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A DEVELOPMENTALLY BASED PROGRAM FOR PROBATIONARY RESIDENT ASSISTANTS

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This article proposes a program to assist the practitioner in formulating individual developmental programs for RAs with probationary status.

Introduction

This article provides an individualized program of challenges and supports to improve job performance and foster cognitive development in Resident Assistants (RAs) placed on probation due to less than satisfactory job performance. This individualized program, based on the theory of cognitive development outlined by Perry (1968), matches intervention level with the RA's developmental level. Each intervention in this program is tailored to fit the needs of the individual RA on probation. With this approach, RAs can better comprehend areas needing improvement and determine methods for realizing better job performance.

Perry (1968) developed a continuum of nine developmental positions divided into four major stages. Stage one represents dualism, in which students view knowledge as existing absolutely, established authorities as possessing all the "right answers", and the student's role as mastering these answers (Knefelkamp, Widick, & Parker, 1978). In the second stage, multiplicity, students acknowledge the existence of multiple perspectives to a given topic or problem. Differing views or opinions are accepted as equally valid by these students, however, these differences are not subject to evaluation (Knefelkamp, Widick, & Parker, 1978).

In the third stage, relativism, students evaluate views and opinions acknowledged in the previous stage, finding merits in each alternative (Knefelkamp, Widick, & Parker, 1978). At the fourth stage, commitment in relativism, students better understand their roles in the world, establishing identities and life styles consistent with personal themes (Knefelkamp, Widick, & Parker, 1978). Blake (1976) found that most RAs appear to be at the dualistic, multiplistic, or relativistic level. The occurrence of an RA at the committed stage appeared to be rare. Therefore, the probationary program outlined focuses on stages one, two, and three.

Application

The first step in establishing a program to assist the development of probationary RAs is to determine the RAs' cognitive developmental levels. This determination can be made using an interview format focusing on key developmental clues (Stonewater & Stonewater, 1983). Developmental clues are comments or questions providing information about developmental level. Stonewater and Stonewater (1983) provided examples of attributes and clues representative of each of the developmental levels (see Table 1).

Table 1

DUALISM

Attributes	Developmental Clues
1. Expects to be told what to do.	1. "Nobody will tell me which program I should do."
2. Thinks the "right answer" is out there and the authority knows it.	2. "My residents don't respect me. How do I make them respect me?"
3. Gets very frustrated with the authority who won't give the answers in clear cut terms.	3. "That Coordinator is lousy. She keeps giving us all this information on discipline but won't tell us how to handle every situation."
4. When the student sees differences of opinion, is either confused or thinks it is a "trick" to "get me to figure it out."	a) "The Coordinator knows what I should do, but she wants me to figure it out for myself."
	b) "Both roommates tell me a different story. I don't know which one is right."

MULTIPLICITY

Attributes	Developmental Clues
1. In some areas, we just haven't found the answer yet.	1. "The Coordinator is really clear on some stuff, but with some of the material, it seems like she just hasn't figured it out yet."
2. Is more tolerant of people with different viewpoints.	2. "You know those Moslems on my floor have some interesting beliefs—makes you think."
3. Understands multiple possibilities with "we all have a right to our own opinions" or "one answer is as good as another."	3. "I don't agree with that RA but I guess her ideas are as good as anybody else's."

RELATIVISM

Attributes	Developmental Clues
1. Understands for the first time about making decisions in context.	1. "I guess the best program for my floor depends a lot on their needs."
2. Sees relativistic thinking as a way of doing things that can be applied to several areas.	2. "You know, I learned a lot about counseling as an RA, and I can use those skills in dealing with my family and friends too."

NOTE: From "Developmental Clues: An Aid for the Practitioner" by B. B. Stonewater, and J. K. Stonewater, 1983, *Journal of the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators, 21* (2), pp. 52-59. Copyright 1983 by National Association of Student Personnel Administrators Inc. Adapted by permission.

In order to initiate development, challenges and supports must be offered (Sanford, 1966). Knefelkamp, Widick, and Parker (1978) stated that challenges must be one developmental level higher than the RA's present stage. If a challenge is made at or below the RA's present level, it will not stimulate development. If the challenge is more than one level above the RA's developmental level, the RA will not be able to comprehend what is desired. This may result in the RA retreating to supports characteristic of an earlier level of development, temporizing at the current level of development, or escaping from the situation altogether (Perry, 1968).

For the dualistic RA, challenges include emphasizing different viewpoints and experiential learning. Supports include a high degree of structure and a personally supportive atmosphere. Challenges for the RAs in the multiplistic stage involve making and defending choices, looking at things introspectively and abstractly, and using experiential learning (Knefelkamp, Widick, & Parker, 1978). Supports for this stage focus on providing the RA positive reinforcement and feedback, allowing the RA to make simple decisions, involving the RA in discussion, using failure as a learning experience, providing structure for the RA, and promoting a personally supportive atmosphere (Knefelkamp, Widick, & Parker, 1978).

Challenges for the RA in the relativistic stage include providing opportunities to make and implement choices, defending choices they have made, and using hypothetical discussions to emphasize abstract reasoning (Knefelkamp, Widick, & Parker, 1978). Supports for this stage involve prioritizing items, forming consensus decisions, and allowing freedom for choice.

Examination of living unit and supervisor evaluations will aid in developing appropriate challenges and supports and in determining specific areas for improvement for each RA in the probationary program. Generally, areas for improvement fall into one or more of the following categories: living unit interaction, staff interaction, or personal performance. Within each of these categories, specific challenges and supports for each developmental level can be identified.

For example, if an insufficient number of educational programs have been completed, an understanding of the RA's present stage of cognitive development will help determine solutions. A multiplistic RA may have a problem determining which programs are considered educational since residents have a valid interest in all of the programs presented. Relativistic RAs may not have completed the required

programs due to an inability to select which topics would be most appropriate for the living unit. The same problem may arise for differing reasons depending on the RA's developmental stage. A challenge to multiplistic RAs would be to have them generate a list of potential educational programs and then defend why the topic should be considered educational. These challenges should be coupled with the supports of allowing the RA to make simple decisions, discussing the choices with the supervisor, and offering the RA positive reinforcement and feedback. Challenges for the relativistic RA would be to select six possibilities for educational programs and defend why each program is relevant for the living unit. The support would be to allow the RA to select which three of the six possible programs to present to the living unit.

Each problem area encountered can be dealt with in this fashion: identifying the problem, identifying the developmental level of the RA, and determining specific challenges and supports. These guidelines, in written form, provide the RA with additional structure.

The following is a sample letter to a probationary RA.

> Dear _____,
>
> I am writing to confirm our recent conversation at which time I formally reviewed your Resident Assistant evaluations. As we discussed, I will be placing you on probation for Spring semester 19_____. I expect at least a satisfactory level of improvement in the areas outlined below, as well as on all corresponding questions on the next Departmental Resident Assistant Evaluation form. If performance does not improve, I will not be able to renew your contract as a Resident Assistant for Fall _____. The experience that you have had during your first semester as a Resident Assistant in _____ can be used to your advantage. (Ahrendt, personal communication, Oct. 30, 1983)

This paragraph provides structure and support for the RA. Within this opening paragraph, the RA knows what is expected, what the consequences of future behavior will be, and how improvement will be measured. The following section of the probationary letter outlines specific guidelines and challenges for the RA to follow to improve.

> To confirm our discussion, I will outline my expectations concerning areas for improvement and some suggestions for achieving them.
>
> **Living Unit Interactions**
>
> 1. Improve knowledge and manner in handling disciplinary situations.
>
> **Dualistic RA** — role play potential situations with your supervisor. Once play the part of the RA. Discuss your feelings that occurred in each situation. How were these similar or different.
>
> **Multiplistic RA** — Role play potential situations with your supervisor, then discuss performance.
>
> **Relativistic RA** — Discuss hypothetical disciplinary situations with your supervisor. Be able to defend your position in each instance.

2. Complete four educational programs.

Dualistic RA — Make a list of five programs you would like to attend, then list five programs that you feel the living unit would like to attend. Out of ten potential programs, select the four you would like to do and discuss them with your supervisor.

Multiplistic RA — Make a list of at least ten potential educational programs. Be able to defend why each program should be considered educational.

Relativistic RA — Make up a list of at least ten educational programs and prioritize them. Next, select the four programs you wish to complete and establish a program date.

Personal Performance

1. Improve your time management and organization skills.

Dualistic RA — Make a list of job responsibilities that never seem to get done and across from each item list what you did instead. What factors played a part in your decisions to do one thing instead of another? How do you feel about that?

Multiplistic RA — Make a list of job responsibilities that never seem to get done and the reason why. Process this list with your supervisor.

Relativistic RA — Make lists of job responsibilities, personal responsibilities, and academic responsibilities. Prioritize these items and with the help of your supervisor, arrange a weekly schedule and calendar.

Staff Interactions

1. Attend and actively participate in discussions in large and small staff meetings in a positive manner.

Dualistic RA — Before each staff meeting, meet with your supervisor to acquire a new role that you will play in the group. Afterwards, process how you felt in the group and how you made your decisions within the group.

Multiplistic RA — Immediately following the meeting, process and examine your role in the group with your supervisor.

Relativistic RA — Prioritize the sections of the meeting you liked best, list the role you played in the group in each situation, and discuss how your involvement influenced the group. Process this with your supervisor.

In the final section of the letter, conclude and provide the RA with additional support.

> I am available to you in any manner in which I can be of support—job related or personally. I believe that if you take a positive attitude toward improving your performance, you can receive satisfactory evaluations both from your floor residents and supervisors during Spring, 19_____. Please feel free to see me if you have any questions regarding this matter or if you need assistance in any area. (Ahrendt, personal communication, Oct. 30, 1983)

The purpose of this letter is to provide the RA with additional support, outline specific areas that have been noted in the past as areas in which the RA needs improvement, and to document your actions in assisting the RA. The documentation is necessary in instances in which the RA does not improve and termination papers must be filed.

In addition to the letter, a regular weekly meeting should be scheduled between the RA and a supervisor. During this time, the supervisor should assist the RA in interpreting the probationary letter and following the suggested guidelines for improvement in the specific areas. Weekly meetings with the supervisor provide the opportunity for additional challenges and supports.

In these meetings, the dualistic RA may be challenged to internalize decision making, to examine subjects from more than one viewpoint, and to explore these challenges through role playing. Supports provided by the weekly meeting include a high degree of structure, feedback, and support.

The multiplistic RA should be challenged to look at things more introspectively and abstractly, and introduced to more diversity and experiential learning. Additional supports can be offered such as giving positive reinforcement, and providing a personal atmosphere of encouragement when things do not work out.

For the relativistic RA, additional challenges may include discussing hypothetical situations that emphasize abstract reasoning, providing opportunities to make choices, and defending a position after making the choice. Supports would necessitate freedom of choice with low structure, prioritizing items, and providing an atmosphere of encouragement. Weekly meetings can be instrumental in encouraging the RA, and guiding the RA's progress. These meetings stimulate the RA's development by providing support, and by addressing additional problem areas.

To discern whether the RA is making progress, Knefelkamp and Slepitza (1978) have listed nine general areas of developmental change: a) the internalization of locus of control; b) the development of increased analytic ability; c) the integration of diverse components into a complex whole; d) the movement toward more open semantic structure allowing for greater use of alternatives, qualifiers, and modifiers; e) the use of self-analysis to become aware of defining factors; f) the awareness and recognition of the legitimacy of other points of view, possible explanations, and different perspectives; g) the acceptance of consequences of actions or decisions; h) the increased ability to seek and master new roles or activity opportunities, and looking forward to new opportunities for self within new roles; and i) a focus on new learnings and experiences (Knefelkamp & Slepitza, 1978). Although this is a subjective notation of progress, behavioral indications should be observable in the RA's interactions.

Without an organized program for improvement, the probationary RA will probably delay development in one of the ways discussed by Perry (1968). The first alternative is temporizing, where the student delays in a developmental stage. The second alternative is escape, where the student is avoiding the responsibility of commitment. The third alternative is retreat, where a student regresses to a dualistic or other lower orientation, perhaps to find security and the strength to cope with an environment that is too challenging (Knefelkamp, Widick, & Parker, 1978).

Conclusion

Overall, a developmentally based probationary program can assist residence hall professionals designing and establishing individualized interventions to fit the

developmental needs of each RA. Combined with appropriate challenges and supports, the residence hall professional can become increasingly effective in fostering development and increasing the number and quality of RAs who return to staff.

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FUND FOR EXCELLENCE

This year the School of Education has allocated support for the publication of the *IUSPA Journal* through the Fund for Excellence in Education. Therefore, the IUSPA will no longer be directly soliciting its alumni and friends for contributions to meet publication costs. We will, however, continue to contact alumni periodically through other mailings. The editors, although disappointed at the loss of some personal contact with the alumni, are excited about the additional time and energy able to be devoted to the process of actually editing submitted articles. We trust that this year's *Journal* reflects that additional time.

The editors do wish to express our thanks to those of you who have continued your support of the *Journal* by contributing both to it and to the new Fund for Excellence. Please continue to be a part of the ongoing tradition of excellence in Indiana University's Student Affairs program by your support of the Fund. We still cannot do it without you.

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