

MANUSCRIPT

Reading Together: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Book Club as Residence Life Professional Development

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Cultivating inclusive residential communities is an important responsibility of professional and graduate residence life staff. Meaningful diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training is crucial for fostering inclusive and safe residential communities, yet there is limited empirical data on this topic. This study explores one residence life office's DEI book club for graduate and professional residence life staff. Using interviews and focus groups, this study explored staff members' experiences in the book club and sought to understand how staff transferred their learning to their professional work. Participants acknowledged that the book club was a valuable source of learning, fostering empathy and relationships among staff and creating a safe space to navigate sometimes difficult conversations. Participants also reported changes in their approaches to supervision and working with students, noting that they were more focused on equity and providing holistic support for their students after the experience of discussing books about racial and gender discrimination, poverty, and homelessness. The findings suggest that a book club can be a simple but meaningful way to foster conversations about diversity, equity, and inclusion while developing equity-minded staff.

Residence life staff have a profound impact on the experiences of residential college students and help to shape students' academic success, social development, and personal growth (Blimling, 2015; Cheng & Chan, 2020; Foste, 2021; Galloway Burke et al., 2014; Kunda et al., 2020; Ong & Chu, 2022; Whitney et al., 2016). Community building is a key task for residence life staff, and the way they shape a community impacts the safety and well-being of students, especially those with marginalized identities (Foste, 2021; C. A. Kortegast, 2017; C. Kortegast & Croom, 2019; Priddie et al., 2022; Pryor & Hoffman, 2020; Volpe & Jones, 2023).

Empirical research on residence life staff training is limited, and most of the existing research focuses on the training of undergraduate resident assistants (RAs). Professional and graduate residence life staff need regular training and opportunities for professional development, but there are few studies of best practices for these older learners. Additionally, diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) training for residence life staff has historically been limited (Koch, 2016). Despite the importance of having culturally competent staff,

DEI training can fall to the wayside to make room for training on safety, security, and community building (Blimling, 2015; Bury & Macon, 2019; Koch, 2016).

This study explored the use of a diversity, equity, and inclusion book club as an opportunity for residence life professional development. Using interviews and focus groups, this study sought to understand how professional and graduate resident directors (RDs) experienced the DEI book club and how they applied their learning to their work.

IMPACT OF RESIDENCE LIFE STAFF

Although living on campus offers numerous benefits to undergraduate students, residential communities can be harmful if they are not inclusive. For many students with marginalized identities, residence halls can be a space where they experience racism, discrimination, microaggressions, and othering and are generally not represented in hall staffing and advertising efforts. Residence halls can be a particularly challenging place for members of the LGBTQ+ community, who often feel unsupported by hall staff and do not trust that staff would intervene in bias situations (Arroyo, 2022; Bolourian et al., 2021; Foste, 2021; Harrington et al., 2014; C. A. Kortegast, 2017; Priddie et al., 2022; Pryor & Hoffman, 2020; Volpe & Jones, 2023).

Encountering discrimination in on-campus housing threatens the basic needs and long-term success of minoritized students, and residence life staff play a crucial role in fostering spaces that are safe and inclusive for all students (Arroyo, 2022; Bolourian et al., 2021; Foste, 2021; C. A. Kortegast, 2017; Pryor & Hoffman, 2020; Volpe & Jones, 2021). The environment within a residence hall has a substantial impact on marginalized students' sense of security, engagement with their community, physical well-being, and academic success (C. A. Kortegast, 2017; Volpe & Jones, 2023). Considering these findings, it is crucial to have culturally competent residence life staff who are prepared to support students from diverse backgrounds.

RESIDENCE LIFE STAFF TRAINING

Traditional approaches to DEI training for residence life staff can be problematic (Foste, 2021; Koch, 2016; C. A. Kortegast, 2017; McCluskey-Titus et al., 2019; Volpe & Jones, 2023). DEI topics have not always been a prominent part of training, since residence life staff must have a wide variety of skills to be successful in their roles, and trainers will often prioritize other topics over DEI education (Bury & Macon, 2019; Koch, 2016; Whitney et al., 2016). In addition, the common approaches used in residence life training are not highly effective because they often depend on lecture-style presentations or small group discussions, traditional approaches that are less engaging and, for some, have only a minimal impact on their learning (Koch, 2016; McCluskey-Titus et al., 2019). Failing to provide effective and engaging training sessions about DEI topics can result in residence life staff being unprepared to address bias incidents or to cultivate inclusive communities. The use of DEI book clubs in residence life training offers a possible solution

to this problem, as these gatherings provide an engaging and participant-driven forum for having meaningful and personal conversations about DEI topics.

THE VALUE OF BOOK CLUBS

Participating in a dialogue with readers of different identities exposes learners to new ideas and builds empathy and understanding for the perspectives and lived experiences of others (Brown, 2019; Henderson et al., 2020; Park, 2012; Polleck, 2011; Polleck & Epstein, 2015; Smith & Galbraith, 2011; Suh & Hinton, 2015; Tijms et al., 2018). Discussing a text with people from diverse backgrounds helps readers better understand their own identities, values, and beliefs (Brown, 2019; Polleck & Epstein, 2015). For many readers, the knowledge gained in a DEI book club has a positive impact on their work, learning, and relationships.

ROSENBLATT'S TRANSACTIONAL READER-RESPONSE THEORY

Rosenblatt's (1995) transactional Reader-Response Theory, which asserts that the meaning of a text comes from the interaction between the text and the reader, informed this study. A reader's interpretation of a text will be influenced by their identities and background, making reading a subjective experience but when this experience can expand to include others, it exposes participants to alternative perspectives and interpretations.

Engaging with literature can make readers more self-aware and empathetic, and reading and discussing texts with others can lead to personal transformation (Rosenblatt, 1995). These assertions guided this study, as the DEI book club provided opportunities for participants to learn about the experiences of others, be exposed to alternative interpretations of a text, and grow as readers, people, and residence life professionals.

METHODOLOGY

This qualitative research study utilized a case study design. A case study "investigates a contemporary phenomenon (the case) in depth and within its real-world context, especially when the boundaries between phenomenon and context may not be clearly evident" (Yin, 2018, p. 15). For the sake of this study, delineating what is and is not included within the case being studied – or "bounding the case" (Yin, 2018, p. 31) – is an important part of the process (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The case for this study involves one residence life office's DEI book club at a small, rural, 4-year public institution.

The DEI book club has been an ongoing professional development activity, and this study covered three iterations of the book clubs. At the beginning of every book club, the RD staff selected a non-fiction book focused on a DEI topic. For each iteration, RDs were invited to nominate books they were interested in reading; I also suggested some books so that

a wide variety of DEI topics were covered. The RDs then voted for their preferred book using a Google form. [Table 1](#) shows the timeframe and text for each iteration.

Table 1.
Book Club Information

<i>Iteration</i>	<i>Timeframe</i>	<i>Text read</i>
1	Spring 2021 semester	<i>Evicted</i> by Matthew Desmond
2	2021-22 academic year	<i>Hood Feminism</i> by Mikki Kendall
3	2022-23 academic year	<i>Invisible Child</i> by Andrea Elliott

I conducted my research in four phases. The first three phases consisted of interviews with DEI book club participants, which I conducted between November 2021 and March 2023, using semi-structured interview questions. The fourth phase consisted of two focus groups: one for those who participated in only one iteration of the DEI book club and the other for those who participated in two iterations. The focus groups took place in June 2023 and used semi-structured interview questions that incorporated themes from the interviews I conducted.

I utilized both interviews and focus groups because the two formats offered different benefits and types of information (Greenbaum, 2000; Yin, 2018). Individual interviews allowed me to explore each participant's experiences and perspectives in depth (Yin, 2018). In addition, because I conducted interviews at different points in the study, the information obtained in previous interviews informed future interview protocols. The focus groups offered the benefit of a group dynamic in which participants could build off each other's ideas or offer opposing views based on what was shared. Focus groups often generate topics that may not come up in individual interviews, and being part of a group may help participants feel more comfortable sharing their thoughts (Greenbaum, 2000). Additionally, the use of focus groups aligns with Rosenblatt's (1995) ideas about learning from and with others. Much like the book club discussions, the focus group discussions provided a forum for resident directors to share their experiences and learn about the experiences of others.

Participants

The participants in this study were all entry-level professional or graduate residence life staff whose primary job duties were to oversee an assigned residence hall and supervise a staff of RAs. The population for this study was former and current professional and graduate resident directors who participated in the DEI book club. This study utilized purposeful sampling, and a total of eight RDs participated in this study. (See [Table 2.](#))

Table 2.
Participant Information

<i>Pseudonym</i>	<i>Role</i>	<i>Gender</i>	<i>Book clubs</i>
Alex	Graduate RD	Female	Spring 2021
Charles	Professional RD	Male	2021-22, first half of 2022-23
George	Professional RD	Male	2021-22, 2022-23
Julia	Graduate RD	Female	2021-22, 2022-23
Marie	Graduate RD	Female	Spring 2021
Maya	Graduate RD	Female	2022-23
Molly	Professional RD	Female	2021-22, 2022-23
Oakley	Graduate RD	Female	Spring 2021

Research Questions

Three research questions guided this study:

1. *What are the resident directors' lived experiences within the DEI book club?*
2. *What connections do the resident directors report making between their lived experiences within the DEI book club and their professional work?*
3. *How does prolonged engagement with the DEI book club impact the resident directors' experiences within the DEI book club and the connections the resident directors make with their professional work?*

Data Analysis Procedures

I asked participants to examine their interview and focus group transcripts before I analyzed them. Once transcripts were approved, I uploaded them into the coding software Dedoose. I used recursive coding when analyzing my transcripts. I started by completing a round of descriptive coding, which allowed me to gain an understanding of the content of each transcript by grouping excerpts into topics (Saldaña, 2021). I then conducted a round of values coding, which captures participants' values, attitudes, and beliefs. According to Saldaña (2021), a value is what someone thinks or feels to be important, an attitude is how someone thinks or feels about a particular object or person, and a belief is what someone thinks or feels to be right and true. Values coding provided insight into what the RDs deemed to be important, how they approached their work, and how they viewed the world.

Once I thoroughly reviewed and coded the transcripts, I moved on to analyzing the data. I grouped similar codes to find common themes among the data based on my research questions. I triangulated my findings across the four phases of data collection, used multiple sources of data, and employed member checking to help ensure the validity of my findings.

Researcher Positionality

I was a researcher-participant throughout this study, meaning that I was an active member of the DEI book club while researching the phenomenon. This dual role afforded me benefits while offering challenges (Yin, 2018). Some of the benefits included access to the DEI book club and shared knowledge with my participants. The major challenge was the possibility for bias, as I was unable to be an outsider. Using a practitioner journal throughout my time in the book club and utilizing recursive coding helped me address this challenge.

I directly supervised most of the participants in this study. Because the informed consent process was especially important due to the supervisory power that I held, I made it very clear to the RDs that participation was voluntary and that not participating would not impact our relationship or work.

FINDINGS

Research Question One

The DEI book club is a source of learning. Every participant acknowledged that the book club was a source of learning about equity and inclusion issues. Hearing the perspectives of other members was the biggest source of learning because participants could better understand the experiences of people whose identities were different from their own, which in turn fostered empathy. In reflecting on her experience discussing *Hood Feminism* (Kendall, 2020), Julia recognized the value of having conversations that she might not otherwise have had.

I think I've gained a lot of understanding. It's a book that is focused on race and as a White person . . . I don't fully understand the experiences of people who are of a minority group. . . . But I feel like the book has, and talking about the book has really sparked a lot of in-depth conversations and conversations that we wouldn't necessarily have in just a normal like staff meeting because they're not related specifically to res life . . . and so I feel like I can understand better, still not fully but better, the experiences of individuals . . . who are of minority racial groups.

Others, like George, noted that the discussions helped them learn more about their peers and better understand their colleagues.

Hearing the perspectives of others led to a better interpretation of the text. Hearing the perspectives of other DEI book club members led to a better understanding of the text, as well as a clearer perception of themselves, since many participants noted that their own identities and experiences impacted how they understood the text. As Marie explained,

Everyone has their own biases, and if I'm just reading it and teaching it my biases, I don't feel like I'm learning as much as opposed to when I'm reading it and then I'm hearing other people sort of discuss what they took away from that same chapter or what really stood out to them . . . that's a whole different dynamic than just reading a book.

George also found value in reading and discussing a text with others and understood that every person will view the book differently, which made him realize that hearing new perspectives is exciting and educational.

Relationships with other RDs created a safe space. The need to feel safe within the book club came up in several interviews and both focus groups, and many participants appreciated the fact that the book club was a safe forum where they could misspeak or make mistakes without being ostracized or judged. Feeling safe did not mean there was a lack of accountability or discomfort; participants sometimes felt uncomfortable and unsure, but the RDs knew that their peers would support and accept them even if they misspoke.

The consistent takeaway from participants was that the relationships among the RDs led to a sense of trust and safety. Oakley and Alex discussed the strong relationships they had with other RDs during their time on staff and noted that their frequent RD game nights created opportunities for difficult conversations and fostered a cohesive and supportive staff dynamic. Charles and Molly explained how the pre-existing relationships with other RDs led them to feel like their character was known, which allowed them to feel safe participating in trickier conversations. Charles noted that the book club gave them “the opportunity to share our perspectives, our understanding, and process through things together without fear of judgement.”

Molly and George also noted the importance of ground rules and confidentiality in creating a safe space. George recognized that the group's commitment to refrain from discussing what happens outside of the DEI book club fostered trust among members, and the group rules, combined with the strong RD relationships, fostered a safe space.

The RDs' identities shaped when and how they participated. The way that RDs navigated how to participate in the book club was often related to their identities. RDs who could not personally relate to the identities or topics being discussed tended to be afraid of offending a peer, misspeaking, or taking up too much space in the conversation. Charles noted his hesitance when talking about gender issues during the discussion of *Hood Feminism* (Kendall, 2020), saying that “I did have an initial like, ‘Oh, well, you know, if I say something wrong or use incorrect verbiage, are my female colleagues going to look at me weird? Or am I going to be perceived as clueless?’” Other RDs had to decide what to share when their identities aligned with the experiences discussed in the text and were concerned about sharing too much. Marie talked about her own challenge when discussing homelessness while

reading *Evicted* (Desmond, 2016), saying that she was “cognizant of trying to not overshare while also being able to talk about how you relate to certain things . . . it was interesting trying to navigate that without oversharing or feeling like it’s becoming a therapy session.” Many participants revealed that they had to thoughtfully approach how they showed up in the DEI book club.

Leading the DEI book club was a meaningful experience. Participants in the second and third iterations of the book club had the opportunity to lead group discussions, which for some was both nerve wracking and enjoyable. Charles and George realized that they were nervous about leading the discussion, noting that they wanted to create a meaningful, engaging, and inclusive experience for all participants. George appreciated the opportunity to take ownership of the experience and was grateful that everyone had the chance to lead the discussions.

Research Question Two

The DEI book club impacted how RDs supervised RAs. Participating in the book club affected how some RDs both perceived and supervised their RAs. The book club helped George view his RAs as holistic individuals, not just employees; as a result, he felt that he could devote more time during his one-on-one meetings to his RAs’ personal development and could go beyond just focusing on their academic or professional performance. Molly offered a similar perspective, noting that she now focuses on being more intentional in getting to know the RAs, saying that “I think treating everyone as a unique identity instead of just like blanket statement, this is the staff, these are the students. Like they’re all students, but where is each person coming from?” Both George and Molly were able to identify ways that participating in the book club changed their approach to supervision by offering a holistic and equity-focused approach to supervising RAs.

The DEI book club influenced how RDs interacted with residents. Participating in the book club also had a positive impact on how the RDs interacted with their residents by strengthening their feelings of empathy and providing a better understanding of the struggles their students face. Marie commented that reading *Evicted* (Desmond, 2016) helped her understand why it was so important for the university to offer housing over breaks and to have a pantry on campus available to students. Julia felt that she had a better understanding of the unique struggles that students of color face in the college setting, while Charles realized that he had become a better, more conscious advocate who is more sensitive to a student’s family background, educational expectations, and identities.

The DEI book club had a broad impact. Alex and Oakley, who graduated and started their professional careers after the first iteration of the book club, recognized that the books and discussions had a significant impact on their professional work. The knowledge gained from discussing *Evicted* (Desmond,

2016), in particular, has given them more empathy for anyone experiencing housing insecurity and a more equity-minded approach to their work outside of residence life.

Research Question Three

Participating in a second DEI book club was beneficial. Those who participated in the book club a second time felt that the second iteration was beneficial and impactful. Molly preferred her second book club experience, as she felt more comfortable with the group and more engaged with the topics discussed in the second book. One of the major benefits of being part of an experience that occurs year after year with the same participants is stronger relationships. As Molly described it,

I think with each book you read you can gain something different, so I think multiple years can be a good thing. And if it's like multiple years with the same group, then you really get to know people, get to know their backgrounds, like as much as they want to share, and that helps discussions and . . . lead discussions I think. Because once someone shares something, they're more likely to open up a little bit more if they felt that it was a safe and comfortable environment.

Previous exposure to the book club format can also increase participants' comfort, as they know what to expect; Molly felt that her own participation in the first book club may have broken the ice for the second one. The combination of prior experience and longer, stronger relationships can only benefit subsequent iterations of a DEI book club.

DISCUSSION

This study provides an in-depth look into one residence life office's DEI book club. Participants found that the book club was a valuable source of learning about both DEI topics and their peers. Although the strong relationships among RD staff fostered a safe and trusting environment, participants still had to determine how they wanted to take part in the discussions, understand how their own identities shaped how they connected with the text and engaged with their peers, and determine what they needed to feel comfortable about speaking up.

Many participants felt that the experience had a direct positive impact on their work in residence life. Some became more equity-minded supervisors, while others changed how they interacted with residents. Many gained empathy for and a better understanding of the struggles that students of minoritized groups face, and this new knowledge led them to be more thoughtful and inclusive in their work in the residence halls. Additionally, two participants noted that they have applied what they learned to their professional work outside of residence life.

This study emphasizes the benefits of being part of a DEI book club, which can foster learning and empathy while impacting how RDs approach their work. This study adds to the literature about residence life staff training and offers a different approach to DEI training for graduate and professional staff.

The findings of this study align with Rosenblatt's (1995) Reader Response Theory, the crux of which is the subjective nature of reading. Since most readers are unable to read a text neutrally, book clubs can offer an opportunity to read alongside others and, in some cases, to counteract their own biases and experiences; hearing the perspectives of others helped participants better understand the text. Additionally, the findings of this study support Rosenblatt's hope that self-aware and reflective readers can positively impact the world around them. All the participants in this study noted instances when they were able to incorporate the learning and perspectives gained from the book club into their work in residence life or beyond, and many realized that they had a more informed and more DEI-focused approach to the work that they do.

IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

This study offers guidance for practitioners who are interested in implementing a DEI book club as a professional development activity that will foster moments of learning and connection while developing empathetic and equity-minded staff. I advocate that any higher education professional or educator who needs impactful DEI training should consider trying a book club.

The findings of this study support the need to foster a safe environment since participants may not wish to be part of vulnerable and difficult conversations without first feeling the sense of safety and trust that comes from strong relationships. Although only two participants, Molly and George, spoke about taking part in two iterations of the book club, their experiences suggest that one meaningful practice is to make a DEI book club a recurring element of staff training and development. Given the carryover of graduate and professional staff from year to year, it is important to ensure that impactful professional development activities are available for more experienced staff. Although more research is needed on this topic, Molly and George's experiences highlight the fact that prolonged engagement with a DEI book club can be beneficial in many ways.

FUTURE RESEARCH AND LIMITATIONS

This study provides an in-depth look at one DEI book club in one residence life office, and the results were sufficiently positive to make the case for more research being done on similar book clubs at other institutions. Additionally, longitudinal research should be conducted about the impact of engaging in a book club year after year.

Research on DEI book clubs could also involve other staff demographics, such as undergraduate resident assistants or administrators. Additionally, future research is needed to determine the impact of a diversity book club on a less diverse staff; though a key benefit was learning from the diverse experiences of others, researchers could also explore the impact of a DEI book club on a group of staff with similar identities.

The limitations of this study include its narrow scope and small number of participants. Additionally, this study relied on self-reported data, and it is possible that participants had a biased view of their learning or professional work. This study offers ideas and suggestions, but additional research is needed to understand how book clubs can contribute to DEI education.

CONCLUSION

Because residence life professionals have such a profound impact on students, it is crucial that they are committed to fostering inclusive, welcoming, and safe communities (Blimling, 2015; Foste, 2021; Galloway Burke et al., 2014; C. A. Kortegast, 2017; C. Kortegast & Croom, 2019; Pryor & Hoffman, 2020; Volpe & Jones, 2023). This study provides an in-depth look into the experiences of the participants of one DEI book club who learned new things from the book club in numerous ways and now approach their work differently. A book club can be a meaningful way to foster conversations about DEI, creating opportunities for participants to learn about themselves and others and to carry their learning with them into their professional work in residence life and beyond.

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DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What challenges might be associated with implementing a diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) book club program in your own institution?
2. The study participants consisted of entry- and graduate-level professionals. Would a similar program have the same effects for mid-level and higher professionals? Why or why not?
3. One of the most positive outcomes of the book club was strengthening feelings of empathy. What are other ways that workplaces can promote empathy towards both staff and students?
4. What books would you suggest for a DEI book club? Why?
5. This study focused on non-fiction books covering in-depth topics related to DEI. While fictional characters are less likely to prescribe changes to behavior, could they still be useful in encouraging empathy for a wider array of students?

Discussion questions were developed by Kaylee Hogness, residence hall coordinator at the University of Delaware in Newark.