



Viewpoints: Balancing Priorities: A Conundrum of Compensation or Competence for Entry-Level Hall Director Positions

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THE RECRUITMENT AND RETENTION OF RESIDENCE LIFE STAFF has become increasingly difficult for many colleges and universities throughout the U.S. Back in 2008, a report supported by the ACUHO-I Commissioned Research Program, *Recruitment and Retention of Entry-Level Staff in Housing and Residence Life*, indicated that the problem was perceived as being worse than it was at that point, since compensation and qualifications were not significant issues. The average entry-level salary was \$24,213, with 83% of positions being live-on. Thirty-one percent of entry-level staff had a master's degree, and 11% were enrolled in a master's program. The report also highlighted a study examining various aspects of the hall director position in an effort to foresee career commitment to housing and residence life, and results indicated that job burnout, workload dissatisfaction, promotion opportunities, role ambiguity, and professional development impacted career resilience and identity. At present, housing departments are again facing a similar issue, but this does not seem to be a case of perception being worse than reality. Housing and residence life departments appear to be struggling to fill their entry-level vacancies, and many are faced with the dilemma of either increasing compensation or relaxing qualifications for these positions. This article explores the current state of housing and residence life recruitment and retention of entry-level hall directors, provides a critical analysis of potential issues contributing to the current state of affairs, and identifies possible solutions by revisiting the measures and best practices outlined in the 2008 ACUHO-I report.

Right around the fall of 2015, there appeared to have been a gradual efflux of entry-level professionals who chose to leave the field of campus housing, or student affairs altogether, due to various personal and/or professional reasons. A quick search for vacant entry-level residence hall director (or equivalent) positions on *highereducationjobs.com* in August 2023 revealed approximately 300 open positions, some of which appear to have been vacant for over a year. These results shed light on an ongoing problem for campus housing, which seems to have been catalyzed by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Since 2020, housing departments have witnessed a mass exodus of entry-level housing professionals, which created a vacuum (often referred to as the “Great Resignation” or the “Big Quit”), part of a national phenomenon affecting various job industries across the U.S. Although economists now assert that the Great Resignation is over (Morgan, 2023), resignation and recruitment issues seem to be far from over for campus housing.

The impact of these entry-level vacancies on housing departments can be complex, and the most obvious impact is the extra work that must be delegated to remaining staff. Some institutions do not compensate their staff for taking on extra duties, which can create a negative atmosphere for existing staff while increasing the risk of pushing good employees out the door. Furthermore, many positions remain vacant for an extended period of time, increasing the difficulty of delegating extra workloads, as these temporary fixes could very well last for more than six months in some instances. Conversations with some senior housing and mid-level housing officers at conferences indicated that their departments have chosen to combat the challenges of recruitment by relaxing qualifications (educational and related experience requirements in particular), which invites a new host of challenges.

FACTORS INFLUENCING RESIGNATION AND RECRUITMENT ISSUES

Inadequate Compensation

NASPA's (2022) *Compass Report* about the future of student affairs revealed that the most common area for concern is with salary and compensation. A total of 88% ($n = 842$) of survey respondents ($n = 957$)—with 28% ($n = 269$) representing on-campus housing—reported that their compensation packages are not competitive in terms of the experience and education required for the position. Furthermore, 70% ($n = 670$) of respondents believe their salaries do not align with their required job responsibilities.

Many positions in housing have a wide scope of responsibilities, regardless of whether the position is entry level or senior leadership. The reality is that oftentimes the addition of “other duties as assigned” can prove to be exhausting, resulting in the risk of burnout. Those in entry-level positions, in particular, are continually being challenged to deliver a high level of work performance to provide premier college experiences for students amid continuously diminishing budgets and resources.

Unfavorable Work Environment

Another prominent factor exacerbated by the pandemic was the unfavorable work environment. Job burnout—fueled by factors such as unrealistic workloads, scarce opportunities for advancement or promotion, role ambiguity, lack of support, and feeling undervalued by the department—has been identified as a culprit affecting career resilience well before the pandemic (Wilson, 2008). An ACUHO-I report on the recruitment and retention of entry-level staff drew attention to these factors and called for housing leadership to promptly address these issues (Wilson, 2008).

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NASPA (2022) reported job burnout as the second largest factor contributing to student affairs practitioners leaving the field (84%, $n = 804$). Alarming, the report also pointed out that 68% of student affairs professionals believe hidden responsibilities and lack of transparency in job descriptions contribute considerably to practitioners leaving the field. Overall, it appears that few practitioners heeded the recommendations and best practices offered in the ACUHO-I report (Wilson, 2008) to improve the future of residence life and the housing profession.

The Live-In Factor

An overwhelming majority of hall director positions are live-in roles, with housing accommodations provided in the residence hall that the employee oversees. There are, however, inherent challenges that can impact the career resiliency of these entry-level employees. First, living where you work is difficult. Residents can be extremely needy and will often violate any boundaries that may have been established to help promote downtime from the job. Second, live-in apartments at higher education institutions may vary drastically in terms of size, condition, and available amenities, which can cause tension among entry-level staff who may perceive they are being treated unfairly. Third, some institutions have strict live-in policies regarding such things as pets and domestic partnerships, which can automatically turn desirable candidates away. Finally, some departments have unrealistic expectations of entry-level staff simply because they are live-in, expecting them to be at their disposal, at any time, with no respect for their personal time. These actions, primarily committed by live-off staff, perpetuate the increasingly negative perception of working for housing and, in particular, of entry-level positions. Taken together, the value of free housing and utilities is lost when such challenges are not addressed.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

The pandemic exposed several shortfalls of college and university housing departments. A great number of institutions had to scramble to meet the ever-changing guidelines and recommendations from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, which resulted in full-time hall directors and graduate assistant hall directors reporting the highest negative impact on their mental health as a result of their functional roles in housing (Seager, 2023). New opportunities to work remotely from home contributed to the exodus of hall directors from their live-in roles because they could now earn comparable, if not greater, compensation without the stress of having to be on the frontlines during the pandemic. Health concerns and the fear of contracting the virus also likely contributed to employees' choice to leave. For some, stimulus checks may have lightened the impact of their decision to leave campus housing, and the incredibly valuable

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transferable skills acquired from working in housing likely made it easier for them to get hired elsewhere. Many housing professionals would argue that if you worked in housing, you could work anywhere.

Some hall directors who chose to remain in their positions during the pandemic vented their frustrations on social media about how their university leadership and/or housing department handled the pandemic, and many complained about chaotic leadership, politically polarized opinions, long working hours, unsafe working environments, and unrealistic work expectations (Boettcher, 2020). These opinions, publicly posted in forums with many other residence life professionals, likely contributed to the growing negativity surrounding entry-level positions and motivated others to leave their roles for better paying remote jobs in the field or other jobs altogether.

The Evolving Complexity of the College Student

The typical college student has evolved significantly since early in the past decade. Students today are more diverse, more tech savvy, more influenced by politics, need more academic and mental health support, are more medicated, seem less resilient, and struggle with interacting well with others (College Cliffs, 2023; McPhillips, 2023; Mintz, 2022; Morris, 2021; Shinn, 2022). These unique characteristics translate to heavier workloads for residence life staff on the frontlines because entry-level staff are now tasked with mediating more roommate conflicts, discovering more ways to engage students, adjudicating more conduct cases, responding to more crisis incidents, providing more academic support, and even managing an ever-increasing number of emotional support animals. In turn, entry-level staff training has become involuted and enervating. Furthermore, housing departments that relaxed their entry-level educational qualifications to the bachelor's level in order to combat difficulties with recruitment now charge their mid-level professionals with providing crash courses and training on topics such as student development theory and counseling, which increases the risk of demotivating mid-level professionals too. These new recruits are likely not looking for a career in the field and will leave as soon as a better opportunity presents itself. Conversely, they can become content being professionally stagnant in their position for an eternity, especially if there are no term limits set by the department.

Decreasing Enrollment in Student Affairs Graduate Programs

Graduate programs focused on higher education administration and student affairs are reporting lower rates of applications and enrollment than ever before, with some programs suffering as much as 50% lower enrollment since the pandemic, and interest in graduate assistant positions in housing has suffered a similar decline (Stoner, 2022). Some potential reasons, apart from the growing negative perception of entry-level

positions in campus housing, could be that recent undergraduates may now prioritize work to gain experience or to make more money, rather than go directly into a graduate program. Additionally, various COVID-19 safety restrictions masked the magic of our practitioner work—the programs, events, and intentional interactions—which could have impacted interest in student affairs as a career. This decline is also evident in the various placement exchanges hosted annually by different institutions and organizations. Registration numbers for prominent successful placement exchanges that are focused on graduate assistantships, such as the Oshkosh Placement Exchange, have declined over the last decade, further illustrating the decline of interest in graduate programs.

Generational Impact

Generational differences about work ethic may have exacerbated some of the current issues related to the negative work environment or culture of housing. Some Baby Boomer and Gen X housing leaders fought over opportunities to take on extra work or responsibilities if there was a staff shortage, and these unique work experiences and opportunities to grow, without the need for any extra compensation, were regarded as high value circumstances. This philosophy was integrated into their work over the course of their careers and created expectations in their staff, causing bewilderment when their Millennial and Gen Z employees pushed back on accepting unpaid extra work during staff shortages. These students have completely different work priorities focused on flexibility and well-being: Millennials value a healthy work/life balance, while Gen Z are more transactional and focus on monetary incentives or benefits that contribute to work/life balance (Hoffower, 2021). This congruence may be due to both generations experiencing a higher degree of anxiety and stress than older generations (Hoffower, 2021). Or, as Dr. Robin Williamson, vice president of student affairs at the University of Central Arkansas, points out, Millennials gave us many clues about their generational change of values, and we simply did not pay attention (Stoner, 2022).

Another factor that may be contributing to the inability to fill entry-level positions is that many Baby Boomers are now retiring and many housing and residence life (HRL) departments are promoting professionals from within, causing an upward shift within the organizational structure and creating more vacancies on the entry-level rung (T. Bruick, personal communication, June 2023). In some instances, professionals may not be ready for these promotions, due to lack of experience, though it appears that some departments would prefer to work through issues of leadership inexperience rather than tackle the potential challenges associated with recruitment.

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SOLUTIONS AND IMPLICATIONS

Inadequate Compensation

The compensation of HRL entry-level positions has now been brought into the spotlight. In 2016, new Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA) overtime exemption rules pushed the minimum annual salary of these positions to just over \$47,000. Many institutions moved their salaries to the new threshold, many looked for a loophole, and some moved to the minimum threshold only to revert once the exemption rules were no longer in effect. The national average for these positions is currently around \$40,000 a year, with a little more than half of positions still compensating below the national average; furthermore, there is an enormous salary spread between the lowest (\$15,000) and highest (\$70,000) annual paying salaries for these positions (ZipRecruiter, 2024). Senior housing officers must take time to evaluate the salaries of these frontline positions and help create a new standard for the field, based on how valuable these positions are in terms of student learning and development (Davidson, 2012). If there is simply no way to adjust compensation due to financial constraints, efforts must be made to increase value in other areas of the position. Offering more professional development funding, meal plans, tuition remission, free parking, or free gym memberships can increase the value of the remuneration for these roles. Because these positions have such a critical impact on the student experience, more priority must be placed on increasing the overall value of these roles to attract high quality candidates. Students today need well-trained, committed, and supportive practitioners more than ever before.

Unfavorable Work Environment

Changing the work environment may be the easiest way for senior housing officers to make significant change. Supervisors must adopt practices, such as regular check-ins with their staff, to help recognize when employees are burning out and then approach the issue with care and concern. If the issue of compensation cannot be resolved, employers must work to demonstrate to their employees that their positions are valued by the department. They can adjust both workloads and expectations appropriately so employees feel more supported and cared for; for example, being flexible with the working hours for live-in staff is an effective way to provide additional support and often leads to increased productivity and job satisfaction (Waltower, 2023). They can also be clear about the responsibilities of the position and seek to remove any ambiguity,

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and speaking with employees about ways to provide them with other means of support will increase their sense of value and may open up new doors to positively impact the departmental work culture.

The Live-In Factor

Similar to the unfavorable work environment, the live-in factor may also be easy to change. HRL leadership must promote a working environment that respects live-in employees' personal boundaries and time and adjust expectations accordingly. Any departmental policies that could affect the overall happiness of live-in staff, such as domestic partnerships and pet allowances, should reflect a priority for their well-being. Reasonable perks, such as a washer and dryer in apartments, an option for personal furniture, ensuring access to external entrances, and other similar amenities can contribute to a positive live-in environment that allows staff to make their on-campus housing a home.

Impact of the COVID-19 Pandemic

Although the impact of the pandemic may be waning, there are lessons to be learned from how departments changed the responsibilities of entry-level positions and tasked employees beyond their job descriptions. The pandemic highlighted how housing departments can be flexible and adapt to extremely challenging circumstances, a lesson that should be extended to overcoming the challenges of recruiting and retaining entry-level staff. If a similar situation occurs again, departments can react in a flexible way by pulling frontline staff into the response planning process, working together through goals and objectives, and determining ways to achieve those targets that are equitable and comfortable for staff at all levels. The concerns and feedback of entry-level staff should be heard and ways found to navigate the complexity of any situation so that everyone is comfortable with the plan of action. Checking in on frontline staff more frequently will ensure that they are receiving all the support they need and have plenty of resources available. It is during these difficult times that leaders, by their actions and decisions, truly illustrate what matters.

Evolving Complexity of the College Student

As the complexity of students' needs increases, so too does the need for attracting qualified candidates for entry-level positions. However, it appears that the field is moving in the opposite direction. If financial constraints are preventing HRL departments from recruiting highly educated and experienced individuals, then they must find other ways to invest in staff to develop them to the desired level. They can provide tuition remission or assistance to employees with bachelor's degrees so they can enroll part-time

in a student affairs master's program to acquire the necessary skills and knowledge to navigate the complexities of today's college student. Additionally, greater emphasis could be placed on the candidate's reference checks, conducted as part of the hiring process, especially when hiring a lower qualified candidate; previous employers can judge whether or not the candidate has the correct mindset for the role, a desire to help students, and an inclination for professional learning and growth.

Decreasing Enrollment in Student Affairs Graduate Programs

Dr. Stephanie McBrayer, associate vice president for student affairs at the University of Central Arkansas, believes that part of the low enrollment in student affairs graduate programs can be attributed to restrictions related to the pandemic. Students simply have not witnessed the true magic of housing and residence life and therefore have not been inspired to pursue a career in student affairs or HRL (Stoner, 2022). Although there may be truth in that assessment, there are still many opportunities to inspire students through mentoring relationships, which can encourage them to consider the field and recognize the positive impact they can make. At the University of Central Arkansas, they created multiple senior resident assistant positions specifically designed for juniors and seniors who are considering a career in student affairs, with the premise that they will enroll in the College Student Personnel Administration master's program and concurrently receive a graduate assistantship with the HRL department. These positions allow students to gain additional leadership experience, manage budgets, co-manage a facility, and run their own staff meetings. In turn, they receive a better compensation package and a larger private apartment. The philosophy behind this initiative is to give them a glimpse of the role and provide transparency about departmental operations, with the hope that they get the "HRL bug." Another way to help combat low enrollment is through an underutilized source: the power of alumni. Connecting successful alumni with students is a fantastic way to counter negative perceptions about the department or the student affairs field in general.

Generational Impact

It is incredibly important for current HRL leadership to know who their entry-level staff are and what they value professionally. Baby Boomer and Gen X leaders must unlearn many old work philosophies and come to terms with the new work culture, which involves being willing to change old habits and create new models that promote and foster healthier work habits for employees while maintaining excellent quality and reaching

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desired objectives. Leadership should also create more opportunities for entry-level staff to become a part of planning and decision-making processes, a form of involvement that can increase staff buy-in and retention (Seager & Bruick, 2021; Wilson, 2008). Although difficult, HRL leaders must try to create an organizational structure that provides opportunities for staff advancement and promotion. Additionally, they must prioritize assessment practices and use relevant data to ensure that they are constantly adapting to ever-evolving students and staff.

CONCLUSION

The field of campus housing continues to experience challenges compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic. This article outlined the many factors contributing to the current entry-level staffing challenge and provided potential solutions and strategies to address the associated issues. Although the current circumstances may seem tough, this is an excellent opportunity for HRL leaders to examine and assess their departmental practices, policies, recruitment and retention strategies, organizational structure, and budget priorities to ensure that all functions and processes are set to maximize the success of the department. This means considering not only student success but also the well-being and job satisfaction of employees at all levels, particularly those in entry-level, frontline roles. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What are some actionable ways that retention for entry-level housing staff can be improved, apart from compensation?
2. What changes need to take place when lowering the qualification threshold for entry-level housing positions?
3. How can senior leaders work to build functional support for mid-level staff who are taking on more responsibility for training entry-level staff who would historically be deemed underqualified?
4. What knowledge has been taken for granted in student affairs?
5. The author discusses generational differences across the many levels of student affairs. What are some steps departments can take to aid in bridging those differences?
6. Reflecting on your own institution, do you believe a graduate assistant program directed toward senior RAs would be effective? What challenges do you foresee in creating and implementing such a program?
7. How can housing departments work to be more transparent with candidates about live-in positions? How much transparency is appropriate? When can transparency become detrimental to a department?

Discussion questions developed by Nick Cornett, University of North Texas