Let's Rethink the Role: A Critical Reflection Addressing Responsibilities of Undergraduate Resident Assistants

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Abstract

In modern contexts, college dormitories, developed initially for the sole purpose of housing students, have evolved into residence halls/centers that promote student engagement and development. As a result, institutions regularly hire student paraprofessionals, commonly known as resident assistants (RAs), to achieve positive outcomes related to student development. Specifically, resident assistants frequently provide support, mentorship, and guidance to students who live in on-campus residence halls. Unfortunately, resident assistants are susceptible to work-related burnout due to this work. Thus, to explore the topic of RA burnout, this study employs non-empirical methods, including a literature review and a semi-structured phone interview, to accomplish three things. First, the essay outlines the challenges that RAs face in their work. Next, the essay describes an emerging model of staffing for RAs. Finally, the narrative concludes with practical, evidence-based recommendations that can improve support for RAs.

Keywords

Resident Assistant, Burnout, Residence Life

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Centering the Role & Responsibilities of the Resident Assistant

Although initially developed for the sole purpose of housing students, on-campus residence halls are now home to dynamic learning environments that promote student engagement and development. Specifically, residence halls encourage student interaction among lines of difference while providing a safe environment for students to experience independent living (Crandall, 2004). Although residence halls are spaces of active engagement, this type of participation is impossible without undergraduate staff members, frequently referred to as resident assistants (RAs). As student paraprofessionals, RAs are traditionally asked to support, mentor, and guide students through various complex concerns of student development. For example, RAs might help students through problems related to identity development, academic concerns, and matters of student health and wellbeing. As a result of these responsibilities, RAs may assume any of the following roles: peer helper, community builder, administrator, cheerleader, mentor, sanitation engineer, policy enforcer, referral agent, programmer, mediator, role model, agent of the state, interventionist, transitional agent, friend, liaison, university representative, tour guide, advisor, and surrogate sibling (Crandall, 2004). From this listing of titles, the many responsibilities of the RA are clear. However, the concerns that arise due to so many different responsibilities are less clear. For example, because of the various responsibilities that an RA may have, student staff members may frequently dedicate more time to the role, at a detriment to themselves. Here, the concern regards how RAs may struggle to implement and maintain good time management practices. Additionally, RAs may not always set appropriate boundaries within the role. To this end, the emotionally and psychologically challenging situations that RAs respond to may negatively affect their lives.

As a current supervisor to seven resident assistants, the challenges associated with the RA role resonate well. Here, I can cite how staff members within my supervisory authority demonstrate the negative symptoms described above. For example, some feel disconnected from their academic work because of how time-consuming their roles are. In another example, some describe the emotional turmoil after responding to a severe incident involving alcohol, physical violence, or harassment. Furthermore, personal experiences are another rich data source to qualify how challenging the RA role can be. For instance, as an RA at a small, liberal arts college in the south [UR], I frequently worked more than the 15 required hours set forth by the Office of Residence Life and Student Housing (University of Richmond, n.d.). During most weeks, duty—alone—accounted for more than 15 hours of my time. As an RA at UR, it was not uncommon to remain in the Duty Office for 7-10 hours some nights. While I enjoyed my time as a resident assistant, frequently, I put my residents first—over my concerns and needs. For instance, instead of studying for exams, I would choose to support residents who were having a hard time transitioning to the social and academic environment at UR. Finally, while studying in UR's duty office, I often found it challenging to concentrate or focus on assignments that were due. To this end, I was unable to complete work because of numerous interruptions, such as mandatory safety walks and phone calls from students or campus partners. Although it is true, my supervisors told me that I was a person first, a student second, and an RA third, these sentiments were sometimes challenging to put to practice. This prioritization of roles was often lost in how my supervisors communicated the expectations of the RA role.

While supervising RAs at a large, public institution in the Midwest [IU], I understand how my student staff members struggle with balancing the role's responsibilities. Because these challenges are multifaceted and individualized, there is something to be said about an RA's ability to find balance in the position. However, there is also something to be said about what we, residence life administrators, ask our RAs to do. Although leaders within divisions of residence life frequently preach that RAs are people first, students second, and RAs third, these sentiments sometimes lose their meaning when RAs must accomplish so much.

Although leaders and students alike see the RAs as competent, many student staffers may now report high levels of burnout, exhaustion, stress, and other adverse side effects (DuBose, 2020; Hardy& Dodd,1998; Harris, 2021; Matten, 2020). Thus, there is a critical need for institutions to assess RA

responsibilities and the environments in which RAs work. While many efforts can minimize the harmful effects of overworking, many are not sustainable or prosperous at accomplishing specific goals to reduce stress and burnout. The lack of success is the case because administrators are not always conscious of the balancing acts that student staff members must take to stay ahead of the required tasks. More specifically, residence life administrators do not consider enough the questions of how RAs sustain the work-life balance when resident assistants must consistently tend to their individual needs and the other demands of the role that center their residents. Additionally, administrators do not typically offer much practical guidance on how RAs navigate their responsibilities. For example, residence life administrators might frequently assess RAs for their ability to find balance among their multiple responsibilities without giving them explicit instructions or guidance on how to manage their time.

Because RAs have such complex roles, the supervisors mentoring and advising them must take a step back to evaluate their responsibilities. Unfortunately, resident assistants are susceptible to work-related burnout and emotional exhaustion due to their work. As supervisors and departmental leaders, we must initiate first-order and second-order change processes (Pope et al., 2019) to transform how RAs experience the role. Here, to move beyond cosmetic, first-order change, there must be a more significant commitment to changing the very nature of the RA role, second-order change. Enacting effective change is how department leaders support holistic development for residents while also supporting the development of our student-staff members. To explore how the RA role and responsibilities might change, this paper employs non-empirical methods to understand better how work-related burnout may be limited or eradicated for RAs. The specific methods applied include a brief literature review and a phone interview with a professional staff member of a medium sized institution on the east coast [G.W.]. Using these methods, an emerging model of staffing for RAs and recommendations for practice are described in the portions that follow.

Making Shifts in the Traditional Responsibilities of Resident Assistants

Although RAs are necessary human resources of many residence life departments, little consideration is given to the type and volume of work that RAs assume. Additionally, there appears to be little concern for the environments RAs work in. For example, Harper et al. (2011) and Roland & Agosto (2017) identify racism, lack of benefit of the doubt, and other racialized phenomena as significant challenges for resident assistants of color. Furthermore, some policies (or the lack thereof) surrounding the RA role may cause difficulty for resident assistants. For example, despite the absence of a social media policy, Will Walker, an RA at UR, was placed on employee-based disciplinary probation for speaking out against the University of Richmond's COVID-19 response (Getis, 2020). Beyond this, the concern of burnout is a legitimate consequence of serving in the RA role (DuBose, 2020; Harris, 2021). Finally, students performing in the RA role might experience any crisis, defined by Canto et al. (2017) as "an event that significantly interferes with an individual's ability to meet needs, disrupts problem-solving skills…and incites a state of disorganization for the individual" (p. 47). For these reasons, there is a need to think critically about the responsibilities that RAs have.

Because of the multifaceted responsibilities of the RA role, some institutions are already thinking critically about how to best support their student staff members. For instance, at a large public research institution in the Midwest, IU, various role requirements have been reconceptualized to minimize the student's labor. Here, RAs are no longer required to serve as customer service agents (Personal Communication, SIL, November 30, 2021). Before the adjustment, RAs were required to work a minimum of 2-hours at each residence hall's center desk. Additionally, RAs at IU can now publish a pre-designed bulletin board instead of creating a new one. Beyond IU, one institution, [G.W.], has taken bold, innovative action to discontinue the traditional design of the RA role (Mangan, 2021).

Exploring an Innovative Approach to the RA Role

To learn more about this new model of RA responsibilities, I reached out to BJ (a pseudonym), a community coordinator at G.W. While serving in this role, BJ was able to talk candidly about G.W.'s decision to shift its student-staff model. BJ's testimony was critical to "the study" because G.W. is believed to be the only institution that has adopted an alternative staffing model. To engage BJ in this study, I first received his contact information from one of the assistant directors in IU's residence life department. Having graduated recently from IU with an M.S. Ed in Higher Education and Student Affairs, BJ was identified as a residence life leader who could offer interesting insights on the topic of interest. After receiving BJ's contact information, I reached out via email with the hopes of conducting a phone interview. Fortunately, BJ accepted the invitation to speak with me on the phone within a day or two of receiving the email. Thus, on November 11, 2021, BJ and I discussed G.W.'s RA staffing model and other related concerns. The interview lasted approximately 1 hour and was primarily unstructured. Because of the lack of structure, there was no initial set of questions. Instead, our conversation was guided mainly by my interest in how G.W. mobilized change to address the needs of RAs.

With a thorough understanding of the complexities of the RA role and the sociopolitical contexts of COVID-19 and anti-Black racism—among other concerns, leaders at G.W. now segment the responsibilities of the RA. Instead of asking individual staff members to take on multiple roles, leaders at G.W. ask RAs to complete distinct tasks. For instance, at G.W., student-staff members might serve only as programmers, policy enforcers, or interventionists—not all three (Personal Communication, BJ, November 11, 2021). Because of how the roles are split, there are various positive outcomes. According to BJ, this innovative model challenges full-time staff members to take more ownership of their buildings and communities. Specifically, this translates to full-time staff members being more directly involved in what is happening within their buildings. Furthermore, these innovative models allow for improved delivery of student services. Because there are fewer administrative layers between students and full-time staff, students in need can receive support in a timelier manner (Personal Communication, BJ, November 11, 2021). However, in contrast to these benefits, there are some challenges. First, students mistake their full-time community director for a resident assistant in many cases (Personal Communication, BJ, November 11, 2021). Secondly, because of the significant differences in experience and developmental levels, full-time staff members may not always relate the best to students who may be several years younger than them. Finally, there are different expectations around policy enforcement and communication for full-time professional staff and paraprofessional staff members. Here, where a resident assistant might give a few warnings about a policy violation, full-time professionals are more apt to submit incident reports without the same level of notice to students (Personal Communication, BJ, November 11, 2021).

Reflections on the Innovative Model of RA Responsibilities

Although BJ's comments provide interesting insights on what happens at G.W., I was initially shocked after hearing more about the innovative model of RA responsibilities. Because much of my residence life training comes from experiences that center on the traditional approach, I had a great deal of difficulty accepting this new innovative model. I immediately questioned how the model at G.W. might be transferable to other institutions such as UR or IU. With fewer students than G.W., I accepted the idea might be feasible at UR; however, I seriously doubted that the model could be implemented at IU, where more than 12,000 students reside in on-campus housing. Here, I proposed that the innovative model could not be scaled to meet the needs of IU's housing department. Thus, ultimately although G.W. has minimized the responsibilities of the RA role, there may very well be a need to maintain the traditional model of the RA role to deliver specified outcomes, such as retention and persistence (Fosnacht et al., 2021). However, more empirical research is needed before the innovative model can be ruled out as ineffective.

Yet still, as the needs of student-staff members continue to evolve, there must be some critical thought given to what the RA role requires. Especially critical are the specific challenges that arise for

RAs during obstacles such as those brought on by events like the COVID-19 pandemic (Hancock & Amaya, 2020; Walker, 2020). Finally, if RAs are the backbone of housing operations, we must change how these student staff members experience the resident assistant role. Although the change to the RA responsibilities may be warranted, we must be careful to consider how to move forward with initiatives and programs that center questions of satisfaction, burnout, and supervision (Reed, 2015). Highlighting the importance of these concepts, Reed shows us how burnout, job satisfaction, and supervision are interrelated and significantly affect live-in and live-on staff members, including RAs. Although unrelated to residence life, Wen et al. (2020) also demonstrate how burnout is directly related to high turnover rates in service-type jobs.

Recommendations for the Future

In what follows, I propose recommendations that may be incredibly impactful. Though I cannot account for all the unique factors that contextualize housing units at other institutions, I suggest these recommendations with a duality of experience framed by time within residence life departments at a private liberal arts college and a public research institution. Thus, I offer six broad recommendations.

Become familiar with the reasons why students become resident assistants

Here, two prominent studies articulate what these motivations are. Bonne (2018) posits that students seek the role of resident assistant to provide support and help, secure stable income, and develop a sense of community with other resident assistants. These motivations hold for RAs regardless of the population they serve, the type of institution they are employed by, demographic characteristics, the variety of residential communities the RAs support, and the number of semesters the RA has previously served in their role. Spaulding (2020) proposes that resident assistants among generation Z pursue the position for three reasons: (1) make connections with coworkers and residents, (2) participate in community building, (3) establish a sense of belonging to their university and the living environment that they inhabit. Beyond this, RAs from various generations seek the role because it seemingly challenges and supports their personal and professional development. Put more plainly, "RAs want to have the ability to develop skills that will help them in future careers" (Spaulding, 2020, p.73).

Prioritize What's Critical & Stay Consistent

Because the Resident Assistant role requires so much from students, leaders should think critically about asking student staff members to do so much. It is likely that the philosophy of *person first, student second, RA third* is lost upon some supervisors and student staff members. To combat this, departmental leaders should prioritize the needs of the students they hope to serve and tell RAs to focus on specific tasks that are best linked to developmental outcomes. For example, as evident at IU, it did not make much sense to require RAs to operate the desks because desk operations may not directly correlate to student development. Although this additional role provides resident assistants with professional skills, it may come at the cost of their sleep, academic success, or financial stability. Finally, leaders should make a great effort to create consistent but individualized expectations for staff members using an identity-conscious approach (Brown et al., 2020).

Be honest about the role

We now know what motivates students to become RAs, so we might consider these motivations when marketing the RA role. However, we must ensure that we are not deceiving students about the role with these motivations noted. It might be advantageous to allow current and former student-staff members to speak about their positive and negative experiences during information sessions. Furthermore, leaders should state the specific differences for RAs in certain living environments. For example, we should be telling prospective staff members that if they reside in a first-year residence hall, they may experience more emotional exhaustion or burnout (Benedict & Mondloch, 1989). Taken together, students should

have a good collection of knowledge from various perspectives that help them determine for themselves if they want to be a resident assistant or not.

Address fit & burnout

Although many leaders may consider students' fit in the RA role, we typically do not have comprehensive ways of measuring this fit. To truly understand what should change, we must know more about the experiences and feelings of resident assistants who serve diverse students. To assess burnout, many measures exist. The *Employee Burnout Survey* (Jawahar, 2012) is one tool of interest that might help us understand how burnout exists within the experiences of resident assistants. Furthermore, there may be some need to use Maslach et al.'s (1996) *Burnout Inventory*. Additionally, leaders might use the Person-Environment Fit Scale (van den Bosch et al., 2019) to assess the environmental fit of student-staff members.

Develop and sustain initiatives that limit the effects of psychological distress and burnout

To address the first part of this, leaders should provide resident assistants with intentional resources that help them deal with job-related stress. For instance, leaders might work with their on-campus counseling center to provide in-center, group therapy sessions specific to concerns and challenges that arise for resident assistants. Additionally, leaders may think about investing in a private space on-campus that provides RAs across buildings and neighborhoods an opportunity to interact with one another. This space might become an RA breakroom and should specifically be where RAs do not have to perform the bulk of their duties.

Give gratitude and appreciation

Although residence life leaders may all believe that appreciation for student staff members is shown, many staff members may not feel valued or appreciated. This is important for leaders to be aware of because, what we hope to show may not translate directly to what is done. To alleviate this tension, supervisors to RAs must intentionally thank staff members, even when they do the bare minimum. Beyond this, leaders might also think about other ways to show our appreciation to staff members. For example, resident assistants might be rewarded for work with free apparel, less work-focused excursions, and more significant departmental celebrations. In any case, our departments should take every opportunity to give as much appreciation as we can to our student staff members. This high level of gratitude has been linked to positive outcomes such as decreased stress at work (Stocker et al., 2019).

Conclusion

Because RAs have such complex roles, the folks supervising them must take a step back to evaluate their responsibilities. Unfortunately, resident assistants are susceptible to work-related burnout and emotional exhaustion due to their work. As supervisors and departmental leaders, we must initiate first-order and second-order change processes to transform how RAs experience the role. To explore how the RA role and responsibilities might change, this paper employs non-empirical methods to understand better how work-related burnout may be limited or eradicated for RAs. Expressly, I turn to a literature review and a phone interview with a professional staff member of a medium sized college located on the east coast [G.W.] to explicate this broad question. Using these methods, I ultimately outline the challenges for RAs, describe an emerging staffing model for RAs, and offer practical, evidence-based recommendations for supporting RAs. The proposed recommendations are broadly situated as promising practices that may increase morale among resident assistants.

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