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PREPARING FOR LIFE AFTER COLLEGE

Preparing for Life After College:

The Career Skills learned by Resident Assistant Alumni

Kala Cousineau

Eastern Illinois University

Abstract

According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), there is a high value placed on college graduates who acquire skills that can be utilized to attain their professional goals (2015). On college campuses, the resident assistant (RA) role is one of the many opportunities the residence life department has that can help develop students and their career readiness (Peck, 2017). There is a lack of research looking at what transferable skills students in the resident assistant position acquire and then use in their careers post-graduation. This qualitative study utilized semi-structured interviews to explore what skills former RAs learned in the position that they now utilize. The research showed that the former RAs learned skills that are not only transferable to any job, but also competencies that they did not anticipate translating into their careers after college.

Dedication

I would like to dedicate this thesis to every RA who has ever questioned why they took the job. I know at times it feels like there are more bad days than good. Know that the work you do matters. I hope this research helps show that all the bulletin boards, programming, and late-night duty calls are worth it.

Acknowledgments

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To my best friend Maddie, thank you for being my hype woman and accomplice over the last decade. Thank you for listening to me rant about school and life over snapchat and reminding me that distance does not define our friendship. Beccah and Faith, I did not expect to make close friends like I have these past two years. All of Starbucks and wine in the world cannot express the love I have for the two of you now. Thank you for sticking with me through class, our assistantships, and what you two fondly call “The Incident”. Thank you to the RA/DA staff in Andrews, central housing staff at EIU, and my supervisor Lauren, who have helped solidify why I chose this career.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

With college students entering the job market after graduation, it is important for students to develop transferable skills while still in college to be better prepared for their career after graduation. According to the National Association of Colleges and Employers (NACE), there is high value placed on college graduates who acquire skills that can be utilized to attain their professional goals (2015). In the residence life department, there are several opportunities for developing student employees and their career readiness and one of these opportunities is the role of the resident assistant (RA) (Peck, 2017). Residence life departments employ many RAs every year and spend a significant amount of time training and supervising these students (McConnell, 2018). Resident assistants operate in a hybrid work environment where they live with the students that they are responsible for while also having many of the same expectations that their residents do, including attending school and taking part in other extracurricular activities.

A common struggle that is seen among resident assistants is the issue of burnout, as it can sometimes feel like the stress of the job is not worth the rewards it provides (Gochnauer, 2017). Students who can successfully combat these feelings of burnout can continue to be successful in the RA role. Developing skills such as resiliency, which is defined as “the process of positive adaptation to significantly difficult life circumstances: (Theron & Theron, 2013, p. 392). If RAs can develop a sense of resiliency when it comes to their responsibilities that are associated with the job, they can continue to be effective in their role.

One contributor to burnout among resident assistants is related to them not seeing the connections between what they are learning and doing in their RA role and its relevance to their career after college (Deluga & Winters, 1991). RAs are positioned within a job that can help develop employability skills useful in any job while being surrounded by full-time professional staff who are invested in their continued development (Donahue, 2015). Being able to see facts about successful career people who were RAs in their undergrad can lead current RAs to see the lifelong impact that the position will have on them after they leave. This can also serve as a recruitment tool by showing potential applicants the benefits that surround the role of the resident assistant beyond the immediate compensation.

Purpose of the study

The purpose of this study is to examine the skills that former RAs identify as having developed while they were in the RA position and how those skills are being used in their career after college. This study seeks to explore the ‘transferable skills’ that RAs acquire in their student leadership role that they use in their work post-graduation. This information can be useful both for housing professionals looking to successfully market the position by highlighting what students learn in the role that can be applied after college as well as aiding in the development of these skills while the students are employed in the RA position.

Research questions

The following research questions will be used to guide this study:

1. How do former resident assistants perceive the impact of their RA experiences on their work post-graduation?

2. What transferable skills do former resident assistants feel that they acquired during their time in the position?
3. How do former resident assistants utilize these skills in their current work?
4. What skills learned during their time as an RA do participants consider the most valuable in their post-graduation work?

Significance of the Study

It has been shown that RAs play a vital role in fostering communities, enforcing safe living environments, and assisting with the personal growth of college students living in the residence halls (Paladino, Murray Jr., Newgent, & Gohn, 2005). While there are studies that show that students who hold leadership or positional roles on their campus have a more positive college experience (Dugan & Komives, 2007; Kuh et al., 2007; Tieu, Pancer & Pratt, 2010; Moore, Lovell, McGann & Wyrick, 1998), there is a lack of research looking at how, or even if, RAs utilize these skills post-graduation. Understanding which skills developed in the RA role are used after graduation can be beneficial in multiple ways, including when promoting the RA position to increase the potential diversity and improving the success of the search for RAs. The results of this research can also allow housing professionals to better support students to be more successful in their development of career competencies. The findings from this study can provide greater understanding of how the RA position prepares students for success in their career after graduation.

Limitations of the Study

There are a few potential limitations that have been identified that might impact the validity of the proposed study. One potential limitation may be in the selection of participants for the study. All participants will be alumni from a mid-sized, public Midwestern University, who were also an RA during their time at the institution. Participants will be contacted through social media in specific housing department alumni groups. In addition, emails of other former RAs will also be provided by the office as they keep a record of all their past employees to contact directly in the event that they are not actively engaged with the social media group. These methods will limit the pool of potential participants to those who have maintained some form of contact with the department after graduation.

Another possible limitation is that the length of time a participant has been an alumnus can drastically impact their answers on what they learned from the RA job. To address this issue, only RAs that were in the position for at least two semesters and who have been alumni for more than two and less than five years post-graduation will be invited to participate.

A third issue of possible concern pertains to the ability to build rapport with the participants during the meeting. Establishing rapport is critical because the more positive the rapport is between the interviewer and interviewee, the more likely the interviewee is willing to share about their experiences (McDermid, Peters, Jackson, & Daly, 2014). Based on the virtual nature of the interviews, establishing rapport will be more difficult and limited to the interactions with the participants in setting up the actual interview. The researcher will attempt to build rapport through shared experiences of being an RA.

Finally, participants may have difficulty recalling their experiences from the RA position. To address this concern, participants will be given the questions prior to the interview so that they can review and think more critically of the questions they will be asked as opposed to if they were asked with no advance notice.

Definitions of Terms

The following are definitions of terms that benefit the understanding of this study:

Resident Assistant: A "Position on college campuses that requires undergraduate students to be available nearly 24 hours a day, be the frontline worker in university housing programs when responding to and managing a multitude of diverse issues in residence halls, and are required to develop a living and learning community conducive to the intellectual and personal growth of students living in the residence halls" (Paladino, et al., 2005, p. 1).

Residence Life: A term used to describe a college or university office and their employees who are responsible for providing support for the residents who live in on-campus housing.

Transferable Skills: A term used to describe "skills developed within one situation (education) are also useful when transferred into another situation (employment)" (Fallows et al., 2000).

Summary

This chapter provided an introduction to this study including the purpose, significance, and the research questions that will guide the study to better understand what career skills are developed by resident assistants that are being used in their career after college. This study will look at former resident assistants who have graduated and

entered the work force, excluding those who pursued a career in student affairs to determine what transferable skills they learned in the position. The findings from this study are important in understanding how former RAs have benefitted from in their time as an RA in their current professions. Chapter two will review the relevant literature that highlights the role and history of the resident assistant, resident assistant training, and those identified transferable skills related to the RA position.

Chapter II

Review of Literature

The purpose of this study is to identify what transferable skills resident assistants (RAs) learn while in their position that they use in their jobs after graduation. More specifically, the researcher seeks to understand if the skills developed while in the position can be applied to many different careers and what aspects of the RA role, if any, are utilized the most often. The following is a review of literature around resident assistants' history, role, and the transferable skills that they bring to their careers post-graduation.

History of Resident Assistants

In the United States, university founders followed the Oxford model which included professors overseeing outside-of-classroom learning within the residence halls but, unlike the Oxford model, added in that the professors would also be overseeing the disciplinary side of student life (Cowley, 1934; Palmer, Broido, & Campbell, 2008). This approach to student behavior was predicated on the application of the doctrine of *in loco parentis* to manage student behavior while attending college (Melear, 2003). This approach allowed institutions the same rights as parents over students which gave the institution both legal authority and shielding from liability for their actions against the students (Lake, 2013).

When World War II ended and the G.I. bill was passed, approximately 360,000 veterans were able to go to college, which caused universities to respond with a boom in housing construction on campuses to accommodate the increase in students (Blimling, 2003). With this influx of residents living on campus, there was a higher demand for

residence hall staff to address everything going on in the building with the students (Frame, 2009). Prior to the 1960s, instead of hiring faculty, colleges enlisted elderly housemothers and retired military officers to enforce policy and standing rules that governed the residence halls (Upcraft & Pilato, 1982). To help these professionals supervise residents, undergraduate students became student workers who took on additional responsibilities, eventually leading to the creation of the current role of Residence Assistant/Advisor or RA (Upcraft & Pilato, 1982; Schroeder & Mable, 1994).

According to Arvidson (2003), the RA role expanded from being more of a disciplinary role at the beginning of the position's existence to incorporate the additional roles of counselor and advisor during the 1970s. The most recent addition to the expectations of the RA position has been in the increased role of the RA in developing community for their residents (Blimling, 2010). In the decades following the boom from the GI Bill, other duties have also been added depending on the needs of individual institutions. Nationally, there has also been legal recognition of the RA role as several laws have been passed that applied to the RA's job duties including the enacting of both the Clery Act and FERPA (Boone, 2016).

Other complex issues that continue to rise in recent years include the complexity and severity of mental health issues (Ritger, 2013) and crises such as school shootings (Diekow & Dunkel, 2013) which have impacted higher education institutions. Not only does the RA serve as a crisis responder, they also play a role in watching for indications of possible threats and situations of concern (Boone, 2016). A shift in the relationship between RAs and students has resulted in less face-to-face contact with residents as a result of the development of various forms of social media that have taken the place of in-

person interaction and has made it more difficult for RAs and residents to make the lasting relationships that often made the expected tasks of the RA easier (Martinez-Alemnan, 2014).

Role of Resident Assistants

Resident assistants' responsibilities may vary from campus to campus; however, there are underlying duties at each university that are common across institutions. These areas of responsibility include performing administrative tasks such as preparing reports and assisting in occupancy management, communicating with residence hall staff members, students, and program leaders, as well as upkeeping the information desk (Blimling, 2003). RAs are also representatives of the institution that they work for. In addition to being a student, these leaders are expected to set the example for other students at that institution. They must be able to interpret and support the institution's rules and regulations, be accountable for other students' behavior, and report infractions made by other students for whom they are responsible (Blimling, 2003; Everett & Loftus, 2011; Donahue, 2015). Resident assistants are also in charge of creating a cohabitated environment within their assigned area of responsibility in the residence hall. Resident assistants oversee student development in several different areas including, but not limited to, multicultural understanding, health and wellness, civility and citizenship, and academic achievement. (Blimling, 2003).

The RA job is often described as a 24 hour a day, seven-day a week job that requires a substantial amount of time to complete all the responsibilities that come with the title (Hardy & Dodd, 1998; Owens, 2011). Before the job begins, RAs are required to attend staff training where they are taught how to enforce policy, program, mediate, and

communicate with their residents (Benjamin & Davis, 2016; Blimling, 2003; & McConnell, 2018). These trainings can range from 8-12 hours per day during the weeks before the residence halls open for the semester which can include everything from formal presentations, role playing common scenarios they will face, and preparing for their floors to be filled with students (McConnell, 2018).

It is also important during this time for the resident assistants to bond with their supervisor and other RAs as cohesiveness and effectiveness contribute to high levels of job satisfaction and function as a community (McConnell, 2018). Current college student populations hold identities such as “multiethnic backgrounds, students with disabilities, and students with mental illness” (Donahue, 2015. p. 9) and to prepare to support these identities, RAs go through rigorous training to be able to work and interact with all these individuals (Donahue, 2015. p. 9). A study conducted by Reingle et al. (2010) looked at RAs’ attitudes towards policy enforcement and when to report incidents and discovered that while RAs knew the benefits of rule enforcement, they often did not know how to judge if a problem was worth reporting. It is important for RAs to be trained on developing these positive communities to provide a culture that is inclusive for all the residents that they are responsible for.

Applying RA Skills Post Graduation

While in the RA role, students are subjected to various experiences that can be used in their work post-graduation. There are aspects to this position that are unique to the RA role that are not usually duplicated in other positions on campus and after graduation, namely, the substantial depth of training that is involved. While this type of

training is anywhere from one to three weeks long, RAs develop several different skillsets such as engagement styles, conflict management, and peer leadership.

When training resident assistants, it is important to account for the different learning styles as to encompass all learners in a way that best informs them. According to McConnell (2018), “addressing different learning styles is an important component of training design, and active learning... helps learners contextualize, reflect on or practice the training they are receiving” (p. 43). Active learning and learner-centered teachings are the most suggested styles of training when looking at retaining the information the RAs have been given (Bell & Kozlowski, 2008). But other trainings such as case-based, lecture, feedback, games, interaction, point of care, problem based, self-directed, and team-based techniques can be used in several different group sizes as other activities to engage the RAs in learning (Bluestone et al., 2013). According to McConnell (2018), other forms of learning that can be utilized to include the use of different forms of technology including using smart phones, presentations, and other electronics as well as print presentations to help with RA learning.

According to Bell and Kazlowsky (2008), active training benefits trainees by allowing the learners to be recognized in implementing what they have been taught. Scenario training is usually referred to as “Behind Closed Doors” (McConnell, 2018) or “problem-based learning” (Werth, 2011 p. 327). These types of training allow RAs to practice enforcing policy violations and other common stressful situations that they might encounter. Another added benefit is that it allows the RAs the “opportunity to pause the scene being acted out and restart it when they are comfortable” (McConnell, 2018, p. 42).

A common problem RAs can struggle with is being the disciplinarian for a community while also being a peer of their residents, “Resident Assistants are traditionally the same age as the residential students they support, but have responsibility for upholding community standards and engaging those peers in community activities and accountability” (McConnell, 2018. p. 38). Being able to understand the balance between holding students accountable and maintaining relationships has been challenging for many RAs. In a research study conducted by Everett and Loftus (2011), they found that, on one hand, RAs want to befriend their residents and be seen as equals; because of their position, RAs also saw this as a barrier, either because the student was hesitant or uninterested in interacting with them (Everett & Loftus, 2011).

To try and combat this, Everett and Loftus suggest various training sessions and materials (2011). Role conflict is a common condition of being an RA and giving that explicit knowledge on it to RAs during training is just one of the ways to make them aware of the problem before students arrive. Another way to help is by practicing role playing during training sessions, specifically activities that focus on RAs confronting their “friends” in various types of policy violations. Finally, Everett and Loftus emphasize that this training should continue throughout the academic year (2011). If RAs are equipped to recognize this problem and know specific ways to address the issues, this can lead to fewer problems with role conflict. Mastery of this difficult skill can be a useful skill for students in their post-graduation careers when they are working with professional peers.

Burnout in Resident Assistants

Burnout started being recognized during the late 1960s by professionals who noted a decrease in energy in motivation (Cripe, 2013). Burnout has been depicted as experiences of long-term exhaustion and disinterest caused by an excessive workload (Arman et al., 2010). In the minds of RAs, the job is extra demanding because of being asked to be both disciplinarian and caregiver simultaneously, causing tension within themselves (Cousineau & Chambers, 2015). Due to this, it can cause RAs to find it more difficult to confront residents over policy violations because of their close relationships (Gochnauer, 2017). There is also the added factor of the job being a live-in position. While it is considered a part time job, work hours for RAs can happen at any time day or night by a knock on their door or a call from their supervisor or a resident which can also contribute to burnout (McConnell, 2018). RAs are prone to develop burnout because of these job requirements along with their academic, extracurricular, and financial responsibilities (Deluga & Winters, 1991).

Paladino, et al (2005) identified three main factors that contribute to burnout in RAs: personal factors, training, and work environment (2005). Personal factors included such things as RAs not maintaining a social and active lifestyle (Benedict & Mondloch, 1989), gender, specifically how the higher burnout rates in female RAs as opposed to male (Fuehrer & McGonagle, 1988; Paladino, et al 2005; Hardy & Dodd, 1998), and also the race of the student can affect rates of burnout among RAs (Harper et al. 2011). Harper et. al. (2011) focused on the Black male RAs experience at predominately White institutions and found that these students struggle with depersonalization, loneliness and disconnection when working and interacting with individuals who identified differently

than themselves (2011). When looking at training, students who are not trained at handling multiple problems can also lead to greater instances of burnout (Twale & Burell, 1994; Elleven et al., 2001). In regard to workload, RAs that have a higher number of students to respond to (Bierman & Carpenter, 1994) and those assigned to first-year students (Hardy & Dodd, 1998; Fuehrer & McGonagle, 1988) reported greater levels of burnout. There are also studies that suggest the type of supervision that is in the work environment can lead to burnout among RAs (Komives, 1991; Paladino, et al, 2005). Managing these pressures in the RA role may help participants develop a greater sense of resiliency when they enter the workforce.

Transferable Skills Developed by Resident Assistants

As stated by Ismay (2019), “RAs are uniquely positioned to develop career readiness and employability skills in their hybrid educational/work setting within a well-woven safety net of full-time professional staff invested in their success” (p. 1). As they enter the work force after they graduate from college, RAs are able to use the numerous skills they developed while on the job in their professional careers. RAs act in a variety of roles that require a wide range of skills including facilitating community, acting as referral agents, serving as engaged team members, representing a larger organization, and being academic role models (Barefoot, 2005).

A study conducted by Benjamin and Davis (2016) looked at whether RAs feel that what they learned as an RA would be valuable to them in their careers after college. The data was collected over a two-year study and looked at 78 RAs at a large four-year research institution. Both first and second-year RAs answered a questionnaire that went over their expectations, experiences, and challenges faced in their position (Benjamin &

Davis, 2016). In addition to the survey, over the two years the researchers conducted an analysis of the RAs job descriptions, initial training, and in-hall or continuous training. The documents studied emphasized what the RAs were intended to learn in the position and generally remained the same over the study period. Data revealed five broad categories of skills that RAs reported developing: interpersonal, helping, problem solving, team-work, and self-efficacy skills over their time as an RA (Benjamin & Davis, 2016).

Interpersonal skills include “communication skills as well as the RAs’ ability to navigate multiple relationships and manage community/floor dynamics” (Benjamin & Davis, 2016. p.18). In this study, participants talked about being flexible with their communication styles and, if the RA is more introverted, initiating contact and conversation. Helping skills stem from the RAs’ interactions with their residents. Such skills include being an advisor and counselor for their students and the most important aspect of this ability is to listen when helping these students. RAs’ developing problem solving skills is different to that of helping skills in that these are mainly used in emergency situations. “Problem solving skills refer to RAs’ abilities to react to unexpected situations, assess situations, and address them” (Benjamin & Davis, 2016. p. 19). Teamwork, and the skills around it, focuses on RAs being a part of a staff team for their job and the importance of having a strong team dynamic. RAs in this study noted the importance of having respect and holding others accountable for their actions. Through the teamwork experience, RAs develop a sense of what type of group dynamic they would like to work with in their future positions. Finally, self-efficacy is demonstrated when RAs developed a better understanding of themselves as well as

learning the importance of self-care, boundary setting, how to reach out if they need it (Benjamin & Davis, 2016).

Along with developing these skills, RAs have many other aspects of their jobs that can be carried over into their post-graduate careers. RAs are charged with creating a welcoming environment regardless of race, sexual preference, religion, or physical ability (Schoeder & Mable, 1994), promoting diversity (Blimling, 2003), upholding and enforcing university policy (Barefoot, 2005), and assisting students in crisis (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2011). RAs are the first resource students will often seek out if they are having an issue (Bliming, 2003), and are seen as a friend to residents who build relationships with their RAs (Everett & Loftus, 2011). According to Donahue (2015), “Logistical locations of RAs vary among colleges, but a main concern is the interpersonal relationships that RAs build with the residents throughout the academic year” (p. 9). Along with this, the professional staff who oversee these resident assistants are held to a higher level of responsibility to help their students develop as part of their foundational mission as student affairs practitioners (Ismay, 2019).

Theoretical/Conceptual Framework

This study will be guided by two theories to examine the findings from interviews with participants: Super’s self-concept career theory (1990) and Chickering and Reiser’s theory of identity development (1993). The following section describes both theories in some detail.

Super’s self-concept career theory

Super’s Theory discusses career development through life stages. Though unique to every person, all facets of a person’s life play a role in their career development

(Super, 1990). He also acknowledged that many factors such as one's values and personal development, can influence their career development. This theory is not strict in that age dictates what stage a person is in, rather it is a flexible process where people might revisit stages during certain periods of life as one's self-concept is developed and set through what they experience (Super, 1990).

There are five stages of Super's theory: growth stage, exploratory stage, establishment stage, maintenance stage, and the disengagement stage (Super, 1957). The first stage, growth, begins in childhood and adolescence, when individuals are first introduced to occupations. This interest comes from being exposed through their family, school, media, and several other sources and is where they start to build a sense of what they are capable of and interested in (Super et al., 1996). The second stage, exploratory, begins when individuals start to investigate different careers through educational training and other work-related experiences. Individuals will begin to learn more about themselves and may apply this to match themselves to potential careers (Super, 1957).

The third stage, establishment, focuses on establishing one's self in stable work (Super, 1957). Individuals will work on career advancement by seeking promotions and increasing their workload. During the maintenance stage, individuals are mainly focused on maintaining and preserving their career. However, there is also a point where one may decide to make career changes which results in the person cycling back through the exploration and establishment stages as they move into a new career experience (Super, 1996). The final stage in Super's theory is the disengagement stage, which focuses on moving away from work and usually towards some form of retirement.

Super's theory allows for individuals to change their self-concept at any time. While in the RA position, participants may have been influenced on their career development. Since the participants being interviewed have graduated with their undergraduate degrees, it is assumed that they are either still in the exploration stage or are now in the establishment stage. This will be determined by the information shared by the participants in their current career.

Chickering and Reissers' theory of identity development

Chickering and Reissers' (1993) theory of identity development describes seven vectors that help determine a student's identify development over time, especially in college students. They explained that each student will move through the vectors differently, and "those differences will affect the way the journey unfolds" (Chickering & Reisser, 1993, p. 35). The theory identified seven vectors of identity development in the following order: developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993).

Students are more likely to experience the first four vectors while in college, whereas the final three are often experienced later in life (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Vector one, which covers developing competence, involves students developing in their critical thinking, and reasoning (Patton et al., 2016). In vector two, managing expectations, students learn to appropriately express and have control over their emotions, and if they do act on their emotions, they do so in a logical manner (Patton et al., 2016). It is during vector three, that students move though autonomy toward

interdependence. Chickering and Reisser (1993), viewed this as “freedom from continual and pressing needs for reassurance, affection, or approval from others” (p. 117).

Vector four, developing mature interpersonal relationships, shows the growth of students in the appreciation of differences and the development of healthy lasting intimate relationships (Patton et. al, 2016). Vector five, establishing identity, focuses on the following: “(1) comfort with body and appearance, (2) comfort with gender and sexual orientation, (3) sense of self in a social, historical, and cultural context, (4) clarification of self-concept through roles and life-style, (5) sense of self in response to feedback from valued others, (6) self-acceptance and self-esteem, and (7) personal stability and integration” (Chickering and Reisser, 1993, p. 49). The sixth vector, developing purpose, focuses on making commitments and goals to both personal interests, activities, and relationships; students in this vector stay with their decisions even when faced with opposition. Developing integrity, the seventh and final vector, has three overlapping strategies: (1) humanizing values, (2) personalizing values, and (3) developing congruence (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). This vector not only includes developing integrity of one’s own values, but the ability and willingness to listen and think of other people’s and maintain a relationship, and behavior while others give their views.

Chickering and Reisser’s theory has made a significant impact on the research on college student development. As students move through the vectors, they will be challenged with new ideas and values that may change how they previously identified. This theory is useful for student affairs professionals to encourage development along the

seven vectors. For this study, the vectors the participants went through while in the position will be ascertained and whether the job itself helped them with this development.

Summary

This chapter focused on the current literature surrounding the role of resident assistants in the residence halls. Starting with an overview of the history of resident assistants and how they became a mechanism for student development within the residence hall community. A look at the roles and responsibilities that resident assistants handle on top of their training as well as the issues facing students in the RA role, such as burnout and the unique pressures on students in the position were also addressed before looking at the future of the RA role. After that, the career readiness of resident assistants for when they graduate was reviewed. Finally, the theoretical framework that will guide the analysis of the findings for this study using Super's Self Concept career theory and Chickering and Risers' theory of identity development. Chapter Three will review the methodology to be used in this study.

Chapter III

Methods

This chapter will review the methodology that was used for this study containing a comprehensive description of the procedures that were used to answer the study's research questions. This includes the study design, research site, participants of the study, instrumentation, and the collection, analysis, and treatment of the data collected by the study.

Design of Study

A phenomenological qualitative methodology was utilized for data collection and analysis in this study. This approach allowed for in-depth conversations with participants, allowing them the opportunity to further explain their personal stories and experiences of being an RA and how those experiences have related to their work as professionals. This method allows researchers the opportunity to discover and explore (Silverman, 2009) a phenomenon much more deeply and fully.

The phenomenological approach attempts to provide the researcher a further understanding of the day-to-day experiences of the participants while searching for a shared phenomenon through which their experiences align (Vagle, 2014). Phenomenology "investigates the various reactions to, or perceptions of, a particular phenomenon" (Fraenkel, Wallen, Hyun, 2015. p. 430). It is the opportunity to better understand a unique experience limited to the participants being studied. Participants were asked questions that are intended to focus on the unique experiences of someone who was an RA. Utilizing this approach allowed for the capture of the essence of how the student experience as an RA have impacted them after graduating and the

skills that they were able to bring into the workforce using their own unique and valid voice. This allowed for better understanding of the lived experiences of a RA at this midsized public institution.

Participants/sample

A group of five RA alumni of the institution were selected as participants in this study. To be included in the study, participants met the following criteria: (1) had been employed as a resident assistant for at least two semesters, to ensure they have at least one academic year of experience in the role and would hopefully have gained more experience through this; (2) had entered a profession not related to student affairs; (3) have between two and five years' work experience post-graduation. Selecting this range of post-graduation employment provided participants sufficient time to have work experiences to reflect on the impact of their RA role in their job without being too far removed from the position. Participants were recruited through an institutional specific alumni group and through a list of past employees kept by the housing program that were utilized to email invitations to qualified individuals to participate in the study.

Jasper. A 24-year-old white male, served as an RA for three years and graduated with degrees in Theater Performance and Business Management. Jasper is an actor but because of the pandemic is currently working as a substitute teacher and artistic director at a local theater company.

Luther. A 25-year-old white male, served as an RA for one year and graduated with a degree in Business management and Marketing. Luther currently works as a material handling supervisor at a Library.

Charlie. A 24-year-old white male, served as an RA for two years and graduated with a degree in Accounting. Charlie currently works as a public accountant.

Alice. A 25-year-old white female, served as an RA for one year and graduated with a degree in Psychology. Alice currently works as an elementary school counselor.

Harper. A 27-year-old white female, served as an RA for one year and graduated with a degree in Biology. Harper currently works as a nurse in the neurological unit at a hospital.

Research Site

The research was conducted at a mid-sized university in the Midwest with approximately 7,800 undergraduate students. Based on the University Fact Sheet from 2019, approximately 40% of the students are males and 60% are females, and over 60% of the students are full time. Racially, the largest population of students are White with approximately 61% of the student population followed by African American or Black students with approximately 15% of the university's population and Hispanic/Latin students the third largest demographic at approximately 12% (Institution A, 2019). There were between approximately 50 to 65 RAs working in the institution's residence halls each year during the time participants were RAs with an on-campus population that fluctuated between approximately 1,500 and 2,200 (personal communication, October 8, 2020).

Instrument

Semi-structured interviews

Data was collected through semi-structured virtual interviews. This approach allowed the participants to go into detail about their experiences and provide

richer data. Each interview was between 45-60 minutes long and took place over the computer utilizing Zoom based upon the participant's preference. Interviews were audio recorded with notification provided to the participant. Questions were designed to be open ended which encouraged participants to add a longer explanation, rather than a simple yes or no. These kinds of questions also lead to other probing questions based off their answers (Patten, 2016). This method seeks to gather detailed information about student's experiences, the support they received during that experience, and how the role of RA prepared them for their career and success/non-success after they graduated.

Demographic and background information was collected from the participants to ensure a diverse and representative group of participants. Given the nature of the questions, and being retrospective in nature, participants were provided the questions in advance of the actual interview. This allowed participants sufficient time to permit them to reflect and provide more thorough responses.

Researcher-as-instrument

Because of the nature of qualitative research, the researcher is the instrument for qualitative interviews. This means that the researcher has "the potential to influence the collection of empirical materials" (Pezalla et al., 2012). Throughout qualitative research, the researcher and participant must establish trust to be able to have a significant experience and process (Levitt, et al., 2017).

As a former RA, the researcher's own personal experiences and passion for student affairs has led to their choice in career now, so an awareness of that potential bias was used by the researcher to limit the impact of it in this study. A possible area of concern was the researcher's own expectations as an observer. Since this study looked at

people who have certain characteristics (RA alumni), there may have been certain expectations of the types of behavior which may not be how the subjects normally behave. (Fraenkel et al., 2015. p. 446). To minimize this, each interview was audio recorded to have a complete record of the dialogue as it occurred. This allowed for repeated access to the interview to confirm the accuracy of what was said. Additionally, participants were given the opportunity to review the transcripts of their interview in order to confirm accuracy of the data being analyzed.

Data Collection

Data was collected using semi-structured interviews during the fall semester of 2020. Each video conference or phone call with the participants was scheduled for between 45-60 minutes. The interviews were conducted as outlined in the interview guide (Appendix B). After providing participants with a waiver of informed consent, the interview began. The interviews were recorded, with notification, by two audio devices to ensure the best audio quality for high quality analysis.

Data Analysis

Once the interviews were completed, they were transcribed. A first read through of the interview was performed completely to get a main script started, and then a second, more thorough readthrough highlighted and coded the main points corresponding to the research questions. This process used the inductive approach, allowing all data to be collected in a summary format to find clear links between research questions and the participant's responses to them (Patten, 2016). This then guided the interpretation for data analysis that was then used to match themes that encompass the purpose of the study for a complete and accurate conclusion.

Treatment of Data

The treatment of the data followed the Institutional Review Board's (IRB's) policies and procedures. Participants in this study were assigned pseudonyms to maintain confidentiality. Data has been stored on two password protected USB drives that will only be available to the research and their thesis advisor. All data collected will be stored for three years in the researcher's possession and then will be deleted in compliance with IRB policies.

Summary

To actively compile a list of the transferable skills utilized by former RAs, a phenomenological qualitative study was selected as the best approach to gain information from former RAs now working post-graduation. Participants were selected based on their continued contact with their undergraduate institution, with every effort made for a diverse selection of participants. Once completed, participant interviews were transcribed, coded, and themes identified by the researcher. Chapter four will share the findings from the interviews.

Chapter IV

Results

This chapter presents the findings that emerged from the interviews with participants in this qualitative study. Guided by the research questions, participants' perceptions of the impact of working as an Resident Assistant on career skills gained for post-graduation work are identified and described within each of the research questions listed below.

Research Question #1: How do former resident assistants perceive the impact of their RA experiences on their work post-graduation?

The participants all described their work as an RA and the impact that it had on them with their individual post-graduation careers. Two common themes emerged from the interviews around the former RAs' perceptions of how the RA job prepared them for life after college. The participants first described how they were able to directly apply some of the administrative skills they learned in the RA position in their current career. In addition to these technical skills, they also indicated that the position was beneficial to them personally in that it had helped them develop a sense of Self-Efficacy and a level of confidence in their ability to manage situations and have a greater sense of self-awareness of their own level of competence.

Administrative Skills Learned

When looking at the benefits from the RA role, the participants were able to directly relate specific parts of the work they do in their current jobs to things they did as an RA. Four of the participants discussed that learning to properly document information

and write reports has been helpful in their current work and two of the participants discussed the importance of detailed notes in the work they do in their current positions. Alice talked about her role as an elementary school counselor and her need to maintain good student case files. She shared that writing incident reports as an RA was “good preparation for writing [the] reports” that she has to do now for each of the students that she works with. Harper, who is currently working as a nurse for neurological patients, also discussed the importance of detailed reports for patients that she writes multiple times a day. Making sure that all of the relevant information was in the patient’s file was a critical way to communicate with other medical staff.

Participants also discussed the importance of being comprehensive in their reporting for their jobs. Charlie talked about the importance of good report writing in his position as an accountant. He shared that he learned how to write good reports as an RA “being objective, knowing the dates, knowing the details all of that, I had to bring that into my position when I’m working in the field”. Luther also has to be diligent with reports as a material handling supervisor at a library “the overall quality of documenting things too. It’s huge in my job because trying to keep things right from the HR standpoint”. All five of the participants stressed that documenting what they did in their work was an important skill to have and reflected on how they developed and trained that skill during their time as an RA.

Luther also discussed the importance of the different types of training he received as an RA, both in the material he learned, but also in the philosophy of training that the department provided. Luther shared that he utilized the way RA training was set up for

him as a student and incorporated those ideas and foundations into the training that he now hosts for his staff:

I've sort of have taken over that model for my staff a little bit. And we have monthly trainings, rather than two times a year, we do it monthly. So, I kind of break down that week that we did for fall [RA] training across four or five months.

In addition to these two primary areas of skills that the participants discussed, they also had individual job duties that directly related to the RA position. Alice mentioned that her time spent making creative bulletin boards when she was an RA has been beneficial to her role now, "I still have to make bulletin boards now, and that's something that is very underrated. How hard it is to come up with some good ones." While her work focuses on children learning how to cope with anxiety and other such issues she said:

In a way that all relates, I'm doing it with elementary kiddos, but when I was an RA, those were some of the things I liked on my bulletin boards... I did different things for anxiety and stuff like that.

Jasper also had similar job duties that directly related to his experience as an RA. When talking about his work as an actor, and now currently as an artistic director for a theater company, he related it back to his time coming up with programs for his floor. "So, like figuring out what is needed on the floor was really helpful because it's similar to the artistic directing stuff... what is the community looking for within this town?"

Self-Efficacy

Three of the participants spoke about the becoming confident in their ability to do work that they experienced during their time as RAs. Being an RA and having the responsibilities that come along with role helped participants develop a sense of self-efficacy as they prepared for their lives after college. When talking about how being an RA has affected his current work, Luther tied it to the trust and responsibility he had as an RA that he now has in current role. He mentioned “managing 40 people [on a floor] and now I’m actually doing that... being trusted to make these decisions.” Two of the participants often used the phrase ‘I grew a lot’ when reflecting on the RA position. Alice shared “it definitely taught me a lot about myself as a person and professional – a lot of growth was made in that year.” Harper said, “I would definitely say it has allowed me to grow as a young adult a lot and I’m grateful for that opportunity.”

Another area that participants said they developed in was in how they handle stressful situations in their current roles. Jasper tied in his experience in dealing with crisis situations and confronting students to the auditioning process “when you have to confront a resident for something that’s really uncomfortable... it’s the same principle when you’re auditioning, because you have to walk in and be like ‘this is me, I’m right for the job’.” When it came to performing, he also tied it to crisis management “you have to be able to think on your feet and move forward” if things were to go wrong mid-performance. Harper, who also has to deal with stressful situations in her work, recalls her experiences in de-escalating incidents in the residence halls and knowing what steps to take:

Definitely in my nursing career that I have felt that... in case of emergency, if something were to happen and we need to call any higher ups or anything, that [the RA role] had definitely made me prepared for [it]

Lastly, participants were able to express their areas of improvement, and by developing this self-awareness has allowed them to grow in their current positions. While the other four participants did not directly mention this, it was reinforced by the other areas of growth they mentioned during their interviews. Charlie tied it to his growth in specific areas:

It has made me more competent as a worker and made me more aware of my abilities and my strengths and weaknesses and knowing where I need to work and where I need to improve on myself. So that's been nice knowing that I can do what I can do and where I'm confident in myself.

Research Question #2: What transferable skills do former resident assistants feel that they acquired during their time in the position?

Three common themes emerged from the interviews around the former RAs perception of the skills they acquired working in the RA position. First, participants felt that they learned how to be self-motivated; they developed time management strategies and were able to create plans and follow through in situations. The second theme, the ability to work with others, centered on the participants' ability to relate to, and connect with others and, as a result, it let them communicate more effectively not only with their coworkers, but with all people they come into contact within their respective careers. And finally, they learned how to properly respond in a crisis, though most of this theme was

recounted through their participation in scenario-based trainings when they went through RA training.

Self-Motivation

In three of the participants' interviews, participants talked about the importance of self-motivation and that they had learned to do this in their RA position in order to get their work accomplished when it was required. Luther had discussed how the self-motivation he learned helps him to be productive on his own when he works "so that really helps I think, through just having that independence while still getting the job done." Having that autonomy and trust that the job would get done without constant supervision is something that Luther works with now in his role as a Material Handling supervisor in his library.

A key element of self-motivation was time management. It was mentioned in three of the participants' interviews, specifically looking back to how they balanced all of their work as an RA and how they do that now. Luther shared "you have to do that [time management] as an RA, because you have all your school stuff and then you have all your RA stuff." It was how he was able to stay on top of all of his responsibilities and he knew he had to be the one to be responsible for it. Jasper, who was a double major in undergrad, was very involved on campus and when he was an RA, he became very efficient managing his time and balancing all of his commitments. He relates this to how much time and attention he has to commit to his work as an actor in New York. Jasper shared "time management was a big thing because in doing that in college and then moving to New York... you have to overbook yourself quite often." Learning how to

manage all the competing expectations in college prepared him for putting in significant hours to building his acting portfolio.

When Charlie talked about juggling grad school and his full-time job, he referred back to his time as an RA. Some nights in undergrad, he had to be more focused on the RA job, finishing up bulletin boards, hosting programs, etc. and other nights his main focus would be on his schoolwork or other priorities. Charlie shared “I knew I can take the night off from school and focus on being an RA and that’s ok... sometimes it’s 50-50 and I think that’s something I’ve carried over now.” As an accountant, Charlie often has to manage tax preparation, internal auditing, income tax, and many other essentials to ensure his clients financial statements are in good order.

Something that was brought up frequently with two of the participants was developing the ability to say no when it was too much. Jasper and Alice both disclosed that they had a hard time saying no when they first started the RA job. Alice had mentioned that she was one who would take on extra responsibilities and then realized how overwhelming it can become “so I think just learning that I [can say] ‘nope, that’s enough, I can’t take on anymore right now’ ... I think that’s something I kind of started to realize.” Jasper struggled in undergrad with saying no when asked to do things either related to his majors, organizations, or the RA job. Jasper expressed “because I was really bad at saying no and I was really bad at saying I needed help... it [the RA job] taught me how to say no, and it taught me how to say I needed help.” Both of them credited their time as RAs in helping them not only recognize when something was too much, but also in feeling comfortable advocating for themselves.

Finally, the ability to think critically in situations was mentioned frequently by the participants in different ways. Harper talked about how she uses this in her nursing job daily asking herself “What are the issues? What can we resolve now and what do we need to do in the future?” Charlie referred to it as ‘looking beyond’ what is presented to him, not taking things on their face but looking deeper. When recalling a situation, he had as an RA, he used this skill to determine if students were hiding alcohol from him when they were confronted. Charlie shared that he uses this now in his work as an accountant to see if there is anything hidden or not adding up in the materials that he reviews.

Working with others

Four of the participants mentioned the importance of building connections with people in order to have effective communication and to improve how they interact with people. When talking about interacting with her past residents, and now with her elementary students, Alice stressed the importance of first establishing good relationships with students and how that makes it easier to have those difficult conversations when necessary. Alice shared “relating to them (the residents) first, before just jumping into anything. I think you have to have the relationship piece first.” Jasper also talked about the importance of building an active floor community and how he does something very similar when working with actors he is cast with, “it’s all about socialization, trust, and community building and working together.” Both of them stressed the importance of having a connection with others to ensure that they could effectively communicate later in their relationship.

Charlie mentioned how having experience with interacting with so many people has helped him in his work as an accountant. Charlie shared “as an RA you interact with

tons of people, whether you like them or not... as an auditor, you're talking to a ton of people." The ability to feel comfortable interacting with others, especially as an authority figure, helped Charlie when he has to review and evaluate financial records. Harper not only practices effective communication with her fellow nurses, but with her patients as well. She talked about the importance of listening to what the person is saying, "I think that's a huge thing. Getting to understand and that listening skill of 'ok what's the issue? What can we resolve now and what do we need to do in the future to present this again?'" She also expressed how working with a diverse group of residents as an RA has helped her when working with her patients:

It has helped me a lot as a nurse, working with patients that I've had... communicating with all different types of population groups and working as a team to meet those goals, truly from my RA position has helped me a lot.

All of the participants shared that the ability to make connections with large groups of people, something that they had to do as RAs, was a key skill in their current work and that it made communication easier, trust quicker to build, and helped them recognize the importance of understanding how different people would need different things from them.

Crisis response

Learning how to better handle crisis situations as a result of their time as an RA was highlighted by three of the participants. Two of them directly referenced the scenario-based training that took place during fall Resident Advisor training. Alice looked back to her mock-scenario training that had a life-long impact in that "I remember

I did the one with the student who was suicidal... and I'm an elementary counselor and I have to have that conversation all the time. And so, it kind of made me much more comfortable talking about that." Harper appreciated the physical aspect of this type of training "I was appreciative of the RA training that we had because... it was a lot more physical training rather than me behind a computer.... it has definitely helped me prepare for working in healthcare in general too." While Charlie didn't mention training specifically, he mentioned that his experience in dealing with crisis situations has helped him "keep a level head" when dealing with stressful situations.

Working with others was a core element that the participants saw in the RA position and the skills they learned all centered on how to work with the students on their floors. The participants saw that their experiences in managing their floor, talking with residents, and handling problems helped prepare them in their current work responsibilities. These transferrable skills were easily applied to their work after college and the participants saw that they had gained them from their time as an RA.

Research Question #3: How do former resident assistants utilize these skills in their current work?

Looking back at their experiences as an RA, all five of the participants were able to identify several ways that the skills they acquired as an RA translated to their current work. Each of the participants utilization of these skills were very dependent on the tasks that their current job requires of them. Former RAs utilize the skills they learned both in everyday tasks and in some more specific tasks they have discovered are very similar to what they do in their current work. All of the participants were able to share instances where the skills they learned and practiced as RAs were used in their current work

responsibilities. Although they all shared a firm belief that the job skills they learned were currently being used, they each had a different skill that they reflected upon. However, all of these skills actually aligned with the traditional duties and responsibilities of the RA position.

One of the skills that was highlighted was the importance of follow through and finishing tasks associated with any job. Another skill highlighted was multi-tasking, and keeping up with multiple responsibilities, takes attention and time and having to be responsible for all materials that enter and exit a library, as well as managing a staff of 40 requires “a lot of logistics and a lot of time management” according to Luther. It is important for him to make sure that he has the appropriate staff scheduled when are needed and that all of the materials are being handled correctly.

Jasper shared similar thoughts about his work with his theater group. He shared that he has to not only come up with the performances for the theater company he works with, but he also has to coordinate a large number of behind-the-scenes tasks as well. Running a show is a complex process that requires he makes sure that the things being done behind the scenes get done in the right way so that the shows can be run successfully. Managing all of the moving parts is similar to balancing the different responsibilities he had when he was a student working as an RA.

Harper completes her work by staying organized and multitasking as well. Harper not only assists “patients and helping them meet their goals” she also has to be in constant communication with the other nurses and doctors in her area and stay on top of patients’ medical charts. As an RA she coordinated with her hall staff on student issues, and now does that with her patients. Alice successfully supports 500 elementary students

by staying organized as well. She runs “individual counseling, group counseling, [and] classroom lessons” at her school and some of the group counseling topics include topics like “family changes [and] social skills” that are very similar to the programs she presented for her residents. Leading these groups, coordinating and communicating about these activities, and making sure she has everything she needs to do so were all skills she developed as an RA. Her work now is like the programming she did for her residents, though on a much smaller scale than the students she takes care of now.

Luther’s current position has him overseeing a staff of 40 people ranging from “high school seniors to... people who have been retired for 10-15 years and they just want something to do.” Even with this wide age range, Luther is still able to successfully supervise his staff as a result of his experiences managing his floor as an RA. Being in charge of his residents and having to develop different approaches and communication styles with his fellow students has prepared him to work with such a diverse group of library volunteers.

Leadership was something that Alice talked about in her work with the elementary students. She regularly leads groups of students through several activities depending on the group’s focus. For example, with her students learning self-regulation exercises, they use activities to “learn appropriate behavior [and] how to handle [themselves] in a public setting.” With the experience she gained from her RA role, Alice is confident in her ability to lead her students in these activities with ease and explained that it was as if she was back running a program, floor meeting, or an ice-breaker.

Finally, being able to create and maintain strong personal connections with others leads to a more productive atmosphere for everyone involved. Charlie talked about this in

how he works with clients, “as an auditor, you’re talking to a ton of people and some aren’t happy you’re there and some are.” He cannot worry about being liked or being friends with them as he needs instead to first build a respectful relationship that allows his clients to recognize his responsibility to the work he is doing. He shared that this was much like when he enforced the rules on his floor with his residents. Similarly, Harper uses this approach to build connections with her patients, understanding the differences between her job and their preferences. She needs to connect so that she is able to be someone who is “working with a patient and helping them meet their goals.”

Jasper uses the team building and bonding activities he learned as an RA to help him connect with his fellow actors. He shared:

Being able to know how people interact with each other and work as a team, and understanding those people who don’t have the same skillsets that I do and utilizing them in a specific way, translates really well to the theater world because we have to collaborate a lot.

Working with elementary students, Alice’s connections with them manifests for her in a few different ways. First, because of how she builds her connections with her students, “the kids know that they’re not in trouble when they come talk to me.” This makes them more open to discussing difficult things that they might be going through with her. She also can use the relationships she builds with her students to help form peer to peer connections “I have fifth graders that go and mentor my little kiddies”. Lastly, she uses this skill with the other staff members at the school to help them with class behavior and other concerns that may arise with their students. Alice shared that “being a counselor,

you're at the same level as the teachers, but there are times that I'm having to help and coach them".

While they may have used different aspects of the RA job in their current work, the participants all found something in the work they did as an RA that directly translated to their work. The most common were skills that centered around connecting to others, being responsible, and following through with the work that they took on. The participants all were clear that they developed skills that they were able to apply in their post-college careers. They also easily identified how their work as an RA was impacting and affecting how they did their current work.

Research Question #4: What skills learned during their time as an RA do participants consider the most valuable in their post-graduation work?

While the participants all talked about a number of different skills that they obtained, there was not a single skill that was really seen as the most valuable for all of the participants. Several of the skills that were repeatedly emphasized included learning how to be organized in the job by learning good time management skills and how to do proper documentation of incidents. These were the first skills that they felt were the most valuable that they gained from being an RA. In addition, several of the participants also stressed the importance of the skill of managing people, both in working with someone that was difficult and learning how to de-escalate situations so that they can be dealt with calmly and effectively. Finally, the participants all spent time clarifying how they valued their experience as an RA and how it was the comprehensive experience of the entire job that was the most valuable, not necessarily any single part.

Organization in the Job

Overall, the two main skills that all participants mentioned centered around the idea of having the organizational skills to do the job and that was a centerpiece of their experiences while in the RA position. All the participants stressed that they learned good time management skills, a point that was brought up in every participant interview at least once, sometimes more than once, and they stressed how it made them be more productive and efficient in their work. Jasper said it best when he shared “time management is a big skill that I learned as an RA that I use today”.

The other organization skill that the participants recognized as critical for their work was being able to document efficiently. No matter their role, they all talked about the fact that there is some kind of paperwork that they must fill out as a component of their work. Charlie clarified that “the overall quality of documenting things” was a skill he learned from his days as an RA. Alice thinks back to how her supervisor taught her how to write reports and how many of the methods she learned in her residence hall she still uses today, “it’s funny, when I’m writing incidents, I think of [her supervisor’s name]... every time I write one it’s in my head like that” .

Managing People

Being able to have difficult conversations, whether it is with a coworker or someone you oversee, can be challenging. For the participants, they became more comfortable with this type of interaction over time as a result of working as RAs. Alice talked about how she currently has to discuss grades with her students and how it reminded her of doing that with her residents, “getting the academic reports and having to have that conversation with a college kid ... it definitely makes it easier talking to kids

[now] when I have to have that conversation with them about their grades”. Charlie also mentioned that the ability to have difficult conversations with the people he is auditing helps him be better in his job, “it’s nice to have the skills to deal with people like that”. The participants all shared how as RAs they often had tough conversations with residents and that experience helped make it easier and less stressful for them when they have to have those kinds of conversations.

Another aspect of managing people that was seen as one of the most valuable skills that they learned from the RA position was the ability to de-escalate situations. When Harper first became an RA, she was not comfortable with handling situations that became heated. But looking back, she remarked that “de-escalating situations... probably my biggest [skill] that I’ve grown from” and now is much more comfortable when she has to deal with that kind of situation. Managing conflicts and emotions of another or a group is difficult but one that the participants felt they learned and can use that others struggle with. Charlie shared how knowing that he could handle a crisis effectively as a result of being an RA, shapes how he sees himself today, “I feel more comfortable now that if there’s an emergency at work or at home, I’m going to be able to follow through with it and hopefully help out.”

Finally, the ability to build connections with coworkers was another element of managing people that was frequently mentioned among participants. Being able to bond and build those connections is important for Jasper’s work as an actor, to make their interactions seem more authentic on stage. Building a team setting and knowing that you can rely on each other to accomplish tasks was another reason he noted this. Jasper shared “it taught me how to rely on other people to get something like programming

done”. Now instead of throwing programs for a floor community, he works on a larger scale in producing performances, working with several people to be able to accomplish that. Harper also ties in working with other people, in her case the multiple professionals that make a hospital run effectively, in performing her job effectively. She related this back to her time as an RA and having to work with the other RAs and housing staff in managing the building she worked in. Harper noted “I think that really truly has helped me in that aspect of it too. Communication and just continuing to move forward and work as a team”.

Appreciation of the job

All five of the participants mentioned how much they loved their experience of being an RA. Jasper, who started out being an RA for the free room and board that came with the position, shared “the more I got into it... it was less about the money... later I realized that it was not just that.” He appreciated the experience not just for what he was getting paid, but for the learning and growth he was experiencing every day. Luther, who was only an RA for a single year, mentioned that he “carried everything that I had learned my senior year [into the workforce].”

Alice, who was initially drawn into the position because she liked planning floor events, shared “I loved getting to know them [the residents] ... that was the best part of it.” Charlie shared that “there wasn’t anything I didn’t like” during his first year as an RA. It was the full sum of the experience that he appreciated. Harper summarized the participant’s impressions of the job best:

I’m just grateful in general for the position and the experiences that I had as an RA and the individuals I worked with. They had truly allowed me to grow not

only as an individual and to get me prepared for the position I have, even though I did not follow the route with college student affairs, it's definitely fully applicable to all job types.

Summary

This chapter looked at the perspectives of the participants on the impact of the RA job on the skills they use in their current careers after graduation. The participants identified the impact that the RA position had on their current competence in their jobs as well as the skills that they developed as RAs and how they use them in their work outside of the college environment. The participants identified a number of specific skills that they felt were valuable as well as general attitudes and approaches to work that were shaped by their experiences. Chapter Five will discuss the findings from this study, implications for student affairs and recommendations for both the profession and future research.

Chapter V

Discussion, Recommendations, & Conclusion

This research study used qualitative semi structured interviews to look at the skills that former RAs attained while in the RA position. The study further examined how those transferable skills are being used in their career after college. Understanding what skills are developed in the RA role and are used after graduation will be beneficial in multiple ways, including the promotion of the value of the RA position to potential candidates as a way to both increase diversity in the recruitment process and improve the success of the RA search.

Five participants, who were between 2-5 years into their post graduate careers, were interviewed and asked a set of questions (Appendix B) around the following research questions: (1) How do former resident assistants perceive the impact of their RA experience on their work post-graduation?; (2) What transferable skills do former resident assistants feel that they acquired during their time in the position?; (3) How do former resident assistants utilize these skills in their current work?; (4) What skills learned during their time as an RA do participants consider the most valuable in their post-graduation work? This chapter discusses the result of the study, recommendations for student affairs professionals, and recommendations for future research.

Discussion and Implications

Across the research questions and themes found, several key conclusions can be drawn from the results. The RA role contains a number of transferable skills that students

take with them to use in their adult careers. The skills that are utilized the most will depend on their career choices and role they currently hold however the skills most utilized were broad skills such as time management, multitasking, and working with others in some form. Other more specific skills varied depending on the work tasks that they have in their current position and how they apply them. Some staff will utilize skills like report writing while others still use the programming and community building techniques in their work that they learned to do as RAs. This finding supported Benjamin & Davis's study that showed that the RA role provides a wide range of skills that former RAs can use outside of that role (2016).

Soft Skill Development

Some of the skills that the former RAs identified can be characterized as soft skills, that is, those skills that can be easily translated into employment in any career field. These skills were easy for participants to articulate when talking about what they learned and were also skills that were anticipated by the participants that they would get from the RA job. These skills included communicating with diverse groups of people, speaking in front of others, time management, managing multiple responsibilities and deadlines, leadership, and working as a team player.

As RAs they learned how to use curriculum as a tool to help establish relationships with all of their students in their building. Building interpersonal relationships with the residents on their floors is a main concern for RAs (Donahue, 2015). They needed to be able to have conversations regarding schoolwork, mental health, and many other topics with all different students and things such as racial identity, gender, and sexual orientation cannot be a barrier for RAs to be able to assist

these students with their needs. RAs also learned how to effectively communicate with their supervisors, building staff, and parents when necessary. These communication skills were regularly identified as having been learned and developed from their RA work to use in their current jobs. This finding is reflected in Chickering and Reisser's third vector, which sees students moving through autonomy towards interdependence (Chickering and Reisser (1993). This finding is also supported by Benjamin and Davis' study that interpersonal and helping skills were among the five categories RAs had reported learning (2016).

Another part of being an RA is having to host floor meetings and facilitating learning opportunities for not just their floor community, but sometimes the whole building. To accomplish this, RAs learned how to be comfortable speaking in front of groups of people they may not be familiar with. All of the participants in this study shared how they learned how to effectively present information in their current careers because of this experience. Being able to communicate and engage colleagues, guests, and supervisors is an important skill that all participants utilize.

Being able to prioritize their time in order of things that must get done soon and things that can be handled later is another important skill that helps one to be successful in any job. Being able to manage things that are important regarding their school, RA responsibilities, and social activities is an important part of being an active and involved student and responsible employee. An important part of time management is being able to be self-motivated to initiate work and not relying on outside forces to prioritize deadlines. Being able to understand priorities, get the job done, all while also look out for their own well-being is something that all of the participants highlighted as being an important part

of their success in their current position. Developing this competence aligns with vector one, developing competence (Chickering and Reisser, 1993).

RAs have to be able to manage a variety of tasks and responsibilities in their work to meet the institution's deadlines including administrative paperwork, communicating with others, managing multiple responsibilities, and being a viable team member. Housing programs and RA candidates were able to anticipate learning many of these skills by taking on the position. A key skill that the RA position teaches is how to manage all of the tasks and responsibilities of the job in what often feels overwhelming to do with the time available to them (Hardy & Dodd, 1998, Owens, 2011). All of the participants in this study shared how they learned to balance their commitments, prioritize their tasks, and focus on the important duties first in getting things done as RAs and then used this skill to be successful in their current positions.

Having to oversee a floor full of residents gives RAs the opportunity to be role models and lead students in the floor in the right direction and help them move closer to graduating from college. As an RA, while they may not have all of the answers, they know where to go to get them. It is important for RAs to make a presence and establish a sense of community on the floor regardless of race, sexual preference, religion, or physical ability (Schoeder & Mable, 1994). During RA training, this is something they learn to do in order to effectively lead a floor. Leadership is a skill used daily by all of the participants whether it was due to their official position and responsibilities or simply in how they worked with others but learning and practicing both leading and supporting the leader was a skill learned in the RA job and practiced long after they left that position.

Finally, being on call, leaning on each other, getting backup in situations, planning programs together, helping build a positive building community are just some of the ways in which RAs work together as a team to accomplish their job expectations. In a study conducted by Benjamin & Davis (2016), teamwork was noted by the RAs as an important skill and that through their experiences with it, RAs were able to establish what type of group dynamic they would like to work with in their future careers. Participants in this study shared how knowing how to recognize their team members as individuals that bring unique perspectives and experiences to the team has been helpful in their current careers.

Task Skill Development

Other skills were not directly anticipated as being useful in their post college career by participants but were seen as actual competencies that they learned how to do. These practical skills were not ones that participants felt would directly apply to their major while they were working as RAs, but once they started working in their field, the participants saw that they actually learned skills that they were using in their jobs. These skills include creating proper documentation, programming, assessing needs, and crisis management. It is important to understand that regardless of the career, there was at least one or more practical skill of the RA job that every participant directly applied to their job responsibilities.

The ability to be clear and concise, detailed, and organized when writing are abilities that participants learned through the various report writing that they did as RAs that they still utilize in their current careers. Being able to write reports that are unbiased and based on factual evidence is a writing method used in writing reports. These writing

skills, while they may differ slightly to how they were used when they were RAs, carried over with participants to their responsibilities to the surprise of more than one of the former RAs

A key element of the RA position is being responsible for overseeing student development in several areas including multicultural understanding, health and wellness, civility and citizenship, and academic achievement (Blimling, 2003). Being able to organize and create effective ways to deliver a variety of information was something that participants learned and, at the time, did not see as something they would use in their careers after college. But the ability to plan ahead, complete the appropriate paperwork, creating objectives and adapting to needs of different individuals were all skills that participants learned through their time as an RA that they did in fact utilize. The skills of planning out for a program or event translated easily to many of the tasks associated with all of their work.

Along with building relationships with residents, being able to see where they need assistance or further education can assist students in becoming more engaged and educated individuals. Developing interpersonal skills and the ability to listen to residents was seen as an important skill with participants in this study and was also seen in research done by Benjamin and Davis' (2016) study. The ability to assess residents' needs continued to be utilized in the way participants help solve problems with clients, co-workers, and themselves in their day-to-day responsibilities.

Being able to think on their feet, adapt, and address problems as they arise are important skills that RAs learn in the role (Benjamin & Davis, 2016). Problem solving while in a situation is happening is important when dealing with crisis situations and

during these situations, RAs can also act as a referral agent when outside resources are needed to solve a problem. This is one of the many roles that are seen as a requirement for RAs in Barefoot's study (2005). No matter the career, arguments and other heated conversations can arise, and because of the training and situations that these participants have gone through as RAs, they emphasized that they felt capable of deescalating and evaluating solutions to problems.

All of the participants were able to relate practical skills and competencies that they developed and used as RAs that were directly applicable to their careers after college. Although they were not the same and there did not appear to be a singular practical skill that everyone used outside the soft skills, they all did use various aspects of what they learned from the RA job. This gives student affairs professionals working in housing critical information that the RA job is more than a resume builder or simply a source of financial support while in school, but that it provides practical career preparation for students in every major and possible field. What is important for Student Affairs professionals to do moving forward is to better advertise the benefits of the RA position to potential candidates and teach the RAs how to market the skills they learned when looking for jobs in their preferred field.

Recommendations for Higher Education Professionals

Based on the research, it would be beneficial for Housing and Residence Life departments to better market all of the skills and experiences that students will gain from the RA position. This study's results show the value in the position and that no matter the future career plans of students, that the abilities that are gained in the RA role can be applied to all careers. This is great information to market not only to current RAs to help

retain them, but to students who are also considering applying for the position in the future. This can be beneficial to not only gain a more diverse pool of potential RAs but also students who are more motivated based on the positive attributes and skills they can learn in the position instead of the incentive of free room and board.

Regardless of if these RAs go into Higher Education work or not, the professionals that educate these student leaders have a significant impact on helping them build these skills for use post-graduation. Something that professionals can provide for RAs is continuous training throughout the school year, whether that be through 1:1 sessions or the whole RA staff. During 1:1 sessions supervisors should discuss the student's future career plans and how they can help them articulate how their work and experiences as an RA has prepared them for that while still in school. It is important to discuss the skills that they are learning while in the RA role and how those skills have prepared them for positions in their field. Besides their administrative skills such as writing reports, they are also learning how to establish good communication between their peers and boss and how to create inclusive groups among their building community, other staff members and workers in their environments. Having these conversations with their current supervisors can help prepare them and make them feel more confident when in interviews for their first full time positions.

Recommendations for Future Research

While this research was limited due to the number of participants and other factors, it lays a foundation for further research. A number of additional studies could be conducted that would add to the literature on this topic.

- Replicating this research to expand on the number of participants. This would allow for a wider range of careers and experiences and to determine if there were any commonalities in skills in different types of post college work.
- Recruiting a more diverse set of participants. Since all the participants in this study were White, looking at other populations would allow researchers to see if what, if any, similarities or differences in skills are utilized in post-graduate careers of RAs of color.
- Several studies could be designed to look at participants in different career fields. Though the participants that were included in this study had a wide variety of careers, it would be beneficial to expand the research to look at multiple RAs in the same career fields to see if the skills are consistent for the work by student academic major such as health professions, education, and engineering.
- Further studies could also see if there is a difference in how the RA position prepares students who enter the work force right after graduation vs. those students who go on to attain another degree/certificate before joining the workforce.

Conclusion

The resident assistant position has been widely researched and the origins and responsibilities associated with the position have been regularly documented. There is significant documentation on the different types of training and issues that students face in the RA role. This study found that former RAs are able to utilize a significant number

of the skills that they learned during their time as an RA in their careers after college, regardless of what that career actually was. They developed soft skills that were skills valued in any employee as expected, but the surprise was the number of practical competencies that they learned as RAs that transferred to post college jobs that were unexpected, but highly valued.

It is important to not view the RA position as just another job, but a real source of training and preparation for work after college. While the RA role is definitely a strong element for any student's resume, students that are successful in the position quickly come to see the RA position as more than just a job, and that the RA position is a learning experience that not only makes them better student leaders but prepares them for their careers after college. Housing programs can greatly improve both the recruitment and retention of high quality candidates by highlighting these benefits of the RA position to all students regardless of major.

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Appendix A

Consent to Participate in Research

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Kala Cousineau, a graduate student in the College Student Affairs program and Eastern Illinois University. Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand, before deciding whether to participate.

You have been asked to participate in this study because you have been identified by the institution as an Alumni of Eastern Illinois University who has previously held the position of a resident assistant for at least one academic year and have not entered into student affairs.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore what transferable skills resident assistants (RAs) acquire while in their role that they can use in their post-graduate career. While also looking at how we prepare RAs for their future careers while in the position.

PROCEDURES

If you volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to schedule out an hour of time that you will be willing to skype, zoom, or video call the researcher to be interviewed. All interviews will take as much of that hour as you need to share your experiences with the researcher. The interviews will be recorded, with permission, by two audio devices. You will be able to choose a pseudonym.

POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS

There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts that will arise from participating in this study.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR SOCIETY

By discovering transferable skills you attained while in the RA position, higher education housing professionals can utilize that in their work to recruit students to the RA role. Universities can use this information to help generate more desire for RAs to succeed in the position as well as making the position more sought after by students.

INCENTIVES FOR PARTICIPATION

As a thank you for participating in the study, you will receive a \$5 gift card Starbucks.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law. Confidentiality will be maintained by means of a document on the researcher's university OneDrive account that will only be seen between the researcher and their chair. All data will be stored for three years in the researcher's possession and then will be shredded and deleted.

PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL

Participation in this research study is voluntary and not a requirement or a condition for being the recipient of benefits or services from Eastern Illinois University or any other organization sponsoring the research project. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled.

There is no penalty if you withdraw from the study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not want to answer.

IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS

If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact:

Ms. Kala Cousineau
Email: kacousineau@eiu.edu
Phone: 217-581-7805

RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS

If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:

Institutional Review Board
Eastern Illinois University
600 Lincoln Ave.
Charleston, IL 61920
Telephone: (217) 581-8576
Email: eiuirb@eiu.edu

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

I voluntarily agree to participate in this study. I understand that I am free to withdraw my consent and discontinue my participation at any time. I have been given a copy of this form

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

Welcome and thank the participant.

Ensure that the participant is comfortable. Give the participant their informed consent and explain the informed consent with participant. Allow the participant to ask any questions they may have. Remind participant that their answers will remain confidential and will not be used to identify them.

Demographic Information

What gender, if any, do you identify with?

What is your age?

How do you racially identify?

How many years did you serve as an RA? And can you recall what year(s) they were?

What year did you graduate?

What was your major?

Interview Questions

1. Can you tell me about your thought process when you decided to apply for the RA position?
 - a. What was it that attracted you to it?
 - b. How did you think you would benefit from holding the position?
2. During your time as an RA, what parts of the job did you excel at?
 - a. What parts were a struggle?

3. RAs get a lot of training for the job: Fall training, in hall training, 1:1 meetings with your supervisor, and so forth. Can you talk about how you think that these trainings have impacted your work after graduation, if they have?
 - a. Did your current work have similar training?
 - b. Did you expect them to?
4. After your first year as an RA, what did you do next (continue as RA or leave)?
 - a. Can you tell me what affected this decision?
5. As you were preparing for graduation and the job search, what kinds of jobs were you looking for?
6. Did any of them share any similarities, responsibilities, or competencies with what you did as an RA?
7. Can you tell me a little about your current position and the work you do?
 - a. Are there some aspects of your job that you feel more prepared for because of your time as an RA?
8. Looking back, are there any skills that you learned or developed during your time as an RA that you continue to use in your current work?
9. What do you think is a skill or ability that you learned as an RA that has been the most beneficial to you in your work after graduation?
10. Overall, how do you feel being an RA affected your performance or experiences at work after graduation?