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## Introduction to the Special Issue on Staff Well-Being

Staff are the backbone of the campus housing and residential life (HRL) experience. These professionals are given immense responsibility for the care, safety, and personal development of thousands of young adults. Depending on their role within the organization, these individuals are often young adults themselves. In addition to the typical administritivia of maintaining a campus housing program, staff frequently find themselves acting as community builders, policy enforcers, crisis first-responders, and event planners (Belch & Mueller, 2003). Unfortunately in recent years, this list has grown exponentially to include managing public health oversight, meeting expectations for customer service, and acting as a brand manager (Boettcher, 2020; Mintz, 2021). Much of this work is conducted behind the scenes and often goes unrecognized and unrewarded by the campus at large. Despite this, staff continue to come to their roles with an intense passion for student support, but this too can have negative consequences—they may end up burned through (Marshall et al., 2016; Mullen et al., 2018) or traumatized (Lynch, 2022; Lynch & Glass 2018) due to unreasonable demands within their role and lack of meaningful preparation to sustain a career in this helping profession.

In order to meet the demands of a quickly evolving 21st-century higher education landscape, housing leaders must develop a new set of skills that balance the needs not only of students, but also those of staff, and this includes helping to support and maintain their well-being (Thomas, 2018). While there is no consensus on what constitutes the term well-being, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention acknowledge that “in simple terms, well-being can be described as judging life positively and feeling good” (CDC, 2018, p. 2). Additionally, scholars acknowledge the multiple and layered experience of well-being, which has physical, emotional, social, and economic dimensions (Kruger, 2010). This special issue seeks to shed light on the experience of staff well-being within campus housing and residence life departments, as well as offer insight into how departments and departmental leaders may shift policies, practices, and cultures to support career sustainability within the field.

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### Mapping the Special Issue

In this special issue of the *The Journal of College and University Student Housing*, authors explore issues impacting the well-being of professional and paraprofessional residential life staff across numerous contexts. Opening this issue, Craig Seager explores how the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic impacted the mental health of housing staff across multiple factors including social identity and organizational context. His findings shed light on how housing leaders, particularly those at small institutions, must go further in supporting the mental health and well-being of new and racially marginalized professionals. Building on this theme, Jody Kunk-Czaplicki and Maureen Wilson examine the phenomenon of burnout in a sample of housing professionals, as well as the work factors that contribute to burnout, including exposure to student trauma. Their work illustrates how as job demands increase, so does burnout, but increasing job resources can mediate the experience of burnout. Complementing these first two quantitative studies, Brittany McDaniel and Laura Dean approach their work using multiple-case analysis to explore the ways that housing departments are successfully balancing student support and staff well-being. They also call on housing leaders to reevaluate the role of live-in residential life staff and help campus partners better understand the work of these staff in order to combat the increasing scope creep of these roles.

The next two articles in this special issue seek to highlight novel perspectives on the impact of specific job responsibilities on the well-being of residential life staff. Valerie Glassman introduces the concepts of judicialization and critogenic harm, which can result from the kind of student conduct work associated with many residential life positions. Her findings illustrate an urgent need for new professionals to receive training that will enable them to better understand the legal implications of their work and education to mitigate critogenic harm. Peter Trentacoste and David Nguyen continue the discussion of how specific job responsibilities can have significant impacts on staff well-being by presenting the stories of current and former live-in residential life staff who supported a resident assistant experiencing suicidal ideation. Their work extends our understanding of how this type of support serves to reinforce or redirect career goals in entry-level staff as a function of job demands and resources before, during, and after supporting RAs experiencing suicidal ideation.

Finally, this special issue is rounded out by two articles that explore well-being through the lens of live-in student staff such as resident assistants. Stephen Sutton, Jacquelyn Thomas, Sunny Lee, and Glenn DeGuzman offer key insights regarding the mental health and well-being of resident assistants, as compared to residential students, through analysis of several surveys administered to on-campus students

throughout the first year of the pandemic. Maximilian Schuster looks at well-being beyond the context of the pandemic, as he explores the experiences of residents possessing minoritized identities and how they develop skills to navigate their well-being within the sociopolitical contexts in which they do their work. Both studies call for more extensive and curated resources to support the mental health of student staff, as well as reconsideration of the responsibilities associated with student staff work.

### Takeaways for the Profession

In reviewing the research presented within this issue, it is my hope that housing leaders take heed of how the current work culture and structures of college and university housing are not compatible with staff well-being and career sustainability. For too long, housing departments have burned through staff in pursuit of the ideal residential experience. Staff are humans deserving of dignity, care, and a humane work environment. To begin this cultural change, I encourage readers to critically reflect on common recommendations across this special issue in order to improve staff well-being. These evidence-based suggestions include the following:

- *Provide greater role clarity, particularly for live-in staff. Many of them feel as if they are often the dumping ground for “other duties as assigned,” leaving little room to accomplish their primary duties. Supervisors at all levels must actively advocate for their staff and shield them from unreasonable scope creep.*
- *Increase job resources, which may include adopting evidence-based professional development curricula dedicated to staff well-being, policies that allow for flexibility in work responsibilities, advocacy for increased salaries or bonuses, and health benefits to compensate for disproportionate emotional labor demands. These resources are especially needed for small college environments, where housing staff often fill multiple functional roles.*
- *Shift educational requirements for live-in roles. Traditional higher education preparation programs are lagging behind in actually preparing new professionals with the knowledge, skills, and competencies to be successful in their roles. Actively recruiting candidates from social work and public health backgrounds may add perspective to housing departments, given their disciplinary focus on community care, community resource management, and systems thinking.*
- *Develop policies and practices that honor, support, and compensate staff possessing marginalized identities for the disproportionate labor they perform in creating safe and inclusive learning environments for students also possessing marginalized identities. Additionally, care should be taken to support these staff in developing strong social connections within and outside of the institution in order to maintain a sense of identity, cultural support, and positive mental health.*

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### Final Thoughts

In curating this special issue, it is my desire that it serves as a starting place for future research and inspiration for a cultural change within the profession. To make such a shift, we must understand staff well-being as not only an organizational issue, but also an ethical one. From the lens of student support, housing and residential life practitioners must be able to navigate complex issues and think creatively to meet the evolving needs of college students. If they are unwell due to burnout, trauma, and stress, they will not have the emotional and cognitive capacity to deal with such needs. In addition, while student service and support is at the core of campus housing departmental missions, the profession also has a responsibility to meet an ethic of care (Sander-Staut, n.d.) for staff who are serving the organizational mission. It is up to all members of the profession to begin normalizing the well-being of both staff and students as a foundational tenet of housing and residential programs. ■

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