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## **Well-Being and the Experiences of Resident Assistants with Minoritized Identities**

WELL-BEING IS A PERTINENT CONCERN in higher education, especially as it relates to residence life staff who have substantial outside-the-classroom responsibilities for students' health, safety, and development. Resident assistants (RAs) assume significant roles and can experience secondary trauma from encountering various crises during the course of their jobs, and minoritized RAs can be even more vulnerable to the effects of such trauma. This article reports the results from qualitative interviews with 21 resident assistants with one or more minoritized identities attending one of four different higher education institutions in the U.S. Findings from this study report two main themes revealing that the occupational experiences and contexts for RAs with minoritized identities have the potential to shape other dimensions of their well-being. In particular, this study describes the types of disruptions that can affect the well-being of resident assistants with minoritized identities and the strategies they utilize to mitigate the disequilibrium. Being better attuned to the experiences of resident assistants with minoritized identities is critical for fostering equitable success through inclusive and affirming environments.

*Editor's note: The author has chosen to lowercase the word White, which would normally be capitalized according to APA guidelines, in order to avoid seeming to center whiteness.*

Well-being topics in higher education have gained new levels of importance in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, which has drawn stark attention to the disparate environmental, economic, and systemic circumstances disproportionately faced by individuals with one or more minoritized identities in the United States. The pandemic also spurred interest in recognizing the uneven conditions that staff face in the workplace and has fueled hiring shortages in a number of industries, including higher education (Zahneis, 2022). Prior to COVID-19, discussion of the well-being of higher education staff had largely been framed by understanding the impact of secondary trauma and burnout and their correlation to negative personal well-being and institutional outcomes (Hardy & Dodd, 1998; Lynch, 2017, 2019; Lynch & Klima, 2021; Mistretta & Dubois, 2021; Stoner, 2017). Sociopolitical contexts and campus climates that reflect bias, oppression, and marginalization

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based on identity also produce negative socio-emotional outcomes (Anderson, 2021; Ardoin & Martinez, 2019; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017; Renn & Reason, 2021; Schuster, 2021), generally as a result of minoritized identity-based fatigue (e.g., racial battle fatigue, queer battle fatigue), that affect well-being (Foste & Johnson, 2021; Smith et al., 2017; Wozolek et al., 2015).

Undergraduate students with minoritized identities serving as resident assistants can be especially challenged by the taxing demands and responsibilities associated with these unique peer leadership roles. They fulfill the multiple responsibilities of their RA roles while simultaneously contending with other sociopolitical and campus climate forces both inside and outside their residence hall communities, which affects various facets of their undergraduate experiences, including the psychosocial dimensions of their development (Schuster & Stalker, 2020). For example, as paraprofessional staff in supporting roles, RAs may encounter negative interactions or comments directed at their minoritized identity in their residence halls while still being expected to continue to build community and interact with residents. However, identity-affirming campus climates maintain the potential to support growth outcomes for minoritized RAs, including identity development, community connections, and self-efficacy (Schuster & Stalker, 2022). In spite of renewed interest in RAs' campus experiences, the well-being of RAs with minoritized identities is not yet broadly understood in the literature. The purpose of this paper is to center the well-being experiences of RAs with minoritized identities throughout the performance of their job-related responsibilities.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF WELL-BEING FOR COLLEGE STUDENTS

Well-being is a multifaceted concept that encapsulates eight overlapping core domains: emotional, physical, social, intellectual, spiritual, financial, environmental, and occupational (Myers et al., 2000). Each of these domains remains deeply connected to the others, and they appear and are felt in individualized ways that are influenced by people's environments, relationships, and identities (Myers et al., 2000). The importance of well-being is particularly relevant to college students who are commonly seeking purpose (Nash & Murray, 2010), belonging (Strayhorn, 2019), and community (Azmitia et al., 2013) during their undergraduate years. Students with clearer understandings of well-being concepts experience positive undergraduate outcomes, including self-development, academic excellence, healthful choices and behaviors, psychological adjustment, and post-graduation career satisfaction and success (Mayhew et al., 2016).

Even so, significant proportions of today's college students encounter high degrees of loneliness (Eisenberg et al., 2020), stress (Winerman, 2017), anxiety (Lee et al., 2021), and financial uncertainty (McDaniel et al., 2015), which act as direct impediments to

several of the dimensions of well-being. Inhospitable campus climates for students with minoritized racial, sexual orientation, and/or gender identities can exacerbate feelings of loneliness, alienation, and stress (Renn & Reason, 2021), even though students with these minoritized identities employ strategies to persist in and transform these environments (DeAngelo et al., 2016; Hill et al., 2021; Rhoads, 1998). Thus, it becomes critical to envision well-being in higher education as a multidimensional process that is individually experienced and made sense of in relation to broad and localized environmental conditions and interactions.

## THE IMPORTANCE OF WELL-BEING FOR RESIDENT ASSISTANTS

RAs serve as peer leaders and helping paraprofessionals on college and university campuses and have distinctive roles and responsibilities. The position generally serves as a positive learning and skill development experience (Benjamin & David, 2016; Blimling, 2015), and core expectations for RAs involve developing positive relationships with residents and creating communities within residence halls (Roland & Agosto, 2017). As such, there is a high level of invisible emotional labor (Hochschild, 1983) that RAs invest in these positions by consoling residents through a range of negative life events, including relationship breakups, homesickness, family issues, course-related anxiety, and roommate conflicts. In addition, RAs are expected to be sources of support and referral for serious student issues including sexual misconduct, suicidal ideation, substance-related medical emergencies, mental health crises, and other forms of trauma (Blimling, 2015; Lynch, 2019). Further, RAs are often the first campus agents to whom residents will go for support during turmoil on or off campus. It is common for RAs to facilitate social justice conversations during tense and painful national incidents or during polarizing political moments (Johnson & Kang, 2006; Roland & Agosto, 2017; Schuster & Stalker, 2020). In addition to their challenging student leadership roles, RAs serve as peer role models who support residents as institutional guides and transformational educators (Blimling, 2015; Sears & Tu, 2017).

In spite of the enormity of their roles and the emotional labor that RAs invest in residents, RA well-being in contemporary contexts is still being explored in the literature. Most studies on RA well-being recognize how some RAs can and do feel the effects of secondary trauma, especially as it relates to their role as frontline responders to crisis (Hardy & Dodd, 1998; Lynch, 2017; Stoner, 2017). According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children & Families (2017), supporting individuals who experience significant trauma can have secondary effects on the helper, such as decreased cognitive abilities (preoccupation,

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reduced concentration), emotional problems (guilt, helplessness), behavioral issues (withdrawal, sleep disruptions), and physical manifestations (pain, rapid heart rate). For RAs, secondary trauma can result from responding to incidents that involve suicidal ideation, sexual assault, severe mental health issues, or death of family or friends (Lynch, 2019) and can manifest as feelings of stress, avoidance, negative mood, and reduced cognition (Lynch, 2017, 2019), each of which destabilizes several well-being domains at once.

## **THE IMPORTANCE OF WELL-BEING FOR RESIDENT ASSISTANTS WITH MINORITIZED IDENTITIES**

Secondary trauma has a strong potential to contribute to burnout for all RAs (Lynch, 2019; McClure et al., 2022; Stoner & Zhang, 2017). Burnout refers to a culminating work-based phenomenon classified by the World Health Organization (2019) as having three measurements related to an occupational context: (a) mental and/or physical exhaustion, (b) job withdrawal, cynicism, or apathy, and (c) diminished feelings of job-related effectiveness. The propensity for burnout and secondary trauma may be heightened for RAs with minoritized identities, who face additional pressures and demands while serving in the role, and a growing body of research on RAs with minoritized identities aids in understanding their experiences in this regard.

While intersectionality cautions against flattening individuals' experiences into a single identity (e.g., Duran & Jones, 2019), several representative themes gleaned from the extant literature on RAs with minoritized identities form the basis of current understandings of the topic. First, RAs with minoritized identities are likely to encounter peers, supervisors, and/or residents who hold biased views and expectations based on stereotypes of their minoritized identity or identities (Harper et al., 2011; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017). Most often, this comes from racialized, heteronormative, and heterocis-gendered expectations that subject minoritized RAs to increased skepticism and scrutiny, which dominant identity RAs do not face (Cousineau & Chambers, 2015; Posner & Brodsky, 1993; Roland & Agosto, 2017). For instance, an RA with a Black or LGBTQ+ identity may have their authority questioned by white and/or straight students when confronting a policy incident while on duty. Second, RAs with minoritized identities may be expected to conform to racialized and gendered roles for the benefit of their dominant identity peers, supervisors, and/or residents. Sometimes, this results in RAs with minoritized identities being asked to account for otherwise absent identities in tokenized and harmful ways (Harper et al., 2011; Roland & Agosto, 2017). Along these same lines, RAs with minoritized identities encounter increased expectations to lead conversations related to diversity, equity, and inclusion because of their minoritized identity (Foste & Johnson, 2021; Johnson & Kang, 2006; Roland & Agosto, 2017). Finally, these experiences can culminate in RAs with minoritized identities feeling increased identity-based fatigue, which impacts other aspects of their campus experience and results in their feelings of loneliness or burnout while in the role (Foste & Johnson, 2021; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017; Mollett et al., 2020; Smith et al., 2017; Tillapaugh, 2015).

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Together, this literature forms the empirical foundation of the present study and recognizes a need to better understand the well-being experiences of RAs with minoritized identities. Through this paper, I sought to fill this gap in the literature by examining the following research question: *How do RAs with minoritized identities consider their well-being while serving in the role?*

## METHODS

This qualitative study explored the well-being experiences of RAs with minoritized identities through a constructivist paradigm. Constructivism was useful in executing the present study because of its intentional focus on understanding individuals' multiple realities (Schwandt, 1998) in ways that counter homogenization (Duran & Jones, 2019).

### Participants and Data Collection

Data was collected through single semi-structured individual interviews with 21 RAs studying at four different predominantly white institutions located in the United States (see Table 1, page 132, for demographics). Interviews lasted about an hour and were audio recorded and then transcribed. Interview questions explored RAs' experiences of well-being and the ways they engaged in well-being strategies. The sample for this study was heterogeneous; more than half were women, two-thirds had one or more minoritized racial and/or ethnic identities, and one-third identified as LGBTQ. Participants represented various experience levels and had served in the RA role for anywhere between one and three years. Other details about this sample and its limitations have been written about elsewhere (see Schuster & Stalker, 2022).

### Analysis

I conducted interpretive thematic data analysis (Saldaña, 2016) to generate themes using asset-based thinking and recognizing the uneven and underlying power dynamics (re)produced within occupational contexts and higher education environments (Charmaz, 2017; Smith, 2020). This meant that I analyzed participants' descriptive narratives in ways that considered the broader systems and structures that produce minoritization and considered participants' exposures to trauma to emanate from these larger forces. To reach these conclusions, my analysis involved iterative phases that heightened my critical thinking in unpacking my research question. While each stage of the analysis involved a degree of fluidity, the general pathway I took began with spending significant time reading, rereading, and thinking about interview transcripts, bracketing my own preconceptions along the way (Bazeley, 2013). From there, I engaged in several rounds of descriptive and analytic coding to organize and sophisticate trends recurring within the data (Saldaña, 2016). In my coding, I was closely focused

**TABLE 1****Profiles of Study Participants**

| Pseudonym | Gender    | Race/ethnicity                     | Sexual orientation | Class year | # years as RA |
|-----------|-----------|------------------------------------|--------------------|------------|---------------|
| Angelina  | Woman     | White, Hispanic                    | Straight           | 2          | 1             |
| Braelynn  | Woman     | Black                              | Straight           | 4          | 3             |
| Brandon   | Man       | Pacific Islander, African American | Gay                | 3          | 1             |
| Breanna   | Woman     | White                              | Straight           | 4          | 1             |
| Emere**   | Woman     | Pacific Islander and Asian         | Not disclosed      | 2          | 1             |
| Hailey    | Woman     | White, Black                       | Not disclosed      | 2          | 1             |
| Jesslyn   | Woman     | White                              | Straight           | 4          | 2             |
| Joziah    | Man       | White                              | Gay                | 4          | 3             |
| Makayla   | Woman     | African American, White            | Not disclosed      | 3          | 2             |
| Missy**   | Woman     | Asian                              | Straight           | 4          | 2             |
| Nicky     | Nonbinary | Pacific Islander (Chamorro)        | Gay                | 4          | 2             |
| Olivia*   | Woman     | White                              | Bisexual           | 3          | 1             |
| P.J.*     | Transman  | White                              | Straight           | 2          | 1             |
| Pooja**   | Woman     | South Asian                        | Straight           | 2          | 1             |
| Renata**  | Woman     | Latina, White                      | Straight           | 3          | 1             |
| Shawn*    | Man       | African American, Ethiopian        | Straight           | 4          | 1             |
| Spencer   | Transman  | White                              | Queer              | 4          | 1             |
| Sydney**  | Woman     | Hispanic                           | Straight           | 4          | 2             |
| Tau       | Man       | Black                              | Straight           | 3          | 2             |
| Tomas**   | Man       | Latino                             | Straight           | 3          | 1             |
| Zac*      | Man       | African American                   | Bisexual           | 3          | 2             |

\* indicates transfer student

\*\* indicates first-generation student

Note. Gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation identities are presented in participants' own language.

on how participants discussed aspects of the eight domains of well-being as established by Myers and colleagues (2000). At the end of this process, I composed themes that were supported by participants' rich descriptions. Bracketing, peer debriefing, and thick descriptions served as strategies to ensure trustworthiness of the findings and occurred at various stages of the analysis (Bazeley, 2013).

### Statement of Positionality

I positioned myself within this study as a learner interested in students' lived experiences and honoring the narratives that they shared with me. I entered the study as a researcher who did and did not share social identities with each of the research participants, and I acknowledged that intersecting systems of oppression produce identity-based marginalization for minoritized students, faculty, and staff in higher education. Prior to becoming a faculty member, I spent several years working as a full-time resident director. In this role, I supervised RAs, managed administrative processes, and responded sensitively to a range of crises. During my years as a resident director, both I and the RAs under my supervision were exposed to and supported student communities through numerous serious incidents. Being in the unique role of supporting students provided me with a first-hand experience of the importance of well-being in these emotionally demanding and difficult parts of the role. Though I had no prior connections to the students I interviewed in this study, my professional background in residence life helped me understand their worlds, build rapport, and provide context for making sense of the kinds of narratives I had seen as a professional residence life staff member.

## FINDINGS

Two main findings emerged from my analysis of participant interviews, and these themes are instructive in better understanding the well-being experiences of RAs with minoritized identities. First, disruption of well-being resulted in feelings of exhaustion and, in a few instances, the feeling of not belonging. Second, RAs in the study generally described their resilience in the face of these occupational demands, which occurred through internal self-regulation strategies and was reinforced by support from empathetic residence life supervisors. In the themes that follow, direct quotations demonstrate trends present across the interviews. While this study represents the broad-based experiences of students with minoritized social identities, its findings and implications serve as both starting points and invitations to further explore the complexity of the experiences of students with multiple minoritized identities through the lens of intersectionality.

*In addition to their challenging student leadership roles, RAs serve as peer role models who support residents as institutional guides and transformational educators.*

## Sources of Well-Being Disruption

Within my first theme, I found two main sources of well-being disruption for RAs with minoritized identities. One was the role itself: RAs are routinely exposed to traumas that most are not sufficiently trained to handle or process. The second was supervisors who held uneven identity-based expectations for RAs' job performances that led to RAs with these kinds of supervisors feeling additional emotional tolls.

**Structure of the RA role.** How RA roles were designed as well as the expectation to informally counsel residents were the primary sources that disrupted the well-being of RAs with minoritized identities in ways that produced mental and physical exhaustion. As Emere expressed it, "If you work nine to five, you come home and you can leave the job. But coming home to the residence hall as an RA is coming home to my job. That was rough." Joziah agreed, saying, "I'm always on the job, so being gay hasn't ever really been at the forefront of my mind." Between programming, consoling residents during emotional life events, attending meetings and trainings, decorating the area, and responding to duty incidents, all RAs in the study recognized the heavy time commitment and varied emotional demands of these tasks.

The communities that RAs oversaw ranged between 32 and 90 residents and were almost always defined by the institution according to residents' sex assigned at birth. RAs in these communities described their maintenance of the well-being of others as being akin to manual labor—or, as Angelina put it, carrying "the weight of 32 people." Shouldering this burden meant ignoring her own well-being in order to support residents at a moment's notice:

*I had a family fight, plus a bad exam. It was a bad week. My bad week happened to be everyone's bad week. I was on the phone fighting with my mom or dad and I was crying and someone knocked on my door. So, I'm trying to make it look like I wasn't crying. Then, [the resident] came in and she was crying, and I felt like I was barely holding on. I was just crying myself and I have to automatically strap in and take care of this resident. It's just very heavy, and I mean [residents] go through horrible things.*

Responding to residents' needs was challenging not only because it was unpredictable, but also because it involved listening to and maintaining confidence about the traumas and hardships they encountered. This meant that RAs with minoritized identities, like Angelina, sometimes set aside their own lives to put residents first. For some RAs, residents' crises meant carrying this weight beyond a conversation or an incident. As Emere explained,

*It's all interconnected, taking on residents' emotional baggage. . . . You know what you're supposed to do on paper [with resident crisis], but it's not something you can just drop. In class the next day, I'm wondering how they're doing. . . . Until the very last day where I moved out, I was talking to residents about hardships they were going through. . . . For a while, I wasn't even sure I wanted to come back [as an RA].*

Renata had similar experiences.

*Incidents are exhausting without a doubt. They take a lot out of you, not only time wise, but also mentally. A couple of my incidents, I've had to ride in the back of a police car. That's something I didn't think would happen. Those times are physically and mentally exhausting. Then, navigating the idea that I'm affected by the incident, but I'm also not the victim. . . . It's very time consuming . . . and has . . . a trickle down effect that has kind of lasted for almost an entire semester.*

In these situations, RAs had not been prepared by their residence life units about the possibility of secondary trauma, which resulted in exhaustion that unbalanced multiple areas of their well-being for stretches of time. Both Emere and Renata were RAs of color, who had to navigate localized incidents as additional stressors were placed upon them by turmoil from national incidents, such as the ongoing tensions around police brutality in minoritized communities.

**Supervisors' identity-based expectations.** While all participants viewed their minoritized social identities positively, a few described their supervisors as a force that disrupted the sense of well-being connected to their identity by layering raced or gendered stereotypes on top of job performance expectations. In this study, LGBTQ+ identities were ignored by most supervisors, who reinforced heterosexist presumptions of gender. Such experiences were a source of stress, anxiety, and exhaustion for RAs with minoritized identities, who resisted these unbalanced expectations in addition to managing their day-to-day duties. After serving as an RA for two years, Tau decided to leave the job because of his supervisor's race-based expectations:

*[My resident director] pinpointed certain people . . . very obviously along color lines . . . me and someone else, we literally got the stereotypes of angry Black male and female as our staff evals . . . I feel like my mental health has definitely waned because of the fact that I have to constantly code switch between so many different spheres. . . . As an RA, that goes back to double consciousness. Being a Black RA, any time I say something it's kind of taken as political. . . . It's just tiring . . . just exhausting . . . and I don't really feel like I belong.*

Similarly, Tomas's minoritized racial and ethnic identities were implicitly used as rationales to assign him more responsibilities that he did not ask for and for which he was not compensated:

*[Residence life leaders] will kind of volunteer me just because I'm one of those few minorities that's an RA. . . . When I applied to be an RA, there was this [application] question saying if we've ever had any experience in a learning community. I put down that yes, I have previously been in [the Latinx learning community]. One of the things they hadn't told us was that question would be taken as a request to work in that dorm and be in charge of a certain learning community. I didn't expect to be put in charge of [the Latinx learning community]. . . . It's a lot of work.*

Sydney, meanwhile, persisted in the role despite frequent supervisor criticisms that chastised her and other RA women for not acting in stereotypical feminine ways:

*[My supervisor] claims I didn't have a positive attitude because I'm not 100% perky at staff meetings or events. That doesn't mean I'm not happy. I'm a little bit more chill. . . . [When I have an issue in the role], he makes me feel as if it's my fault . . . because I ultimately applied to the position . . . [And, he asked another woman on staff publicly when] she was planning on marrying her current boyfriend. . . . She was really taken aback. . . . He just gives me anxiety whenever I see him.*

Breanna felt that she was expected to act like a maternal parent: "They expected me to be almost like a mom because it was [first-year residents'] first time without parents. . . . They expected me to have a lot more involvement in their lives than usual."

Raced and gendered job performance expectations were clear among these RAs, who felt the emotional drain from these unbalanced responsibilities. While not every participant in the study had a negative experience with their supervisors, those few that did ultimately resisted supervisors' biased expectations but communicated how these expectations for performing their minoritized identities in stereotypical ways intruded into the occupational contexts of being an RA.

### Strategies for Rebalancing Well-Being

As RAs with minoritized identities encountered and dealt with the effects of their well-being being disrupted, they also utilized several strategies to rebalance their well-being. First, they enacted individualized strategies that focused on their own mindfulness as well as their ability to set boundaries that allowed them to recharge. Second, they received support from empathetic supervisors who affirmed their minoritized identities and focused on their holistic well-being in the role.

**Mindfulness and setting boundaries.** Participants employed two strategies to re-center their well-being while coping with the structural aspects of the position. The occupational demands of being an RA mostly resulted in RAs experiencing mental and emotional exhaustion that sometimes sapped their physical energy. As a result, mindfulness techniques were often used to regain balance. Such techniques were necessary because RAs in the study frequently engaged their campus communities beyond their RA roles. Minoritized RAs were formidable students on campus, who led student organizations, pursued double majors and minors, and took full course loads and honors classes. Brandon explained his approach to balancing the various demands related to being both an RA and an engaged student:

*My main way of actually dealing with stress is finding small breaks to just relax and exist at a slower pace than most. . . . You can easily take on everything that you want at once as long as you give yourself the time to take care of yourself every week. I take two hours every week to just sit and exist and think about all the things I'm excited for, all the things that I'm scared for, and how to attack them all . . . I make sure I have the ability to take on all of this at once and still have time to relax . . . I'm doing what I need to do to take care of myself and the people around me.*

While all participants viewed their minoritized social identities positively, a few described their supervisors as a force that disrupted the sense of well-being connected to their identity by layering raced or gendered stereotypes on top of job performance expectations.

While engagement was important for Brandon in making a positive and transformational difference for his fellow students and on campus, he also understood the importance of weekly reflections to attend to his own needs first in order to be able to better support residents.

Braelynn understood the importance of her own well-being in creating a solid foundation from which she could support her residents. She was able to recalibrate her expectations so that she could recenter herself during tumultuous periods. This recalibration occurred early in her RA career after she found herself neglecting her own care:

*I learned very quickly what my limits were . . . I'm now able to keep my batteries charged because I'm never letting myself get burned out. What caused me to initially burn out was the fishbowl effect my first semester as RA. It was my worst academic semester because . . . I wanted to be the Pinterest RA. I realized that's not feasible . . . so I just started setting boundaries to keep myself charged. You can't give so much of yourself you have nothing left. My approach to managing myself and this role is best for me and my well-being. I'm not always available on the floor . . . I read books. I watch Netflix and I crochet . . . I pray.*

By sustaining her emotional, physical, and intellectual well-being through hobbies and spirituality practices, Braelynn set healthy boundaries with her residents. Jesslyn also discussed the importance of setting boundaries: "I had [residents] crying in my room [a] lot. . . . They might want something, but I'm like 'I can't be your therapist for three hours. I mean I love to talk to you, but that's just really not my job.'" In Emere's RA experience, boundary setting was her key strategy:

*The more important thing I learned was to set boundaries with my residents, which I think comes off as cold, but it's really important in terms of self-care. . . . That helped me grow. . . . Without this job, I wouldn't have realized the importance of self-care.*

Boundaries also proved to be important for these RAs in finding personal space to process painful and traumatic national events. Renata described her approach to addressing the 2018 mass shooting at Marjory Stoneman Douglas High School in Parkland, Florida, that resulted in 17 murders and multiple injuries:

*What I really tried to do is I start by recognizing this thing happened [with my residents]. . . . I feel it is important enough that we, as a community, should recognize that this happened. . . . It's emotionally taxing enough on me. I'm like, "Give me 24 hours to process my feelings . . . I'm also a student. I'm also human . . . I'm feeling some sort of way. Give me 24 hours."*

These boundaries helped her process her own feelings and prepare to engage her residents in difficult conversations about senseless mass murders in the U.S. It was clear that painful national traumas do affect the residential campus experience and that RAs were looked to as sources of support and comfort during these times when they were also navigating their own diminished emotional well-being. Being direct in expressing healthy boundaries with residents was a clear trend among the participants, a strategy that allowed them to set definitive expectations that kept their individual well-being in focus and limited the kinds of enduring negative effects that the position had the potential to produce.

**Empathetic supervisors.** Supervisors, who were mostly hall directors and graduate student assistants, sometimes established crucial connections with RAs with minoritized identities, which allowed them to lean into the relationship during challenging times. While not every RA in the study described having an empathetic direct supervisor, those who did defined them as affirming champions who listened and validated. As Sydney recalled, “My supervisor last year was definitely more concerned with my well-being. When we would have our one-on-ones, it was definitely discussions about how I’m doing.” Shawn regularly explored parts of his personal life that were affecting his well-being during supervisory meetings:

*I told [my supervisor] that my girlfriend started working full-time and we don’t get [to] see each other much. It’s hard. . . . It was on my mind. It’s nice that I get to tell [my supervisor] the truth. . . . It’s been pretty personal and [my supervisor] is always helpful. She gave me advice on how to see my girlfriend more.*

Like many others, Shawn benefited from talking about his well-being—beyond the RA role—which helped form a positive relationship with his supervisor.

Renata noticed this concern for RA well-being as something embedded within residence life structures at her institution, which made her feel comfortable discussing her well-being with her supervisor; residence life administrators “always tell us in all of our trainings, you’re a person first, a student second, and RA third.” Brandon also talked about how his supervisors cultivated an affirming environment that supported him in managing his RA duties: “My manager and coordinator were my rocks these last two quarters. They made me feel at home. . . . I’ve handled a lot of emotional problems and . . . [my supervisor] just kinda works through them with me.” The supervisors’ empathetic approaches led to positive relationships that cultivated environmental aspects of well-being for the RAs.

*While not every RA in the study described having an empathetic direct supervisor, those who did defined them as affirming champions who listened and validated.*

*... this study demonstrates how the occupational domain of wellness, as understood by the broader environmental context in which it is situated, affects students' emotional, physical, and social well-being.*

## DISCUSSION

Though understood through the experiences of RAs with minoritized identities, this study extends our current knowledge of well-being in residence life in several key ways. First, this study's findings demonstrate new ways that the eight domains of well-being, as indicated by Myers and colleagues (2000), are interrelated for students with minoritized identities. The study also extends the narratives about secondary trauma, adding to what Lynch (2019) has concluded about its negative impact and extending the knowledge of how occupational contexts intersect with multiple well-being domains for RAs with minoritized identities. Specifically, this study demonstrates how the occupational domain of wellness, as understood by the broader environmental context in which it is situated, affects students' emotional, physical, and social well-being. A key contribution made by this study is to show that identities, professional role, and relationships strongly informed how RAs in the study were impacted by their occupational environment.

This research also contributes to a growing body of literature about how identity-based experiences unfold for minoritized RAs as they fulfill job-related responsibilities and navigate supervisory relationships (e.g., Foste & Johnson, 2021). Supervisors in the study either added to RAs' wellness through affirming and supportive supervision or became sources of stress by expecting them to perform in stereotypical ways, which resulted in RAs feeling exhausted and unbalanced. Finally, this study provides additional support for the idea that sociopolitical contexts affect campus experiences and need to be given additional consideration when working with college students (Schuster, 2021). In other words, what occurs for students in their local campus context in terms of performing their RA roles has to be understood through what trends and events are unfolding in the surrounding environments and broader national contexts.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

There are several practical implications for residence life deans, directors, and other leaders who would like to support the holistic well-being of their staff. First, RAs in the study noted repeatedly that the structure of the role itself disrupted their well-being because of the expansive responsibilities associated with the job as well as the frequent expectations that others had about their responsibilities related to crisis response. Informed by this finding, residence life leaders can begin to rethink the essential functions of RA work and seek input from current and past RAs about the role. The increasing mental health needs of today's college students (Bonfiglio, 2016) make crisis response for RAs even more difficult, given the secondary trauma it can produce (Lynch, 2019; McClure et al., 2022; Mistretta & DuBois, 2021). Asking undergraduate students

with minoritized identities who serve as RAs to ignore their own well-being needs is problematic, to say the least. Residence life administrators can begin by listening to and anonymously assessing the needs of their RAs in relation to their well-being. For instance, holding listening sessions for RAs with minoritized identities to regularly communicate their needs with housing leaders throughout the year can be one way to get started. Teaching students living in the residence halls about professional boundaries with their RAs and crisis resources during pre-orientation and orientation services may help to alleviate some, but not all, of the negative impacts on their well-being.

Though being an RA was described as a learning experience by study participants, this kind of education can be enhanced with resources, tools, and trainings that teach RAs how to limit and manage the deleterious effects of direct and indirect exposure to trauma. In reconsidering the structural elements of RA roles, residence life leaders may consider placing two RAs on floors that house 30+ residents and not antiquating communities by assigning residents to single-gender floors or buildings, which promoted gendered or heterosexist job performance expectations for students in the study. A redesigned RA role can be entirely focused on community building and educational programming. The socio-emotional support parts of the RA position could be redistributed to culturally competent clinicians, who could be assigned offices in the residence hall for late-night appointments or group sessions. Such reimaginations of the RA role have already begun in higher education, as evidenced by George Washington University's 2021 RA position overhaul (Mangan, 2021).

RAs in the study consistently described how the strategies they used to maintain their well-being were self-taught. Even so, in-service professional development sessions for RAs could continually enhance their individual strategies beyond a single training session. Housing professionals could partner with expert clinicians to develop curricula defining secondary trauma, well-being, and coping strategies. Breakout sessions that RAs can opt into based on topic or identity can also be a way to further support the intersections of institutional role and minoritized identity that they uniquely hold. Previous research aligns with this recommendation, and training that teaches coping and boundary-setting skills can improve RA well-being (McClure et al., 2022). Further, such training would be most effective when RAs are also prepared for navigating national traumas with their residents. Throughout, resources and spaces need to be developed and delivered that are identity-affirming and specifically encourage minoritized student well-being (Schuster & Stalker, 2020).

Finally, participants noted that supervisors with little experience in diversity, equity, and inclusion and those with stereotypical expectations for RA job performance negatively impacted their well-being. Residence life leaders should consider

*A redesigned RA role can be entirely focused on community building and educational programming.*

their professional staff hiring and training. Inviting full-time candidates to discuss diversity, equity, and inclusion in cover letters, interviews, case study responses, and job talk presentations can be helpful starting points to evaluate how candidates understand these vital topics. Further, professional development training that includes workshops with expert faculty on identity-conscious supervision and mentoring can help prepare new professionals for fostering identity-affirming environments (Brown et al., 2020; Schuster & Stalker, 2022). Along these same lines, faculty in higher education and student affairs graduate programs need to update curricula to reflect inclusive student staff supervision as a core competency for higher education professionals. It is essential that these curricula and trainings provide direct instruction on unlearning heterosexist and racialized conceptions of gender and more fully centralizing LGBTQ+ topics and identities, which many residence life staff are uncomfortable addressing (Kortegast, 2017). Recognizing the well-being experiences of RAs with minoritized identities and thinking creatively about the RA role to meet the needs of today's students have potential to create more socially just and inclusive cocurricular learning and leading opportunities. ■

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## DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

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1. In what ways does your organization (formally or informally) contribute to the disruption of well-being in minoritized RAs?
2. In what ways are identity-based expectations reinforced in present organizational structures (roles, reporting, physical, social, etc.)? How can those organizational structures be deconstructed and redesigned to affirm identity and incorporate wellness concepts?
3. When has the well-being of minoritized RAs been centered by your organization? How has that consideration or lack thereof been demonstrated?
4. How can observed secondary trauma responses inform development of creative solutions to mitigate well-being disruptions among minoritized RAs?
5. What resources do housing departments need to better support the well-being of minoritized RAs?

*Discussion questions developed by Kendall Pete, Radford University*