

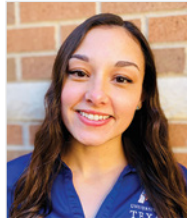


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The Questions We Ask: A Content Analysis of Resident Assistant Interview Questions

EVERY YEAR UNIVERSITY HOUSING DEPARTMENTS engage in processes to select Resident Assistants (RAs) to be peer leaders in their communities. The purpose of this study is to better understand the job expectations and competencies interview questions address. This study uses qualitative content analysis to chronicle the questions asked of RAs across 12 institutions in the Southwest region of the United States. Overall, 200 questions were coded and placed into three themes: *Competencies* (97), *Personal* (58), and *Job Expectations* (45). The highest frequency coded questions in each theme were: Job Expectation: *Community Outreach* (17); Competencies: *Diversity Awareness* (15); and Personal: *Personality/About You* (33). The study reveals the importance placed on specific competency areas viewed to be important in the RA position. Additionally, the findings show a disconnect in areas seen as important in the position yet infrequently addressed by the questions asked of candidates.

Residential college campuses strive to create environments where students can thrive and successfully contribute to their college experiences (Horvath & Stack, 2013). Campuses often turn to Resident Assistants (RAs) to be front-line employees influencing the student experience (Paladino et al., 2005). The RA position has many responsibilities often including policy enforcement, community building, and student support (Blimling, 2003). It is important for housing departments to hire dependable and well-rounded students to serve in the RA role. Research has examined what contributes to high performing RA candidates, including looking at emotional intel-

ligence (Jaeger & Caison, 2006; Wu & Stemler, 2008), training (Murray et al., 1999), and interview types (Berg & Stoner, 2016).

Interviews are the most common practice for evaluating RA candidates (Berg & Stoner, 2016). It is essential that interview questions are carefully developed to assess the knowledge desired about each candidate. However, there is little research specifically evaluating the questions asked during RA selection interviews. The purpose of this study was to analyze the questions asked during the RA interview process by addressing the following: Which competencies do RA interview questions focus on? and How do RA interview questions align with general RA job expectations?

RA EXPECTATIONS AND COMPETENCIES

RAs are an influential population of student leaders on college campuses (Healea, 2006) who live and work with students in residence halls. This part-time job provides student staff the opportunity to be front line leaders (Deluga & Masson, 2000) while also serving as vital links between college students and universities (Jaeger & Caison, 2006). The responsibilities and expectations established for RAs range from maintaining campus residence halls, enforcing policies, developing community, and assisting students (Healea, 2006). Successful RAs can foster an atmosphere of academic, social, cultural, and emotional growth in their respective residence halls. Throughout the academic school year, RAs apply virtuous behavior and character to inspire students on college campuses with whom RAs regularly interact (Healea, 2006). This requires a large investment of time by the RAs (Terenzini et al., 1996) and an ability to make connections to ensure students have positive residential experiences.

RAs are expected to have more interaction with students than professional student affairs educators, parents, and faculty members. With near-daily exposure to those who live in their communities, RAs encourage students toward academic, social, cultural, and emotional growth (Wu & Stemler, 2008). RAs possessing the ability to relate closely with students by offering resources on how to be involved, how to excel in classes, and how to become a leader on campus are desired. Terenzini et al. (1996) found that when peer interactions involve educational or intellectual topics, the effects are almost always beneficial to students. For that reason, departments seek candidates

who can effectively lead floor study hours, specific learning community initiatives, and target-based programs for their floors.

The most successful RAs are approachable, can comfortably interact with their peers, and proactively take a leadership role with residents (Deluga & Masson, 2000). Literature indicates hiring departments are likely to look for RA candidates who are role models, leaders, resourceful, able to enforce policies, and competent in programming (Healea, 2006; Upcraft, 1982; Wu & Stemler, 2008). However, there is little literature on interview questions used in hiring qualified candidates.

STRUCTURED INTERVIEWS

Structured interviews have been shown to be a better assessment measure during interview processes compared to unstructured interviews (Levashin et al., 2013). According to Hartwell et al. (2019), the most common structured interview questions are situational, past behavior, background, and job knowledge. Situational interview questions allow for candidates to answer questions by describing how they would respond to given scenarios (Huffcutt et al., 2001) while “past behavior” (or “behavioral”) questions ask candidates to discuss how they handled situations in the past while citing examples (Huffcutt et al., 2001). Background and job knowledge questions are designed to understand how well candidates understand the work they will do and what past experiences would contribute to their success in the position (Hartwell et al., 2019). In housing literature, Berg and Stoner (2016) found structured interviews were more predictive of future performance than group interviews or application essays. However, while there is significant universal research on employ-

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ment interviews (Hartwell et al., 2019), there is limited research on the questions used during the RA selection process. The purpose of this qualitative study was to fill a gap in existing literature regarding the kinds of questions used in RA selection interviews.

METHOD

The research team selected a qualitative study as the method of research because it involves a naturalistic approach where one derives meaning through interpretation and phenomena. Data may be classified, coded, and interpreted into meaningful categories or themes (Creswell, 2013). Put another way, “We use qualitative research because quantitative research measures and statistical analysis simply do not *fit the problem*” (Cresswell, 2013, p. 48). Gall et al. (2003) maintained that qualitative researchers have a history of studying language and communication, believing language and communication can be interpreted and studied in the social environment. In this study, the language and communication being examined were the interview questions asked of RAs during interview processes.

Sample and Data Collection

This study used a preexisting dataset collected in Fall 2017 by the Research, Assessment, and Information (RAI) Committee within The Southwest Association of College and University Housing Officers (SWACUHO, 2017). The RAI committee emailed all member institutions requesting they submit copies of the interview questions used during their RA staff selection processes

and provide consent to make the interview questions publicly available for the purpose of creating a resource databank for the regional membership to use. Of the 60 member institutions, 17 responded and provided the requested information. Of these 17, only 12 institutions granted permission for their data to be made publicly available. According to a personal communication from Stoner (2020), the RAI Committee Chair at the time of data collection, the original call for interview questions allowed for departments to submit questions to the RAI committee for analysis in the aggregate without having their questions publicly available in the question bank. Thus, any such questions that did not have permission to be publicly shared were completely excluded from the analysis since the researchers were unable to confirm if their intent for their documents to be withheld from the membership extended to the goals of our study. The RAI committee provided the questions to the research team from the remaining 12 participating institutions. Institutional and departmental information was removed by the RAI Committee prior to receipt to maintain confidentiality and anonymity.

DATA ANALYSIS

Content analysis is a useful tool for research in the field of library science (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009) and technical writing (Boettger & Palmer, 2010). This study employed qualitative content analysis due to the focus on themes and not linguistic units such as words and sentences (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). Qualitative content

analysis helps researchers focus on specific data and is a systematic, yet flexible process (Flick, 2014). Qualitative content analysis also considers the researcher's perspective, including professional credentials and personal meanings derived from the data (Gall et al., 2003).

Prior to coding the questions, the researchers used their collective residence life experience to develop an anticipated code book to use as a guide. The use of a code book and letting it evolve helps ensure consistency when using multiple coders (Zhang & Wildemuth, 2009). The process of developing the code book started with a brainstorming session that included researchers' knowledge of their institutions' interview questions: personal experiences in the RA role; research gathered on the role of the RA; years of experience supervising RAs; and expectations of the job.

Once the code book was completed, each of the 12 institutions' questions were added to a spreadsheet. The spreadsheet listed each question in its own row. Several institutions listed multiple questions together under one thematic area without specific direction to ask either one question or all questions; therefore, each question was considered individually. A column was added for each researcher to assign a code from the code book to each question. The researchers then completed an independent coding exercise consisting of reading each question and assigning it a code from the code book. During the coding exercise, the researchers independently coded all questions, including any open-ended statements typically found at the beginning of the question set such as, "Tell us about yourself and your interests." On several occasions during the independent coding exercise, the researchers assigned two codes

if they were unsure which code to use or if the question was not as direct. An example of a question producing an obvious code was, "What are your experiences with diversity and how would you utilize those experiences to help you with being an RA?" This question was easy to code as it fit cleanly into the specific code *Diversity Awareness* without much debate for any other code. However, other questions were more difficult to assign a single code. For example, "As an RA, you are required to reach out to students on your floor or in your building who are different from yourself. How would you go about reaching out to these students and building relationships with them?" While this certainly could be coded under *Community Outreach*, the primary point of the question was determined to be about the interviewee's *Diversity Awareness*, which was addressed in the first part of the question about the outreach to others "different from yourself." The complexity of multiple-coded questions was later resolved during the group coding process when a final, single code was agreed on and applied to these interview questions.

During the first round of independent coding, the researchers used a qualitative research technique, constant comparison, which includes the steps: check your work, verify codes, and identify any missing codes (Yin, 2015). The constant comparison process "leads to sorting and clustering of initial codes... as well as constructions of new, more elaborated codes by merging or combining identical or similar initial codes" (Flick, 2014, p. 158). Upon completing the first round of independent coding, the researchers discussed areas where the code book failed to completely describe the data then updated the code book. This led to the researchers completing a second round of independent coding using the updated code book.

The final process included the lead researcher compiling the independently coded interview questions from the five researchers into one consolidated spreadsheet. The consolidated spreadsheet had each question with all five researchers' suggested codes. The five researchers then went through each question as a group, using intercoder agreement, and discussed the coding until they reached a consensus, labeling each question with a unanimous code from the codebook (Creswell, 2013). By the end of the process, there were 25 total codes within the three larger themes: *Job Expectations* (e.g., policy enforcement, community development), *Competencies* (e.g., crisis management, diversity), and *Personal* (e.g., job interest, get to know you).

FINDINGS

The researchers analyzed 189 questions from 12 institutions. A total of 25 codes were considered by the researchers and categorized into *Job Expectations* (*n* = 9), *Competencies* (*n* = 13), and *Personal* (*n* = 3). Table 1 details the category breakdown by institution. Eleven interview questions merited two codes based on the questions seeking information from two unique areas. For example, “Tell us a little bit about yourself and why you want to be an RA” was coded as *Personality/About You* and *Positional Interest*, both of which fell under the larger Personal theme. Therefore, with 189 questions, there were a total of 200 codes applied by the researchers. Table 2 provides example questions from select codes within the larger category themes.

TABLE 1
Question Themes by Institution

INSTITUTION	EXPECTATIONS	COMPETENCIES	PERSONAL	TOTAL
1	3 (21.4)	4 (28.6)	7 (50)	14
2	0 (0)	9 (75)	3 (25)	12
3	1 (5)	10 (50)	9 (45)	20
4	7 (43.8)	5 (31.3)	4 (25)	16
5	13 (35.1)	18 (48.6)	6 (16.2)	37
6	5 (33.3)	7 (46.7)	3 (20)	15
7	2 (15.4)	6 (46.2)	5 (38.5)	13
8	3 (18.8)	9 (56.3)	4 (25)	16
9	1 (5.6)	12 (66.7)	5 (27.8)	18
10	5 (33.3)	6 (40)	4 (26.7)	15
11	2 (22.2)	4 (44.4)	3 (33.3)	9
12	3 (20)	7 (46.7)	5 (33.3)	15
Total	45 (22.5)	97 (48.5)	58 (29)	200

Note. Numbers in parentheses represent thematic percentage by department.

TABLE 2

Example Interview Questions by Code

THEME	EXAMPLE QUESTION	CODE
Expectations	What would be the most difficult policy for you to enforce and why?	Policy Enforcement
	How would you incorporate academics into your community?	Academic Support
	How would you inspire residents to take responsibility for their actions and those of others in the residence hall?	Mentor
Competencies	Please tell us about a time when you had a conflict to resolve and how you resolved it. Follow up with: Would you have done anything differently?	Conflict Management
	What does diversity mean to you and how did you come to this meaning?	Diversity Awareness
	Tell us about a time when someone came to you with a problem. What did you do to help them?	Problem Solving
Personal	Why are you interested in being an RA?	Interest
	What qualities do you look for in a supervisor?	Personality/About You
	If you were describing the RA position to your parents, how would you describe it?	Knowledge of Position

Job Expectations

Job Expectations questions appeared to seek information testing the applicant's understanding of specific expectations of the job and how applicants would complete these tasks. Nine codes emerged from the *Job Expectations* theme, comprising 22.5% ($n = 45$) of the total questions reviewed. The most frequent *Job Expectation* coded questions were: *Community Outreach* ($n = 17$); *Role Modeling*;

Academic and Social ($n = 8$); *Event Planning* ($n = 6$); and *Policy Enforcement* ($n = 6$).

Community Outreach is a key aspect of the RA position. Based on the total number of questions dedicated to this theme, institutions seem interested in how applicants will perform this responsibility. One example of a *Community Outreach* question is based around community development: "How would you go about building community in

your hall?” Another example is, “What are your thoughts on community (definition, importance, etc.). How would you plan to build community on your floor or within your hall?” The job expectation of building community and outreach to the residents as RAs was prevalent in the questions in this area.

The *Role Modeling* code was used for questions that either directly asked about the candidate’s thoughts on being a role model or more indirectly asked about representing the department or being a resource. For example, one question under this code asks, “What does being a role model mean to you?” This is an example of directly asking the candidate about being a role model, which was a common approach. An example of an indirect approach is, “How do you feel about being a representative of Housing and Residence Life at all times?” While not specifically asking about being a role model, this type of question was determined as trying to get at the same information as the direct role modeling questions.

Competencies

Competency questions appeared to gather information from the candidates about current skills and abilities they have that align with the responsibilities of the RA position. The 13 codes that emerged under the *Competency* theme comprised 48.5% ($n = 97$) of the total questions reviewed. The most frequent *Competency* codes were: *Diversity Awareness* ($n = 15$); *Conflict Management* ($n = 12$); *Time Management* ($n = 12$); and *Team Player* ($n = 9$).

A total of 12 questions fell under *Conflict Management*. Several of the questions were centered on conflict with other team members (e.g., “If a conflict were to arise on your staff team, how would you handle it?”). Other questions were about conflict management in general, such as, “Describe a situation in which you had a disagreement with someone and chose to confront that person. Describe the conversation and the outcome.” This RA competency is specific to the candidate’s ability to resolve conflict and not about helping residents encountering conflict with others as that was coded under the *Job Expectation* code *Mediation*.

Two areas had similarities but received separate codes: *Time Management* and *Prioritization*. *Time Management* questions ask how candidates balance their time while having multiple responsibilities (e.g., “What are your extracurricular activities and how do you balance them with work and school?”) while *Prioritization* questions ask candidates how they order and rank competing priorities. While an argument could be made that *Time Management* overlaps with *Prioritization* responses, the researchers determined the central point was different for each code. To illustrate, an example of a *Prioritization* question was, “How would you prioritize your various commitments including being a student, a Resident Advisor and other campus obligations and decide what tasks are most important?” This question is specifically asking for the candidate to list what is most important to complete first rather than balancing all the responsibilities.

RAs possessing the ability to relate closely with students by offering resources on how to be involved, how to excel in classes, and how to become a leader on campus are desired.

However, while there is significant universal research on employment interviews, there is limited research on the questions used during the RA selection process.

Personal

Questions that did not fit any of the *Job Expectations* or *RA Competency* themes fell under three codes within the *Personal* theme. The breakdown of the number of questions in this theme was: *Personality/About You* ($n = 33$); *Interest in the Position* ($n = 14$); and *Knowledge of Position* ($n = 11$). The *Personal* theme accounted for 29% of the total questions reviewed ($n = 58$). Each participating institution asked one or more questions in this theme.

The most frequent question type throughout the study was in the area of *Personality/About You*, which accounted for 16.5% ($n = 33$) of the total questions reviewed. Some of the questions are broad, such as, “Tell us a little bit about yourself.” Other questions are more specific to types of situations or relationships with others, such as, “If we were to talk to a previous boss, how would they describe you?” Chronicled under this code were questions about where the candidate viewed their weaknesses or areas needing improvement. This code had a broad spectrum of questions designed to get to know the candidate better but were not specifically tied to either a *Job Expectation* or *RA Competency*.

The other two codes in the *Personal* theme, *Interest in the Position* and *Knowledge of the Position*, were more straightforward. An example of an *Interest in the Position* question is, “Please explain what interests you about the position.” While not all the questions are as straightforward as this, they all appeared to be designed to understand the candidate’s interest in applying for the position. The

Knowledge of the Position questions appeared to be designed to assess candidates’ awareness of what the position entails, for example: “How would you describe the RA position to someone who does not know what it is?” Again, the question is not looking for a specific expectation or competency but were perceived to be looking to get a broader sense of how the candidate understands the components of the position.

LIMITATIONS

Several limitations existed within this study. The first limitation was using a preexisting collection of documents without any institutions’ demographic information. The researchers were not provided any additional information around the schools’ intentions regarding question rationalization or desired outcomes. The lack of context left the interview questions up to interpretation by the researchers.

The demographics of this study were also a limitation. The RA interview questions were obtained from universities in the Southwest Region in the United States who voluntarily participated. The Southwest Region is one of nine housing regions; therefore, there is no way to know that this regional study is transferable to other regions in the United States. Although the questions received were from both private and public institutions, the researchers did not include the institution type in the findings of this research. Due to the nature of this study, the results are not generalizable to all universities or campuses.

Another limitation was researcher bias. Any assumptions or conclusions drawn throughout the research process were influenced by the five researchers' personal histories and priorities in hiring candidates. While analyzing the interview questions and drawing conclusions, codes were made based on the researchers' interpretations, years of experience in the field, and knowledge of the RA role. While the researchers assessed the interview questions and coding in this research, conclusions or implications may include bias.

DISCUSSION

This study adds to the literature by analyzing interview questions asked in the RA hiring process. The qualitative approach allowed researchers to focus on coding questions into three themes: *Job Expectations*, *Competencies*, and *Personal*. The findings show *Competency*-based questions made up the largest percentage of all institutions' interview questions (48.5%, $n = 97$). This outcome is certainly not unexpected as the goal of most hiring practices is to assess how applicants' current skill sets match with the position, and leadership skills are an important characteristic for RAs (Deluga & Masson, 2000). This shows that departments prioritize questions in this area.

Another important finding is that *Personal* represented a higher frequency with 29% ($n = 58$) compared to *Job Expectations* interview questions with 22.5% ($n = 45$). This indicates that institutions put a higher

emphasis on getting to know the candidates' interests and knowledge of the position than on an understanding of RA job expectations. This data highlights a disconnect between the vitality of assessing personal attributes and characteristics over candidates' abilities to recognize the job expectations. If institutions emphasize RAs upholding job expectations, then asking questions to prompt the knowledge of candidates would be highly beneficial. Therefore, asking more interview questions regarding job expectations could better inform and educate those who are interested in serving and being successful in the RA role. Within these modalities, revisiting what each department values and aims to excel in may also help guide them in choosing which questions will best serve their needs.

While the questions interviewers ask are important, a lot can also be learned from what is not asked. In general, the questions asked demonstrate areas important to the department; conversely, questions not asked indicate less importance. There were seven codes that were initially established by the researchers that were removed because no questions fell in those categories. The omitted codes included: *Public Speaking*, *Desk Work*, *Report Writing*, *Marketing*, *Emergency Response*, *Administrative Skills*, and *Approachability*. The absence of these types of questions might be explained in several ways. First, some of these areas might be observable throughout other areas of the interview process, such as public speaking

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while engaging in a group interview setting. Secondly, report writing and administrative skills might be appraised through the written application and timely submission of application materials. However, not having any questions in these areas challenges the importance departments place in these areas. Not having any emergency response questions is a striking omission due to the nature of an RA's work.

Additionally, there was only one question under the *Personal Academic Success* competency and three under the *Academic Support* expectation, (representing 2.0% of the total questions. This finding is perplexing as student success and creating successful living learning environments are common goals of most departments (Wu & Stemler, 2008). As demonstrated, the literature displays how vital RAs are in contributing to a student's academic success. The lack of questions focused on academics provides insight into the level of importance that is being placed in this area when evaluating RA candidates.

Implications for Practice

Each year, Housing departments develop or update questions for their RA selection processes. These processes are often either internal or might consist of sharing questions within staff members' professional networks. This study provides practitioners with a guide to the categories of questions other institutions use. This study's breakdown al-

lows departments to analyze their questions to see if they are asking the questions that fit their institution's hiring needs. Institutions can use the framework from this study to do their own self-assessment on what type of questions they are asking and what areas are being under addressed. Another implication is how institutions can examine how these themes can also be used in their evaluation processes. By using the themes from this study, staff members can analyze how they are assessing the performance of RAs. By doing this analysis they can see if their evaluations are consistent with the questions they ask of RA candidates.

This research contributes to the design and implementation of RA interview questions in hopes of hiring the best fit and highest performing RAs throughout each academic year. Those serving on RA selection committees can be more intentional with not only the different types of interview questions but also the department's resources and time to improve the overall experience of the RA selection process. The data on RA interview questions are a steppingstone in research and can be used to further research into the types of questions that can lead to successful RA hiring decisions.

Implications for Future Research

This study focused on one aspect of the RA selection process often used by institutions. There are other tools used in the RA hiring

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process such as group interviews, application essays, or references that are often part of the candidate assessment process. Future research could focus on how these areas are evaluated, specifically within the established themes of this study. Additionally, this study focused on the RA interview questions and could be expanded to examine the questions used in graduate or professional staff interviews. Finally, this study could be expanded to other geographic regions to examine if there are regional differences in the questions. With the amount of time selection processes consume and the importance of having a strong RA staff, it is important that research on the selection process continues.

CONCLUSION

This study analyzed questions asked during RA interview processes and found departments were asking more competency questions than either job expectation or personal type questions. The findings illuminated both the areas the questions addressed and what was left unaddressed. Based on the findings, departments should consider evaluating their interview questions to determine whether they need to focus more in other areas. While this research demonstrated a predictable emphasis of competency-based questions, departments may be over reliant on personal questions rather than job focused questions. ■

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What actionable steps can you take to improve your current structured interviews?
2. How closely do your RA interview questions align with your department mission and philosophy?
3. In what ways do the categories of interview questions presented in this article align with the question categories you use?
4. Considering the questions your department asks RA candidates, what competency areas are overrepresented or underrepresented?
5. This study looked at interview questions from a specific region. What variations, if any, might exist between regions? What variations might exist between departments?
6. The authors noted specific areas not frequently addressed in structured interview questions. Are there other components of an interview process that evaluate these areas?

Discussion questions developed by Miguel Najera, Assistant Residential Life Coordinator at The University of Texas at Dallas and Laura Glasgow, Residential Life Coordinator at The University of Texas at Dallas.