



Re-imagining Live-In Staff Experiences in Creating Work/Life Boundaries and Confronting the Urgency Demands of Their Positions

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STAFF MEMBERS IN LIVE-IN POSITIONS often find themselves faced with a difficult choice: Leave their roles in search of a job that offers a better work/life balance or stay and hope their department is invested in making the changes necessary to support their staff. Live-in staff are in a unique position because the challenges they face in establishing work/life boundaries and confronting a constant sense of urgency permeate their jobs and are exacerbated by living where they work. Entry-level staff, often the ones who fill live-in roles, are the professionals who leave the field of student affairs at the greatest rate. How can residence life leaders make entry-level live-in roles feel more sustainable for their staff? In this study, researchers center the perspectives of seven live-in staff who attempt to re-imagine their roles. Findings show that there are greater organizational challenges related to a work culture characterized by a sense of urgency and lack of reflection. Participants' ideas for re-imagining the role are framed using a liberatory consciousness framework.

Concerns about attrition in student affairs and campus housing professions are not new (Marshall et al., 2016; Renn & Jessup-Anger, 2008; Sallee, 2021), and presently entry-level professionals leave the field at the greatest rates (Sallee, 2021), citing excessive hours, work/life conflict, a lack of responsiveness, and burnout as reasons for leaving (Marshall et al., 2016; NASPA, 2022). For live-in residence life professionals working *and* living on campus, the challenges of their work responsibilities are exacerbated by the permeable boundaries created by the reality that their home is also their workplace. Pressures also arise from an organizational focus on productivity and what Okun (2021) refers to as “a constant sense of urgency” (p. 27) that permeates their work (Hirschy & Staten, 2021; Rankin & Gulley, 2018). Practitioners in residence life are well situated to change workplace culture, especially if they are able to increase their organizational capacity for reflection and build a collective liberatory consciousness. In this study, qualitative, semi-structured interviews reveal rich insights about live-in professionals' experiences by seeking to understand how they would re-imagine their live-in role.

WHITE SUPREMACY CULTURE AND FUNCTIONAL STUPIDITY

The student affairs profession has cultivated a reputation for expecting long hours from its employees, who are faced with the burden of responding to student needs at all hours of the day while still balancing obligations to their families and their own sense of well-being (Marshall et al., 2016; Sallee, 2021). Entry-level residence life staff are faced with the additional challenge of being required to live where they work, which limits their available choices for managing work/life boundaries (Hirschy & Staten,

2021). Such integrated work environments heighten challenges related to physical space, time management, and interpersonal relationships (Hirschy & Staten, 2021; Rankin & Gulley, 2018).

This study views the necessity of long hours and high expectations for responsiveness to be reflective of the persistent sense of urgency (Okun, 2021) that characterizes White supremacy culture (ACPA Presidential Taskforce on 21st Century Employment in Higher Education, 2022). Okun's (2021) framework offers a unique perspective for unpacking how White supremacy—a construct that plays a central role in disconnecting and dividing members of an organization based on race—manifests in higher education organizations like residence life. White supremacy culture affects all members of an organization as an invisible and systemic force that influences standards of practice and inhibits progress in creating sustainable workplace experiences, especially for entry-level professionals (ACPA Presidential Taskforce on 21st Century Employment in Higher Education, 2022). In Okun's framework, urgency explains the underlying feeling of "sacrificing potential allies for quick or highly visible results" (2021, p. 27), which can make it difficult for staff to pause and engage in thoughtful, inclusive decision-making. For live-in professionals, a sense of urgency can materialize as feeling the need to move quickly or the pressure to complete tasks fast. This state of constant urgency makes actually urgent situations less real, as individuals begin to feel that everything is a matter of life and death, even when it is not (Okun, 2021).

The undermining of thoughtful and careful decision-making is a form of what Alvesson and Spicer refer to as functional stupidity: an organization's support for a "lack of reflexivity, substantive reasoning, and justification. It entails a refusal to use intellectual resources outside a narrow and 'safe' terrain. . . trapping individuals and organizations into problematic patterns of thinking" (2012, p. 1196) and thus restricting reflective communication and ultimately opportunities for change. In residence life organizations, the fact that long hours and boundary challenges for live-in professionals are seen as natural or inevitable reflects the presence of functional stupidity within organizations and exemplifies the urgency domain of White supremacy culture at work. There are legitimate times when residence life professionals must act quickly and decisively; however, organizations with a strong adherence to urgency are driven more by their orientation to action than the presence of actual emergencies (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012).

When organizations are driven primarily by a sense of urgency, there is little space for questioning current practices or engaging in critical reflection (Alvesson & Eino-la, 2018; Dee & Collinsworth, 2023). Employees may not feel they have the space to question expectations about boundaries and may begin to believe that boundary-less speed and efficiency are essential for success (Dee & Collinsworth, 2023). Organizational functional stupidity limits members' ability to reflect and to question dominant beliefs and expectations about how to perform their roles (Alvesson & Spicer, 2012). In such conditions, individuals experience little autonomy and ultimately are left feeling dissatisfied, leading to less effective decision-making, resentment, and burnout (Dee & Collinsworth, 2023; Okun, 2021).

LIBERATORY CONSCIOUSNESS FRAMEWORK

An organization's ability to create space for critical reflection not only supports sustainable careers, but also ensures time for organizations and individuals to intentionally cultivate a liberatory consciousness, which involves countering oppressive systems with "awareness and intentionality" (Love, 2013, p. 605). Using Love's (2013) liberatory consciousness framework, this study aims to center the experiences of individuals while acknowledging the steps needed for an organization to encourage and elevate this kind of awareness in their practice. Cultivating a liberatory consciousness empowers an organization to notice, explore, and examine issues of equity and to act responsibly and collaboratively to transform workspaces (Love, 2013).

In Love's (2013) framework, there are four elements of developing a liberatory consciousness: awareness, analysis, action, and accountability/allyship. Individuals cultivating *awareness* develop the capacity for observing the world around them, and through *analysis* they begin to theorize about root causes and potential solutions to identified problems. Individuals pursue *action* with the recognition that awareness and analysis will not be sufficient to counter oppressive environments. *Accountability* and *allyship* involve accepting responsibility for the consequences of action or inaction, as well as valuing possibilities for allyship and sharing perspectives. Love's liberatory consciousness framework guided the interpretation of our findings as we synthesized our participants' reflections on their re-imagined roles into action steps for departments to apply.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

In this study, we posed a critical question: When given the opportunity to re-imagine their live-in role, what would live-in professionals change? Several studies have demonstrated that organizations do not always socialize live-in entry-level residence life professionals in a manner that empowers them to critically reflect on their experiences or make changes to those experiences. Centering the voices of these professionals symbolizes a necessary shift in power from employers to employees, allows for additional voices to be represented in the production of scholarship, and models the liberatory perspective that employees and employers can collaborate to enact change (White, 2002). By offering reflective space to generate ideas about how they might change the nature of their live-in roles, participants unpacked their residential experience and revealed opportunities for sustainable change (Catalano et al., 2018).

For live-in residence life professionals working *and* living on campus, the challenges of their work responsibilities are exacerbated by the permeable boundaries created by the reality that their home is also their workplace.

Practitioners in residence life are well situated to change workplace culture, especially if they are able to increase their organizational capacity for reflection and build a collective liberatory consciousness.

METHODS

We utilized qualitative inquiry as a way to honor the complex and varied experiences of live-in staff (Merriam, 2009). Semi-structured interviews allowed participants to express these experience in a detailed and illustrative manner (Schuh et al., 2016).

Participants

To better understand how live-in staff would re-imagine their roles, we conducted 60-minute interviews with seven participants, many of whom had experience in multiple live-in roles in different residence life departments that included on-call responsibilities. Applying a convenience sampling approach, we reviewed the websites of higher education institutions within four states in the Midwest and identified residence life professionals using information available on campus websites. Participants were eligible if they had been in a live-in position for at least one year. More than 25 individuals expressed interest, but many did not reply to requests for an interview. Ultimately, we interviewed seven staff at five different institutions:

- **Alex** (they/them) works at a private religiously affiliated institution in a metropolitan area and disclosed that they identify outside of the gender binary.
- **Lake** (she/her) works at a large public suburban institution and describes herself as a queer cisgender White woman who identifies as being on the “ace” (asexual-aromantic) spectrum. Lake also shared that she has obsessive compulsive disorder and that many of her obsessions or compulsions revolve around sleep, which greatly affects her work in residence life to the point that being woken up in the middle of the night was impacting her mental health.
- **Harley** (she/they) works at a private university in a metropolitan area and considers her salient identities as being a queer Jewish White woman. At work, she utilizes her queer and Jewish identities to create more representation in the workplace.
- **Spencer** (she/her) works at a large public suburban institution and describes her salient identities as being genderqueer, White, non-religious, disabled, and lower middle class. During her interview and in follow-up communication, Spencer also noted the relevance of identifying as American, biromantic, and asexual.
- **Stella Luna** (she/her) also works at a large public research university in a suburban area. The most salient identities that impact her work are being a queer Jewish cisgender White woman. She also notes the saliency of age, given that she is 24 years old, the youngest professional in her department.

- **Sunny** (she/her) works at a private religious college in a metropolitan area and shared that she identifies most strongly as Black, American, and a woman.
- **Rafael** (he/him) works at a large metropolitan public university. In addition to identifying as Latino and being married, Rafael noted with great pride that he recently became a father, which has had a profound impact on how he views his work.

Data Collection

We conducted semi-structured interviews to engage participants in conversations about their experiences with boundaries and a sense of urgency in their department and asked them to brainstorm about changes they would make to their role. Participants were invited to use a pseudonym to provide them a layer of confidentiality and had an opportunity to review the draft of this manuscript to confirm that their voice was represented as intended.

In terms of the research team's positionality, as a collective we share more than 19 years of residence life experience, with 15 of the shared years being live-in roles. Two of the research team members supervise live-in staff in residence life. We hold varying gender and racial identities and sexual orientations. As current and former residence life professionals, we are acutely aware of the difficulties and challenges of serving as live-in staff, which fuels our desire to make these roles more sustainable. Collectively holding historically marginalized identities provides an awareness of the intersection of identities and the experience of live-in professionals in this field. As practitioners, we value scholarship that points to clear insights into actionable changes and strive, as scholars, to deliver actionable insights to others.

Data Analysis

Because not all researchers participated in each interview, the first cycle of review focused on ensuring that they were all familiarized with each participant's responses. We coded responses inductively, with no preliminary expectations for codes that might emerge, honoring the perspectives of our participants as primary sources of knowledge (Saldaña, 2021; White, 2002). In the first cycle of coding, we reviewed responses for emerging patterns. Noting those that were reflective of both challenges and re-imagined solutions, we synthesized codes into categories reflective of specific types of boundary challenges that emerged across responses.

FINDINGS

When asked about how they would re-imagine their role, participants often framed their re-imaginings within the context of a particular boundary challenge they had noted earlier in their interview. Below, we share re-imagined solutions framed within the four types of boundary challenges experienced by our participants.

Time-Based Boundaries

Participants acknowledged that the live-in role posed challenges to managing their time and that at certain points in the year time management became very difficult. Rafael pointed out the expectation that residence life staff spend extra hours working during move-in.

It's like it's opening. You know how it's going to be. I'm going to leave in the morning. You're not going to see me until like midnight, because, you know, we got students to welcome and all that, and we're going to do it for . . . a week straight.

This is, he explained, part of an expectation to be visible and “show face,” which creates challenges that extend to staff supervision. Participants wanted their supervisees to feel supported, which often meant being visible at their after-hours events or responding quickly to questions after hours even for non-urgent issues. Harley described this conundrum.

One of the things that was really hard was the boundary of . . . Do I respond to this message or not? Is it between 8 and 5? Yes, I can respond. But after five o'clock, if they have a question, is that something that I need to answer? Is that something that I need to address? And I think that's something that's a very personal thing that someone has to answer for themselves. But maybe this is why I wasn't [perceived as] the most amazing supervisor because I had those firm boundaries.

Here, Harley underscores the pressure of being a good employee who is available after hours to answer any question from supervisees. Lake also noted the conflict between being willing and able to help someone while at the same time protecting one's own time. “I'm conflicted there because I always want them to be able to ask questions, but also I'm a human with limited energy and cannot answer every single question.”

Temporal boundaries are compounded by feelings of urgency while on-call. For example, some participants felt that their time was not their own. As Alex explained, “When I'm on-call, I basically behave like I have nothing between me and the job just because it's how immediate [duty] is.” Some institutions blurred distinctions between being on-call and not being on-call. In these circumstances, participants were expected to be the first call from student staff even when they were not officially on-call; the feeling that this disruption could occur at any time created a sense of constant underlying stress.

When prompted to re-imagine the role, participants advocated for clear delineations between on-call and off-call expectations, which could effectively mitigate constant feelings of urgency. As Lake explained,

I think that there's a misunderstanding of this notion of being on-call all the time. We tried to have some conversations this year about what happens if I'm at the grocery store or what happens if I'm at this other place. And our expectations of RAs, we set them up to believe that we're available to them all the time when that might not actually be the case.

Though participants generally did not express too much frustration for time-management challenges during on-call events, they did advocate for clear delineations between on-call and off-call expectations for staff. Multiple respondents also mentioned the pos-

sibility of establishing office-wide core working hours or utilizing common practices related to flex time.

Place-Based Boundaries

Participants also acknowledged the complications of living where they work. For example, they wondered if they were obligated to respond to every knock on the door or every noise in the hallway. For some, it seemed there were no boundaries between their work and personal lives. As Alex said, “You can put a sign on the door, but that doesn’t stop people from knocking.” Even with a sign stating “Private Residence” and a living place slightly separated from students, Rafael felt that just living near students provided more reminders of work:

We would either hear people in the stairwell doing whatever [it] is that they were doing or go up to the door, and yank[ing] on it wondering “What’s back here?” That’s a boundary that I would want to have, but it’s only gotten more difficult.

The proximity to student living space was a constant reminder of the obligation for work.

In addition, three of the participants with pets mentioned students staring through their windows to catch a glimpse of it or even knocking on their door in order to meet it. Stella Luna provided an example that demonstrates the challenge of location-based boundaries.

[Students] would try and put their hands under my door to play with my cat, which was cute one time. And then I was like, I literally live here. I promise my cat has toys to play with, he doesn’t need your hands under the door.

Participants desired not only more distance between their living space and their students, but also more between their home and office. As Lake recalled, the proximity of home and office “presented its challenges as someone that was new to the work and the field and trying to set boundaries because there just wasn’t physical separation between my office and my apartment.”

When prompted to re-imagine the role, Stella Luna described clarification of physical boundaries as “the first step.” Both Alex and Rafael suggested that the location of staff living spaces should be unknown and separate from students. “A lot of times, when I hear of [professionals] tired of living on campus, it relates to living around students,” Rafael said. Alex agreed, re-imagining a living space that was nearby, but not inside the building.

I think that would really help with boundaries, because I would still be near the building, still be close by, so my response time will still be the same, but [then I wouldn’t have to walk through the lobby and be seen].

For live-in professionals, a sense of urgency can materialize as feeling the need to move quickly or the pressure to complete tasks fast. This state of constant urgency makes actually urgent situations less real, as individuals begin to feel that everything is a matter of life and death, even when it is not.

In residence life organizations, the fact that long hours and boundary challenges for live-in professionals are seen as natural or inevitable reflects the presence of functional stupidity within organizations and exemplifies the urgency domain of White supremacy culture at work.

Finally, Sunny drew attention to concerns about needing to move from one building to another each year and felt that the threat of having to move at the end of the academic year was always present: “I could be moved, I don’t know where I’m going to be, kind of makes it hard to feel as if you are actually settled and can establish boundaries.”

Identity-Based Boundaries

Many participants brought dimensions of their social identities to the conversation. Rafael, for example, who lived on campus with his wife and newborn child, recognized that his family, and especially his partner, were also impacted by the lack of clear boundaries between work and home. “This is just like a [normal] thing [to me], but to know that she was also affected by things that would happen . . . that was probably some of the biggest areas where our boundaries were tested.”

Harley felt conflicted about public versus private spaces when she recognized that she felt unsure if displaying items important to her religion on her door was acceptable:

Something that’s really tricky is being able to hang [my religious objects] in my living space and feeling comfortable without knowing for sure that there won’t be a student that looks at it, and maybe does some questionable things. It’s one of those things that shouldn’t be an issue, but it’s something to be super cognizant about.

Some participants felt that their responsibilities placed them in difficult situations. While on call once, for example, Sunny was instructed to search for weapons or asked to interact with students suspected of dealing drugs, which made her feel extremely uncomfortable and vulnerable, since she was essentially being asked to perform unsafe actions with no real protection.

Because of my identity as a Black woman, I’m like, no, I don’t feel comfortable. That’s definitely the hardest thing I have dealt with. How do I establish boundaries while still doing my job and not coming off as too difficult just because, you know, I have been asked to do things that I didn’t believe was the best way to handle the situation? Because I was on duty, it was like, well, you just need to do this.

Rafael, Harley, and Sunny shared stories that clearly demonstrated the sometimes challenging interplay between their work experience and their social identities, highlighting specific challenges that placed additional pressure on the long-term sustainability of the role. Reflecting on these identities and considering re-imaginings of the live-in role, Sunny mentioned that there should be clear communication and protocols that make staff feel comfortable opting out of duty situations when their safety or well-being is negatively impacted. Participants re-imagined a world where it was acceptable to

opt out of situations that cause discomfort. In relation to concerns raised by Rafael and Harley, participants re-imagined roles where live-in staff lived in staff apartment areas that were separated from students.

Communicating About Boundaries

Participants described several incidents that demonstrated how boundary expectations were communicated during their live-in roles. Though they were told about the importance of boundaries (“From the beginning, even during my interview stage, [boundaries] were definitely advertised,” Sunny noted), the messages were inconsistent (“Usually those boundary conversations will come up during training, but to be honest, it feels just like the word is being thrown out there,” Spencer added). While there may have been initial conversations or training about setting boundaries, there was no ongoing process of reinforcing this on the job.

Participants described how a departmental sense of urgency impacted their boundaries. Stella Luna indicated that she hadn’t received any training about how to determine whether a request was actually urgent, which made it difficult to know what was expected of her or how to protect her time. Some participants revealed that, when asking questions or offering feedback about boundaries, they were met with resistance by supervisors. What Spencer felt had been communicated to him was “This is just the nature of the live-in residence life position.”

When prompted to re-imagine how individuals and departments could improve communication about boundaries, participants observed that boundary and urgency management requires ongoing support. While training at the beginning of the year could be useful, Lake’s experience was that communicating the information throughout the year reinforced this important message: “[They] had a lot of good conversations with a very supportive supervisor about how to handle different situations.” Sunny suggested that when hall directors are on the same page about boundary management, the department is more respectful of individual boundaries, and she imagined that collaborative communication and expectation setting among staff would be particularly beneficial.

Perhaps most important, several participants simply stated that they hadn’t been given an opportunity to engage in a conversation about boundaries that also offered them the space to consider alternative paths forward. “It’s not easy to re-imagine something that we don’t feel like we can access all the time,” Lake noted, and Rafael agreed, saying, “Folks would benefit more from having this be a conversation.”

DISCUSSION

A liberatory consciousness begins with awareness, but as Love’s (2013) framework demonstrates, this step is just the beginning. Many of the suggestions that participants shared align closely with the domains of the liberatory consciousness framework

Departmental leaders can be strong allies in positioning live-in staff as experts in their own experience while not relying solely on them to solve boundary management or urgency challenges on their own.

(see Table 1). As our participants unpacked their experiences, they were given the freedom to brainstorm re-imagined possibilities. They highlighted a variety of potential solutions and strategies for change, and many suggestions echoed ACPA's strategies to build a more sustainable work culture for student affairs professionals, affirming the validity of those recommended strategies in improving entry-level experiences (College Student Educators International [ACPA], 2022). For example, organizations can train staff to be prepared for the realities of boundary management (ACPA, 2022) and can then be attentive to socializing new employees away from the mindset of constant availability and continuous immediate response. In addition, supervisors can define and model what constitutes an urgent situation; can differentiate between emergencies and inconveniences; and can set, communicate, and model good boundary management.

TABLE 1

Participant Re-imaginings in Alignment with the Liberatory Consciousness Framework

Re-imagined ideas	
<i>Awareness</i>	• Notice distances between staff living spaces and working spaces. • Observe how students could disrupt staff living spaces. • Reflect on how different aspects of the live-in role may impact social identities in different ways.
<i>Analysis</i>	• Engage in conversation meant to tease out the delineations between on-call expectations and day-to-day expectations for boundaries and urgency. • Create regularly occurring opportunities for staff to reflect and imagine potential solutions to boundary challenges or urgency demands.
<i>Action</i>	• Implement consistent core working hours and/or flex-time policies. • Locate staff living spaces that maintain separation from students and from offices. • Facilitate consensus-building activities amongst live-in staff to align expectations for interactions when on-call or responding to student staff after business hours. • Maintain ongoing discussion about boundary management and urgency through supervision. • Limit annual movement of staff to new buildings.
<i>Accountability/allyship</i>	• Listen to, validate, and implement changes in response to live-in staff concerns about boundaries or urgency demands. • Model boundary management and appropriate interpretation of emergent or urgent concerns. • Cultivate community among live-in staff teams so that they can mutually agree on some aspects of navigating boundaries and urgency that are collectively beneficial to the community. • Establish protocols for on-call staff to opt out of situations where their comfort, safety, or mental health are threatened.

Organizations must recognize how the sense of urgency related to White supremacy culture limits the space and opportunity for reflection and long-term thinking that motivates change (Anderson, 2021; Okun, 2021). Many participants noted that they had neither opportunities nor time to reflect on their role in this way in the workplace. Without the space to cultivate awareness among live-in staff about their own role and their own workplaces, opportunities for them to identify problems or re-imagine solutions will be limited. Our participants didn't immediately jump to imaginative re-inventions of the role; they initially imagined small, realistic changes that many departments have the potential to make. The challenges they had in identifying radical re-imaginings are indicative of organizational cultures where reflection is inhibited, which allows institutions to prolong the exploitation of their staff's labor, enhancing the unsustainable nature of these positions. Organizations can support their staff's future creativity and imagination by beginning to provide opportunities for individuals to critically reflect on their experiences. In turn, carving out time for reflection helps to prevent a culture of urgency from dominating the organizational experience.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Cultivating awareness is only the first step in developing a liberatory consciousness; however, it is an important step that allows employees to take the time to reflect and re-imagine. Organizations must help create this space for their employees and must provide specific strategies to support more sustainable work cultures for live-in staff. Departmental leaders can be strong allies in positioning live-in staff as experts in their own experience while not relying solely on them to solve boundary management or urgency challenges on their own. Live-in staff must be able to participate in the development of solutions, while organizational leaders can take responsibility for implementing change and working with live-in staff to monitor the progress of change. While our study offered perspectives from seven individuals, with experiences at more than 10 institutions combined, these may not be reflective of the experiences of staff at other institutions. Future research may broaden participant numbers, as well as institutional types. This study utilized semi-structured interviews with seven participants at different institutions to create space for brainstorming and imagination. Given that participants expressed appreciation for dedicated time to have this conversation, replicating such a strategy in meetings between supervisors and live-in staff may be a useful implication for practice as well.

In situating live-in staff as experts of their own experience, we have cultivated vital ideas and re-imaginings within the frame of a liberatory consciousness. If changes to residence life work cultures are not made, staff will continue to leave the field. Organizations that do not engage in improving the sustainability and longevity of these roles will experience continuous turnover, resulting in ineffective use of departmental time, energy, and resources. It is up to leaders to embrace the opportunity to re-imagine their workplace and empower their employees to do so too. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Functional stupidity impacts the response of professionals by exemplifying the urgency domain in White supremacy culture. In what ways do you see functional stupidity present in your department when responding to urgent issues within your community? Is this constant sense of urgency impacting how you respond to tasks and events in your day-to-day work?
2. How can we, as professionals, re-imagine ways to create a space in our department for reflection in the work of live-in staff and implement liberatory consciousness in the practice of reflection?
3. Participants identified place-based boundaries as being difficult because of a lack of separation between work and personal life. How can departments be intentional in creating spaces for live-in professionals that allow them to feel separation from their community?
4. If you could re-imagine the research study, what are some ways you would adjust the design (identifying study participants, methods employed, data collection, etc.)?
5. In terms of the four areas of boundaries discussed in this article (those defined by time, place, identity, and communication), why are they still so difficult to manage? How can we improve the healthy practices of setting clear boundaries within our housing departments?

Discussion questions prepared by Ramon Izquierdo, Clemson University