

MANUSCRIPT

Development of Evaluation Criteria and Comparison of Performance Between Sophomore and Upper-Division Resident Assistants

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The high turnover of resident assistants at institutions of higher education continues to be a problem. Upper-division students of at least a junior standing typically fill the resident assistant (RA) position, but housing professionals are increasingly considering hiring sophomore RAs. The purpose of this mixed-methods exploratory study design was to develop evaluation criteria and to compare the performance of first-time sophomore and upper-division RAs. Content analysis was used to develop evaluation criteria. Performance criteria included relationships with residents and staff, residential community development, programming, and administration. These criteria were then used to predict class standing ex post facto. Researchers gathered data from nine U.S. universities for 302 resident assistants in the Mid-Atlantic Region. Excluded were RAs of nontraditional age. We analyzed data using binary logistic regression. Results showed that performance criteria did not predict an RA's class standing. This finding will give housing professionals more confidence in selecting sophomore students to serve as resident assistants.

Campus housing professionals recruit and consider hiring resident assistants (RAs) from an applicant pool that includes students with less experience in college than what is traditionally expected (i.e., upper-division juniors and seniors are generally believed to be mature enough to handle the demands of being an RA). The multiple complex demands of the RA job and resultant burnout have made it difficult for housing professionals to recruit students in their junior and senior years (Crandall, 2004; Schaller & Wagner, 2007), and the dwindling number of candidates with more experience has compelled them to consider hiring first-year students (Brandt Brecheisen, 2015; Schaller & Wagner, 2007). This is now a common but not yet validated practice: 28% of RAs are sophomores (Brandt Brecheisen, 2015, p. 206).

RAs are critical to the work of student affairs. In 2021, *The Journal of College and University Student Housing* published a special issue on RA hiring practices in which the editors noted that although there are many different methods and philosophies for hiring RAs, “Years of practice have not yielded a consensus best practice” (Stoner & Leibowitz, 2021, p. 9). Research about hiring RAs is scant and provides little direct guidance regarding the efficacy of second-year students in the RA role when compared

to juniors or seniors. In order to explore whether or not hiring sophomore RAs is an acceptable practice, the present study compares the performance of sophomore and upper-division resident assistants based upon the following research question: *Do scores on performance evaluation criteria, as determined by their campus housing supervisors, differ between sophomore and upper-division (junior and senior) first-time resident assistants?* The question addressed all RAs, females and males, and those whose residents were first-year and upper-division students.

Housing professionals recognize the value of RAs, who work on the frontline to support students by orienting and engaging them throughout their residential experience. However, this is not an easy job; many students today enter college with a number of personal and emotional challenges, and the RA job has become more demanding and stressful as a result (Boone et al., 2016; Brandt Brecheisen, 2015).

THE CRITICAL ROLE OF RESIDENT ASSISTANTS

Beginning in the 1970s, Astin (1977, 1993) extolled the benefits of students living on campus, hiring student peers as RAs, and increasing RA responsibilities. Similarly, Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that leadership positions, such as the RA role, contributed to the retention and achievement of students. Huffman (2014) described the RA role as being pivotal in changing personal perceptions and improving communication and leadership skills, resulting in a more refined identity as professionals and members of communities.

At residential colleges and universities in the United States, resident assistants are ubiquitous, valued, and esteemed, but they are also endangered by stress and burnout (Blimling, 2010; Paladino et al., 2005; Schaller & Wagner, 2007). Resident assistants are mainstays in the student affairs profession, often referred to in such glowing terms as “front-line troops” (Upcraft & Pilato, 1982, p. 2), “the cornerstone of the operation of residence life departments” (Bailey & Grandpre, 1997, p. 40), “staff in the trenches” (Arvidson, 2003, p. 31), and “the vanguard of the field of student development” (Blimling, 2010, p. 31). The conventional roles of RAs include acting as an administrator, campus resource, community builder, conflict mediator, counselor, group facilitator, problem solver, role model, student, and trained observer (Blimling, 2010).

Characteristics of a successful resident assistant include academic ability; emotional intelligence, especially flexibility and the ability to solve problems; skill in group communication; and motivation (Denzine & Anderson, 1999; Jaeger & Caison, 2006). Though prosocial behaviors that strengthened compassion and cooperation were higher among RAs than they were among non-RAs (Soria & Roberts, 2023), RAs still face tremendous pressures (a fact not often revealed in recruitment materials or job descriptions) and need to be prepared to resolve a myriad of behavioral and mental health issues among students.

RAs can experience conflict in their dual role as supporters of residents and enforcers of the rules. They must be able to maintain a social connection with residents while at the same time acting as enforcement officers (Everett & Loftus, 2011), and these are challenges that should be addressed in their training (Koch, 2016).

The role has become much more challenging, as RAs confront such serious issues as alcoholism, date rape, emotional challenges, homophobia, personal challenges, and racism (Abrams, 2022; American College Personnel Association, 2001; Boone et al., 2016; Dodge, 1990; Horvath & Stack, 2013; Taub et al., 2016). The complexity of their responsibilities has increased in the last 30 years, and their role has shifted “from clerical assistant to paraprofessional and from cop to counselor” (Arvidson, 2003, p. 34). Their jobs are further complicated by social media and technology, parental over-involvement, and compliance issues brought by government legislation and regulation (McKuskey, 2013). In terms of their exposure to legal risks, LeTarte (2013) described the RA role as “dangerously important,” given their responsibility to keep residential students safe through policy enforcement.

One of the most damaging effects of all these responsibilities is burnout (Benedict & Mondloch, 1989; DuBose, 2020; Harris, 2021; Hetherington et al., 1989; Maten, 2020; Miller & Conyne, 1980; Nowack et al., 1985; Paladino et al., 2005; Stark, 2022), which is especially high among RAs whose primary assignment is on first-year floors (Benedict & Mondloch, 1989; Fuehrer & McGonagle, 1988; Hardy & Dodd, 1998). High levels of burnout have created the need to expand the applicant pool for the RA position by including sophomores.

UTILIZING SOPHOMORE RESIDENT ASSISTANTS

Researchers conduct much less research on sophomores than on first-year students, even though studies have shown that students in their second year have the strongest needs; they also have fewer supports than do other upper-division students (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006). Thus, retention of sophomores has become an important area of focus for research (Hunter et al., 2010). Several factors have a significant impact on their retention: financial factors (Blekic et al., 2020), commitment to their major field of study and to their relationships with faculty and staff (Xueli & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013), and their overall satisfaction with their collegiate experience, which was most strongly influenced by involvement in campus activities and satisfaction with their peers (Hunter et al., 2010). Questions remain about the impact of serving as an RA on sophomores’ overall sense of commitment and satisfaction, but what we can discern is that they experience a complexity of challenges in their own development while mentoring other students (Foote et al., 2013; Schaller, 2005).

Three known studies have addressed the issue of sophomores serving as resident assistants (Brandt Brecheisen, 2015; Kauffman, 2008; Schaller & Wagner, 2007). A phenomenological study of sophomore RAs at a private

four-year university over two years was conducted to determine how the RA position affects sophomores (Schaller & Wagner, 2007). The study, which was limited in terms of sample size and demographics (90% of participants being White and the institution requiring on-campus living for all firstand second-year students), revealed that serving as an RA can disrupt the transitions involved in the sophomore year: “Sophomore students contend with specific transition struggles and challenges unique to their class standing as they make decisions about their sense of purpose and future career” (Brandt Brecheisen, 2015, p. 195). The demands involved in supporting first-year students, the distance between themselves and residents who violate policy, and the hesitation to become involved in extracurricular activities because of the risk of overinvolvement contributed to sophomore RAs being challenged to meet their own goals.

Kauffman (2008) conducted a qualitative study of 27 volunteer traditional-age sophomore RAs at three Midwestern universities, and all participants reported that their sophomore RA experience was positive. Benefits included improved time management, leadership skills, and confidence. Challenges included complex administrative tasks, a lack of respect from other students, loss of sleep, and less time to be with friends and family. Sophomore RAs noted an overwhelming sense of being on the job 24 hours a day and feeling like “being the fish in the fishbowl” (Kauffman, 2008, p. 64), which caused them to avoid compromising positions by changing their social lives.

Brandt Brecheisen (2015) took a quantitative approach to studying a large population by using existing data from a national survey instrument, the 2004-2005 RA Survey, an annual project of the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International (ACUHO-I) and Educational Benchmarking Incorporated (EBI). The sample comprised 1,443 sophomore RAs representing 61 institutions from across the U.S. The researchers examined expectations, gender, and grade point average as well as attributes of the sophomore RA position such as supervision, training, and work/life balance and outcomes such as job satisfaction, turnover intention, and self-efficacy.

The gender of respondents did not correlate with the variables measured, though there was a strong correlation between satisfaction with training and reported self-efficacy among sophomore RAs. “RA training for a sophomore RA evolves into preparation to navigate their transition into and through their sophomore year” (Brandt Brecheisen, 2015, p. 204). In terms of intent to return, 69% of RAs planned to return to the position (Brandt Brecheisen, 2015, p. 200), compared to 56% found earlier (Kauffman, 2008, p. 47). Of those sophomore RAs who did not intend to return, 16% revealed that they were able to return to the job but chose not to, and they reported higher mean GPAs and less satisfaction with the position than those who intended to return (Brandt Brecheisen, 2014, p. 107). It may be that, as

Brandt Brecheisen (2015) speculates, the time and effort needed to fulfill responsibilities of the RA position might threaten sophomore RAs with higher GPAs and offered this as a topic for future research.

The present research differs from these three previous studies about sophomore RAs. We employed an exploratory, sequential mixed-methods approach, first collecting qualitative and then quantitative data (Creswell & Creswell, 2018; Lodico et al., 2010). The use of mixed methods is appropriate when multiple phases are needed to fulfill research purposes (Creswell & Clark, 2011). The present study required two phases. First, we collected qualitative data in order to develop performance evaluation criteria using content analysis. These criteria were then used to survey key informants and collect quantitative performance data, which were analyzed using logistic regression.

METHODOLOGY

Phase I Methods and Results

Content analysis was used to develop an instrument to measure the performance evaluation criteria of RAs because no common criteria existed. Content analysis is a method of examining artifacts to derive patterns (Saldaña, 2011). We collected nine forms used to evaluate first-year RAs from student housing supervisors located beyond the Mid-Atlantic region where Phase II was conducted, using convenience sampling.

Iterative categorization was the coding approach taken to analyze headings listed on evaluation forms (Neale, 2016). In categorizing these, we listed categories if two or more forms contained the same or similar headings. The process yielded 59 initial categories of performance criteria.

Through an iterative process, we combined and reduced categories to create a list of five primary criteria of performance: (1) relationships with residents, (2) community development, (3) programming, (4) administration, and (5) relationships with staff. Evaluation criteria represented independent variables for the quantitative Phase II of the study.

Relationships with residents was a variable construct that included the following attributes:

- *communication, counseling, and conflict and resolution skills*
- *individual engagement with and knowledge of residents*
- *accessibility, approachability, and availability*
- *helping skills*
- *welcoming of diversity*
- *listening skills; outreach; confronts, enforces, and adheres to policy*

- *is on-call and makes duty rounds*
- *manages crises calmly following emergency procedures.*

Community development was a variable construct that included the following attributes:

- *serves as role model*
- *balances responsibilities*
- *promotes academic development.*

Programming was a variable construct that included the following attributes:

- *distributes information*
- *maintains bulletin boards and posts notices*
- *aware of and makes referrals to campus resources*
- *supportive of hall council/activity board*
- *creates programming, both active and passive.*

Administration was a variable construct that included the following attributes:

- *timeliness, punctuality, and time management*
- *attendance at meetings*
- *accuracy and follow-through with incident reporting and paperwork*
- *appropriate check-in/checkout and other front desk procedures.*

Relationships with staff was a variable construct that included the following attributes:

- *keeps supervisor informed*
- *has positive attitude*
- *supports/mentors other staff*
- *actively involved in meetings*
- *accepts responsibility*

- *supports departmental mission*
- *responds to requests*
- *leads.*

Phase II Methods

Variable constructs were used to collect data in Phase II of the study. We utilized a nonexperimental quantitative multivariate comparative survey design to collect RA performance evaluation data from their supervisors. Logistic regression was used to analyze the data. We present the population and sample represented in Phase II of the study, the survey instrument and variables measured, and inferential statistical analysis procedures in the subsections below.

Population and Sample

The target population of the study was all first-time RAs at colleges and universities in the U.S. We undertook a multiphase sampling approach. In the first phase, we included all colleges and universities represented by members of the Mid-Atlantic Association of College and University Housing Officers (MACUHO) as a convenience sample based on affiliation. MACUHO members represent institutions in the states of Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, and West Virginia (MACUHO, 2018). We targeted all registered members of the association, and MACUHO's director of strategic initiatives and president supported the recruitment process via email, endorsing the study and encouraging participation as part of their commitment to advancing academic scholarship in college and university housing.

The second phase represented a volunteer sample of key informants, who are persons able to provide information because of their position or expertise (Ravitch & Carl, 2016). In this case, volunteer key informants were housing professionals who supervised first-time RAs. We asked RA supervisors to complete a digital survey for each RA to evaluate all first-time RAs hired in the two previous fall terms.

Survey Instrument and Variables

Several professionals working in the housing field during the pilot testing process confirmed evaluation criteria resulting from Phase I of the study. Pilot testing improved the content and face validity of the instrument developed to measure the performance of RAs during Phase II (Fink, 2006; McMillan, 2021; Mertler & Charles, 2011). A digital survey instrument was used to collect performance data.

We measured three demographic variables: the RA's gender, class standing of most residential students served by the first-time RA, and job status at the time of data collection (see [Table 1](#)). Female, male, and transgender were the categories of gender presented, but since there were no transgender

Table 1.
Frequencies of Demographic Variables (N = 302)

Variables	f	%
Gender		
male	137	45
female	165	55
transgender	0	0
Predominant class standing of residents		
mostly first-year students	188	62
mostly upper-division students	114	38
Job status		
terminated	6	2
resigned	24	8
probation	6	2
continuing	266	88

students, we excluded them from the analysis. Respondents reported the predominant class standing of the residents on the first-time RA's floor/community (defined as the simple majority of the floor's residents as either first-year or upper-division residents).

The class standing of first-time RAs was the single dichotomous dependent variable of the study: sophomore (1) and non-sophomore upper-division juniors and seniors (0). We defined a sophomore RA as a student having completed two semesters or fewer of full-time college study by the beginning of the fall semester in which the RA began their job. This definition of sophomore is sustainable regardless of the fact that sophomore status at some institutions is defined based on the number of credit hours achieved, including credit hours earned prior to matriculation or at other institutions. Upper-division RAs were those who had completed three or more semesters of study. Job status was measured in four categories: terminated, resigned, probation, and continuing. The large majority (88%) reported that they planned to continue in their jobs (job status was not used in inferential analysis but is presented as a variable of interest).

We defined RA performance as a multivariate independent variable construct as documented by an institutionally determined supervisor. We reported each of five performance criteria on a 4-point ordinal scale with a range of 0 to 3: 0 = did not meet requirement; 1 = needed improvement; 2 = met requirement; and 3 = exceeded requirement. [Table 2](#) presents the frequencies of dependent and independent variables.

Table 2.
Frequencies of Dependent and Independent Variables (N = 302)

Variables and coding	f	%
Class standing		
0 = non-sophomore	190	63
1 = sophomore	112	37
Relations with residents		
0 = did not meet expectation	1	0
1 = needs improvement	23	1
2 = meets expectation	179	59
3 = exceeds expectation	99	33
Community development		
0 = did not meet expectation	2	0
1 = needs improvement	19	6
2 = meets expectation	175	58
3 = exceeds expectation	106	35
Programming		
0 = did not meet expectation	4	1
1 = needs improvement	29	10
2 = meets expectation	180	60
3 = exceeds expectation	89	29
Administration		
0 = did not meet expectation	4	1
1 = needs improvement	33	11
2 = meets expectation	179	59
3 = exceeds expectation	86	28
Relations with staff		
0 = did not meet expectation	3	1
1 = needs improvement	18	6
2 = meets expectation	168	56
3 = exceeds expectation	113	37

Inferential Statistical Analysis

We used IBM SPSS for inferential statistical analyses. We screened data for errors and missing values. We imputed the average of non-missing data from each record for 40 of 2,718 cells.

We employed binary logistic regression to ascertain if there were any measured performance criteria that differentiated the status of an RA as being either in their sophomore year or beyond. Logistic regression is suitable “to predict a categorical variable from a set of predictor variables” (Leech et al., 2015, p. 167). In this study, the dependent variable was binary, and the

independent predictor variables were ordinal. Binary logistic regression is akin to linear regression but is more flexible, with fewer distributional assumptions about the independent variables and allowance for a dichotomous dependent variable (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 2000; Leech et al., 2015).

The sample of 302 was adequate to use binary logistic regression according to the one-in-ten rule of thumb estimated by Peduzzi and colleagues (1996). By applying this rule of thumb, we could have tested 11 predictor variables based on the count of 114 in the lowest category of the binary criterion variable. The model only included five predictor variables, so the sample was more than double the size needed to estimate parameters.

We met the statistical assumptions that categorical observations were independently measured and were mutually exclusive by design. We assessed multicollinearity among independent predictor variables through production of a Spearman's rank order correlation matrix. Variables that correlated at a coefficient of .90 or below were suitable to be entered into the logistic regression model (Rovai et al., 2013).

We entered independent variables simultaneously as covariates at the .05 level (Leech et al., 2015). IBM SPSS software utilized the likelihood-ratio chi-square test as the omnibus test for model coefficients, comparing the base model without explanatory variables to the new model with explanatory variables (Agresti, 2007).

In our logistic regression analysis, the odds ratio in this study is defined as the probability ratio between sophomore and non-sophomore class standing. This dichotomous dependent variable had two outcomes: 1 = sophomore standing, 0 = non-sophomore standing. Logit is the natural logarithm of any odds ratio. For this study, the mathematical model of the simple logistic regression is as follows: $\text{logit}(Y) = \ln[\pi/1-\pi] = B_0 + B_1X_1 + B_2X_2 + B_3X_3 + \dots + B_nX_n$ where π is the probability of a sophomore class standing for a first-time resident assistant, B_0 is the Y intercept, B_s are regression coefficients, and X_s are the multiple independent variables (Peng et al., 2002). We employed the Nagelkerke R^2 to examine the practical significance of any statistically significant models. We set the a priori level of significance at $p \leq .05$ for both the model and individual variables.

RESULTS

Nine supervisors of RAs at institutions of higher education in the Mid-Atlantic region of the U.S. submitted 302 complete RA performance evaluation responses. All reporting institutions were four-year colleges or universities. Four were private institutions, and five were public institutions. Most (55%) of these institutions had housing capacity for between 1,501 and 3,000 residents; 20% had capacity to house 1,500 to 2,000 residents; 15% had capacity less than 1,500; and 10% had capacity to house 6,000 or more residents.

We conducted logistic regression to determine if five performance criteria differentiated sophomore and upper-division RAs. Performance criteria included relationships with residents, community development, programming, administration, and relationships with staff. For all RAs, females and males, and for RAs whose residents were mostly first-year or upper-division students, we generated models with this combination of independent explanatory variables.

All Resident Assistants

The full model containing all performance criteria was not statistically significant for all RAs, $\chi^2 = 5.28$, $df = 5$, $n = 302$, $p = .38$. This result was meaningful because it shows that the logit model did not distinguish between sophomore and upper-division RAs based on their performance in the position. Performance criteria did not differentiate the sophomore or upper-division standing of a first-time RA. In effect, this result shows that knowing how well an RA performed in their first semester on the job is of no value in predicting that RA's class standing *ex post facto*. [Table 3](#) presents logistic regression coefficients for performance criteria among all RAs.

Gender

As with all RAs, performance criteria did not differentiate sophomores and upper-division standing among females, who comprised 55% of the sample, $\chi^2 = 4.01$, $df = 5$, $n = 165$, $p = .55$. Such was not the case for males, who comprised 45% of the sample. When considered together, performance criteria differentiate sophomore and upper-division first-time male RAs, $\chi^2 = 12.14$, $df = 5$, $n = 137$, $p = .03$. [Table 4](#) presents logistic regression coefficients for performance criteria among male RAs, suggesting that sophomore male RAs have fewer relationships with residents than do upper-division RAs. This implies that better relationships with residents differentiates upper-division male RAs ($Mo = 3$, exceeds expectations) from sophomore male RAs ($Mo = 2$, meets expectations). Though differentiating, five performance criteria accounted for only 12% of the variability in the dependent variable as measured by Nagelkerke R^2 .

Class Standing of Residents on RAs' Assigned Floor/Community

Performance criteria did not differentiate sophomores and upper-division RAs for those assigned to floors/communities with mostly first-year ($\chi^2 = 5.16$, $df = 5$, $n = 188$, $p = .40$) or mostly upper-division residents ($\chi^2 = 5.01$, $df = 5$, $n = 114$, $p = .40$). (See [Table 5](#).)

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations are inherent in the present study, including the sample type and size, selection, perceptions of reviewers/reporters, and the approach to sampling, generalizability, representativeness, and potential for interpretive bias. Nine housing professionals gathered a nonrandom sample of 302 first-time RAs to assess staff performance at several universities in the Mid-

Table 3.**Logistic Regression Coefficients for Performance Criteria Among All RAs**

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Relationships with residents	-.116	.302	.147	1	.702
Community development	.088	.287	.095	1	.758
Programming	.255	.231	1.216	1	.270
Administration	-.173	.235	.542	1	.462
Relationships with staff	-.352	.263	1.797	1	.180
Constant	1.219	.589	4.274	1	.039

Table 4.**Logistic Regression Coefficients for Performance Criteria Among Male RAs**

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Relationships with residents	-1.076	.510	4.447	1	.035
Community development	.549	.459	1.429	1	.232
Programming	.123	.331	.138	1	.710
Administration	-.154	.338	.206	1	.650
Relationships with staff	-.464	.380	1.492	1	.222
Constant	2.942	.922	10.191	1	.001

Table 5.**Logistic Regression Coefficients for Performance Criteria Among RAs Assigned to Mostly First-Year Communities**

	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	<i>Wald</i>	<i>df</i>	<i>p</i>
Relationships with residents	-.394	.409	.929	1	.335
Community development	.530	.406	1.700	1	.192
Programming	.252	.292	.746	1	.388
Administration	-.046	.292	.025	1	.875
Relationships with staff	-.394	.341	1.330	1	.249
Constant	.953	.762	1.565	1	.211

Atlantic region. Random selection is an assumption for using inferential statistics; nonrandom sampling violated this assumption, but this is not an unusual violation in social science research (Pallant, 2020).

Results cannot be assumed to be generalizable to the entire population of first-time RAs across the U.S. given the Mid-Atlantic regional sampling approach. Findings are limited to institutions represented by those in the “Population and Sample” section. The ability to extrapolate findings to RAs at other institutions was limited due to differences in selection, training, and evaluation of staff at diverse campuses.

Potential bias of housing professionals who reported RA performance data archived at their institution on a 4-point scale exacerbates the limitations of measuring individual performance for five general attributes. Although the questionnaire provided synonyms to clarify the attributes, housing

professionals were reporting information from their own institutions and could have unintentionally introduced interpretive bias or errors when categorizing and assigning values.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

The results of our study revealed that sophomore RAs performed just as well as upper-division RAs in fulfilling their job responsibilities. This is true even when sophomore RAs were assigned to communities of first-year students with greater needs for support and attention. The present study does not support the idea that the transitions that occur during their sophomore year were disrupted (Schaller & Wagner, 2007).

The one exception to the collective effectiveness of sophomore RAs is male RAs. Upper-division and sophomore male RAs differ in terms of relationship building. This finding suggests that sophomore males might lack the maturity to build relationships with residents compared to those who are upper-division RAs. Developing interpersonal relationships is foundational to identity development in college (Chickering & Reisser, 1993), and perhaps one or two more years of college and experience as an RA could make a difference in male RAs' ability to develop interpersonal relationships. When selecting and training male sophomore RAs, it is important to consider that upper-division RAs are older and have more experience. Selection could focus on the ability of sophomore male RAs to strengthen relationships and their own emotional intelligence, as suggested by Jaeger and Caison (2006). For male sophomore RAs who are hired, training could focus on how to build these relationships.

The finding that sophomores perform just as well as upper-division RAs has implications for hiring and training first-time resident assistants. Directors or associate directors of housing responsible for selecting and training RA staff should consider including first-year students even though institutional administrators might question the practice based on the academic and emotional maturity of these students. Practitioners can expand the pool of applicants who are considered qualified by including first-year students desiring to become RAs in their sophomore year.

With the unceasing demand for RAs, it becomes increasingly important to expand the pool of applicants. Campus housing professionals apprehensive about hiring sophomore RAs may now do so with more confidence. Though this may now be common practice, until recently housing professionals did not have evidence that sophomore RAs are as effective as upper-division RAs (regardless of the floor or community to which we assign them). Hiring sophomore RAs might fill the gap between the supply and demand of effective frontline campus housing professionals. There is also some corroboration for the recommendation that housing professionals should start or continue their practice of recruiting first-year students to serve as RAs in their sophomore year.

IMPLICATIONS FOR RESEARCH

Future research on the success of sophomore RAs might take several approaches, including the use of self-assessment, longitudinal mixed methods, and more detailed comparisons. One potential gauge of sophomore RA success is their assessment of their own performance. Prior studies have primarily used a qualitative approach to explore the experiences of sophomore RAs (Kauffman, 2008; Schaller & Wagner, 2007). In these studies, the intention to return to the RA position was the proxy for RAs' self-evaluation of their success in the job. A quantitative self-assessment of sophomore RAs would best include non-continuing or dissatisfied RAs in their samples. As Brandt Brecheisen's (2015) study points out, the 1,443 sophomore RA respondents were satisfied RAs, as were most of the sophomore RAs in the qualitative studies described above, so engaging input from unsatisfied sophomore RAs would be worthwhile in future research.

A comparison beyond the dichotomous grouping of sophomore and upper-division students would shed further light on RA efficacy. During the conduct of the present study, housing practitioners felt that sophomore RAs performed as well as junior RAs but that senior RAs tended to underperform according to their supervisors' expectations. While sophomore RAs, by definition, are first-time RAs, senior RAs can have any level of direct experience in the job. Those who were originally hired as sophomore RAs may have progressed to become senior RAs, spending 3 years in the position, or senior RAs may be first-time staff themselves, hired only in their fourth year. Just as this study aimed to determine if any performance criteria could distinguish sophomore RAs from their advanced peers, future studies could try to isolate the success of senior RAs using the same criteria. Research in this direction would need to first discriminate between types of senior RAs, as described above. Though senior RAs have progressed beyond the transitions of their mid-college years, we should consider their level of experience in the RA job a confounding variable.

Another fertile area for future research is to longitudinally measure the success and development of sophomore RAs. Schaller's (2005) commitment model could frame the study. As described above, senior RAs may have become first-time RAs in their sophomore year and then continued to serve as an RA for a third year. Research on the experience and success of these third-year RAs would be valuable for housing professionals. A longitudinal mixed-methods study of sophomore RAs would be most valuable if it gathered both qualitative and quantitative data regarding the experience and success of RAs over the course of three years, from an RA's first year on the job as a sophomore through their third year as a senior. Housing professionals would have a sense of both the beneficial and disruptive impacts of the RA position on sophomore students over time. A longitudinal mixed-methods study also could shed light on the differences found by the present study in relationship building between sophomore and upper-division male RAs.

Though not reported in the body of this study, the researchers cross-tabulated the class standing of residents served by first-time sophomore RAs. We found that out of the 190 sophomore RAs, 130 (68%) of them had assignments to work primarily with first-year students on a floor or in community housing. The data from the study also revealed that upper-division RAs were assigned to first-year communities at a rate similar to that of upper-division communities (52% for first-year communities and 48% for upper-division communities). Since burnout is higher among RAs whose primary assignment is on first-year floors (Benedict & Mondloch, 1989; Fuehrer & McGonagle, 1988; Hardy & Dodd, 1998) and sophomore RAs tend to be assigned to first-year floors, this observation merits further exploration in future studies.

CONCLUSION

Housing professionals are increasingly compelled to consider hiring sophomore RAs in order to be able to fill the demand for housing professionals at institutions of higher education. The purpose of this mixed-methods exploratory study design was two-fold: to develop evaluation criteria and to compare the performance of first-time sophomore and upper-division RAs. The performance criteria included relationships with residents and staff, residential community development, programming, and administration. The performance criteria did not predict an RA's class standing. Slight gender differences were found among sophomore and upper-division male RAs in their ability to establish relationships, implying a need for training in this area. Floor assignment did not differentiate sophomore and upper-division RAs.

Implications of primary findings extend to both hiring and training first-time RAs. Directors and associate directors of housing now have evidence to support the inclusion of first-year students among RA recruits and applicants, thus expanding the pool of qualified candidates. This is particularly significant given the perpetual demand for RAs on college and university campuses. Furthermore, findings of the study offer reassurance to housing professionals who may have been hesitant to hire sophomore RAs in the past. With evidence of their effectiveness, there is now a solid foundation for hiring first-year students to serve as RAs in their sophomore year. Ultimately, this will help address the ongoing need for frontline campus housing professionals and enhance the support provided by campus residential communities.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. If your campus allows sophomore resident assistants (RAs), what kind of training do you provide for them? How long do they train, and are there development sessions throughout the academic year to help with their personal and professional growth?
2. In what ways could future research expand on the findings of this study to better understand the long-term impacts of the RA role on sophomore students? What components do you think are missing from this study?
3. How do the emotional and social challenges faced by sophomore RAs compare to those experienced by upper-division RAs? As a housing professional, how would you address these challenges and differences in training and support programs?
4. How could recruitment and selection for this position better prepare students for the extra emotional effort needed to serve as an RA for a first-year community?
5. This article mentions including self-assessment of RAs in a future study. Do you think this would be helpful or hurtful to the overall effectiveness of the study? How and why?

Discussion questions were developed by Kamariah Hammonds, Clemson University.