

MANUSCRIPT

Sometimes Superheroes Can't Save Everyone: Rethinking the Resident Assistant Role

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Some superheroes are not born into greatness but have it thrust upon them. Cape-less resident assistants (RAs) play a vital role in the organizational, operational, and programmatic needs of many student housing offices across the U.S. and select countries abroad. While the presence of the position is crucial to most residential life programs, the qualities, characteristics, roles, and responsibilities of this live-in paraprofessional position remain widely understudied. Herein lies the purpose of this study: to provide a comprehensive examination of the RA role. Using the Regional Entry Level Institute (RELI) competencies as a baseline for comparing the role and responsibilities of RAs, we explored the knowledge and skill expectations required to meet the needs of college and university students. We employed a qualitative methodological approach to analyze themes from a large repository of RA position descriptions collected from varying institutional types. Data collected from this analysis was then compared to data obtained from RA focus groups. Developing communal association, assessing student needs, and strengthening peer relationships are the most salient responsibilities, and all 20 RELI competencies are mentioned in more than a quarter of all position descriptions. Despite the existence of training and learning supports, focus group participants voiced concerns about the scope and sustainability of their jobs.

Resident assistants (RAs) have played a critical role in the management of residence halls since the 1960s (Upcraft & Pilato, 1982) and are widely acknowledged as a foundation of student support: “For decades, the RA position has been regarded as the cornerstone in the operation of housing departments and the enhancement of student learning and development” (Bailey & Granpre, 1997, p. 40). The scope and breadth of RA responsibilities seem to be evolving at a ceaseless pace, mirroring the ever-changing environment of the colleges and universities where they serve. As institutional values shift, financial security fluctuates, and political agendas infiltrate higher education (Bess & Dee, 2012), the complexity of the RA position is forced to follow suit.

Student leaders who serve as RAs act as role models, problem solvers, counselors, mediators, campus resources, community builders, and administrators (Boone et al., 2016). Many students take on this role, often a part-time job that they assume they can manage while in pursuit of

their academic degree (Blimling, 2010). However, the demands, scope of responsibilities, and complexity of the position have expanded (Boone et al., 2016; Papandrea, 2015), which raises questions about the increased depth of responsibilities and whether or not the position is sustainable.

Given the capricious landscape of higher education in our global society, RAs serve as critical resources for residents by offering learning supports and strengthening community development (Boone et al., 2016; Heasley et al., 2020). To ensure that they have the necessary skills, RAs receive extensive training, many attending a course either prior to the beginning of the job or during their first semester in the role (Blimling, 2010). Moreover, paraprofessionals often receive training prior to the start of each academic year, as well as during and in between semesters. Role readiness programs help RAs build lifelong skills such as time management, critical thinking, conflict mediation, crises management, diversity awareness, accountability, confidentiality, problem solving, counseling, administrative acumen, team dynamics, and community development (Blimling, 2010; Boone et al., 2016). Though these programs offer important opportunities for education in skill development, we must consider whether training topics concern the *necessary* skills. What must an RA really know to be effective? Are we asking them to do too much as we strive to improve workplace sustainability?

EVOLUTION OF THE RESIDENT ASSISTANT ROLE

Throughout the mid-late 20th century, several scholars published articles documenting job functionality of the RA role (Arvidson, 2003; Greenleaf, 1970; Upcraft & Pilato, 1982), as well as the large number of RA responsibilities, including the following:

(1) provide personal help and assistance; (2) manage and facilitate groups; (3) facilitate social, recreational and educational programs; (4) inform students or refer them to appropriate information sources; (5) explain and enforce rules and regulations; and (6) maintain a safe, orderly and relatively quiet environment. (Upcraft & Pilato, 1982, p. 10)

In addition, the position serves an increasingly diverse student population (Dunn & Dean, 2013), and often one new responsibility generates another. The task of developing community association among residents, for example, led in one case to increased responsibility for mediating interhall conflict among residents or roommates (Boone et al., 2016).

The RA role evolved in complexity throughout the latter part of the 20th century. In response to the political mayhem of the 1960s and 70s, after-hour and night-shift duties became a mainstay for the RA position (Boone et al., 2016). Twenty years later, the Campus Crime Awareness and Security Act of 1990, later known as the Clery Act (Jeanne Clery Act, 2025), gave RAs a new responsibility: reporting certain suspicious or unlawful behaviors by residents and guests within the halls (Gill, 2019). Then an increasing number

of incidents of human loss and violence on campuses, such as mass shootings, arson, and sexual assault, led RAs to act as threat assessors (Boone et al., 2016; Gill, 2019). As a natural progression to post-crime watch responsibilities, RAs were expected to have significant awareness of mental health issues, including crisis response, monitoring emotional stresses, and intervening during traumatic events (Conn, 2020). This particular responsibility became super-charged during the COVID-19 pandemic when many RAs were given even more responsibility for monitoring, assessing, reporting, and caring for the increased mental health needs of residents (Conn, 2020).

CURRENT RESEARCH ON THE RESIDENT ASSISTANT ROLE

Contemporary scholarship on the RA role highlights training: its type and content (Koch, 2016) and its sequencing (Whitney et al., 2016); RA knowledge acquisition (Benjamin & Davis, 2016); RA self-care (McClure et al., 2022; McLaughlin, 2017) and burnout (Paladino et al., 2005); and the need to clarify expectations (Longwell-Grice & Kerr, 2013).

Resident Assistant Training and Knowledge Acquisition

RA training types include pre-service training, in-service training, and academic courses, where lectures, guest speakers, and engaging activities provide content (Koch, 2016). Recent scholarship has also addressed capacity building through the residential curriculum (Kerr & Quaye, 2020). Curriculum development encompasses emerging research and learning theory (Kerr et al., 2017), and one priority is to align learning outcomes with competency in developing content, though desired skills can vary among programs (Kerr & Quaye, 2020).

RA training and the residential curriculum support student staff in the process of their learning and leadership development (Kerr & Quaye, 2020; Koch, 2016), and this learning is then cultivated through interpersonal peer-to-peer engagements (Benjamin & Davis, 2016). Student learning thrives as RAs develop helping skills, solve problems, commit to teamwork, and nurture self-efficacy, so it becomes even more important to highlight and assess learning through specific outcomes in training and interpersonal skill development (Benjamin & Davis, 2016).

Self-Care and Burnout

The RA role can be demanding and complex, leading to increased academic and personal stress and anxiety (McClure et al., 2022) and in some cases burnout: “A syndrome characterized by elevated levels of depersonalization and emotional exhaustion and decreased levels of personal accomplishment” (Paladino et al., 2005, p. 19). Causes of RA burnout are related to personal factors, training, and work environment (Paladino et al., 2005), and the relationship between RA burnout and self-care can be similar to the connection observed in other high-responsibility positions.

Scholars investigating RA self-care report significant changes in compassion, satisfaction, burnout, and secondary traumatic stress as a result of serving in the role, which makes the need for relevant training even more important (McClure et al., 2022). Some researchers recommend the inclusion of trauma-informed care, self-care, and dialogue (McClure et al., 2022) to fill this gap, but more research needs to be done about changes in curriculum models, how to enhance RA competency development, and the connection between RA job descriptions and the actual work RAs are required to do.

RESIDENT ASSISTANT COMPETENCIES AND SKILL DEVELOPMENT

Despite the increasing complexity of the RA role (Blimling, 2003; Taub et al., 2016), few research initiatives examine the knowledge and skills necessary to meet students' needs (Boone et al., 2016). Lack of a competency model led this research team to consider competencies developed by the Regional Entry Level Institute (RELI) for professional student housing staff (NEACUHO, n.d.). We were able to align RELI content areas derived from the ACUHO-I Competencies and Body of Knowledge (ACUHO-I, 2024) and the National Housing Training Institute (NHTI) competencies (J. Conlogue, personal communication, July 5, 2018). From an initial list of 39 competencies, 20 (see [Table 1](#)) were identified as critical to success in a mid-level position based on previous surveys of mid-level and senior housing officer staff (NEACUHO, n.d.). Without a widely applied theory, utilization of RELI competencies provides a framework for a holistic examination of the RA role and its accompanying responsibilities. In this study, RELI competencies are used as an overlay to RA position descriptions in order to decipher information about job scope, reach, and prioritization of tasks.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

Scholars have studied RA selection processes and performance assessment (Benjamin & Davis, 2016; Berg & Stoner, 2016; Denzine & Anderson, 1999), training (Bowman & Bowman, 1995, 1998), and burnout (Benjamin & Davis, 2016; Paladino et al., 2005), but the scope of such research does not provide findings on the relationship between role responsibilities and job actualization. Several questions remain unanswered and are the focus of this inquiry: *Does the RA job description accurately depict the responsibilities of the role? If not, how is it misaligned? Are there attributes missing or over-emphasized in the role? If yes, which ones? Do role responsibilities allow RAs to adequately meet the needs of their residents? If yes, how so? Do current RA responsibilities ensure workplace sustainability of the role? If not, how might we remedy this circumstance?*

Table 1.
Regional Entry Level Institute (RELI) Competencies

Competency	Description
Accessibility/availability	The inclination to be easily approached, easy to talk to or to get along with, present and ready to work, qualified, and willing to serve (e.g., maintaining an open-door policy).
Accountability	Capable of accepting or causing responsibility (e.g., taking responsibility for providing an accurate count of vacancies to the housing office before they send a reminder).
Assessment of student needs	To understand the requirements, desires, necessities of students (e.g., surveying student programming interests).
Community development	To create and maintain a strong sense of identity, rapport, and mutual support within a residential area.
Crisis management	Handling, supervising, controlling an emotionally stressful event, a traumatic change in a person's life, or an unstable condition; the ability to effectively respond to an unstable person or condition (e.g., dealing with a student emotional crisis or a significant facilities issue).
Customer service	Work done for others in a positive manner, working closely with students, parents, staff, faculty, community members to address and meet their needs (e.g., providing correct answers in a cheerful way to parents of new students at check-in).
Developing relationships with peers	To bring, grow, or evolve a connection with someone of equal
Goal setting	To establish desired results or purpose; objectives.
Management of multiple priorities	To direct or control more than one important task at the same time (e.g., writing multiple incident reports, serving as a support to a resident dealing with a recent break-up, and conducting a major hall program in the same week).
Observation	To be aware of changes in the community environment and in individual students who may require further attention (e.g., following up with a student who seems to be spending an inordinate amount of time in her room and possibly skipping classes).
Peer advising	Providing support to residents about personal and academic issues; RAs serve as coaches, mediators, and referral agents regarding a broad range of student needs and issues.
Policy enforcement	To educate residents about relevant community standards and institutional policies; and to promote compliance with these policies in a fair, humane, and consistent manner.
Problem-solving skills	The ability to resolve unsettled questions, issues, perplexities; to develop solutions when faced with situations (e.g., creating programming for students when faced with a temporary power outage).
Programming	To offer engaging, substantive events to address identified resident and community needs; fostering opportunities for residents to explore and promote their social, physical, spiritual, and emotional health and well-being.
Recognizing the needs of diverse students	Acknowledging and working with students from a wide variety of backgrounds, cultures, lifestyles, disabilities, etc. (e.g., working with international students).
Resource/referral person	Providing access to programs and resources that facilitate student education and awareness; educating residents about campus-wide programs, resources, and opportunities.
Respecting personal limits	To establish and avoid violations of personal boundaries (e.g., recognizing that staff have lives outside of work).
Role modeling	To serve as an example to other students regarding campus and residence hall life and to successfully manage the job, academics, and personal duties and responsibilities.
Working with change	To be a catalyst; to cause to be different; alter (e.g., dealing with duty schedule revisions due to a staff member's departure).
Written communication	To convey information, have an exchange of ideas, and/or to express oneself in such a way that one is readily and easily understood via correspondence (e.g., writing a coherent, complete, concise report following an incident).

METHODOLOGY

This study uses the RELI competencies as a theoretical framework for a qualitative methodological approach (Booth et al., 2016; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). A two-phased process informs qualitative data collection in this study: document analysis and focus group sessions (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007). Qualitative analysis then provides an opportunity to investigate—via document analysis of RA job descriptions and narrative inquiry from the focus groups—themes derived from written expectations of the role and the real-life experiences of students who serve as RAs. Accordingly, and to narrow the foci of inquiry, qualitative document analysis was purposely executed before collecting focus group data. This intentional sequencing of analysis enabled us to answer the first research question (*Does the RA job description accurately depict the responsibilities of the role?*) before exploring missed or over-emphasized attributes of the role and the position's effectiveness in meeting student needs.

Procedures

After obtaining Institutional Review Board approvals from the three home institutions of the research team, necessary data were collected from different institutional types to perform an analysis of RA job descriptions. We partnered with the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International (ACUHO-I) to establish a coordinated plan to request job descriptions from the association's institutional membership. Data collection began with a request for national and international RA job descriptions, sent via email by the association directly to senior-level administrators in the housing and residence life fields of all ACUHO-I member institutions.

Interested member institutions uploaded a copy of their position descriptions and completed a short Qualtrics questionnaire sent through email. The research team stored these job descriptions in a password-protected Google document repository. The questionnaire asked the professional staff member to report information such as institutional enrollment, housing occupancy, ACUHO-I region affiliation, institution type (i.e., public, private), number of residents, RA compensation, and number of RAs employed by the institution. The final question inquired if the school would like to participate in the second phase of the study by hosting a focus group.

Following the collection of RA job descriptions, we determined focus groups by reviewing demographic information from volunteering institutions. Ensuring a diverse sample of school types was a primary goal for selection. We considered a myriad of institutional characteristics such as geographic location, school type (public or private), enrollment, and number of residents as criteria for selection (See [Table 2](#)). One criterion, geographic location, proved to be challenging due to the limited time and financial constraints of the research team, which made it difficult to guarantee that a team member could be present to conduct the focus group. This led to our

Table 2.

Institutional Composition for Focus Group Participants

Focus group	Institutional type	Institutional size ^a	Number of participants
1	Four-year private	Mid-sized	7
2	Four-year private	Large	5
3	Four-year public	Large	4
4	Four-year private	Large	3
5	Four-year private	Large	5
6	Four-year public	Mid-sized	3
7	Four-year private	Large	4

^aMid-size = 5,001–10,000 students; large = 10,001+ students.

collecting data from institutions in the Northeast region of the United States. All other aforementioned criteria were used to determine the focus group sites, and seven schools were selected.

Each participating institution provided the necessary support for hosting the focus group by completing the host agreement form and providing a suitable space for the session. To recruit interested RA participants, we provided a recruitment flyer and email that were sent to the school's RAs by our institutional contact. (In most cases, this was the person who completed the initial Qualtrics questionnaire.) The email sent to potential focus group participants described the purpose of our study, asked for bio-demographic information (gender, nationality, race and ethnicity, age, academic year of study, years served as an RA, and major), and requested a participant's email address. After reviewing applications, we invited applicants to a focus group, via email, based on a diverse representation across all bio-demographic fields. The institutional contact took responsibility for determining a date, time, and location for our in-person focus group session. Two researchers were present at each session: one asking questions and the other taking notes. Audio recordings were made to ensure accurate transcription. Participation in the focus groups was voluntary and required informed consent, and facilitators gained permission to audio record the discussions in order to create a verbatim transcription used in later analysis (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008; Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). The research team hired a transcription service to convert audio files to Microsoft Word documents.

A semi-structured interview guide was used to collect qualitative information during these sessions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008; Patton, 2015), which improved reliability and limited research team bias and positionality (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). The interview guide included a script for initial briefing, relevant questions, and the post-interview debriefing. Eleven crafted focus group questions represented four broad criteria necessary for effective data collection: range, specificity, depth, and personal context (Merton et al., 1990).

Questions in the interview guide were created by the research team and sought to determine if RA lived experiences aligned with RELI competencies. Questions included “What are the core qualities and abilities that you need to have as an RA?” and “What do you find most challenging about the RA role, and what are the possible solutions to help you overcome that challenge?” The researchers asked additional probing questions, where appropriate, to further elicit narratives from participants. For example, after asking “Given your understanding of the RA role, what responsibilities are misaligned with what you are actually asked to do?” additional questions explored the relevance of specific factors such as programmatic misalignments, the scope of crisis management, and the RA role in mental health assessment. From the narratives collected, the research team developed analytical findings based on converging patterns and themes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007; Glesne, 2016; Morgan, 1997; Patton, 2015).

Participants

There were two levels of participation in this study: institutions that provided RA job descriptions and students who took part in focus groups.

Institutions providing RA position descriptions. Initial correspondence for participation in this study went to 950 ACUHO-I member institutions. Representation of institutions from all 10 ACUHO-I regional affiliations was achieved, although representation within each region varied (see [Table 3](#)). Public colleges and universities (67.1%, $n = 157$) comprised the majority of responding institutions; the remaining identified as private (32.9%, $n = 77$).

Among participating institutions, the research team received 295 completed Qualtrics surveys from 234 unique institutions and a total of 426 distinct RA position descriptions (multiple staff at some institutions submitted surveys, and many institutions uploaded several distinct job descriptions).

Focus group participants. Purposive selection of typical cases was most appropriate for selecting participants for the focus groups (Coyne, 1997). Participants in seven focus groups, each group from a unique institution of higher education, provided data for narrative analysis. To increase diversity of experience, selection of host institutions for focus groups was determined by reviewing the reported institutional information collected in the initial Qualtrics questionnaire.

A total of 31 students participated in focus groups. They represented a diverse group with varying years of RA service, different majors, and diverse social identities. Participant selection was based on the demographic information within each campus. Participants included 20 women and 11 men, and their racial identities included American Indian/Alaskan Native (1), Asian/Asian American (6), Black/African American (4), Hispanic/Latino (4), Multiracial (1), and White (15). A majority of the RAs were serving in their first year in the role (17 or 55%), followed by second-year returners (11 or 35%) and third-year and beyond returners (3 or 10%).

Table 3.
Participation by ACUHO-I Regional Affiliation

Region	Number	Percentage
Great Lakes (GLACUHO)	33	14.1 %
Intermountain (AIMHO)	15	6.4 %
International affiliations	17	7.3 %
Mid-Atlantic (MACUHO)	24	10.3 %
Northeast (NEACUHO)	23	9.8 %
Northwest (NWACUHO)	12	5.1 %
Southeast (SEAHO)	47	20.0 %
Southwest (SWACUHO)	13	5.6 %
Upper Midwest (UMR-ACUHO)	32	13.7 %
Western (WACUHO)	12	5.1 %
Other (not listed)	6	2.6 %
Total	234	100.0%

Data Analysis

Data analysis involved identifying themes and subthemes within the focus group transcripts, determining themes within RA job descriptions, and identifying the frequency of these within the RELI competencies. Saldaña's (2021) thematizing approach was used as a guide for coding the qualitative data. This process includes a first-cycle coding process, in which attribute coding was utilized as a way to initially summarize job descriptions. Second-cycle coding resulted in overarching themes through pattern coding (Saldaña, 2021). From both cycles, themes emerged across the data.

Document analysis involves the classification of text by which researchers can draw conclusions through development of a structured coding scheme (Rose et al., 2015). Consistent with this practice, the researcher team met weekly over a six-month period via Zoom to collectively analyze all data using NVivo, a software tool. The research team prioritized developing a structured coding scheme from collected data. Informed by the RELI competencies, the coding scheme provided alignment between responsibilities highlighted in the job descriptions and those articulated in ACUHO-I's core curriculum for the profession (ACUHO-I, 2024). The intent of document analysis was two-fold: to understand the importance of each competency by virtue of its inclusion in position descriptions and to inform questions in the focus group interview guide.

For the analysis of these sessions, we employed Kvale and Brinkmann's (2008) analysis of meaning and language, which involves rephrasing long statements into smaller units of meaning by ascertaining the natural meaning units within the participant narratives. Each transcript was manually reviewed for common words, categories, and themes. Following first-cycle and second-cycle coding (Saldaña, 2021), transcripts were reviewed multiple times, line-by-line, to establish coding and identify themes. As unique themes surfaced,

they were linked to formulate a complete description of participants' experiences (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008). Following job description analysis, the researchers continued meeting weekly for coding sessions and identification of themes in the focus groups. This process was a collaborative effort: Two team members conducted analysis, and if there were differences, the third researcher resolved them.

RESULTS

Findings from the two-stage data collection (Creswell et al., 2003) and subsequent analysis are presented in relation to the RA position descriptions and focus groups. Themes identified in the job descriptions aligned with central themes from the focus groups.

Position Description Findings

Findings from our analysis of the RA position descriptions confirmed that all 20 RELI competencies were mentioned in more than 25% of those received. Moreover, 18 of 20 competencies were present in more than 50% of the position descriptions that were submitted (see [Table 4](#)). Three major RA competencies were prevalent in the 426 coded job descriptions: community development (96.2%), assessing student needs (95.1%), and developing relationships with peers (93.7%). Two other competencies—accountability (38.5%) and goal setting (25.2%)—were presented in less than half of the RA job descriptions.

Thus, while RELI competencies are used to measure the performance of new housing professionals (NEACUHO, n.d.), they also present a performance expectation for the RA role. Findings from the process of document analysis validated subsequent narratives of focus group participants.

Focus Group Findings

This study also explored whether job descriptions aligned with the RA role as expressed through group testimonies. Focus group participants conveyed a collective voice in identifying the same three themes as those that appeared in the document analysis. They also confirmed all 20 RELI competencies as reflecting expectations for their role, whether or not this was explicitly stated in the job description. Participants in four focus groups voiced concerns about the scope of the job, despite training and learning support. Notwithstanding the all-encompassing tasks of the role, participants appreciated the value of meeting residents' needs and acknowledged how much they learned from being an RA. Finally, they discussed some misalignments between expected competencies and assigned tasks.

Complexity of the RA role. Focus group participants discussed the complexity of the RA role in response to facilitator questions. Those in five of the focus groups mentioned interpersonal skill development on 12 separate occasions and indicated that work distribution, support, and task completion

Table 4.

RELI Competency Frequency and Percentage Identified in RA Job Descriptions

RELI competency	Frequency	Percentage ^a
Community development	410	96.2%
Assessing student needs	405	95.1%
Developing relationships with peers	399	93.7%
Accessibility and/or availability	382	89.7%
Policy enforcement	378	88.7%
Problem-solving skills	378	88.7%
Programming	372	87.3%
Crisis management	360	84.1%
Role modeling	348	81.7%
Recognizing the needs of diverse students	321	75.4%
Managing multiple priorities	317	74.4%
Written communication	306	71.8%
Peer advising	304	71.4%
Respecting personal limits	302	70.9%
Observation	294	69.0%
Working with change	254	69.0%
Resource and/or referral person	246	57.8%
Customer service	254	56.6%
Accountability	164	38.5%
Goal setting	110	25.2%

^aPercentage was calculated by dividing *times referred* by the *total number* of RA job descriptions received ($N = 426$).

were all important components of working in a team. In addition, participants in five of the focus groups recognized that empathy was critical for providing a caring and supportive environment for residents.

Approachability was brought up 10 times within five of the focus groups. De-emphasizing supervisory attributes of the role, RAs understood that residents feel trusted as peers, rather than as subordinates. As one RA explained it,

People feel like maybe you're not equals all the time because [of policy enforcement], but the fact that they can talk to you if something's happening, and they don't feel like there's a huge distance between the two of you [speaks to trust and approachability].

Students in five focus groups mentioned RA communication responsibilities eight times during their sessions and described the importance of effectively communicating not only with their residents, but also with staff and other institutional stakeholders. As one RA stated, "You have to be able to talk to your team, talk to your residents, figure out what you need, what they need, and put everything together." Other competencies—such as

time management, active listening, adaptability, stress and crisis management, self-confidence, resilience, introspection, and open-mindedness—also received significant time and attention during the focus group discussions.

Enormity of the role. Feeling overwhelmed by the responsibilities of the RA role seemed to be a shared emotional and physical response from almost all focus group participants. Structural elements of the role were actualized through daily operational tasks such as duty rounds, emergency response, programmatic requirements, office support, attendance at required meetings and events, and administrative support—all of which seemed difficult and burdensome and in some cases hindered participants' academic success. One focus group participant provided the following insight: "Time spent with incidents as an RA kind of follows the classic 90/10 rule, where 90% of your time is spent doing 10% of the incidents . . . but those select few . . . you're there for hours. And typically, there's police involvement." Such situations were common and generally occurred while RAs were completing floor or community walks, helping students in need of emergency or critical assistance, or offering peer counseling sessions that took place at all hours of the day. While all focus group participants received ample training, both predictable and unpredictable events elevated their stress and anxiety.

Supporting student needs. The responsibilities of mentorship, assisting others, and providing institutional supports and guidance on personal matters fell under the umbrella topic of supporting residential student needs. One RA commented on the frequency of resident visits. "At least two to three times a week, I get a knock in the evening just about random things. Sometimes it's concerns, sometimes it's just, like, things they want to talk to me about for fun." The modality of interaction between an RA and residents varied; students might plan an intentional meeting with their RA, drop by the RA's room unexpectedly, or communicate via email or other social media applications.

Although these interactions can provide feelings of importance and belonging for the RA, the unpredictable time, location, and significance for such support also seemed to cause an increased workload. Nevertheless, the RAs collectively reminisced about this aspect of their role with fondness, even after recognizing the emotional and physical toll required to fulfill the task. Participants appreciated the importance of contributing to peer development, but they also found it difficult to cope with an increase in the number of residents' needs, especially those for emotional support and mental health and well-being. As one RA acknowledged, "There's a lot of stuff that happens that's not easy to cope with, mental health issues with your residents. Situations where you have to call the police on your own residents. Those aren't easy . . ." This comment provoked condolences from other participants, who reinforced the desire to have greater supports for their residents' mental, emotional, and physical states of being.

Competency and role misalignment. Not all RA tasks aligned with key responsibilities of the role. Although all the focus group participants spoke about RELI competencies, they were also assigned other duties. Some of them commented on the misalignment between the required competence and actions requested by professional staff, which seemed to prioritize administrative-centered needs over student-centered responsibilities. Several focus group participants mentioned that RA responsibilities were inaccurately presented or altogether excluded from the position description and during RA trainings. Specifically, they mentioned administrative and operational obligations, resident data tracking, and facility support. For example, one RA questioned the purpose of locating residents who could complete a survey for the institution. “I think we’re given survey questions that don’t do anything to help us build a relationship with our residents or to help us know how the residents are doing.” Another bothersome task included monitoring the condition of the facility, a charge that often involved RAs reporting concerns through a centralized software system, with frequent RA follow-up required until the repair work was completed. As one RA commented, “I find myself monitoring situations and hounding the respective departments to fix things, which I didn’t realize would be as much of a role that it has [been].”

Ambiguity about the role also created a misalignment of competency development, emphasis, and scope. RAs verbalized confusion about their role and how it lacked continuity in their levels of responsibility and the purpose of the role (i.e., student leader versus student employee versus peer mentor), something not adequately explained in written or verbal presentations of the role and its responsibilities.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Findings from this study may guide institutional administrators as they examine the success of RAs in meeting increasing demands on their performance responsibilities. This study’s methodological approach investigates RA competency and the effectiveness of their skill development and highlights the competencies and skills associated with successful actualization of the role. Pragmatic findings from this research provide talking points and support for continued investigation of the position’s sustainability.

In response to our questions about whether or not the RA job description accurately depicts the responsibilities of the role or if those responsibilities allow them to adequately meet the needs of their residents, this study concludes that the complexity and magnitude of the RA role make it difficult for RAs to meet all the job requirements. In light of our findings, we offer several implications and recommendations for how to relearn, rethink, and reimagine the RA role.

Learning Through the Role

The success of any superhero lies foremost within their cunning intellect, rather than their notable brawn. Similarly, RA roles should be rooted in Neumann's (2005) conceptualization of learning: "Learning, as changed cognition, involves the personal and shared construction of knowledge; it involves coming to know something familiar in different ways, or to know something altogether new, from within one's self and often with others" (p. 65). Neumann referred to a central assertion about learning: Content, the learner, and context matter. The learning process calls on individuals "to be exposed to, question, reflect, and re-conceptualize [learning experiences] in ways that build on current understandings and develop new understandings" (Heasley & Terosky, 2020, p. 22). It is within these moments of contemplation that learning thrives.

It can be argued that the RA role has drifted from a leadership position to an administrative job. When it comes to the completion of administrative and operational tasks, the role seems merely perfunctory for some staff—a flex of hero muscle. But what might the RA role look like if it was truly centered entirely on student learning? Can we imagine the role actualizing necessary learning for an ever-evolving workplace and world? As professionals in a student-centered field, we need to take responsibility for assessing the learning that is part of the RA experience (Benjamin & Davis, 2016). Learning, as an agent of change, can include intentional interactions between housing professionals and RAs and their residents. Communal association involves a mutuality of influence, shared emotional connection, and a fulfillment of needs (Heasley et al., 2020). When these elements coexist, reciprocity of learning thrives, a notion supported within the Residential Curriculum Model (Kerr & Quaye, 2020). Re-centering organizational focus to give space for increased interactions with supervisors and peers optimizes student learning and refocuses the role so that RA superheroes are able to develop their minds before their muscles.

Reinventing the Role

Reimagining the RA role by building something new from what exists seems most appropriate given the position's current complexity and prodigious scope. Maxine Greene (1995), an eminent educational scholar, espouses the need to release the imagination. Giving way to this perspective, we offer a recommendation that for many may seem extreme. Study participants voiced support for recognizing the enormity of responsibilities associated with the RA role. Their collective narratives confirm that we are asking RAs to be too omniscient, as they are often expected to manage disparate tasks, such as strengthening the sense of belonging and connection in the very peers they must police for conduct violations. To ensure workforce sustainability, we need to rethink what is most important for RAs to accomplish: meaningful student connections and communal association that enhance mutually beneficial student learning.

Some institutions have already begun this reflective practice and are in the midst of redeveloping the RA role. Some have decided to strip away tasks and focus on only three to five competencies. Other models consider having several paraprofessional roles, each with a different focus. Within this framework, students would be selected for a specific role based on having interest, knowledge, and skills complementary to the required competencies. One RA might be responsible for community development, whilst another fulfills programmatic requirements, and another is responsible for enhancing community well-being.

Improving the RA role can materialize into a shared strategy, which includes the goals of improving sense of belonging, eliminating role ambiguity, and focusing on meaningful tasks. As a value-add exercise, we found that evaluating position descriptions through the lens of RELI competencies is a meaningful assessment strategy, one that spurred new thinking about RA responsibilities. This approach may illuminate which responsibilities fall on part-time student roles versus full-time professional staff. All in all, transformation of the scope of RA responsibility seems necessary to ensure longevity of the position.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Though this study provides valuable information for practitioners and scholars with an interest in RA responsibilities relative to contemporary practice, several limitations warrant discussion. Trustworthiness and transparency were essential for this study (Leedy & Ormrod, 2019). Qualitative validation measures were considered, which included acknowledging the researchers' bias (Glesne, 2016) and providing sufficient time for each interview and document analysis. Despite ethically sound practices, study limitations still exist.

One limiting factor is participant diversity. Greater representation of focus group participants with different social identities and from varying U.S. regions would be beneficial, as additional voices provide greater representation. Our study may also be limited by use of the RELI competencies, which restricts data analysis to this framework over another. Additionally, developing a coding scheme for use with content and narrative analysis can be open to interpretation, may introduce bias, and can limit findings (Rose et al., 2015).

Based on these limitations, we encourage future studies to utilize a similar research design and data collection methodology in the hope of replicating the results with different populations and strengthening the trustworthiness of our findings. Although it was beyond this study's scope, we also have a great interest in geographical analysis and exploration of data by varied institution type and enrollment. For instance, it would be helpful to understand how large public schools measure the quality of RA work in comparison to smaller private institutions, and examining the RA role in Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions,

and Tribal Institutions may also uncover differences. Lastly, we see merit in examining the RA role through the perceptions of residents and professional staff.

CONCLUSION

Most superheroes have one superpower, not 20. Yet for too long, we have expected RAs to possess the wisdom of Black Panther, the strength of Wonder Woman, the agility of Spiderman, the genius of Iron Man, and the speed of The Flash. In this study we qualitatively examined the vastness of the RA role through document analysis of RA position descriptions and investigation of their skill development as a way to understand workforce sustainability. As evidenced through the shared testimonies of study participants, the reality is that professional staff expect students who don the RA title to be superheroes. Using RELI competencies for comparison, we see strong similarities between the position descriptions and what professional staff expect from RAs. Surprisingly, RAs are often asked to perform tasks beyond RELI competencies. Focus group insights not only revealed concerns over the job scope and role sustainability, but also underscored the importance of meeting the needs of residents. Additional research is necessary to determine whether all competencies are crucial for the role.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This study used the 20 RELI competencies to highlight the many different facets of the current RA role. Accountability and goal setting were the two least identified in RA job descriptions. Why do you believe that is the case?
2. The author suggests that “the RA position has drifted from a leadership position to an administrative job.” Is this true in your department? When talking about role misalignment, RAs in the focus groups mention that the role is more administrative-centered than student-centered. If this is true, how can we make it more student-centered in today’s climate? If not, why would a more administrative-centered RA role cause misalignment?
3. The study examines RA training and job descriptions. What are the shortfalls in these areas? How can we improve them?
4. The RA position has changed considerably throughout the years (for example, nowadays RAs also act as threat assessors). Looking at the evolution of the position, what is the biggest challenge RAs face today compared to what they faced in the past? How could we better assist them?
5. Rethinking the overall RA position causes housing departments to evaluate themselves in the mirror, whether that is their values, goals, or initiatives. When you rethink the RA position, how can your department change it to create less misalignment?
6. What is the superpower of today’s RAs? And exploring the flip side of that, for every great superhero, there must be a villain. What is the biggest villain RAs face today? How can we best aid these superheroes against their greatest foes?

Discussion questions were developed by John Ramirez, University of North Texas in Denton.