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Examining How Working-Class Resident Advisors Perceive Social Class and Classism Within Residential Life

SOCIAL CLASS ON CAMPUS is omnipresent, with higher education institutions largely geared towards middle- and upper-class students. The social class contrast can be particularly poignant in the residence halls, where choice of hall and room type, personal possessions, and cocurricular involvement can all indicate one's class background. Simultaneously, for working-class students, the resident advisor (RA) position is often viewed as a more desirable student employment option due to its combination of a high-profile leadership role and sizable compensation package. In this study, we examine how RAs from working-class backgrounds experience social class and classism within residential life. Using data from a larger narrative inquiry study on pathways into and through higher education for working-class students, we examine the experiences of seven working-class RAs working at two large public research institutions in the Northeast. Our findings show a series of tension points where the RA position provides important support for working-class students, but within limited parameters across financial, social justice, and community foci. We conclude with implications for practice to better support working-class RAs in their positions.

In the United States, pursuit of higher education is often viewed as a means for social mobility by providing individuals with access to degree credentials and competitive career pathways. However, enduring gaps remain in how students access, experience, and persist within postsecondary institutions based on social class (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Stuber, 2011; Walpole, 2007), which can be defined as "a relative social ranking based on income, wealth, education, status, and power" (Leondar-Wright & Yeskel, 2007, p. 314). Such rankings form the basis of classism, a system of oppression perpetuated through institutional, cultural, and individual practices that privilege affluent individuals and marginalize the poor and working class (Leondar-Wright & Yeskel, 2007). While social class has been defined in a myriad of ways across higher education scholarship—most notably through the designation of first-generation college students and/or low-income students—these categorizations

often negate the role of power, culture, and labor in shaping social class (Hurst, 2012; Stich & Freie, 2016). Here, we center working-class students, defined by parental education and occupation (Hurst, 2010), to examine the impact of social class as positioned within systems of classism. Research on working-class students has shown that they experience a direct contrast between their home and postsecondary communities (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Hurst, 2010); they also experience a lower sense of belonging and perceive a less welcoming environment than do their peers (Bettencourt, 2021; Soria & Bultmann, 2014).

Social class is rarely discussed within higher education even as it is omnipresent (Ardoin & martinez, 2019; Martin, 2015). In particular, residence halls can serve as environments where social class is highly visible through students' various social and work commitments and possessions such as electronics, wardrobe, and room furnishings (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; Jack, 2019; Nguyen & Herron, 2021). Indeed, the increasing push to add amenities and luxury dining to residence halls has emphasized that students are consumers within higher education (Saunders, 2014) and has re-iterated this stratification. These amenities appeal to middle- and upper-class students who can prioritize such luxuries, but poor and working-class students in higher education may not be able to afford them or may feel unwelcome in such spaces (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013; McClure et al., 2017). Research has shown that social class can impact students' academic and social transition in the residence halls (Inkelas et al., 2007; Schudde, 2016), where working-class students often face pressure to assimilate to campus norms (Bettencourt, 2021; Hurst, 2010).

Issues of social class and classism impact both students who live in the residence halls and those who work in the halls. Many higher education campuses offer a resident advisor (RA) position, a leadership role primarily for undergraduate students who offer programming, transitional support, and crisis and conflict response in exchange for compensation (Blimling & Baumann, 2019). The financial package for RAs often includes features such as a room in a residence hall, associated utilities, a meal plan, and a stipend. With the combination of leadership and financial gain, it is perhaps unsurprising that working-class students are well represented amongst resident advisors (Stuber, 2011). These students are employees in the same space they call home, navigating the racialized and classed on-campus environments (Foste, 2021) alongside the residents they support. Additionally, they are expected to serve as leaders regarding issues of social justice and inclusion due to the nature of their positions (Johnson & Kang, 2006). As a result, working-class RAs are well positioned to examine the complex and contradictory messages about social class that can impact the experiences and success of working-class students.

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When successful, residential living can be a transformative experience. Research has long shown the benefits of living on campus for all students (Mayhew et al., 2016); working-class students in particular gained greater resilience and a sense of belonging (Soria & Roberts, 2021). In this study, we argue that addressing social class inequities and classism is of critical importance within higher education as a whole and within residence life specifically. This study examines working-class RAs as individuals who may be overrepresented in the RA role due to financial need and who are navigating classism simultaneously as individuals and professionals. Specifically, we examine the research question, how do working-class resident advisors experience social class and classism within residential life?

METHODS AND DATA

This research was part of a larger narrative inquiry study into the experiences of working-class students. The larger study was used to understand how working-class students access, experience, and persist within higher education; during the data collection and analysis of the primary research questions, it emerged that several participants were RAs and spoke of their work in the residence halls as a salient part of their experiences. Across the study, we used narrative inquiry to understand the lived experiences of participants (Clandinin & Rosiek, 2007; Josselson, 2011).

Data collection took place at two flagship public research institutions in the northeastern United States, given the pseudonyms Mountain University (MU) and Coastal University (CU). The lead author recruited participants by emailing a variety of student organizations, instructors, and programs on both campuses as well as posting flyers on campus. Interested students completed a brief screening survey to ensure that they met study criteria, which included being over age 18 and at least a sophomore at the time of the interview. Working-class status was ascertained using a modified version of Hurst's (2010) criteria focusing on parental education (less than a four-year college degree) and parental employment (hourly wages, involving manual labor, no oversight or supervision of others' work, no significant training or education, not considered prestigious). Eligible students were invited to participate in two interviews focusing on their experiences choosing, transitioning to, and navigating through college (see Bettencourt, 2019).

Twenty-four students agreed to participate. During data collection, seven participants identified as being RAs at the time of the study and spoke at length about their involvement in residential life. Thus, a sub-focus of the study emerged related to how working-class students approached the RA role and navigated social class within residential life. The seven participants generated more than 16 hours of interview data and 235 pages of transcription *(see Table 1, page 74)*.

To analyze data for this manuscript, we used inductive coding through a series of analytic memos (Saldaña, 2016). Originally, the first author read through the full data for each participant to capture key parts of their social class narratives. Then both authors independently read each of the transcripts and wrote memos on how each participant experienced the RA role and residential life, with a cumulative memo identifying emerging themes across participants. We then met to discuss initial themes, positioning our findings within the broader social class narrative of each participant. Finally, we wrote the findings section with quotations that illuminate those themes, while also using our broader narrative sketches to illuminate the nuances and interrelationships within each experience, as consistent with narrative inquiry (Josselson, 2011).

TABLE 1

Participant Demographics

PSEUDONYM	RACE	PRONOUNS	YEAR IN SCHOOL	MAJOR
Leah	White	She/her/hers	Junior	Women's Studies
Guillame	White	He/him/his	Senior	Animal Science
Nia	South Asian	She/her/hers	Junior	Biology
Sam	Asian American	He/him/his	Senior	Nursing
Lauren	White	She/her/hers	Junior	Psychology
Jane	White	She/her/hers	Junior	Sociology
Bugsy	White	She/her/hers	Junior	Psychology

LIMITATIONS

We did not intentionally seek out RAs in our initial sample, so it is important to note that this study emerged as a secondary analysis of pre-existing data. Further research should specifically engage with RAs from working-class backgrounds and specifically ask them about their experiences with social class and classism. Moreover, the sample sites are not intended to be representative of all higher education campuses. MU had a strong history of student activism related to wage equality that likely made its students highly aware of social class and financial resources. Finally, this research took place at two public research universities, which are often thought of as the bridge between selective and broad access higher education (Armstrong & Hamilton, 2013). Examining other institutional types, such as elite private colleges and regional comprehensive universities, would likely result in variations on these findings and illuminate additional nuance.

. . . social class can impact students' academic and social transition in the residence halls, where working-class students often face pressure to assimilate to campus norms.

FINDINGS

Our analysis revealed that participants' perceived tension between their working-class identities and residential life and the RA role in three key areas. First, RA compensation was higher than that for many comparable positions, but still limited in what financial stability it offered participants. Second, RA positions often were more explicitly connected to issues of equity and social justice, but rarely targeted social class directly. Third, while residential life often acted as a space to share values such as work ethic, class distinctions were still highly salient. In the section below, we unpack each of these themes with evidence from participant interviews.

Financial Assistance from the RA Job Was Crucial, but Limited

The RA role served as a key source of financial support for the participants in this study. Several participants noted that, without the position (which at both institutions covered the cost of lodging on campus), they might not have been able to afford to attend their institution. Lauren remarked on the importance of this income: "I'm an RA, which definitely . . . allowed me to stay at [MU]. . . I don't know what I would've done if I didn't get the job because it's housing and then also a bi-weekly stipend." Leah noted how "the jobs that I have, they pay for my housing, they pay for my food. . . . if I don't have a job, I literally will not be able to go to school here." Though demanding, being an RA also had positive trade-offs compared to the other jobs available to students. Jane had previously worked odd hour jobs opening a Starbucks in town and serving as an Uber driver at night. As she commented, "Parts of the RA job are hard and annoying, but it's a definitely a lot better than going to work at 5:00 in the morning and also having to serve college students."

Yet sometimes the importance of the job's financial assistance meant that participants felt obligated to pursue the role regardless of their interests or passions. Sam exemplified this sentiment. His mother worked tirelessly to support him and his older sister through primary and secondary school, but money was always tight in the family. Prior to accepting college admission, Sam had examined how he might earn money to support his attendance.

> *I knew that finances would be a big thing, and when I committed to [MU], I had already done my research as to what sort of paid positions I could get to really make it easier for myself. This was the summer before freshman year. I had a note on my phone. It had orientation leader, resident assistant . . . how much money they made, what does it entail, and all those contracts.*

The need for work became particularly dire after Sam's family experienced an abrupt change in their financial circumstances. Overnight, Sam spent his savings to stay in

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college, removing the small safety net he had been able to establish. Subsequently, the positions became "jobs that I had to do or else I could not be a student here," taking time and energy away from his ability to "find my passions."

Moreover, even though the RA job offered a substantial financial benefit, it did not always offer enough to help working-class students cover their expenses. Several participants worked multiple jobs in addition to the RA position. Lauren commented that residence life was not always supportive of her need to work multiple jobs, which created complications:

> *Res life's policy is that the RA job comes right after academics and will supersede any other job. I had an issue with scheduling a staff meeting because it conflicted with my work/study job and there was not a lot of flexibility, which was a little hard because I can't really rely on just the RA income.*

Some of the financial limitations were furthered by the mixed feelings regarding payment within residence life. MU had a vibrant history of student activism related to labor on campus. As a result, students like Guillame were quick to note that while the RA position paid higher than other positions, it was limited given the overall scope of work. As he noted, "If you break down the stipend, you're not making minimum wage." Without a clear lens on social class and classism, the financial gain provided by the RA position may be viewed as sufficient without a clear understanding of the full range of barriers working-class students may face.

Residential Life Is Focused on Social Justice, but Rarely on Social Class

Compared with other communities and programs on campus, participants perceived residence life to be a hub for examining social justice, which came up in multiple facets of the position, such as the semester-long required course for prospective resident advisor candidates at MU to become eligible to apply for the position. However, social class was largely absent from these conversations about social justice. Guillame described residence life as "the worst at talking about class."

> *I've always loved being an RA [but] year after year, there's less conversation about class. Now I live in [building] and my first year as a student I felt that there was more conversation about class. Last year, not as much. This year, still not so much . . . even with my RA staff, I don't think they talk about class very often. They do bring up a lot of social identities, they bring up a lot of important points, but it is very rare that we talk about class.*

As training for RAs often varied year by year and across specific staffs, it is also important to note that these degrees of engagement with social class varied. Echoing Guillame, Leah noted the change in discussions of social class over the two years she served as an RA. She had taken a gap year mid-college to engage in an AmeriCorps VISTA position in a nearby city; when she returned to campus and the RA role, she noted, "I was an RA two years ago before my gap year, and [social class] wasn't really talked about too much, but this year they have increased their social justice training a lot." While social justice trainings didn't inherently include discussions of social class and classism, the enhanced commitment to social justice in the department provided an opening for working-class RAs to proactively address the topic. Both Leah and Bugsy spoke about implementing specific initiatives with residents related to campus resources and financial literacy. Similarly, Nia and Guillame worked with fellow RAs to improve working conditions and increase wages. Thus, while social class was at times absent from social justice conversations, participants found ways to integrate class into their work.

More complicated, even when social class was actively discussed, there could still be a disconnect in how fellow RAs and residential life staff acted in response to class and classism. As Leah shared, "At times, I think it's theorized a lot, but in practice, it's not really. I think that's where I get a little frustrated, with the disconnect." Leah went on to share examples of other RAs who frequently planned activities with residents or even staff activities that relied on money to participate, effectively excluding working-class students who could not afford the cost.

RA Positions Facilitate a Shared Focus on Work That Differs by Class

Prior research has found that working-class students often create spaces based on shared values that they associate with their social class (e.g., work ethic, responsibility, dedication) rather than exclusively looking for spaces with other working-class students (Bettencourt, 2021). As social class can be both invisible and hypervisible in higher education (Ardoin & martinez, 2019; Barratt, 2011; Martin, 2015), these shared values serve as a proxy at times for difficult, dynamic conversations about class. For participants in this study, the RA role often served as a hub for students at MU and CU to connect around work and their work ethic. As Bugsy noted, "We support each other, and we know we all have this job and we're all trying to get through."

. . . while these positions focused on social justice and aligned with participants' working-class values, they often contributed to the erasure of working-class identities and the centering of middle- and upper-class students. Thus, the burden often fell to RAs to speak up about class equity even as they were experiencing classism.

Here, the value of work provided important common ground amongst RA peer groups. For example, participants perceived that many of their peer RAs did not necessarily share the same burden of financial obligations as working-class students did. Yet even without the same firsthand knowledge of the working-class experience, participants noted that fellow RAs could relate to the importance of work. For example, Jane often took early morning shifts at other jobs to help supplement her RA income. She relied on her peer RAs who did not need to work other jobs to help her navigate her schedule.

> *Last semester when I was working at [dining hall], I would have to work early in the morning and then I would be like "I can't be on duty tonight because I have to wake up super early, could someone take my shift?" And they'd be like, "oh sure, I feel so bad, you're such a hard worker". . . I don't think any of them have other jobs, but at the time I had [the RA job] and then two other things that I was doing for money. They could see that, they respected that.*

While the shared focus on and understanding of work provided important common ground for participants and their RA peers, the experiences were still nuanced by social class background. Working-class participants in this study identified as outliers in important ways, particularly regarding the degree to which work was central to their lives. In one case, Bugsy's work ethic and commitment were key parts of her sense of self that she didn't necessarily see in her peers who were not working-class.

> *I feel like I have more of a drive than others. I don't know if it is just laziness, but sometimes it feels like [other RAs are] just doing it for the money. Which is a component of why I'm doing it, but it's also an outlet for me, like I was talking about. I can utilize my skills. I don't think everyone necessarily has the same drive for that.*

Sometimes the sense of social class distinctions was aided by the fact that class was very visible through the lens of campus housing, both in and outside of the RA job. Residence halls were full of subtle demarcations of social class ranging from clothing and cars to technology and even the furnishing of one's room. Guillame shared this tension, noting, "I literally live with 350 people. A lot of them are rich. I can't get away from that."

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

Our findings here emphasize the contradictory ways that RAs from working-class backgrounds experience social class and classism within their leadership roles in residential life. The RA position provided participants with access to a prestigious, relatively high-paying position on campus. However, due to income constraints tied to their working-class backgrounds, participants often felt they had no other choice but to serve as an RA regardless of their ultimate goals or interests. Moreover, while these positions focused on social justice and aligned with participants' working-class

values (Bettencourt, 2020a; Hurst, 2010; Martin, 2015), they often contributed to the erasure of working-class identities and the centering of middle- and upper-class students (Barratt, 2011). Thus, the burden often fell to RAs to speak up about class equity even as they were experiencing classism.

For higher education institutions, working-class RAs provide an asset as they help push institutions to (re)consider their social class allyships and engagement with classism (Bettencourt, 2020b). Moreover, having student staff with marginalized identities in leadership roles can be valuable for residential students as role models to promote leadership and sense of belonging (Williams et al., 2021). However, there are tremendous limitations to placing the onus of such advocacy on working-class RAs. Such risks include furthering the burnout associated with the RA role (Stoner, 2017) and perpetuating the racism, heterosexism, and classism already present in residential life (Harper et al., 2011; Harwood et al., 2012; Strayhorn & Mullins, 2012).

Working-class students benefit when colleges and universities proactively engage with the issues of social class and classism. One important step for practitioners in residential life might be to conduct an audit of areas such as RA training, programming, and the residential curriculum to examine the explicit and implicit messages about class contained therein. Alternatively, bolstering ways to discuss social justice, including conversations about social class and classism, might show working-class students that their social class identities are valued while also reducing the onus on them to bring up issues reactively (for possible approaches, see Martin & Ardoin, 2021). Creating spaces to discuss social class in residential life, such as RA training, could proactively allow working-class RAs to find community, discuss concerns, and perceive commitment from institutional leaders to addressing classism. Moreover, such endeavors could also lead to broader dialogue and inclusion in the residence halls for all working-class residents.

While these changes represent affirmative support that acts in favor of current working-class students, additional work is needed to re-examine the foundations of classism and transform current systems of inequality in higher education institutions (Bettencourt, 2020b). Residence life has the ability to disrupt systemic oppression and internalized messages of classism, racism, and sexism (Means & Pyne, 2017) and support students' sense of belonging on campus (Soria & Roberts, 2021). In this study, we looked at the experiences of seven resident advisors and how they navigated social class and classism in residential life. Due to their unique blend of involvement

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> *Due to their unique blend of involvement and employment, RA positions might be particularly valuable gateway roles for working-class students on campus to access financial resources and leadership positions.*

and employment, RA positions might be particularly valuable gateway roles for working-class students on campus to access financial resources and leadership positions. Simultaneously, working-class RAs can be tremendous assets to residential life units as they provide diverse perspectives, serve as role models to working-class residents, and further social justice goals. However, our analysis shows that these positions at times fall short of their full potential in supporting working-class students and in addressing the classism embedded in residential life. We offer these points of tension for residence life professionals to consider how they can support working-class students more holistically and attempt to counter some of the embedded social class disparities within higher education. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. One participant referred to the existing department policy that expects the RA position to be prioritized above all else, second only to academics. In general, how does this expectation align with students' level of engagement compared to the profession's dedication to providing a full college experience? What are implications for developing a sense of belonging? What would an adjusted expectation look like that supports both the needs of working-class RAs and the purpose of the RA role?
2. Consider adjusting RA job requirements to better support working-class students' need for income. What meaningful benefits can be added to the existing stipend and room and board? How can RA jobs and work/study positions be deliberately paired to supplement each other? For example, can we help RAs secure a work/study job within a student life functional area that would simultaneously support the "be visible" goal of the RA role?
3. Examine your staffing practices: Do you require or expect staff to pay their own way or incur some sort of expense? Is there an expectation to pay up front and then request reimbursement afterward? What changes can help alleviate that situation while still staying within the department budget?
4. As professionals, leaders, and allies, are we allowing students to carry the burden of speaking up "about class equity even as they were experiencing classism"? As we continue to examine our own privileges, how can we include this topic in our own professional development, then in our RA training, and subsequently in the residential curriculum? What resources can you find to help support learning more?

Discussion questions developed by Amy Paciej-Woodruff, Marywood University