



The University of New Mexico, Albuquerque

Authors



SARAH WILLIAMS
Graduate Assistant,
Educational Leadership,
Central Michigan University
willi3sb@cmich.edu



MATTHEW R. JOHNSON
Associate Professor,
Educational Leadership,
Central Michigan University
johns9m@cmich.edu



ETHAN A. KOLEK
Visiting Assistant Professor,
Educational Policy Studies,
Florida International
University
ekolek@fiu.edu



ANNE M. HORNAK
Professor, Educational
Leadership,
Central Michigan University
horna1am@cmich.edu



FRIM AMPAW
Professor, Educational
Leadership,
Central Michigan University
ampaw1fd@cmich.edu



KATHLEEN GARDNER
Director of Residence Life,
Central Michigan University
gardn2k@cmich.edu

Using Inclusion Assistants Within a Residential Curriculum to Improve the Experiences and Success of Students with Underrepresented Identities

EXAMINING THE ROLE OF INCLUSION ASSISTANTS as part of a redesigned residential life curriculum at a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in the Midwest served as the impetus for this qualitative case study. The inclusion assistants program was designed to increase the support provided to students with underrepresented identities (e.g., students of color, gay or queer students) in the residence halls. Inclusion assistants worked alongside traditional resident assistants and positively supported students with underrepresented identities, as well as students in the majority. This study also identifies challenges that the inclusion assistants faced and accompanying recommendations to improve the inclusion assistant program and other similar programs.

Students from underrepresented groups continue to face barriers to achieving success in college. Though administrators and researchers have paid specific attention to diversifying the student body, efforts to support students with underrepresented identities continue to lag (Milem et al., 2005; Quayle et al., 2020). Fueling the lack of intentionality is the idea that diversifying the student body is sufficient. Chang et al. (2005) argued that educators often assume that students will naturally learn from one another when placed in diverse environments; this kind of “magical thinking” (p. 10) is prominent in the assessment of residence halls, when educators assume that considerable time spent living in community enhances learning. However, without campus envi-

ronments that “engage underrepresented students both academically and socially” and “provide more opportunities for all students to interact freely, wisely, and responsibly with one another in formal and informal settings” (Chang et al., 2005, p. 15), student engagement and learning will be limited. Similarly, there is some evidence that first-year residential students experience negative effects with several diversity-related outcomes, including intercultural effectiveness, relativistic appreciation, experiences with diverse others, and comfort with differences (Padgett et al., 2012). As Blimling (2015) has pointed out, residence hall staff need to work more intentionally with students—particularly those with underrepresented identities—in order to foster belonging and community.

Students of color, transgender students, students with disabilities, and other underrepresented students face greater challenges to thriving and completing college than do students with majority identities.

To better support these students (and specifically students of color) in the residence halls, the institution that is the site of this study created a multicultural advisor program 30 years ago. Residence life staff reimagined the program in 2017-18 as a result of data from focus groups and student staff surveys indicating the need to better support students of color (the primary focus of the multicultural advisor program) in addition to other students with underrepresented identities such as LGBTQ students and students with disabilities. This redesign follows a national trend of creating or retooling positions within residence halls in order to better respond to increasing diversity among college students; while older models relied on resident assistants (RAs) to be responsible for issues of inclusion and discrimination, researchers like Blimling and Baumann (2019) have noted that RAs are increasingly taxed to respond to the myriad issues that residential living presents—including those related to inclusion and social justice—and require additional support in order to be effective.

The multicultural advisor program evolved into the inclusion assistant program and is now part of a larger residential curriculum at the institution, which “reflects the intentionality, structure, and sequencing that is applied in the design of academic majors and individual courses to college experiences beyond the classroom” (Kerr et al., 2017, p. 22). In the redesign, inclusion assistants work alongside traditional resident assistants (i.e., peer leaders with paraprofessional roles in residence life) and other paraprofessional staff to specifically focus on the support and

engagement of students with underrepresented identities in the residence halls. (More information about the redesign can be found in Figure 1.) This study sought to understand how the redesigned inclusion assistant program fostered student success among students with underrepresented identities at a public rural PWI in the Midwest and to identify any shortcomings of the program.

PERSISTENCE IN HIGHER EDUCATION OF STUDENTS WITH UNDERREPRESENTED IDENTITIES

Students of color (Museus et al., 2020; Reynolds et al., 2010), transgender students (Nicolazzo, 2017), students with disabilities (Abes & Wallace, 2018), and other underrepresented students face greater challenges to thriving and completing college than do students with majority identities. Several environmental factors can negatively influence the experiences of underrepresented students: being the only or one of few students to hold a particular underrepresented identity in campus micro and macroenvironments, stereotypes and stereotype threat, lack of representation in faculty and staff, bias incidents, and curricular content that privileges majority (e.g., European, heteronormative) identities (Nicolazzo, 2017; Quaye et al., 2020; Reynolds et al., 2010). These factors contribute to lower rates of engagement in the campus environment, lower persistence and graduation rates, and more negative views of campus climate (Johnson et al., 2014; Schreiner & Nelson, 2013).

Researchers have identified other factors that contribute to college success out-

comes such as persistence and graduation. Those that contribute to persistence include joining a community (Kniess et al., 2015), attending summer residential programs geared to students with underrepresented identities (Mayhew et al., 2016), fostering strong commitments to a campus program or organization among residents (Kniess et al., 2015), and residing in a living-learning community (Mayhew et al., 2016). Efforts designed to improve campus climate overall, such as diversity courses and cocurricular programming, have also been linked with college success outcomes for underrepresented students (Mayhew et al., 2016).

EXPERIENCES OF STUDENTS WITH UNDERREPRESENTED IDENTITIES IN RESIDENCE HALLS

Mayhew et al. (2016) suggested that living in a residence hall increases retention and persistence even when controlling for other variables such as high school GPA or SAT/ACT scores, in large part because of increased social integration. However, other researchers argue that students of color (Boettcher et al., 2019; Harwood et al., 2012; Johnson, 2003), transgender students (Krum et al., 2013), LGBTQ students (Tetreault et al., 2013), and neurodivergent students (Belch, 2011) face unique and challenging experiences when living in residence halls and may not derive the same benefits as their peers. Johnson (2003) found that students of color, when sharing their perception of the racial climate in residence halls, reported a significantly more negative experience than did their White counterparts. Harwood et al. (2012)

described how students of color experienced racial microaggressions, observed racial slurs written in common areas, perceived de facto segregation, and experienced feelings of not belonging due to racial jokes by their fellow residents.

In another study, Black students reported a sense of not belonging due to the lack of representation of their race in the residence halls and campus-wide (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017). Additionally, Altmaier (2019) found that students with underrepresented identities did not feel safe in the residence halls and often felt that the institution did not support them. Residents managed these experiences by finding safe spaces such as organizations comprising students of color (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017), self-selecting living arrangements with few or no White students (Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017; Koehler & Skvoretz, 2010), and attending institutions with gender-inclusive housing (Krum et al., 2013).

RESIDENCE HALL STAFF SUPPORT FOR STUDENTS WITH UNDERREPRESENTED IDENTITIES

Resident assistants play critical roles in fostering student success and are often the first line of support for students (Altmaier, 2019; Blimling, 2015; Boettcher et al., 2019). Resident assistants have long been considered leaders in promoting diversity on college and university campuses and supporting students with underrepresented identities (Pope et al., 2009), bringing the social identities of resident assistants into focus. Research confirms the importance of diverse

Resident assistants have long been considered leaders in promoting diversity on college campuses and supporting students with underrepresented identities, bringing the social identities of resident assistants into focus.

Inclusion assistants provided support and empathy when students with underrepresented identities experienced discrimination, oppression, or a crisis based on their identity. . . . They also formed and hosted dialogue groups where residents could be part of intentional dialogue about discrimination, oppression, and inclusion.

practices in hiring RAs in order to better support residents with underrepresented identities (Boettcher et al., 2019; Healea & Hale, 2016; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017).

However, simply hiring a diverse resident assistant staff is insufficient (Harper et al., 2011). Students with underrepresented identities still report a lack of support by the residence hall staff on issues of diversity (Altmaier, 2019; Hotchkins & Dancy, 2017). When students of color serve as resident assistants, they are faced with more challenging and negative experiences than are their White counterparts. In a study of the experiences of Black male resident assistants at a PWI, Harper et al. (2011) found that they experienced racial stereotyping, isolation within the residence hall staff, and harsher treatment and were held to higher standards than the White resident assistants. However, Healea and Hale (2016) found that resident assistants from underrepresented backgrounds recognized that even small amounts of diversity training made a big difference in improving the climate for underrepresented students. The professional staff and their awareness and activism on behalf of students with underrepresented identities also provided positive support for resident assistants of diverse backgrounds (Healea & Hale, 2016). Harper et al. (2011) advocate for residence hall staff engaging in self-reflection on their treatment and thought processes regarding Black resident assistants versus their White counterparts. The residence hall staff must not only receive training on issues of diversi-

ty, but must also make sure they consciously treat paraprofessional staff with underrepresented identities equitably. Intentional efforts to better support underrepresented students are critical, but prioritizing inclusion work among other responsibilities remains challenging (Boettcher et al., 2019).

INCLUSION ASSISTANT PROGRAM

Wanting to better support students with underrepresented identities in the residence halls and recognizing shortcomings of the existing multicultural advisor program, members of the residence life staff at the site of this study transformed their multicultural advisor program into an inclusion assistant program. This program supplements the traditional resident assistant program and is part of a residential curriculum grounded in Baxter Magolda and King's (2004) learning partnerships model and in principles of intergroup dialogue (Nagda, 2006). The engagement strategies of the program include intentional interactions between residents and paraprofessional staff, community meetings, residence hall programs designed and facilitated by professional staff, and self-guided learning opportunities (see Figure 1). The program is consistent with studies showing the importance of positive diversity interactions and supportive environments (Mayhew et al., 2016).

Inclusion assistants are undergraduate and graduate paraprofessional staff who work alongside resident assistants and professional staff to collaboratively support the

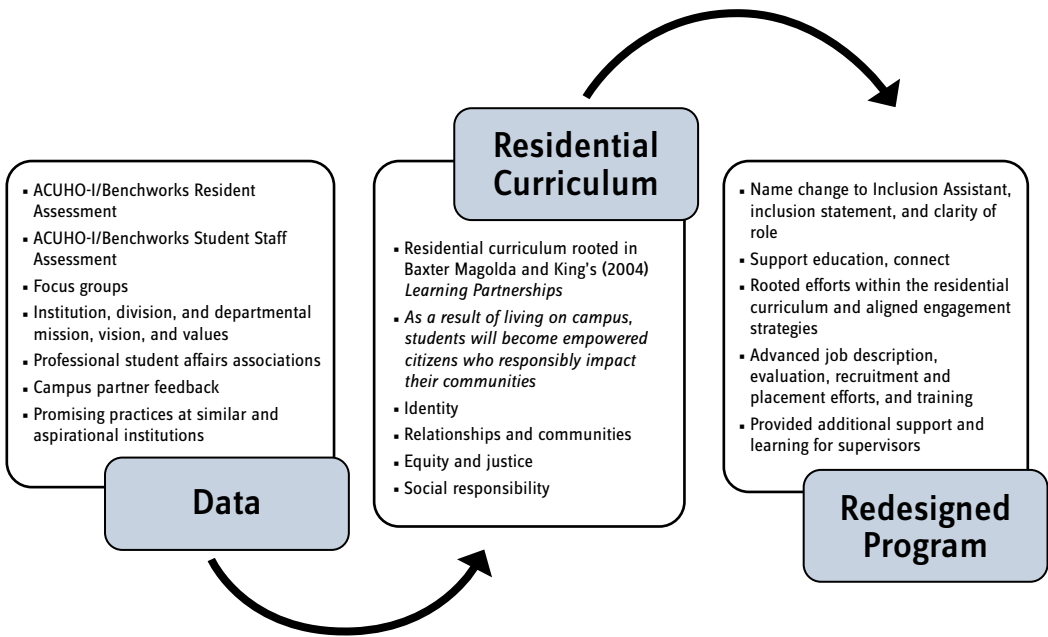
residence life office’s educational priority, learning goals, and outcomes. Residence hall/residence directors directly supervise the inclusion assistants and are supported by an assistant director who coordinates the inclusion assistant program. When the original multicultural advisor position was created 30 years ago, its purpose was to support African American students living in the residence halls. The position title and role have broadened over the years, and after the most recent redesign, inclusion assistants are now charged with enhancing the support of students with underrepresented identities in the residential environment, educating them

about equity and justice, and connecting them with campus resources. With their colleagues and supervisor, inclusion assistants create a list of students they intentionally reach out to each semester based on different factors that are self-reported or are observed and learned about in the residence halls.

Members of the residence life office recruit inclusion assistant candidates during the fall semester via social media, information sessions, posters, and academic and student affairs partners, and inclusion assistants add to the effort by encouraging other students to apply. To be eligible for the role, students must have sophomore status, a cumulative

FIGURE 1

Inclusion Assistant Program Redesign



grade point average of 2.5 or higher, and be in good disciplinary standing with the university. Inclusion assistants work approximately 15–20 hours per week building relationships with residents, creating opportunities for them to learn about equity and justice, and including planning events with professional staff that engage students in dialogue around these issues. Inclusion assistants receive remuneration for the position in the form of an in-kind wage for their room and board. The residence life office employs 22 inclusion assistants, each one representing a residence hall in addition to one apartment complex for undergraduate students.

METHODOLOGY

We employed a qualitative case study methodology (Stake, 1995) in order to investigate the effectiveness of the inclusion assistant program. The case study design allowed for an in-depth analysis to address our research question: How does the inclusion assistant program influence success among students with underrepresented identities at a public rural PWI in the Midwest? Data collection included three focus groups with inclusion assistants (21 participants total), three focus groups with residence hall/residence directors who supervise the inclusion assistants (16 participants total), four focus groups of students identified by inclusion assistants as residents with whom they had significant interactions (9 participants total), and 11 individual interviews with residents in the halls who identify as having underrepresented identities.

We also conducted a document analysis to bolster our research. These documents included residential curriculum materials, assessment and evaluation materials from prior and current semesters, training man-

uals and documents, recruitment materials for both residence hall/residence directors and inclusion assistants, and prior residence life focus group studies conducted within the previous two years. Members of the residence life staff created this focus group report before establishing the inclusion assistant program and offered important historical context for the re-creation of the inclusion assistant program. Table 1 contains information about our data collection sources.

Members of the research team conducted the focus groups and interviews and had the transcripts transcribed by a professional company. We then read each transcription and used open and focused coding (Corbin & Strauss, 2008), which involves making connections to the initial open coding and relating concepts to one another. After conducting these analyses, the research team analyzed the documents listed above and looked at how those further informed, contextualized, or refuted focus group and interview data. We sought to bolster the trustworthiness of the study through data triangulation, member checking, and peer review of the final analysis (Corbin & Strauss, 2008).

LIMITATIONS

The findings of this study should be considered alongside at least two limitations. First, this study is a single institution case study at a public PWI in the Midwest. Different campuses, regions, student characteristics, and residence life models would no doubt influence findings from future studies. Further, the inquiry for this study took place during a multi-year organizational change within the department of residence life, as they were transitioning from a traditional residence life model to a residential curriculum model (Kerr et al., 2017). Shifting to a model that

TABLE 1

Data Collection

SOURCE	DESCRIPTION
Focus groups	Inclusion assistants (8 participants)
	Inclusion assistants (7 participants)
	Inclusion assistants (6 participants)
	Inclusion assistant supervisors (7 participants)
	Inclusion assistant supervisors (5 participants)
	Inclusion assistant supervisors (4 participants)
	Students who had significant interactions with inclusion assistants (3 participants)
	Students who had significant interactions with inclusion assistants (3 participants)
	Students who had significant interactions with inclusion assistants (2 participants)
	Students who had significant interactions with inclusion assistants (1 participant)
Individual interviews	11 students with underrepresented identities
Document analysis	Residential curriculum materials
	Assessment and evaluation materials
	Training manuals and documents
	Recruitment materials
	Previous focus group report

featured inclusion assistants was entangled with other organizational changes, which likely influenced the experiences of inclusion assistants and thus our findings.

FINDINGS

We identified four themes from the data that addressed our research question: How does the inclusion assistant program influence

success among students with underrepresented identities at a public rural PWI in the Midwest? The first two themes relate to the impact that the inclusion assistants had and how they met the needs of the residents. The final two themes address challenges that the inclusion assistants faced when striving to support residents with underrepresented identities.

Theme 1: Inclusion Assistants Positively Impact All Students

Our data suggest that inclusion assistants have a generally positive impact on students, especially those with underrepresented identities such as students of color. Support came in many forms: maintaining an active presence around the residence halls and larger campus, providing visibility for underrepresented students in their formal leadership roles, and having dedicated and recognized responsibilities for supporting students with underrepresented identities. As one resident commented about their inclusion assistant,

He is always in the lobby. He lives on the third floor, but he spent a lot of his time on [the] first floor where I live, just getting to know and checking in on everybody, making sure we feel comfortable with where we're living, and making sure we're enjoying our first year.

Many of the interviewees commented on how the inclusion assistants (IAs) were key in supporting students in their transition to the university, especially those who were experiencing a campus environment that was much different than their home environments. One resident stated, "The IA has helped me just adjust overall to being here." Another stated,

I think that IAs are very beneficial to the minorities here, whether they be racial or . . . I don't want to say able-bodied, but able-bodied people as well. But yeah, it's really nice to have somebody that knows where you're coming from.

Inclusion assistants also supported students remaining at the university when they were considering leaving. One hall director commented, "I've met so many students where it's like they [inclusion assistants] are

the difference sometimes of whether or not someone stays, or they go." This persistent theme of supporting students with underrepresented identities is also evidenced within several documents we reviewed, including their job descriptions and training materials. Participants in the study, from residents to residence life staff, felt that the inclusion assistant program met the value of supporting students with underrepresented identities.

Although they focused on supporting those with underrepresented identities, inclusion assistants also supported students in the majority. One residence hall/residence director noting the context of being at a PWI commented that inclusion assistants act as important role models for what inclusion looks like. "That role model piece is huge for our inclusion assistants. They just are able to provide an example of somebody different to our majority students, and it can change stereotypes and change perspectives." The residents we interviewed who held mostly majority identities all spoke positively of the inclusion assistants and appreciated having someone concerned with their adjustment to college and to living in the residence halls.

Theme 2: Inclusion Assistants Foster a Sense of Belonging

Our data suggested that the support provided by inclusion assistants converged on fostering an overall sense of belonging in the residence hall and in turn at the institution. Inclusion assistants promoted a sense of belonging among students with underrepresented identities by relating with their experiences and being visible role models for these students in formal leadership positions. One resident of color summarized this sentiment: "It was really important to see people of color that are in leadership positions." Many residents and inclusion assis-

... inclusion assistants felt overburdened and overextended. Too often, issues of diversity and inclusion fell solely on their shoulders, with little or no help from other members of the residence hall.

tants commented that seeing students of color in formal leadership roles on campus was rare, but the inclusion assistant program had several leaders of color. This visibility sent a strong message to residents that not only do students of color and other students with underrepresented identities matter, but they can grow into formal leadership roles.

Inclusion assistants also fostered a sense of belonging by cultivating intentional relationships with residents. One student commented on how the inclusion assistant helped her feel a sense of belonging:

I felt like I was the only Black person on my floor, which ended up being true but it's not that bad, but it's still like I didn't really have anybody to talk to until I met the inclusion assistant. Yeah. . . Being here I noticed that some people may find it a bit uncomfortable . . . I know that at our floor meetings I'm . . . one of the only two Black people on the floor. And when we have meetings a lot of people don't want to like, sit by me. I don't know if that's just because they don't want me to feel awkward, or anything like that, but it's like I feel even more isolated when they don't do that. And then my inclusion assistant, he comes to sit by me, and my RAs come and sit by me, so those are like the people that I like to talk to.

Inclusion assistants provided support and empathy when students with underrepresented identities experienced discrimination, oppression, or a crisis based on their identity. The inclusion assistants received additional training about diversity and inclu-

sion and felt confident in their ability to have conversations across differences and to value and respect people who are different from them. This is evident from their responses in a recent assessment report completed by inclusion assistants. One of them commented, "The fact that they're comfortable coming to me with questions that would be very difficult to ask just anybody makes me know that I'm doing something right as far as being open and transparent with them." They also formed and hosted dialogue groups where residents could be part of intentional dialogue about discrimination, oppression, and inclusion. Many residents talked about the importance of this effort, as it provided a space for them to be heard and find support for issues they were experiencing.

Inclusion assistants also fostered a sense of belonging by encouraging students to join hall council and other student organizations. This encouragement had a positive impact on residents' experiences and provided them with communities and additional support within the larger university community. A document we reviewed that led to the creation of the inclusion assistant program indicated that a stated goal of the program was "connecting students with campus resources related to diversity, equity and inclusion." The positive result of these connections was repeated consistently in the interviews. As one resident explained,

IAs, I think working with a whole building, they're more of bringing people, like I noticed . . . you might feel like you don't belong here, but here's other people that are feeling the same way kind of. Bringing

them together and being like “hey, here’s a group for you that you could be with and be comfortable with.” And then they’re in your building, and then here are other resources you have that could help you with that.

A final way the inclusion assistants fostered a sense of belonging was through bulletin boards. Though these were sometimes derided as simplistic or trite, many residents commented on how the self-guided learning opportunities were meaningful to them. One resident commented that the inclusion assistant “had these really cool boards up in the lobby . . . It showed where everyone was from and the demographics, and that helped me to feel not as alone on campus.” Given the focus on inclusion in their responsibilities, inclusion assistants had a keen eye towards finding ways to communicate to residents that they belong in the residence halls and the broader university. Students often cited bulletin boards as important mechanisms to foster a sense of belonging.

Theme 3: Inclusion Assistants Feel Overburdened and Overextended

Despite the positive impact that inclusion assistants had on students with majority and underrepresented identities, these successes were not without cost. Most notably, inclusion assistants felt overburdened and overextended. Too often, issues of diversity and inclusion fell solely on their shoulders, with little or no help from other members of the

residence hall. This finding was most pronounced in the interviews with inclusion assistants, who shared that they often felt pressure to support an entire residence hall on all issues of diversity and inclusion by themselves. One inclusion assistant commented, “I don’t think it can possibly be done by just one person in each hall. It’s not practical to reach all of the populations that we’re trying to reach in a way that actually works.” Another interviewee shared,

. . . how many dorms are there on campus? There aren’t a lot, so there’s just a very small team of people . . . that promotes diversity but doesn’t do a good job of implementing it and it seems like it’s just the inclusion assistants sometimes just this very small group of people that’s trying to help with that.

Many inclusion assistants noted that whenever an issue arose in the residence halls and the student was from an underrepresented background, they were often asked to respond, as if issues for students with underrepresented identities were always under the jurisdiction of the inclusion assistant. One inclusion assistant said, “It’s not just like, ‘Oh, that person’s gay, that goes to the inclusion assistant, that person’s Black, that goes [to] the inclusion assistant,’ but that’s how it is.”

Inclusion assistants felt that more is expected of them than of their resident assistant counterparts, especially in terms of meetings and educational sessions. In addition to their

With a somewhat ill-defined and broad charge to promote inclusion in the residence halls backed by a pedagogy that empowers them to shape aspects of the position as they think is best, inclusion assistants felt that more was expected of them than of the resident assistants and more delineation between the two roles was needed.

broad charge to promote inclusion in the residence hall, their job descriptions also stipulated that inclusion assistants must conduct weekly social rounds. Additionally, they engage in focused educational opportunities on issues of diversity. One such training was a day-long event at a nearby Native American cultural center. Inclusion assistants enjoyed the experience but felt that it was an “add-on” to their job and they did not have anything else “taken off their plates.” Although race and inclusion are institution-wide issues and must be addressed across all levels of the university, inclusion assistants often felt they were the only ones in their residence halls undertaking such work. Hall directors, who are full-time professionals, also experienced this tension. One noted,

I struggle a little bit to find the balance between what is my inclusion assistant's role in this and what is my staff, like the resident assistants' role on this. Because my RAs should be working with these students as well.

With a somewhat ill-defined and broad charge to promote inclusion in the residence halls backed by a pedagogy that empowers them to shape aspects of the position as they think is best, inclusion assistants felt that more was expected of them than of the resident assistants and more delineation between the two roles was needed.

Inclusion assistants were keenly aware of the gravity of their positions. They knew the cost associated with students continuing to experience marginalization and the real prospect that they could make or break their residents' experiences in the residence hall and college overall. Inclusion assistants often internalized this deep pressure to reach every person in their hall. One inclusion assistant stated,

I have 25 in my building that I check on regularly, and it is tiring to be like their mother and be the person that they come to all the time, but then I have to think about all the people that I don't see. All the residents on my list who don't go to events—who probably aren't coming back here next year because they feel uninvolved.

This inclusion assistant aptly identified the precarious position of their work: If they failed in their jobs, this might mean that a student would not return to school the next year. Another inclusion assistant continued,

I feel like the world is on my shoulders and it's my role. And I have fellow staff members who aren't as invested in this work, so I have to do more, because they need me, my students need me, this world needs me, so I've gotta run at 100, because no one else is doing the work.

This inclusion assistant corroborates the feelings of being burdened by the expectations placed on them, which are exacerbated by the perceived lack of investment from other staff. Taken together, these two comments illustrate the weight of expectations they felt in connecting to students with underrepresented identities in their residence halls.

Theme 4: Inclusion Assistants Experience Varying Levels of Support

Although all inclusion assistants had the same position, they received varying levels of support, which mediated their experiences. Inclusion assistants talked about the differences in support they received from their residence hall/residence directors and resident assistants. Some felt adequately supported in their role: “I actually feel supported on my staff. I think my [residence hall director] does

a good job of picking our staff members and being careful of who she hires. She does a great job of making sure our staff is diverse.” Another stated,

I've been blessed with a staff that understands and they can handle certain things like that. When it comes to inclusion, when it comes to bias situations, things like that, most people on my staff know how to handle those things. That's just because that's who they are, they're just good with that. And I'm thankful for that.

However, a number of inclusion assistants experienced frustration and lack of support. One noted that when they planned a program, other staff never attended. “Another part about the role, when I even have a program, why is half my staff, ‘Oh, I’m sorry, I fell asleep.’ Stuff like that. I don’t get the support that I’m supposed to.” Others spoke of resident assistants begrudgingly attending their events and even mocking them.

RAs ain't never went to nothing and could tell that they was forced to do the thing. That's the impression that the RAs get every time they have to go to something for diversity. That's why I sit at my staff table and they joke the whole time we in anything, any diversity education. Because RAs do it so they can say that they did it. They'll sit there, we'll be in those socializations and they'll joke the whole time about triggers and racism and oppression, and anything like that. And it's going right over their damn head.

The response of residence hall staff ranged from extremely supportive to ambivalent to hostile. Inclusion assistants sometimes joked about “good situations” and “bad situations” regarding residence halls that had supportive resident assistants and residence

hall/residence directors (deemed “good situations”) and those that did not (deemed “bad situations”).

The training materials for all staff we reviewed showed that considerable time had been spent on issues of inclusion, logical sequencing of activities in terms of depth, and intentional sequencing of outcomes and experiences mapped onto the overall goals of the residence life program. However, the inclusion assistants received additional training in diversity and inclusion, which the resident assistants and residence hall/residence directors did not receive. Assessment data showed that only 62.2% of the inclusion assistants thought that their training was effective for them to be successful. That resident assistants did not have to attend the additional diversity training and that the training was not deemed effective by a third of inclusion assistants was a source of frustration. As one remarked,

RAs don't have that training . . . I have entirely White staff except one other person. All of them are phenomenal. I love my staff. I agree about staff. But, some of them aren't completely aware of the cultural differences, and so they don't know how to bridge those gaps and have those conversations. And so every now and then I get a reference of like . . . I'm happy that they feel comfortable, and will be like, “[student name], this was said. How do I work through this?” But also, it's still kind of like maybe if they also had the training, they were also made aware.

Despite some considerable efforts designed to support and train inclusion assistants, they experienced varying levels of support. The nomenclature of “good situations” and “bad situations” discussed by several inclu-

While the rhetoric of “diversity and inclusion are everyone’s job” is important and true, it’s necessary to go beyond the rhetoric by actualizing this sentiment and buttressing it with job descriptions, trainings, and ongoing professional development.

sion assistants in a focus group serves as an apt summary of the variation they experienced in their roles.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE AND RESEARCH

We offer these implications for practitioners who may be interested in offering supplemental student positions beyond resident assistants within residence life, those looking to reexamine existing positions tasked with promoting diversity and inclusion, and researchers studying the experiences and effects of peer positions in residence halls. Overall, we found that the inclusion assistant program has a positive effect on both students with underrepresented identities and those in the majority. The value of having a designated person in the residence halls to focus on issues of diversity and inclusion is strong. Although there are certainly issues that need to be improved with the position, the program has demonstrated value beyond a traditional model of only residence hall/residence directors and resident assistants. We offer several implications for practice based on our findings and in this vein: that this approach has value and should be refined.

First, the inclusion assistant program has demonstrated benefit to student success. Areas of strength are the positive effects the inclusion assistants have on both students with underrepresented identities and those in the majority, as well as their ability to foster a sense of community in the residence halls. As disparities in engagement and campus climate continue to persist in

residence life and colleges and universities overall (Blimling, 2015; Miley et al., 2005; Quaye et al., 2020), programs or models that demonstrate success in narrowing those gaps should be continued, expanded, and improved upon.

Inclusion assistant programs, and those that are similar, need to confront the challenge of the burden that inclusion assistants feel to meet the needs of all students in each hall. While the rhetoric of “diversity and inclusion are everyone’s job” is important and true, it’s necessary to go beyond the rhetoric by actualizing this sentiment and buttressing it with job descriptions, trainings, and ongoing professional development. All staff should be held accountable for promoting diversity and inclusion through performance reviews, rehiring decisions, and meetings with supervisory staff. Residence life staff should audit and revise hiring practices to ensure that any newly hired resident assistant and professional staff are committed to the goal of improving inclusion in the residence halls and across campus. Inclusion assistants noted the difficulty in trying to advance diversity and inclusion in their halls when their fellow staff were not similarly invested. Additionally, space should be provided in professional staff settings (e.g., monthly meetings) for dialogue and check-ins about diversity and inclusion issues and initiatives. Another strategy would be to invest in more inclusion assistants. Hiring enough of them to meet the increasing and complex needs of students with underrepresented identities is critical. In the current study, participants voiced the

Inclusion assistants were keenly aware of the gravity of their positions. They knew the cost associated with students continuing to experience marginalization and the real prospect that they could make or break their residents' experiences in the residence hall and college overall.

need for expanding the number of inclusion assistants so they feel less overwhelmed and can invest more in their residents.

Sufficient time should also be invested in clarifying the roles and responsibilities of inclusion assistants and resident assistants. This was an ongoing source of tension that arose in focus groups with both groups and residence hall/residence directors, who were tasked with supervising both of them. Equal attention should be paid to how the roles differ and to the work shared between them. Additionally, intentional and specific strategies should be created for inclusion assistants and resident assistants to work together across their differences related to issues of diversity and inclusion. Given their supervisory role, residence hall/residence directors must have an active part in these conversations. This advice applies not only to the specific program in this study, but also to similar models in residence life settings.

Possibilities for future research studies are numerous. One line of inquiry would be exploring similar programs in different contexts: institution type, region, student demographics, and residence life models. These contextual factors likely influence the experiences of inclusion assistants (or similar positions) and should be investigated more fully. Another study might examine the outcomes of the experiences more robustly, perhaps in a quasi-experimental model that might better isolate the effects of inclusion assistants.

Linking these results to persistence and retention would also be beneficial. Another line of inquiry might be to determine the ideal ratio of inclusion assistants to students. We are hard pressed to offer specific guidance to practitioners about how many inclusion assistants is sufficient; future research might illuminate this question.

CONCLUSION

Residence life at PWIs is rife with possibilities and challenges, especially for students with underrepresented identities. While this experience can be an important catalyst to promote student success, it can also be difficult for students to feel included and supported. When students feel connected, involved, and that they belong, they are more likely to be successful (Boettcher et al., 2019; Chang et al., 2005). Inclusion assistants, like those examined in the current study, play a vital role in supporting both students with underrepresented identities and those in the majority. Though the inclusion assistants model undoubtedly has demonstrated value, the program could be improved with more adequate support and intentionality. Practitioners wrestling with how to bolster inclusion through various staffing models and positions would be well served by looking at the inclusion assistants as a promising model. ■

REFERENCES

- Abes, E. S., & Wallace, M. M. (2018). "People see me, but they don't see me": An intersectional study of college students with physical disabilities. *Journal of College Student Development*, 59(5), 545–562. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2018.0052>
- Altnaier, P. (2019). Are you my ally: Implications for training on bias-related incidents. *The Journal of College and University Student Housing*, 45(3), 56–70.
- Baxter Magolda, M. B., & King, P. M. (2004). *Learning partnerships: Theories and models to educate for self-authorship*. Stylus.
- Belch, H. A. (2011). Understanding the experiences of students with psychiatric disabilities: A foundation for creating conditions of support and success. *New Directions for Student Services*, 2011(134), 73–94. <https://doi.org/10.1002/ss.396>
- Blimling, G. S. (2015). *Student learning in college residence halls: What works, what doesn't, and why*. Jossey-Bass.
- Blimling, G. S., & Baumann, D. (2019). *The resident assistant: Applications and strategies for working with college students in residence halls* (8th ed.). Kendall Hunt.
- Boettcher, M. L., Eason, A., Earnest, K., & Lewis, L. (2019). The cultivation of support networks by students of color in a residence hall setting at a Predominantly White Institution. *The Journal of College and University Student Housing*, 45(3), 30–46.
- Chang, M. J., Chang, J. C., & Ledesma, M. C. (2005). Beyond magical thinking: Doing the real work of diversifying our institutions. *About Campus*, 10(2), 9–16.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research*. Sage.
- Harper, S. R., Davis, R. J., Jones, D. E., McGowan, B. L., Ingram, T. N., & Platt, C. S. (2011). Race and racism in the experiences of Black male resident assistants at predominantly White universities. *Journal of College Student Development*, 52(2), 180–200. <https://doi.org/10.1353/csd.2011.0025>
- Harwood, S. A., Hunt, M. B., Mendenhall, R., & Lewis, J. A. (2012). Racial microaggressions in the residence halls: Experiences of students of color at a predominantly White university. *Journal of Diversity in Higher Education*, 5(3), 159–173.
- Healea, C. D., & Hale, P. J. (2016). Reaching out: Challenges and opportunities of recruiting a diverse staff of resident assistants. *The Journal of College and University Student Housing*, 42(3), 66–79.
- Hotchkins, B. K., & Dancy, T. E. (2017). A house is not a home: Black students' responses to racism in university residential halls. *The Journal of College and University Student Housing*, 43(3), 42–53.
- Johnson, V. D. (2003). Cultural group perceptions of racial climates in residence halls. *NASPA Journal*, 41(1), 114–134.
- Johnson, D. R., Wasserman, T. H., Yildirim, N., & Yonai, B. A. (2014). Examining the effects of stress and campus climate on persistence of students of color and White students: An application of Bean and Eaton's psychological model of retention. *Research in Higher Education*, 55(1), 75–110.
- Kerr, K. G., Tweedy, J., Edwards, K. E., & Kimmel, D. (2017). Beyond seat time and student satisfaction: A curricular approach to residential education. *About Campus*, 22(1), 22–31.
- Kniess, D. R., Havice, P. A., & Cawthon, T. W. (2015). Creating networks that facilitate successful transitions to the second year for African American students at a PWI: Implications for residence life. *The Journal of College and University Student Housing*, 42(1), 144–159.
- Koehler, G., & Skvoretz, J. (2010). Residential segregation in university housing: The mathematics of preferences. *Social Science Research*, 39(1), 14–24. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ssresearch.2009.05.004>

- Krum, T. E., Davis, K. S., & Galupo, M. P. (2013). Gender-inclusive housing preferences: A survey of college-aged transgender students. *Journal of LGBT Youth*, 10(1-2), 64-82.
- Mayhew, M. J., Rockenbach, A. N., Bowman, N. A., Seifert, T. A., & Wolniak, G. C. (2016). *How college affects students: 21st century evidence that higher education works* (Vol. 3). Jossey-Bass.
- Milem, J., Chang, M., & Antonio, A. (2005). *Making diversity work on campus: A research-based perspective*. Association of American Colleges & Universities.
- Museus, S. D., Griffin, K. A., & Quaye, S. J. (2020). Engaging students of color. In S. J. Quaye, S. R. Harper, & S. L. Pendakur (Eds.), *Student engagement in higher education: Theoretical perspectives and practical approaches for diverse populations* (3rd ed., pp. 37-54). Routledge.
- Nagda, B. A. (2006). Breaking barriers, crossing boundaries, building bridges: Communication processes in intergroup dialogues. *Journal of Social Issues*, 62(3), 553-576.
- Nicolazzo, Z. (2017). Imagining a trans* epistemology: What liberation thinks like in postsecondary education. *Urban Education*, 004208591769720. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0042085917697203>
- Padgett, R. D., Johnson, M. P., & Pascarella, E. T. (2012). First-generation undergraduate students and the impacts of the first year of college: Additional evidence. *Journal of College Student Development*, 53, 243-266.
- Pope, R. L., Mueller, J. A., & Reynolds, A. L. (2009). Looking back and moving forward: Future directions for diversity research in student affairs. *Journal of College Student Development*, 50, 640-658.
- Quaye, S. J., Harper, S. R., & Pendakur, S. L. (Eds.). (2020). *Student engagement in higher education: Theoretical perspectives and practical approaches for diverse populations* (3rd ed.). Routledge.
- Reynolds, A. L., Sneva, J. N., & Beehler, G. P. (2010). The influence of racism-related stress on the academic motivation of Black and Latino/a students. *Journal of College Student Development*, 51, 135-149.
- Schreiner, L. A., & Nelson, D. D. (2013). The contribution of student satisfaction to persistence. *Journal of College Student Retention*, 15(1), 73-III.
- Stake, R. E. (1995). *The art of case study research*. Sage.
- Tetreault, P. A., Fette, R., Meidlinger, P. C., & Hope, D. (2013). Perceptions of campus climate by sexual minorities. *Journal of Homosexuality*, 60(7), 947-964. <https://doi.org/10.1080/00918369.2013.774874>

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. This article highlights the challenges that unique or nontraditional staff positions often have in integration and support. Describe successful methods of onboarding and supporting unique positions in staffing models.
2. Residents with marginalized identities can strain to find spaces where their identity is not only accepted but is also either celebrated or included in the plurality.
 - a. What spaces does your program have for students outside their rooms? Is there an identity-based living-learning community?
 - b. If there are no formal spaces, what spaces have different identity communities created for themselves? How can you help in supporting the development of these spaces?
 - c. What results can come from including students in designing spaces in residence halls or campus facilities?
3. The article notes that any training on inclusion is helpful for staff. What competency and/or exposure training is offered in your program to peer staff if adding positions, like inclusion assistants, is not a reality? Do other models exist that you can refer to?
4. The institution in the study utilizes a residential curriculum and integrates inclusion into their curricular model. If you have a residential curriculum, in what ways does it incorporate inclusion topics? Is it enough? If you don't have a formal curriculum, how is inclusion programming represented?
5. A prominent refrain from students representing marginalized identities, be it in the classroom or in leadership roles, is the exhaustion they often feel to be the voice or de facto representative of that identity. What are some successful methods of engaging these students, without requiring their labor to be the only impetus for education or exposure?

Discussion questions developed by Chris MacDonald, executive director of housing and residence life at West Virginia University, andCarolynn Komanski, director of the Office of Youth Conference Services and associate director of housing operations at the University of Florida.