Residence Life
Assessment of Interim Housing Policies and Procedures

Submitted by Master of Public Administration Candidate Michael Nugent

ABSTRACT
During fall semester 2008, applications for residence on campus exceeded capacity levels and resulted in a record number of students (148) being assigned to live in interim housing within the residence halls. Consequently, students occupied interim housing for a much longer period than in the past. Residence Life assessed the experiences students had once they were assigned to interim housing to determine which areas could be improved for future overflow students. The assessment process also addressed students’ satisfaction with Residence Life’s communications about their housing status both before their arrival as well as after their stay in interim housing had begun. Responses varied from acknowledging tardiness in the application process and thanking the Residence Life Office for creating extra space and being accommodating, to expecting space to be available whenever a student applies before the academic year begins, to suggesting that Residence Life turn students away when there are no legitimate beds available. Multiple suggestions were offered to improve the situation of interim residents, as discussed in detail further in this assessment.

BACKGROUND
To accomplish its mission, the Residence Life Office must make every reasonable attempt to accommodate students’ residence needs, sometimes offering interim housing to students who are awaiting permanent housing assignments. Interim housing is located in study lounges, TV lounges, and other spaces that have been temporarily converted into living quarters with full bed sets and cardboard wardrobes.

Generally, students are completely moved out of interim housing within the first three weeks of the semester. This is accomplished by conducting a “warm body” audit to determine how many students actually checked in to their assignments. Students who have not checked in are then called to determine if they still plan to move in to the residence hall; depending on their response, students in interim housing are then moved into permanent assignments. After an unusually large number of “no shows” in fall 2006, a new refund and deposit policy was put in place to decrease unnecessary stays in interim housing. This system appears to be working, as there were fewer no shows in fall 2008 than in previous years. However, fall 2008 was unique in that Residence Life received a record number of housing applications. Because of this, students lived in interim housing for a much longer period than in the past, with a large number of those students living in their interim assignments for the entire fall semester. This assessment was conducted to inform decisions that may improve services to students placed in interim housing.

ASSESSMENT PROCEDURE
In order to garner a wide variety of information and responses from students who had occupied interim housing, the assessment was completed in two steps. The first step was an online survey sent to each student who had been assigned to interim housing at any point in time. The second step was a follow-up interview with those who volunteered at the conclusion of the initial online survey.

The initial survey was a series of questions, generally “yes” and “no” in variety, followed by comment sections in which respondents could discuss their experiences. The questions were developed by Michael Nugent, the Head Resident of Miller Hall and a candidate for the Master of Public Administration degree, and were enhanced and approved by Ron Brunell and Rita Tucker, the Director and Associate Director of Residence Life, respectively.

On November 2, 2008, the 14-question survey was e-mailed to all 148 students who had lived or were still living in interim housing during fall 2008. The e-mail message contained a brief explanation of the assessment and the Residence Life Office’s desire to improve upon its services. Every e-mail address known to the University for each student was used; thus, some students received the e-mail containing the message in more than one of their accounts.

Roughly three weeks later, on November 24, 2008, a follow up e-mail was sent to the same address list, thanking those who had already participated and asking those who hadn’t to please take a few moments to complete the survey. A week later, on December 1, 2008, the survey was closed and the results were analyzed for this assessment report. In total, 29 residents responded to the survey out of the initial 148, for a survey response rate of 19.6 percent.
Seven respondents identified themselves as willing to participate in follow-up interviews. Each of the seven provided an e-mail address as their best contact information, and the students were sent an e-mail on December 1, 2008 inviting them to a discussion session on December 4 between 4 and 7 p.m. The students were told that Mr. Nugent would be there during the entire three-hour window, and that they were free to come and go as they pleased. The e-mail also stated that the interview would be brief and that if these times did not work, they could schedule a time more convenient to them. None of the seven residents came to the discussion forum or responded to the e-mail, so the assessment findings and recommendations are based solely on the online survey results.

FINDINGS
Based on the survey results, a few regular occurrences have been identified. The majority of respondents, 76 percent, entered the fall semester having earned between zero and 15 college credits. Ninety percent of respondents were Montana residents. Although not relevant to this study, the large number of Montana residents entering with fewer than 15 credits may show that issues outside of the University’s control proved to be the deciding factor in their college decision, and that UM was quite possibly their back-up plan. One of the respondents never actually expected to go to UM, but was still surprised and disappointed to be living in interim housing, despite tardy submission of the housing application.

When asked when they submitted their housing applications, the vast majority of survey respondents, 93 percent, reported that they turned in their applications during June, July or August, or simply selected the response “late.” When asked whether they were clearly informed of the interim housing situation or if they spoke to the Residence Life Office prior to their arrival, 52 percent of respondents said “no.”

In the comment section following these questions, respondents expressed a wide variety of thoughts on their housing situation. Several respondents expressed dissatisfaction with parts of the service, such as tight quarters or a lack of real dressers to hold their clothes. While others expressed dissatisfaction with the lack of amenities, for example basic technological tools such as data ports for Internet hookups and cable television. A few respondents expressed their frustrations with the Residence Life staff at various levels, from the director through the building secretaries and on to the resident assistants. Frustrations ranged from the staff’s lack of answers about permanent placement timetables to their inability to follow through on stated intentions, such as removing excess furniture as students began to leave the interim situation. Some students felt they had been lied to prior to their arrival about what their housing situation would be like.

There were several positive responses in which interim students claimed responsibility for their situations and stated that they should have applied for housing earlier. A majority of respondents felt that the staff did their best to help out and give answers; 62 percent of respondents indicated that they found the Residence Life Office staff to be helpful after they had moved into their temporary assignments. There were also several respondents who stated that they enjoyed their time in interim housing and would only suggest minor improvements. These students cited aspects of the interim experience such as large rooms that were only shared with one or two other students, and not having to find housing on their own, as reasons for their satisfaction. Some respondents felt that the alternative was not attending UM, and that the Residence Life Office was doing the best that they could with the situation. One non-traditional student expressed frustration at living with 18-year-olds who felt entitled to regular housing even though they acknowledged that they signed up late. This respondent felt that the Residence Life Office should be commended for their efforts and that the attacks from the media, especially the Montana Kaimin, were entirely inappropriate.

Only 17 percent of students assigned to interim housing did not occupy their temporary room assignment. The comment section of the survey showed that some of these students sought out local family members rather than live in the temporary quarters; others “couch surfed” among their friends. Most made due with the situation and only had small concerns such as the lack of storage space or poor distribution of interim students, even as situations improved across campus. Overall, the interim students expressed frustration with the general lack of a placement timetable and the inability of staff members at any level to give clear answers.

RECOMMENDATIONS
The following is a list of recommendations intended to improve the interim service and overflow procedures of the Residence Life Office. These recommendations are based on the interim assessment survey responses as well as comments to Residence Life staff members from interim housing students throughout fall 2008. The recommendations are
separated into four categories: improving communication regarding housing status prior to students’ arrival, improving the atmosphere and amenities of the interim rooms for residents, improving the resident experience while students occupy temporary assignments, and preventing and/or limiting interim assignments in the future.

Communication Prior to Arrival

Based on the assessment, many students felt they were not properly informed of their situations before they arrived. Even some students who spoke to the Residence Life Office felt like they did not receive an accurate and complete description of what living in an interim assignment would be like. The Residence Life staff does its best to explain the situation when students ask, but most students discover their assignments by checking their status on Cyberbear because they have received a postcard prompting them to do so.

To alleviate residents’ concerns and address the communication breakdown, the Residence Life Office should adopt a policy of placing a phone call to a student who has been assigned to interim housing for the purpose of explaining the situation. The caller should be honest in stating that the student’s application was received after every regular bed had been assigned and that interim housing is not exactly the same as a regular bed and room assignment. This phone call should be followed up with an informational letter explaining the situation again, covering the services given to interim students such as free storage and a reduced housing rate, and outlining the options available to interim students, including early release from residency requirements.

Interim Atmosphere and Amenities

The most common concerns expressed in the assessment had to do with the arrangement of the interim rooms and the lack of the same basic services that are standard in a regular room assignment. These concerns ranged from a lack of closet space and dressers to a desire for working Internet ports. With the understanding that interim rooms will never be equal to regular rooms, the Residence Life Office should take steps to improve the amenities provided. The improvement that requires the largest financial commitment would most likely address the biggest concern of the interim students, and that is the issue of Internet ports. An effort should be made to ensure that there are working Internet ports in each interim room equal to the largest interim capacity of that room. For example, if twelve students are going to be assigned to the TV lounge in Miller Hall, there should be twelve Internet ports as well—one resident per port, just like in regular rooms. Priority in completing this project should be given to the interim spaces most commonly used, the study lounges in Aber, Jesse, and Knowles halls. This may seem excessive, but as expressed by more than one respondent, Internet capabilities are a necessity for college students in today’s technological society. At a lower priority, each interim room should have at least one cable TV port so students can attempt to create a “home-like” environment, even if it is just temporary.

Although not a result of this assessment, greater Internet access in lounge spaces may not only benefit interim housing; additional Internet ports may benefit permanent residents as well. Live Internet ports in residence hall study lounges that could be used by residents who have already registered and paid for Direct Connect services would encourage more educational use of these spaces and give residents an additional area to study and complete their work, should they want or need an alternative to their room.

The other area referenced often by the survey respondents was the unacceptable furnishings in the interim accommodations. If the assignment is truly temporary, to be used for less than three weeks, cardboard closets are acceptable. However, for students in interim housing for longer periods of time, a better wardrobe solution needs to be implemented. As interim students thin out and there are fewer residents assigned to each interim space, permanent furniture should be brought in. For example, the extra bed no longer in use could be replaced with a desk and a small dresser.

Interim Resident Experience
Once students have arrived on campus and checked into their interim housing assignments, the Residence Life Office must continue to be vigilant in assuring that students have the best possible living situation. This can be done through many small improvements.

The first recommendation regarding the resident experience is to have more information available up front to better inform both interim students and Residence Life staff, including building secretaries and resident assistants. This can be accomplished through a Frequently Asked Questions (FAQ) sheet available at each hall office and distributed to each staff member. The information sheet would include storage information, refund policies, services offered, release information, and any other information pertinent to interim housing. It would be similar (if not exactly the same) to the information to be sent to students upon their initial assignment to interim housing. The FAQ sheet would help give staff a better idea of what is going on and some direction when answering basic interim housing questions.

The second recommendation encompasses two steps and is aimed toward long-term interim situations. First, the Residence Life Office should make an attempt to redistribute interim students as other interim spaces clear out. For example, if an entire study lounge in Jesse Hall has cleared out, two of those spaces should be offered to the six students still sharing a basement room in Miller Hall. This way, if students are residing in interim housing longer than they or the Residence Life Office would like, they will at least have more privacy and space. Redistributing students will also spread the burden and responsibility of interim housing among more staff members in more residence halls, so as not to over-stress one resident assistant or building secretary, and cause less disruption to the creation of community, which is at the core of the Residence Life mission. It would be necessary to implement this step on a voluntary basis, as making a resident move from one interim assignment to another without their input may agitate the situation beyond any benefit gained by the extra space.

The second step of this recommendation involves the Residence Life Office removing the unused furniture of the residents who have moved out and replacing it with desks and/or wardrobes to create an environment that more closely resembles a standard residence hall room. This would allow residents a similar experience to that of their floor mates in each residence hall.

Long Term

In the long term, the Residence Life Office should move toward eliminating interim housing concerns, which will in turn improve the stakeholder satisfaction of their residents. This would involve developing space, either through new construction or renovation of existing buildings on campus, into one of two housing options.

One option entails using new housing space for overflow housing in the fall and conference housing throughout the rest of the year for groups that do not need rooms on a semester basis, such as the group of teachers from China that occupied a floor of Aber Hall for two months in the fall of 2007.

The second option entails using the new space as a residence hall similar to the other halls on campus, but with slight differences. It would be filled only when every other building was full and would initially be used to house the overflow students. Any extra spaces in this building could be used as single rooms to accommodate the increasing demand for single occupant rooms in campus housing, a national trend.

Additional options exist for addressing the interim housing situation. The Residence Life Office could stop accepting housing applications when permanent capacity is reached, thereby eliminating interim housing completely. Alternatively, the unit could cap interim housing spaces at a number that matches its expectations of finding permanent assignments for interim residents.

If students must occupy interim housing for longer than anticipated, or longer than seems reasonable, Residence Life should consider helping to place them in local hotels. The Residence Life Office would inform students of participating hotels and allow students to make arrangements on their own. However, Residence Life could not be fiscally responsible for the added costs, as hotel rooms have been quoted at minimum three times the expense of standard room rates. Residence Life would continue to offer its interim spaces to students without assignments.
Another option entails establishing a housing assignment system that gives first-year and new transfer students priority in housing assignments, and distributing local rental information to upperclassmen and/or transfer students.

Depending on which recommended action the Residence Life Office decides to pursue, the unit should consider taking additional steps to better accommodate students’ housing needs. For instance, the Residence Life Office should continue to compare male and female housing application totals in order to determine whether more space should be allocated to male applicants versus female applicants. The unit could also make decisions regarding these “flex floors,” flipping female-designated floors to male-designated floors in July, even if there is a back-up of applications in May. Waiting until July to make these flooring decisions would allow for a more complete view of the number of overflow applications, and whether there are more males or more females awaiting a room.

Finally, the Residence Life Office should consider establishing June 1 as an evaluation point for application acceptance decisions. The unit should analyze current and previous years’ application numbers, comparing first-year with upperclassmen, to determine if all remaining space should be held for first-year students.