Burnout in Resident Assistants.

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Alexander Astin’s (1999) theory of student involvement states that student time and energy are finite resources. Student leaders go beyond involvement and dedicate their time and energy towards creating experiences and opportunities for other students (Astin, 1999). Boundaries become hard to manage when students live and work in the same environment, such as with Resident Assistant (RA) positions. This study examines the experiences of Resident Assistants and their relationship with burnout while in the RA position at a medium sized, private, Jesuit University in the Pacific Northwest. Through individual participant interviews the findings include that RAs face a significant amount of role ambiguity, that their supervisors have a strong impact on their RA experience, they devalue their personal experiences as RAs, and that the benefits ultimately outweigh the costs of the RA position. Implications of this research provide insight as to how future RAs can be supported in their position.

Keywords: resident assistants, burnout, student leaders, residence halls

PROBLEM STATEMENT AND PURPOSE

Problem Statement

In Astin’s (1999) theory of student involvement, it was determined that the most important and pervasive environmental factor that supported student involvement was the student’s residence. Living in a campus residence was positively related to retention regardless of institutional type, sex, race, ability, or family background (Astin, 1999). “The theory of student involvement explicitly acknowledges that the psychic and physical time and energy of students are finite” (Astin, 1999). Some of the first people students meet when moving on campus are most likely housing staff members, such as RAs. The first opportunities for involvement a student will encounter is in a residence hall, most likely a form of residence hall government followed closely by RA recruitment. As student affairs administrators continually push students to become involved and dedicate time and energy outside the classroom to benefit their own development as students, less encouragement has been given to looking at the depth of certain commitments and balancing this time and energy effectively. The RA position is a unique position that is unlike most other jobs and careers outside of universities. Furthermore, the RA position usually has the longest job description in a housing department and typically includes the catch all phrase of “other duties as assigned” (Butler & Campbell, 2003). Unclear and expanding job duties are the tip of the iceberg when looking at burnout in RAs.

In the 1980s and into the 1990s there was a significant amount of research that looked at RAs in some capacity. In 1999, a study that looked at RAs and their sense of self-efficacy suggested that RA training should include sessions that support the development of self-efficacy (Denzine & Anderson, 1999). Since then, research on RAs has significantly dropped, and ironically, RA duties have generally expanded. When Susan Komives (1992) looked at the nature of interactions between Resident Directors (RD’s) and RA staffs back in 1992,
regardless of the institution type, campus climates were vastly different from what they are today. RAs and RDs now have e-mail, cell phones, and social media in the workplace; these additions drastically change the work environment and consequently, the ever-expanding job duties for RAs. In addition, RAs are not the only ones confused about their position; residents are as well (Pratt, Hunter, & Matthews, 1993). Resident expectations of RAs are an important foundation for constructive relationships in the residence hall community (Pratt et al., 1993). In a qualitative study from 2007 that examined the unique experiences of RAs who identify as sophomores, there were many quotes from participants detailing how they did not entirely understand the position and its duties until those duties arose (Schaller & Wagner, 2007). In training, RAs are given a toolbox of skills that are designed to be general enough to help them triage any situation that may arise until support can be given by a professional staff member; not every situation they may triage while in the position will be directly covered in training due to time constraints.

Purpose

The purpose of this study is to expand the limited and outdated pool of research to include the experiences of modern day RAs and their relationship to burnout. RAs are an important group of student leaders that are in the pipeline to become student affairs educators; if student affairs educators cannot successfully support student leaders in their development, let alone the part time RA position, these future student affairs educators may burn out before they reach graduate school. The limited research available on burnout in RAs indicates that burnout is an issue, and further research needs to be conducted. Examining burnout in RAs is important because student affairs educators have a purpose to holistically develop students. Student leaders are not developing holistically if they are exhibiting behavior consistent with burnout in their leadership positions that educators encourage them to pursue. This study focuses on the experiences of returning RAs and their suggested support for burnout with training incoming RAs.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Theme #1: Role Ambiguity

The most prevalent theme throughout the current research involving RA burnout was role ambiguity. Role ambiguity for RAs has increased over time because these roles have drastically expanded beyond the catch all phrase at the end of their employment contract that typically includes, “other duties as assigned”. Blimling (1998) described the role of the RA as always being available—for nearly 24 hours a day, sometimes for weeks at a time. In addition, Butler and Campbell (2003) agree stating, “The tasks assigned to RAs have been expanding continually as the result of changes in the law, policies, students, relationships with parents, and new program approaches”. It would not be unusual for an RA position description to be the longest out of all the positions in a housing department (Butler & Campbell, 2003). RAs perform the duties of
counselor and disciplinarian, safety and first aid officer, conflict resolver, and crisis manager (as cited in Twale & Burrell, 1995). Additionally, “RAs are expected to foster environments that encourage cooperative living, to render advice and assistance, to refer students to other professionals, and to facilitate training when necessary on topics and issues of concern to residents” (Twale & Burrell, 1995). In a qualitative study looking at the unique experiences of RAs who identify as sophomores, there were many direct quotes from participants detailing how they did not entirely understand the position and its duties until those duties arose (Schaller & Wagner, 2007). “RAs did not always know or fully understand what it was that they agreed to in taking the job. They seemed in many cases to have a naïve view of what the experience would be like” (Schaller & Wagner, 2007). Another portion of role ambiguity for RAs also originates from the role conflict they face as peer leaders with authority. Fuehrer and McGonagle (1988) stated, “when the peer role clashes with the rule enforcer role, RAs may struggle to reconcile the conflicting demands” (Everett & Loftus, 2011; Fuehrer & McGonagle, 1988).

**Theme #2: Resident Assistant Relationship with Supervisor**

Another prevalent theme woven throughout the literature is the relationship dynamic RAs have with their direct supervisor, usually called a Resident Director (RD). RA burnout is related to the drop in desirability of the RD position for graduate students and entry-level professionals “...and the lack of interest in graduate assistant positions and RD positions as documented by this study may be a reflection of the perception of stress associated with the RA position” (Belch & Mueller, 2003). Furthermore, “the nature of the interaction between [RDs] and their staff of RAs are important in understanding RA motivation, satisfaction, and effectiveness” (Komives, 1992). Another study looking at the leadership development of RAs suggested further research explore the RD’s relationship with the RA as a way of measuring leadership development (Posner & Brodsky, 1993). The support and community of the residence life staff is a popular motivator for RAs. Staff team development was the second highest job satisfier in a study that looked at the motivation of RAs (Bierman & Carpenter, 1994). Due to the many roles RAs have, it is necessary for RAs to have multiple self-efficacy beliefs in order to be successful. “Supervisors must model self-efficacious thoughts and behaviors... supervisors can model persistence in their efforts to positively influence the development of a student...” (Denzine & Anderson, 1999). Supervisors, such as RDs, need to exhibit behaviors, such as self-efficacy, that foster growth in their student leaders (RAs). Another dynamic within the RA and RD relationship is identities. However, in a study that examined work values between members and leaders, it was found that there was no relationship between demographic attributes or similarity in supervisor-subordinate dyadic relationships (Dose, 1999). It was work-based values that drew leaders and members together, not identities. (Dose, 1999).

**METHODOLOGY**

The methodology for this study uses a social constructivist framework (Creswell, 2014). Participants developed varied meanings through their experiences as RAs, which led to a complexity...
of intersecting views rather than narrow meanings into categories (Creswell, 2014). Understanding the specific context that RAs work and live in the same environment was a critical component to this study and reflective of the social constructivist framework. Ten central questions were created and half had one or more follow up questions, adding up to a total of twenty questions. This number of questions is more than what is recommended by Miles and Huberman (1994) in Creswell (2009), but after several rounds of revision it was clear that all twenty questions were necessary. The questions were developed to understand the motivations behind the RA position, the relationship between the challenges and the benefits of the position, the impact of stress from the position, and the overall preparation for the position.

DATA COLLECTION
This study used qualitative methodology to guide the data collection. By having individual interviews with open-ended questions for participants to answer, it gave greater depth and agency than any available techniques encompassed in quantitative methodology. Understanding the RA experience and how burnout in the RA position has affected the experiences of students with differing identities provides multiple intersecting lenses on a singular topic.

The data collection for this inquiry addresses diversity, social justice, and ethical leadership in higher education in a multitude of facets. Starting with the participant demographics, the identities represented in the individual interviews are not representative of the RA staff holistically, on-campus student population, or the entire student population at the university. There are many identities not represented in these focus groups because the total population of returning RAs is small. The five RAs that participated in this study make up .19 of the RA population, .005 of the on-campus student population, and .00138 of the university population. If the structures of the university’s department of Housing and Residence Life does not work from an asset based framework and contain support for Yosso’s (2005) communities of cultural wealth, it is not surprising that the student leader population within residence life is not representative of the diversity and social justice mission that the university claims to uphold (Yosso, 2005).

FINDINGS
During the interviews it was clear that no RA experience is exactly like another. The findings that emerged from the thematic coding include role ambiguity, the impact of the supervisory relationship, the devaluation of personal experience, and the holistic worth of the RA position.

Role Ambiguity
As made prevalent in the literature, “RA” not only can stand for Resident Assistant but can also stand for role ambiguity. Sheila, during her interview, described with energy and emotion how she felt thrown into the position, “Um but you don’t necessarily know, you don’t know it, you don’t feel it until you’re in it…Oh my god I’m being thrown into it!” All of the RAs interviewed mentioned that at some point during their time in the position it was overwhelmingly unclear what their job duties included. Meredith described that training does the best that it can to prepare RAs, but skills in the RA
position are not always something that can be taught in an example scenario. Meredith explained, ...it wasn't anything necessarily anything that could be taught beforehand it was more just like you gotta get in there and feel it out especially because we could sit here and say like you know scenario one this could happen, this or this way, this could happen, [and then] the absolute third way that no one thought about will happen.

RAs are taught a variety of skills throughout training that align with certain protocols. However, knowing the unpredictability of the job, RAs are expected to use their critical thinking and problem solving skills to handle any situation that comes their way, whether that be a standard scenario practiced during “Behind Closed Doors” in training or a unique variation composed of several different types of crisis responses. The ambiguity of what unique situations may arise while in the position is what cannot be covered during training.

**Supervisory Relationship**

Also prevalent in the literature was the theme of the impact of the supervisory relationship between the RA and their direct supervisor. Max early in his interview spoke about how he feels his supervisor was more of a big sister to him,

Ashley (ARD)\(^2\) has always been there for me for the past two years. So she’s been very much a big sister more than a mom- even though I told her once ‘oh you’re like a mom to me’ she's more of a big sister to me.

The one participant to not talk about the impactful relationship with their supervisor was Sheila, who consequently was on a staff where her supervisor resigned over winter break and had a new supervisor directly after spring break.

I think that the frustrations that like the RAs are having as a staff can be really exhausting for like Carrie and Mark too, but like Mark just got here and Mark is also transitioning and I had a really good talk with Mark yesterday ‘cause I don't want him to feel like ‘Oh my god’ like the way that our staff dynamic is going right [now] it should get better after the conversation that we had on Wednesday. It's kinda like it to me it feels like somehow it went from like the RAs vs. senior team and not that we're all collectively on the same team together which is like a really-not like- it's like a really negative - it's a really negative environment to be in.

Sheila also went on to describe how she felt abandoned after her supervisor left mid-year.

All of the other participants spoke about positive and impactful relationships with their supervisor; in many cases, impactful enough to convince them to return to the RA position for another year.

**Devaluation of Personal Experience**

One of the interesting themes that emerged was the consistent devaluing of personal experiences. All but one of the participants explained that they are the anomaly and that their personal experience in struggling to manage time is not something

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\(^1\) Behind Closed Doors is a training procedure used to prepare new RAs to approach any situation they may face while on the job. Situations can range from roommate mediations, quiet hours violations, alcohol violations, sexual assaults, etc.

\(^2\) Assistant Resident Director works under the Resident Director holding similar responsibilities in supporting the RA staff.
common across the spectrum of RAs. Max described how his class schedule has interfered with his ability to balance time similar to three of the other participants, “Uh this quarter has been very challenging to balance that and just because of how my class schedule has been. Um maybe–I’ve had little to no free time this quarter uh. And it’s been very stressful…” Meredith, the one participant to claim that she does balance time management and stress as a returning RA, talked about how it took her an entire year to get there:

Um so the RA stuff–between this year and last year I’ve learned how to depend on my co a lot more, I think last year I was kinda the person that was I’m just going to do it all because it’s easier for me to just do it. And this year Derrick and I have just we just work really well together and we’re really good at delegating tasks to each other. And so it’s been good to like depend on and share you know work loads with him so that I can have other time to do like academic things and so it's a lot of planning out my life and my planner is color coded and full of lots of things...

Meredith’s increased belief in her skills and abilities from collaboration with Derrick is consistent with the literature pertaining to RAs sense of self-efficacy. Denzine and Anderson (1999) described self-efficacy as an individual’s belief system about their competencies and abilities in a given situation. RAs need multiple self-efficacy beliefs in order to be successful; Derrick was able to be one source of fostering self-efficacy in Meredith. Knowing that another theme of role ambiguity emerged, it is not surprising that the theme of
devaluing of personal experiences also emerged based on the narratives shared in this study.

**Worth It**

The final theme to emerge from the participant interviews was that despite the role ambiguity, challenges, and potential burnout, ultimately the RA position is worth it. Gillian in her interview described how there are a lot of transferrable skills in the RA position, “I think there’s so much in the RA job that you can like take out and plop into whatever role you’re in.” Benni similarly described that the benefit is much more than the cost,

...it might sound selfish-ish but um I think the benefit is much more than the cost um I mean I’m losing friendships or relationship meaning with people but in return I’m getting this experience that I might not have gotten if I had not taken this job. You know friendships you can always try to revive later on in life you know after school and such, but you know this role the benefit that I’m getting from this job like the leadership like it’s hard to obtain outside of school especially college so I think, I mean you get this experience you know you can apply this to your future in a way.

Despite feeling unprepared and thrown into the position, struggling to balance time management and stress, and having at some point felt the burnout from the position, in the end all of the RAs shared that the benefits outweigh the sacrifices made.

**IMPLICATIONS**

Given the findings from this study, there are clear implications for residence life professionals as well as further research. The purpose of this study was to expand the literature to include current RAs
and reveal potential sources of RA burnout. Belch and Mueller (2003) explored a degree of burnout in professionals and stated that literature in the 1980s and into the 1990s showed limited documentation about intervening and addressing the issues of burnout. Consistent with the limited research available, this study found that RAs struggle with a multitude of factors contributing to burnout, but ultimately stay in the position because the benefits outweigh the costs. As residential life professionals, this leads to the question if the ends justify the means; is pushing our student leaders into levels of burnout for the sake of growth and development ethical? RA job duties have expanded but their support in the RA position has not. Is there a way to foster this growth and development without pushing student leaders to their limits?

This study addresses diversity, social justice, and ethical leadership in higher education in several ways. The RAs that participated in this study come from diverse backgrounds with differing intersections of privilege. In the university’s mission, it is stated that the university is dedicated to empowering leaders for a just and humane world. In a socially just world, everyone should have the same rights, opportunities, and equitable support for achieving success. Although having a small sample size, it is clear that the university is working to support the student success in a diverse population of students through the theme of the position being worth it. Finally, higher education administrators have the ethical responsibility to create support systems to address how RA job duties have continually expanded over the past twenty years. It is unethical to have student leadership positions that are inadequately supported for success on a campus that values creating a socially just and humane world.

REFERENCES


Caroline Bubbers is an assistant resident director for Housing and Residence Life at Seattle University. She will earn her MA in Student Development Administration from Seattle U in June 2016.