will have privacy until he/she chooses to share more personal information. All communication occurs directly between the students, and the Housing staff do not intervene in this process.

The Student Government Association funded the initial development of The Dawg House. The initial programming took approximately 40 hours to complete with an approximate cost of \$3,000. The Department of University Housing already had a contract with the Application Support Group for other Web-based initiatives, and the Housing Department assumed all responsibility for the Web site once developed,

including staff support and the cost of technical support. The program code was written in PHP, an open source programming language.

### **Implementation**

The Dawg House was piloted with a group of 276 incoming students participating in the Freshman College Summer Experience Program in Summer 2004. One half of the students created a profile and used the site to search for a potential roommate. The other half chose not to utilize The Dawg House. The support required from the Housing Assignments Office (including phone calls, email communications and technological assistance) was so minimal that the Department of University Housing staff decided to proceed with some enhancements to the program, including the list of questions outlined previously. In December 2004, The Dawg House was made available for use by all newly admitted students. Since December 2004, only minor changes or modifications have been made to The Dawg House and very little administrative support (both technical and non-technical) has been required. The table below represents the numbers of student users each year since the creation of The Dawg House.

	<b>2004</b>	<b>2005</b>	<b>2006</b>	<b>2007</b>
<b>Total Users</b>	141	2071	2472	2555

With respect to the timeline for implementation, discussions began in late Fall 2003 with the student leaders in the Residence Hall Association and the Student Government Association. Programmers from the Application Support Group were contracted by February 2004. The test site was launched in early April 2004 for use over a six-week period. Although the Housing Assignments Office was prepared for a high

number of phone calls and emails regarding the Web site, the pilot was launched without much effort on the part of the front-line staff in the Housing Assignments Office. The programmers monitored usage of the Web site closely and, fortunately, relatively few problems with the programming code had to be addressed.

Since Fall 2004, the site has been launched in December of each year to correspond with the time that the first freshmen are receiving their letters of admittance to the institution. Minimal programming time is needed each year to reopen the Web site, and staff are easily prepared to meet the annual target date for start-up. At the present time, the Web site is maintained through the Department of University Housing's annual contract with the Application Support Group. These programmers support more than 15 different Web applications, and The Dawg House requires very little maintenance.

### **Benefits**

The University of Georgia conducts an annual assessment regarding The Dawg House roommate matching program. In it, students living on-campus are asked to complete the Roommate Relationship Inventory (RRI) each spring (Winston & Yaranovich, 1994). Results are analyzed to compare student responses for the three most popular methods of selecting roommates: those who are randomly assigned; those who had a prior relationship with their prospective roommate; and those who used The Dawg House to select their roommate. Consistently, the results show that students using The Dawg House are more satisfied than students who are randomly assigned as roommates. In addition, students who are randomly assigned a roommate are more likely to change

roommates than those students who had a prior relationship with their roommate or those who used The Dawg House.

UGA students report high satisfaction with The Dawg House and appreciate the option to search for a roommate prior to arriving on campus. Although the Department of University Housing has not been able to document a decrease in the numbers of requested room changes since the implementation of The Dawg House, students do report anecdotally that they assume a greater personal responsibility for the quality of their roommate relationship when they use the online program. Helping students attribute more personal responsibility to the roommate relationship is critical to improving student satisfaction with the assignments process and the roommate selection process.

### **Retrospect**

Fortunately, the development and implementation of The Dawg House truly was a smooth one. Everyone involved in the planning—including student leaders, administrators and the programmers—wanted to offer a unique service to students. In retrospect, staff should have promoted the usage of The Dawg House more aggressively. Currently, the main promotion of The Dawg House is a paragraph in an email message sent to all new students who complete the registration process for on-campus living. In the future, more targeted marketing should be conducted to increase usage of the Web site by new students. In light of the positive results of University Housing’s research, more students should be encouraged to create a profile and search for a potential roommate on The Dawg House.

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