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Serving as a Resident Assistant While Black: How Race Shapes Black Student Staff Members’ Motivations for Working in Residence Life and Their Experiences on Staff

BLACK RESIDENT ASSISTANTS’ EXPERIENCES are shaped by race and racism. Previous research highlights the unique challenges that Black RAs encounter, such as isolation and hypervisibility, racial stereotypes, and unfair treatment from white supervisors. Most of this research is, however, located within predominantly white institutions (PWIs). As the diversity of our student population across the United States increases, additional research is needed that explores the experiences of Black RAs at institutions that have lost or will soon lose their PWI classification. Guided by critical race theory, the purpose of this study was to explore how race shapes motivations to pursue the RA position and the experiences of Black RAs at a public research university where students of color make up about half of the general student population and more than half of the residential population. The study combined a case study design with narrative inquiry to highlight the unique stories and voices of Black RAs. Based on two interviews with five Black RAs, this study found that, despite the diversity of the student body and RA staff, participants perceived the institution as a white space where they could not be their authentic selves and had to engage in additional emotional labor to navigate racialized interactions. Study findings point to the importance of disrupting the norms within these white spaces to create inclusive and supportive campus environments for Black RAs.

Editor’s note: The authors have chosen to lowercase the word White, which would normally be capitalized according to APA guidelines, in order to avoid seeming to center whiteness.

Resident assistants (RAs) play an important role in supporting diverse groups of college students and helping them navigate multicultural situations (Petryk et al., 2013). Residence life departments strive to hire diverse RA staffs that are representative of or surpass the compositional diversity of the on-campus student population (Sorensen & Keil, 2021). However, departments may encounter challenges

when recruiting Black students as they may not be aware of opportunities to become an RA (Healea & Hale, 2016) or may be more interested in opportunities that allow them to engage with other Black students, rather than being part of a mixed racial group like an RA staff (Arminio et al., 2000). Black candidates may also find the selection process isolating when they are one of only a few Black students (Bleikamp et al., 2015).

There is also a need to better understand the experiences of Black RAs. Scholars have critiqued the literature on the RA experience for being based on white-only or mixed-race groups, with no attention paid to race (Foste & Johnson, 2021; Harper et al., 2011). The few studies that have explored the experiences of RAs of color (e.g., Foste & Johnson, 2021) or Black RAs (e.g., Hardaway, 2019; Harper et al., 2011; Roland & Agosta, 2017) indicate that Black RAs encounter unique challenges such as being one of only a few Black RAs or RAs of color, which can lead to feeling isolated but also hypervisible. Black RAs encounter racial stereotypes, from being viewed as incompetent (Harper et al., 2011) to having their authority or institutional role questioned due to their race (Foste & Johnson, 2021). In addition, they expend energy trying to disprove stereotypes by choosing carefully how to act around residents, peers, and supervisors (Hardaway, 2019).

Race shapes relationships with supervisors and other institutional agents, and Black RAs shared their discomfort when having to work with campus police (Foste & Johnson, 2021) and when they encountered harsh or unfair treatment and higher expectations from white supervisors (Hardaway, 2019; Harper et al., 2011). Black RAs looked to Black peers and supervisors for support within this oppressive climate (Hardaway, 2019; Harper et al., 2011; Roland & Agosta, 2017). Those who had supervisors of color highlighted the usefulness of being able to engage in conversations about navigating the complexities and racial dynamics of the position with a trusted administrator who could relate to their experiences (Harper et al., 2011).

Research on Black RAs is situated primarily within predominantly white institutions (PWIs), defined as institutions where whites account for 50% or more of the student population (see, for example, Hardaway, 2019; Harper et al., 2011; Roland & Agosta, 2017). The lack of representation among RAs—as well as residents and professional staff—shaped participants' experiences in these studies. As the diversity of college students across the United States increases, more and more institutions will no longer meet the PWI classification. While the compositional diversity of these institutions is changing, their elitist and exclusionary origins will continue to shape the experience of Black RAs unless institutions intentionally address the unique needs of their increasingly diverse student bodies. Thus, the purpose of this study was to explore how race shapes Black RAs' experiences at a public research university that used to be a PWI but where students of color now make up about half of the general student population and more than half of the residential population. We were interested in Black RAs' experiences, starting with their motivation to pursue an RA position, their experiences during the selection process, and their actual experiences on staff.

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CRITICAL RACE THEORY

Our study was guided by critical race theory (CRT) and, in particular, the application of CRT to education research (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Patton, 2016). Originating from the study of law, CRT has become a transdisciplinary approach that highlights and strives to transform the relationship between race, racism, and power (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001). The basic beliefs of CRT are as follows: (a) racism is commonplace and embedded in everyday life, which makes it difficult to identify and address; (b) racism promotes the interests of white people, which gives them little incentive to eradicate racism; (c) race and races are socially constructed, which means that racial categories can be manipulated based on the interests of those in power; and (d) voices of people of color can highlight unique experiences that may otherwise not be known (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001, p. 7).

Understanding race as a social construct and understanding the legacy of racism disrupts the idea of racelessness and neutrality by exposing racial inequalities in many areas, including education (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995; Patton, 2016). CRT research recognizes higher education's roots in racism and white supremacy and the ways that these origins continue to shape how institutions operate (Patton, 2016). Critical race theory research explores how racial inequities are reinforced within academia, challenges racist notions about whose voices are valued, and strives to disrupt dominant narratives and create knowledge that can transform higher education institutions into more equitable spaces (Patton, 2016).

A common approach to CRT research is the utilization of counternarratives, which highlight the “experiences and realities of the oppressed” (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995, p. 58) and “challenge the assumed universality of stories told by those who are in power” (Harper et al., 2011, p. 184). Utilizing CRT and counternarratives allowed us to disrupt the common narratives about the RA position, which are dominated by stories of white resident assistants, and challenged us to pay attention to how race and racism influence participants' experiences and how the racist origins of higher education shape Black students' experiences.

RESEARCH DESIGN

We combined a case study design (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016) and narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to explore Black RAs' motivations and experiences at an institution where the number of white students has fallen below 50 percent. A case study can be defined as “an in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system” (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 37). Recognizing how institutional and departmental

contexts shape RAs' experiences (see, for example, Harper et al., 2011), we chose a single case study approach focusing on the experiences of Black RAs at one institution. We used a narrative inquiry approach for data collection and analysis (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) to gain insights into participants' lived experiences and highlight their unique voices via counternarratives (Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995).

Our research team consisted of four white women. The first author has seven years of residence life experience and conducts research on the experiences of minoritized populations in higher education. The fourth author currently works in a senior leadership position in residence life. The second and third authors do not have any residence life experience but work in other areas of higher education. Throughout the research process, we reflected on how our identities and differing levels of residence life experience may influence relationships with participants and our interpretation of the data. We engaged in peer review to solicit different perspectives. Two Black professional residence life staff and a Black faculty member, who conducts research on Black college students' experiences, reviewed a draft of our manuscript, focusing in particular on apparency, the understandability of the findings and whether they resonate with their experiences, and verisimilitude or how truthful and authentic findings appear (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). We revised our manuscript based on their recommendations.

Case Description: The Residence Life Department at PRU

PRU is a public research university located near a larger urban area in the Midwest of the United States and serving approximately 16,000 students. PRU is at the cusp of losing its PWI classification, with white students accounting for 49% of the student population and 45% of the residential population in 2020-21. The university houses 3,500 students in 11 traditional residence halls and one apartment complex. In 2020-21, only 2,863 students lived on campus due to COVID-19 safety regulations and the lifting of the first-year residency requirement, and 39% of those identified as Black. Of the 119 RAs employed at PRU, 40% identified as Black (see Table 1, *page 47* for detailed demographic information about PRU students and staff).

Participants

Participants were recruited using purposeful sampling (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). To be eligible, participants had to both identify as Black and currently serve as a resident assistant at PRU. We identified eligible participants from the department's staff database and invited them to participate via email. Interested students completed an online consent form. Eight students initially expressed interest, but only five completed the interviews. Participants were asked to choose a pseudonym to protect their confidentiality (see Table 2 for participant demographics, *page 47*).

TABLE 1
Demographics of Students and Residence Life Staff at PRU

	Student population (%)	Residential population (%)	RA staff (%)	Graduate staff (%)	Professional staff (%)
Black	17	39	40	33	9
Latinx	19	10	5	25	9
Asian	6	3	6	0	0
White	49	45	50	42	82
Other	9	3	0	0	0

Note. "Other" includes international, two or more races, American Indian/Alaska Native, Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander, and unknown.

TABLE 2
Participant Demographics

Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Year at college	Years in RA position (at time of interviews)
Captain	Woman	Black	4th year	2nd year
Liam	Woman	Black	3rd year	2nd year
Simone	Woman	Black	2nd year	1st year
Brandon	Man	Black	3rd year	2nd semester (mid-year hire)
Student	Woman	Black	3rd year	2nd year

As the diversity of college students across the United States increases, more and more institutions will no longer meet the PWI classification. While the compositional diversity of these institutions is changing, their elitist and exclusionary origins will continue to shape the experience of Black RAs unless institutions intentionally address the unique needs of their increasingly diverse student bodies.

Critical race theory research explores how racial inequities are reinforced within academia, challenges racist notions about whose voices are valued, and strives to disrupt dominant narratives and create knowledge that can transform higher education institutions into more equitable spaces.

Data Collection and Analysis

We conducted two rounds of 60-minute, semi-structured, virtual interviews in the fall of 2020. We conducted two interviews to build rapport with participants and honor the relational nature of narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). The first round of interviews (mid-September to early October) focused on participants' motivations for pursuing the RA position, the application and training process, and first impressions of the position. The second round of interviews (late November or early December) explored their experiences in the position, including relationships with residents, peers, and supervisors. Throughout both interviews, we encouraged participants to reflect on the ways that race shaped their motivations and experiences.

Informal data analysis occurred concurrently with data collection via memoing and conversations as a research team. To start our formal data analysis, each research team member transcribed the interview(s) they had conducted and re-read them multiple times before creating a narrative retelling the participant's story (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000). We paid particular attention to the ways in which race shaped participants' experiences within different contexts. Next, we reviewed all narratives, reflecting on commonalities and differences among participants' stories. We engaged in reflective memoing before meeting as a team to develop a list of tentative themes and then conducted more formal coding, marking segments of data that corresponded with our tentative themes as well as adding themes we noticed during this round of data analysis. Through conversations as a team, we narrowed down our themes, focusing on the ways that race shaped participants' experiences. We decided to share our findings as a fictional conversation in order to highlight the particularity of participants' stories and their unique voices, an approach aligned with narrative inquiry (Clandinin & Connelly, 2000) and critical race theory (Delgado & Stefancic, 2001; Ladson-Billings & Tate, 1995). We chose a fictional setting for our conversation but used quotations directly taken from interviews.

FINDINGS

Conversations in staff meetings at PRU had recently revolved around recruiting a more diverse staff. While thinking about these departmental efforts, the conversation among a group of Black RAs (Captain, Simone, Liam, Student, and Brandon) eating lunch in the dining hall turned to how race shaped their motivations for working in residence life as well as their experiences being on staff.

Pursuing the RA Position

Liam recalled how her own RA, a Black woman, inspired her to pursue the position:

[My RA] really opened me to a lot of opportunities when I first came here, and it was really easy to talk to her because I did have a lot of issues regarding race as a freshman. I lived with a lot of white kids who had never lived with Black kids before and did a lot of offensive things. I felt like if I had a white [RA], I wouldn't have felt as comfortable coming to them to tell them about the issues.

Having had a positive experience with a Black RA, Liam wanted to be that person for other students:

To have [an RA] who looks like you in your first year here, that's like elemental in your development as a college student. I didn't know where to get my hair done at. I didn't know where the beauty supplies were at. . . . Stuff like that is elemental to Black culture, especially for young Black women. I think that encouraged me as well as just wanting to be in a position to aid people like how she aided me.

The others nodded. While they may not have had a Black RA like Liam, they could relate to wanting to support Black residents. Brandon explained how his experience differed from Liam's but how he, too, thought about race when considering the position:

I didn't really see many Black RAs around. So, I was like let me take this opportunity to like show and let people know like hey, even though you don't really see that many Black RAs, if you actually go out there and actually show and prove that you can do things, then you know you'll be able to get the position.

Student agreed. "I don't ever want African Americans to feel like they can't do something because you don't see enough that are like you."

Captain opened her mouth, then closed it again. The others looked at her expectantly. She acknowledged that there weren't that many Black RAs, but she had never questioned her ability to become an RA: "[To me], it was more like, I know, for sure they're going to need some more people that are non-white to be on staff." Simone seemed surprised by Captain's comment:

I do know, that in like, just regular jobs, they do have like a quota for like diversity hires and stuff. . . . But yeah, I just didn't think they were like thinking, they need to be here because more diversity, or you know, she's just a diversity hire, just so they won't seem all white or. . . It's more of, you know, who is qualified for the position.

Everyone was silent for a few minutes as they reflected on whether they had perceived their race as something that helped or hindered their chances of being selected.

Higher education institutions are historically white spaces, rooted in racism and white supremacy, that continue to use curricula and policies that reinforce systems of oppression.

Black Leaders in the Department

Breaking the silence, Captain recalled how excited she had been to see a Black woman hall director at the information session:

Based upon my experience, I don't see a lot of people of color in positions of power. And not to say that her position is like super powerful. But being like a hall director in a residential hall, to me, is a big thing. Anybody of color that's in a position that is above me is pretty powerful to me.

Liam nodded. She had been surprised to have Black staff interview her for the RA position:

I expected to be interviewed by white people. I don't really think of it as, oh, I might see somebody who looks like me. I've never even thought of that because it's so rare to see Black people in positions of power and stuff like that. But I automatically go in with the mindset that I'm going to be interviewed by white people.

Having Black interviewers made her feel more comfortable. "If you slip up and say 'finna' in front of a Black committee it's all right. In a white community that's seen as unprofessional. You will be called out as ghetto and they won't hire you."

Brandon nodded slowly. There had been an awkward moment during his interview with two white staff when he had been confused by a diversity-related question and asked for clarification:

I was doing good [during the interview] except for that one little moment. It kind of threw me off and then like the girl was like laughing or whatever, like did like a little smirk or whatever, that kind of like irritated me a little bit.

Brandon pondered whether race shaped the interviewer's response. "I honestly don't, I don't really know like what it was." The others nodded; they could relate to wondering if race played into awkward or uncomfortable situations.

Captain shifted the conversation to supervisors, saying that she felt more comfortable in the position because of reporting to two Black supervisors during her first year as an RA:

I don't think I've ever felt unsafe being in this position, especially as being a Black RA because I had that buffer of having two Black hall directors. So, if someone were to say something that was out of pocket, I could go to them and say, hey, this happened to me, and then we'll talk it out and then after I'll feel much better about myself.

Student nodded. Reflecting on the difference in her relationship with her Black and white supervisor, she explained,

I can say things to [my Black supervisor] or tell her certain things that she will only understand because we're, we're there. But if I say something to like to [my white supervisor], he'll be like, what? Can you explain it a little bit more?

Simone agreed. “[There’s more] cultural understanding when I am talking to [my Black supervisor], like even in casual conversations.” Simone’s experiences with two white members of her supervisory team had been mixed, and she recalled how the white graduate assistant had talked to her about Black Lives Matter during move-in, something that meant a lot to her:

And to know that like he’s very supportive of Black Lives Matter and how he’s learning, he’s actively learning about, you know, biases, and he’s reading books and learning and especially as it makes me very comfortable knowing that he is learning to try to get out of these biases and be a better person and be a better supporter about Black Lives Matter.

While Simone had positive experiences with the white graduate assistant, she also recalled an uncomfortable situation with the white hall director. In a staff meeting, a Black RA had brought up a racial issue with residents, and the hall director “brushed it off” as “everyone has these biases and preconceived notions,” failing to recognize the severity of the issue. Simone and one of her friends had initially planned to talk to the hall director about it, but, as she explained,

I think that we like, we’ve just kind of given up trying to talk to him. Or at least, I have. I think the other one has as well because I realized like I don’t think he’s going to listen to us. I don’t think he’s going to understand.

Student nodded. She too was hesitant when talking to white supervisors about issues related to race, particularly when it also meant confronting the supervisor’s behavior.

Authenticity

Talking about their relationships with supervisors got Liam thinking about her ability, or lack thereof, to be her authentic self in the RA position.

I think there are times where I have to um, de-Blackify myself if that makes sense. I know it sounds funny, but I do think there are times where I feel like I do have to code switch or I have to, you know, because I don’t want to be looked at as that angry Black girl. Everything when you’re Black kind of comes out as more aggressive. Well, it’s not aggressive, but to the un-Black eye it’s always gonna seem more aggressive than it’s supposed to be. And that’s just a struggle that you have to deal with as a Black person every day in your life. You always have to tiptoe around the things you say or how you say it.

Captain could relate to Liam’s concerns about being seen as too aggressive, though she didn’t necessarily connect it to race.

I’m pretty known for being myself. . . [but] tact is probably the one thing that my parents talked to me about, because sometimes I could be a bit aggressive in how I say things. You have to be a little bit careful, especially in a professional setting. So, I kind of like put that on, making sure that I’m not just like, informal but formal at the same time when I’m working with my co-workers and residents.

Liam asked if Captain thought she had to be more tactful because of her race. Captain paused for a moment, then shook her head and said, “I don’t think it has anything to do with race.”

Simone had been listening intently. She too felt the need to be more professional. “I still have to maintain that boundary of me being an RA and them being residents. [With fellow staff members or supervisor], it’s still professional, but I feel like I can be a little more myself.”

Relationships with Other RAs

Simone’s comment shifted the conversation to relationships and who they spent time with outside of mandatory meetings or work-related duties. Simone explained how most of the RAs she is friends with are Black. Liam shared how she was also closest with the other Black RAs.

I tend to become pretty chummy with the other Black RAs. I just think that’s an automatic response that people have when you see people who will look like you, you automatically want to go and be with those people who look like you because they have shared experience, shared the dialect and syntax and all that other nonsense. . . . I just can’t really relate or have the same type of conversation with a non-Black RA as I would be able to have with another Black RA.

Student agreed.

Everybody has their own cliques. And it’s like all the time, we always end up separating. So like a certain race with like, the whites will be with the whites, like they always say, I’m going to grab food, and nobody like my race would reply at all, like we wouldn’t, we wouldn’t reply or nothing but everybody else who is like white or whatever, they are the main ones who are replying.

As Student reflected further on her relationships with other RAs, she realized that the small number of Black RAs may shape their friendships: “There are only a few Black RAs. So, it’s like we all, you know, we all stay together. . . . And we also did, like, make sure each other were good and stuff like that.” Brandon nodded. He too felt a different bond with other Black RAs and wished there were more Black RAs on his staff. He wondered if some students might have been hesitant to apply for the RA position because they worried about not being able to be their authentic selves as RAs.

You might get some of those students who may be like, oh, they’re not going to pick me anyway, or just from them, like, the only other things, they might be like, Oh, I don’t really see many people, my race there, I don’t want to feel out of place. . . . and then, you know, some jobs don’t like us being us, you know, we’ll have our hair all types of like different ways. You know, that’s some people’s cultures, that’s just how some people express themselves.

The group sank into silence, each reflecting on the need for more representation of Black students among RAs and pondering the reasons why there may not be as many Black RAs.

DISCUSSION

Our findings highlight how race shaped our participants' motivations for pursuing the RA position and their experiences on staff. While about 40% of the on-campus population as well as the RA staff at PRU identified as Black, our participants experienced the institution and department as a white space, where Black individuals in leadership positions, whether the RA position or higher level positions in residence life, were seen as the exception. Higher education institutions are historically white spaces, rooted in racism and white supremacy, that continue to use curricula and policies that reinforce systems of oppression (Patton, 2016). Within such environments, increased representation is not enough to create truly inclusive communities, in particular when this increased representation occurs primarily at lower ranks (i.e., the RA position or graduate assistants, rather than hall directors or departmental leadership).

While our participants did not experience being the only Black RAs on staff, unlike their peers at PWIs (Hardaway, 2019; Harper et al., 2011; Roland & Agosta, 2017), they still felt a responsibility to represent their race and be a resource and role model for Black residents. Participants wanted to support Black residents and show them that they too could take on this leadership role, a desire that shaped their motivations for pursuing the position. Previous research indicates that RAs of color can create an important support network for students of color (Foste & Johnson, 2021); our participants seemed to embrace the call to do so. Departments, however, need to be careful to acknowledge the additional emotional labor that comes with doing this work (Foste & Johnson, 2021). Similar to faculty and staff of color, Black RAs may encounter heavier workloads due to their commitments to support students of color.

While going through the selection process, our participants had to confront complicated feelings about how their race might shape their chances of being selected and whether they believed that their race might help or hinder their chances. Simone rejected the idea of being a “diversity hire,” wanting to believe that she was hired due to her qualifications and not her race. Engaging in the emotional work of speculating about whether or not race shaped a situation—in this case, the RA selection process—can take a toll on an individual’s well-being (Wang et al., 2011). Our participants’ comments also indicate that the RA position at the institution continued to be seen as something white students engage in.

During the interview process and once they were working as RAs, our participants struggled to be their authentic selves. They felt a need to change their behaviors to appear more professional, which some attributed to their race though others did not. Captain, for example, did not believe she had to change her behavior due to race

During the interview process and once they were working as RAs, our participants struggled to be their authentic selves. They felt a need to change their behaviors to appear more professional, which some attributed to their race though others did not.

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but seems to have adopted white standards of professionalism regarding language and tone. Studies have shown that Black individuals who engage in code-switching are perceived as more professional by both white and Black colleagues (McCluney et al., 2021), but it can be emotionally and physically exhausting and comes at a social and psychological cost (McCluney et al., 2021). In addition, Brandon pointed out that knowing they will have to assimilate to a white professional context may also deter Black students from pursuing the RA position (Arminio et al., 2000).

Similar to their peers at PWIs (Hardaway, 2019; Harper et al., 2011; Roland & Agosta, 2017), having a Black community and support system was important to our participants, who looked to Black peers for support and friendship. Black supervisors served as another source of support, as participants felt more comfortable talking to them, knowing they would understand and have their back. While white supervisors could be allies, they had to actively show their support for the Black community. The racist origins of U.S. higher education shape Black students' perceptions of white administrators and create mistrust (Johnson-Bailey, 2012). Simone, for example, was positively surprised when a white supervisor brought up the topic of racism and indicated a willingness to learn more. When another white supervisor dismissed the severity of an incident, which Simone perceived as grounded in racism, this supervisor reinforced perceptions of white mentors as untrustworthy and unable to understand the experiences of Black students and staff (Johnson-Bailey, 2012).

LIMITATIONS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Several limitations need to be considered when interpreting our findings. First, our analysis focused primarily on RAs' motivations and their experiences with other RAs and supervisors. Race also shaped participants' interactions with residents; however, our participants focused more on other aspects of the position during the interviews. This may be due to collecting data during the COVID-19 pandemic. In the fall semester of 2020, PRU's residence life department had implemented a variety of safety regulations, which limited RAs' interactions with residents. Future research should explore how race shapes Black RAs' relationships with residents during times when more social interactions occur in the residence halls.

Second, four out of five of our participants identified as women. The intersections of race and gender shape Black RAs' experiences in unique ways (e.g., Harper et al., 2011; Roland & Agosta, 2017). Future research should either explore Black RAs' experiences with a more gender-balanced sample or consider the intersections of race and gender, as well as intersections with other social identities, in its analysis.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

Our findings have several implications for practice. Most importantly, residence life professionals need to recognize that U.S. higher education institutions continue to be white spaces, even when the diversity of students increases. Higher education's history, its policies, and the uneven distribution of power shape Black students'—including Black RAs'—experiences on college and university campuses. To counteract these environments, residence life professionals need to actively work toward creating inclusive environments. Departments can do so by acknowledging the additional labor that Black RAs engage in by supporting Black students in their buildings and providing them with resources and recognition for this work. Supervisors could engage their staff in conversations about racism—including how race may shape seemingly innocuous situations and processes in the department—thus allowing Black RAs to better process their experiences. Recognizing how white norms shape perceptions of professionalism, departments should reflect on the standards they communicate to staff. Challenging white and Black staff members' perceptions of professionalism can help disrupt norms upheld by our institutions and can provide opportunities for staff to engage more authentically in their leadership roles.

Our findings also point to the importance of having a Black community that includes Black peers and supervisors. Hiring not only Black student staff but also professional staff has to be a priority. As not every Black RA will have a Black supervisor, Black RAs should also be provided with other ways to access Black mentors or engage with the Black residence life staff community. To limit the additional labor placed on Black professionals to serve as mentors (Johnson-Bailey, 2012), white supervisors should participate in cross-racial mentor training, so they can provide more adequate support to their Black RAs.

To recruit more Black RAs, departments need to work toward changing the perception of the RA position as intended for white students. Allowing Black RAs to be their authentic selves—including changing standards for professionalism within the department—could make the position more attractive. Having Black members on interview teams can increase the comfort level of Black candidates. Finally, considering Black RAs' commitment to supporting Black residents, providing opportunities for them to engage in this type of work and be recognized for their efforts could make the position more attractive to them.

CONCLUSION

Our study highlights how race shapes the experiences of Black RAs at an institution where students of color make up about half of the student population. Despite the diversity of the student body and RA staff, our participants experienced the institution as a white space, where they could not be their authentic selves and had to engage in additional emotional labor to navigate racialized interactions. Our findings point to the importance of disrupting the norms within these white spaces to create inclusive campus environments for Black RAs. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What steps need to be taken to deconstruct the perception of “white space” when the racial demographic of the student population would suggest it is not?
2. What are strategies to recruit a diverse pool of resident assistants?
3. Black RAs can be an important support network for Black students and other students of color. How can housing departments ensure that Black RAs are not inundated with emotional labor in their attempts to support other students of color?

Discussion questions developed by LaFarin Meriwether, University of North Carolina Greensboro, and Chandra Myrick, University of Tennessee, Knoxville