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IMPACT OF BEING A RESIDENT ASSISTANT ON STUDENT'S ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Brian P. Donahue

University of Nebraska-Lincoln, brian.donahue28@gmail.com

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IMPACT OF BEING A RESIDENT ASSISTANT
ON STUDENT'S ACADEMIC SUCCESS

by

Brian Donahue

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of
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IMPACT OF BEING A RESIDENT ASSISTANT
ON STUDENTS' ACADEMIC SUCCESS

Brian Donahue, M.A.

University of Nebraska, 2015

Adviser: Barbara Y. LaCost

The purpose of this mixed-methods study was to examine the experiences and needs of resident assistants at Great Plains University institution to better understand the impact that being a resident assistant has on the resident assistant's academic success. A quantitative survey was created and sent to 175 resident assistants to their academic success strategies. In addition, six resident assistants were interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of the multiple roles assumed, the support systems in place, and the studying habits in which they engage regularly.

There were two research questions that guided the exploration of this study. The first research question of this study was what are the core practices that resident assistants engage in in their goal of being academically successful? This was divided into three sub-questions: (a) What support systems are in place for RAs to be academically successful? (b) How do resident assistants' experiences differ among the varied environments in which they serve? (c) How do the different roles of RAs affect their academic success? The second and last research question is what overall purpose are these resident assistants fulfilling?

The findings of this study inform student affairs practitioners that work within Residence Life Departments and directly supervise undergraduate staffs that work in the

residence halls. The findings indicated that resident assistant's motivations, behaviors, environment, and academic success can influence one another and determine if they persist in the resident assistant role. This mixed-methods research study provides recommendations for practices as well as recommendations for future research.

Dedication

This thesis is for all the amazing student leaders on college campuses across the country that take the form of a Resident Assistant. You do so much for higher education and are always the first to support, care, and react. I write this in the hopes that your stories help inform the best practices of Residence Life programs and help guide future students in their ambitions to balance both the role of Resident Assistant and academic responsibilities.

Acknowledgements

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To Kim, my best friend, thank you for teaching me how to be selfless and for pushing me to be the best version of myself that I can be. You bring focus to my life when my mind is cluttered, you helped me stay grounded through the ups and down of graduate school and could not be more thankful you came into my life. I love you, A lot A lot. Next, to my parents, for your love and support for when I had the crazy idea to move eight hours away to great state of Nebraska. You support me in all my crazy endeavors, and I wouldn't be half the person I am today without your endless encouragement. You both have been my biggest advocates and best cheerleaders, and I am so lucky to call you both my parents. Thank you both for all you've done to get me to this point in my life. To my sisters, thank you for always being willing to lend an ear to listen and offer advice. I could not be prouder of what you both have accomplished. To Susan B., the endless phone calls, listening to my rants, and processing class discussion with me, thank you. You challenged me when I was being stubborn and helped me think

critically about who I am and how my identities and experiences impact what I'm learning in the classroom.

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Chapter One

Introduction and General Information

Much of the college experience for the traditional undergraduate-aged student is attributed to their experience living in the residence halls. For some of our students on campus, their experiences of living in the residence halls do not end after their first or second year. These students opt to serve as resident assistants. The resident assistant (RA) position at higher education institutions is a position of great influence and responsibility. RAs have the opportunity to interact with many students through the various roles in which they engage as resident assistants. These students are most often seen as a student, administrator, role model, teacher, and counselor (Bliming, 1998). Although the RA position can vary from campus to campus, RAs typically are asked to develop community on their floors, enforce policies, serve as peer mentors, and even be a friend to residents, among other responsibilities (Buchard, 2001).

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and needs of resident assistants at a public research institution to better understand the impact that being a resident assistant has on the resident assistant's academic success. Building upon my own experiences as a RA and the literature on residence life and academic success, I planned this study as an observation of the experiences of resident assistants in their attempts to balance being both a student and a resident assistant. I sought deeper understanding of the multiple roles played by RAs, the support systems in place for RAs, and the studying habits in which they engage regularly.

Research Questions

The following research questions were established to guide this research:

1. What are the core practices that resident assistants engage in in their goal of being academically successful?
 - a. What support systems are in place for RAs to be academically successful?
 - b. How do resident assistants' experiences differ among the varied environments in which they serve?
 - c. How do the different roles of RAs affect their academic success?
2. What overall purpose are these Resident Assistants fulfilling?

These research questions were addressed through one quantitative survey and one, semi-structured interview. The survey focused on gaining a broad understanding of the Resident Assistants' interpretation of their environments that helped create the foundation for the interviews. The three sub-questions brought specific experiences to the surface to show the varied experiences of Residents Assistants and how they negotiate their needs between Residence Life and academics. The study was created in the hopes of giving resident assistants an outlet to share their experiences so that student affairs practitioners can better adapt to the needs of these student leaders on campus.

Research Design

This study used a mixed methods approach to develop an understanding of the ways in which resident assistants' experiences impact their academic success as undergraduate students. To accomplish this purpose, 175 resident assistants were surveyed using a researcher-developed survey that assessed academic success strategies. In addition, six resident assistants were interviewed to gain a deeper understanding of the

multiple roles assumed, the support systems in place, and the studying habits in which they engage regularly.

Definition of Terms

Mixed Methods—Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) described mixed methods as: “Mixed methods research involves both collecting and analyzing quantitative data” (p. 6). Though the two methods have different methodologies and foundational purposes, Creswell and Plano Clark stated that the need exists for both approaches in some areas of study. “The combination of qualitative and quantitative data provides a more complete picture by noting trends and generalizations as well as in-depth knowledge of participants’ perspectives” (p. 33).

Academic Success—For this study, academic success is defined as the scholastic achievement brought on through effort, progress to degree, making efficient use of academic resources on campus, establishing purpose, and participating in the learning process (Howe & Post, 1997).

Resident Assistant (RA)—An RA is an undergraduate student who lives on a residence hall floor, who is responsible for development of programs and activities on the floor and in the hall, and who serves as resource and enforces policies and procedures that ensure the safety of residents (Great Plains University, 2013).

Delimitations and Limitations

The delimitations of narrowing the scope of this study are that the students had to identify as current Resident Assistants, in good academic standing (2.5 minimum GPA), and be 19 years of age. This ensured that participants were all of the age to engage in this research. Furthermore, the process created a participant pool of Resident Assistants (a)

who had at least one semester of experience of being a Resident Assistant, (b) who were committed to a full time academic course load, and (c) who were meeting the minimum qualifications to stay in their positions. An additional delimitation was that all students who engaged with the quantitative survey and qualitative interviews were students at the same public research institution. No other criteria were used to recruit participants.

I served as the primary investigator and recruited participants through the roster of the 2014-2015 Resident Assistant Community through emails. Participants volunteered by responding to the survey and then finding my contact information at the end of the survey, sometimes contacting me weeks later. No information is known about the Resident Assistants who did not take the quantitative survey, but as a graduate student in a Student Affairs cohort, I perceived that the students who chose to participate in this study were those that work for my graduate-level peers in the Residence Life community.

Assumptions

I approached the study with the assumption that students who worked within Residence Life had a passion for peer mentorship and that being a Resident Assistant was a salient identity of theirs while they were in those roles. During the interview process, I assumed that academic success was a priority for these students and that many of them had set up personal success methods to assure this end goal when that was not always the case. Additionally, I held predetermined notions of the kinds of experiences these students might be having from having been a Resident Assistant as an undergraduate student.

Significance of the Study

The multiple roles that Resident Assistants manage on campus impact their approach to academic success and in-classroom learning. Understanding this dynamic can help better prepare future Resident Assistants in managing their academic and Residence Life responsibilities as well as prepare Hall Directors some best practices when supervising and supporting a team of Resident Assistants.

Conclusion

This study explored the self-reported behavioral characteristics for Resident Assistants as they negotiated the balance between their Residence Life job expectations and an academic course load. The next chapter provides contextual information on relevant literature regarding the history of Residence Life, the role of a Resident Assistant, and factors that are affiliated with academic success.

Chapter Two

Selected Literature Review

The role of the residence hall on a college campus has been researched thoroughly. Current research continues to report new findings that address effects on RAs. In this chapter, I provide a review of literature that focuses on (a) the history of residence life, (b) the role of the resident assistant (RA), (c) support, and (d) environmental factors that have linked to achieving academic success.

A Brief History of Residence Life

A residential hall can be thought of as a microcosm for the world in which we live; the environment is becoming increasingly diverse, mixing students of different racial and ethnic backgrounds, sexual orientations, mental and physical challenges and political affiliations, and a range of other characteristics or issues (Harper & Quayle, 2009). The purpose of residence halls and their staff functionalities have endured multiple changes since inception. The early Colonial colleges assumed a responsibility for “conduct” and “character building” *in loco parentis* on the part of these colleges (Upcraft & Pilato, 1982). During the 1960s and 1970s, civil rights were prominent efforts that influenced the role of college staffs to include more proactive courses of action when working with college students (Schroeder & Mable, 1994). In the current setting, university housing has reclaimed the previous attitude of legal liability and assumed duty to care and protect the student that serves as a basis for the more structured living environment expected by families of residence hall students and by most students themselves (Winston & Anchors, 1993).

The roots of higher education in the United States can be traced to the 13th century universities of Europe and Great Britain, which include Paris, Oxford, and Bologna (Schuh et al., 2011). The early Colonial colleges tried duplicating the early examples of British universities “collegial” atmosphere that resulted from the interaction of students and faculty (Winston & Anchors, 1993). In the premature American institutions, there was one clear distinction between its system and the British schools. Faculty took charge of the student conduct. Colonial colleges had faculty that assumed roles of instructor and student disciplinarian, thus showcasing the earliest form of a student affairs staff on a college campuses (Schroeder & Mable, 1994). There were multiple factors that led to the faculty assuming these new roles; a major contributor was the distance that the students of the college had to travel to attend. Faculty assumed the substitute role of family and provided a religious environment in the early colleges (Schuh et al., 2011).

During the 18th century, the American colleges and universities continued to expand rapidly, and faculty continued their previous self-appointed role of *in loco parentis*.

Student personnel workers were seen as the caretakers who looked after the welfare needs of students. They were expected to serve in place of the parents, ensuring that students adhered to rules that would continue their development and encourage behaviors and values appropriate for a college-educated individual. (Schuh et al., 2011)

Colonial colleges imposed a rigid system of schedules and behavioral reform on its students. For students who did not live up to the expectations of the behavioral code, there were harsh penalties for not meeting the school standards (Rentz & Saddlemire, 1988). Punishments included public confessions, corporal punishment, and forced service

in households of religious leaders as well as possible expulsion from college (Bliming & Miltenberger, 1984; Rentz & Rentz & Saddlemire, 1988).

University presidents established the position of a dean who oversaw student behavior and conduct. This role evolved into the positions titled Dean of Men and Dean of Women. As new roles began to take shape, the position of housemother was introduced to serve as a “control factor” for women living in the dormitories (Winston & Anchors, 1993). Housemothers took over the roles of behavior enforcer and *in loco parentis* that were held previously by faculty members. Soon after the establishment of housemothers, students were enlisted to help monitor their housing units. These students eventually became academic assistants such as proctors, monitors and preceptors. These positions served as the foundation for the current Resident Assistant position (Upcraft & Pilato, 1982). The academic assistants reported to Deans of Women and Deans of Men. They oversaw much of the student life outside of academia. This organizational arrangement proved effective until after World War II. Due to the age of the students returning to campus after the war, the focus for preceptors switched from serving all student attendees to serving undergraduate women.

Once the college environment began transition into the civil rights movement of the 1960s and 1970s, changes in the dormitories were observed (Upcraft & Pilato, 1982). This period has been termed the “residence hall years” (DeCoster & Mable, 1974) as residence hall living began to become more incorporated into the total higher education experience. The role of preceptors evolved into a role more like the mentor role seen today; some of the first changes observed were expectations of programming and helping students (Blimling & Miltenberger, 1984). There was a change in language around the

campuses; Resident Assistant and Residence Hall became the commonly used terms for Residence Life. Residence Life was believed to enhance academic success in a variety of ways due to the environments these communities tended to offer. Riker (2008) posited that “[t]he impact of residential learning stems from two conditions. First, in residential living, the ‘teachers’ are primarily fellow students. Second, the informal environment and rich range of problems and relationships offer[ed] many opportunities for learning” (p. 83).

The Resident Assistant

The Resident Assistant position has been an ever-evolving student position since its inception as a preceptor. “In addition to several work responsibilities, an RA is the frontline worker in university housing programs when responding to and managing the multitude of diverse issues in residence halls” (Bliming, 1998, p. #). RAs engage in rigorous training to be able to work with a wide spectrum of students that include, but is not limited to, students with multiethnic backgrounds, students with disabilities, and students with mental illness. RAs live and work within a college’s residential buildings and have major, comprehensive positions in student affairs, encompassing many roles and demands (Russell, Allen, & Jeff, 2001).

The RA has five main roles: student, administrator, role model, teacher, and counselor (Bliming, 1998). The logistical locations of RAs vary among colleges, but a main concern is the interpersonal relationships that RAs build with the residents throughout the academic year. RAs have duties that include checking in, checking out, closing the building for holiday breaks, counseling referrals, programming requirements, academic check-ins with students, building rounds in the evening hours, creating accurate

records of misconduct and other duties as assigned. As role models, RAs occupy positions of authority within the residence halls among students that are the same age or close to it. Because of the close dynamic between RAs and building residents, residents look up to RAs in the hall as leaders on campus (Blimling, 1998). When students come to campus they have many student leaders looking out for them, and for many the one within closest proximity is their RA. The RA role requires these students to teach campus behaviors to their floor/building residents of where they can find particular services, teach athletic culture, and give periodic updates about Residence Life. Finally, as a counselor, RAs are seen as trustworthy confidantes for students for personal issues, emotional traumas, transitions to college, and roommate conflicts.

Factors Affiliated with Academic Success

The literature about academic success varies greatly, and the research studying the academic nature of college students is abundant. Each author may define academic success in a different way depending on which student population is being observed; comparing admissions essays to aptitude, homework completion to grade point average, and the social transition to academic confidence are a few studies that have researched the different ways we can choose to look at academic success. Studies have indicated the important role that students' use of self-regulated learning strategies plays in their academic success (Zimmerman, 1990). The effects of that role indicate that students perform their potentials efficiently, and as a result of it, learning takes place. In the investigation, the use of self-regulated learning strategies was strongly associated with superior academic functioning (Zimmerman & Martinez-Pons, 1986). Results of these studies demonstrate that (a) we can interpret this term in a variety of ways, and (b) how

academic success is most often a function of an environment that provides the appropriate factors for students to be successful in their academic coursework.

Astin's Theory of Involvement (1984). When students are motivated it is expected that they are willing to get involved in their learning environments. Astin (1984) claimed that students involved in both the academic and interpersonal aspects of the collegiate experience show greater gains in student learning. He interpreted involvement as a student who devotes considerable amount of time to academic work, spends much time on campus, participates actively in student organizations and activities, and interacts often with staff (p. 292). Five postulates represent the entirety of the Involvement Theory set forth by Astin in 1984.

1. Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects. The objects may be highly generalized (the student experience) or highly specific preparing for a chemistry examination).
2. Regardless of its object, involvement occurs along a continuum; that is, different students manifest different degrees of involvement in a given object, and the same student manifests different degrees of involvement in different objects at different times.
3. Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features. The extent of a student's involvement in academic work, for instance, can be measured quantitatively (how many hours the student spends studying) and qualitatively (whether the student reviews and comprehends reading assignments or simply stares at the textbook and daydreams).

4. The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program.
5. The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement. (Astin, 1993, p. 519).

As noted by Evans et al. (2010), Astin's Involvement Theory is unique because rather than being entirely descriptive like most theories of development, Astin focused on the facilitation of development, arguing that "for student learning and growth to occur, students need to actively engage in their environment, and educators need to create opportunities for in- and out-of-classroom involvement" (p. 31).

Motivation. The general consensus is that motivation is affected (a) by one's views on their own ability to complete tasks and (b) that there is a positive correlation between motivation and finishing tasks (Van Etten, 2008; Pintrich & De Groot, 1990). Results of these studies indicated a positive correlation between students' motivations and their academic successes in college. Van Etten (2008) found that college students had two primary goals, to get good grades and to graduate. Astin (1984) wrote that student motivation and extra-curricular involvement are suggested to influence students' learning outcomes.

Mentoring. In addition to motivations of achieving academic success, Jacobi (1991) asserted that a link existed between mentoring and academic success. One study assessed the relationship between natural mentoring and academic success among undergraduates. Erkut and Mokro (1984) reported results in which the mentor

relationships are by-products rather than causes of high achievement. Multiple descriptions of mentoring programs designed to promote academic success are available in the higher education literature (e.g., American Association of State Colleges and Universities, 1985; Dunphy et al., 1987; Ellis, 1988; Johnson, 1989; King & Bireley, 1982; Kramer, Bryan, Rood, & Smith, 1982; O'Brien, 1989; Sharkey et al., 1987). Among these studies, diversity in the components of mentoring programs exist in the ways in which the authors define academic success (e.g., grades, credits earned, or standardized test scores) while others emphasized graduate rates and interest in graduate school or professional school (Johnson, 1989; Merriam, 1998; Wrightsman, 1981).

Mentoring provides an excellent opportunity for individual academic success. Mentoring programs implemented in the context of higher education have been found to show positive effects for mentees, as well as for mentors and universities. Mentees achieve better academic performance (Campbell & Campbell, 1997). The outcomes of mentoring programs have been discussed in the literature, but individual differences in realizing mentoring styles are rarely taken into consideration. The academic success of mentoring programs can be attributed to how mentors fulfill different mentoring functions. In the context of higher education, peer mentoring has proven to be effective in supporting undergraduate students (Crisp & Cruz, 2009).

Living on campus. Results of multiple studies suggest that residential students have considerable advantages over commuter students pertaining to student success and development in college (Astin, 1993; Chickering, 1974, Tinto, 1993). The main advantages to living on-campus revolve around the more attainable opportunities for academic integration of using the resources only available on campus and the possibility

of interacting with faculty. Edwards & McKelfresh (2002) stated that living in the residence halls, specifically living-learning communities (i.e., academically orientated housing environments), positively contributed to students' social integration and academic success, especially for students of underrepresented populations.

Employment. Students often seek employment in order to meet monetary requirements for college. "The Bureau of Labor Statistics (2009) reports that 76% of part-time and 39% of full-time college students are employed," (Howe & Post, 1997). Riggert et al. (2006) suggested, "The growing employment rate among undergraduates indicates that students are increasingly forced to work in order to meet the monetary requirements for college. They(sic) suggest that universities can no longer expect that students will devote their full attention to meeting academic demands" (p. 78). The key factors to consider regarding an employed undergraduate student is to consider number of hours worked, motivational beliefs, self-efficacy, goal orientation, time management and help-seeking (Howe & Post, 1997).

Employment among undergraduate students suggests that time spent on paid employment can promote (Cox, 2006) academic achievement. Howe & Post, (1997), in a study that investigated how employment impacted college students' academic performance in a public university, reported:

Results showed that work status by itself was not predictive of academic achievement, however, other aspects of work, such as reasons for working, hours worked and relevance of work experience were found to significantly influence achievement. Specifically, the number of hours worked to gain experience and develop skills and knowledge was associated with higher GPAs, while number of hours worked out of boredom was associated with decreased GPAs. (p. ##)

For the purpose of this research project, I interpret academic success through an educational achievement scheme. Academic success includes making progress toward a degree, making efficient use of campus resources, establishing a purpose, and participating in the learning process (Howe & Post, 1997).

Looking Ahead

An overview of the history and importance of residence life, insight into the roles and expectations of RAs, definition of academic success, and the environmental/support factors that lead to academic success. In Chapter Three, I explain the methodology used for the current study.

Chapter Three

Methodology

As stated, the purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and needs of resident assistants at a public research institution to better understand the impact that being a resident assistant has on the resident assistant's academic success. The research was designed as a pragmatic, mixed methodology approach involving both qualitative and quantitative components. Although designed to accomplish different goals, Patton (2002) asserted that both research methodologies are complementary and can be combined effectively. By conducting qualitative research, a researcher can highlight the individual differences between subjects in a study, as well as create more detailed descriptions of the finding, while quantitative design provides more generalizable data. In this methodology chapter, I review the assumptions and rationale associated with the methodology, the research questions, the selection of participants and sampling, the instrumentation, data collection procedures, and data analysis.

Assumptions and Rationale for a Mixed Methods Research Design

Stayhorn (2006) stated, "Many tend to describe quantitative and qualitative methodologies as if the two were not two halves of a whole (Smith, 1983)." He stated,

While there are significant differences in the underlying assumptions of these two approaches, fundamentally, they represent different way of knowing or epistemologies . . . A number of experts argue that both should be used, quantitative and qualitative research methods, one with the other, to understand more fully and complexities of human existence (Fry, et al., 1981; Smith, 1986; Stage, 1992). (pp. 21-22)

According to Huysamen (1997), "descriptions of quantitative research typically discern a cycle of successive phases of hypothesis formulation, data collection, analysis and interpretation." Using a deductive approach, quantitative research seeks to establish facts,

make predictions, and test hypotheses that have already been stated. Data analysis of quantitative research is descriptive and statistical, striving to show that the world can be looked at in terms of one reality; this reality, when isolated in context, can be measured and understood, a perspective known as positivism (Gay & Airasian, 1999). Qualitative research is inductive (principles are derived from particular facts or instances). The qualitative research design describes emergent patterns that may help to describe, understand, develop, or discover phenomena being studied. These emergent patterns may help the researcher to develop a theory or compare them to existing theories (Creswell, 1994). “Qualitative methodologies are based on the assumption that knowledge is socially constructed and therefore not wholly describable or controllable (Stage, 1992)” (cited in Strayhorn, 2006, p. 21).

Phenomenological research is a form of qualitative human science research that examines an existential phenomenon through qualitative interviews with subjects that have experienced it. This interview evidence contributes to a greater understanding of the phenomenon through interpreted insights. Meaning is created, and knowledge is extended about the phenomenon (Moustakas, 1994). Quantitative research is deductive, meaning that conclusions necessarily follow from propositions stated by the subjects. In a quantitative research, a researcher tests a theory and measures variables (Creswell, 1994).

Strayhorn (2006, p. #) described quantitative research as:

Assigning numbers and symbols (e.g., X, Y) to constructs of interest—also known as variables (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 1998). Quantitative methodologies are based on positivistic perspectives that view the world and knowledge as objective and knowable. Under this frame, knowledge can be known in part and ultimately is completely describable and controllable. (Stage, 1992)

Creswell and Plano Clark (2007) identified three ways of mixing quantitative and qualitative data in an attempt to gain a better understanding of the subject undergoing study: merge by bringing together, connect by building on the other, or embed “so that one type of data provides a supportive role for other dataset” (p. 7). This cross-referencing triangulation of quantitative and qualitative results provides rich data in the search for a correlation of patterns and relationships within the results. A visual representation for this mixed methods design can be seen in Figures 1 and 2.

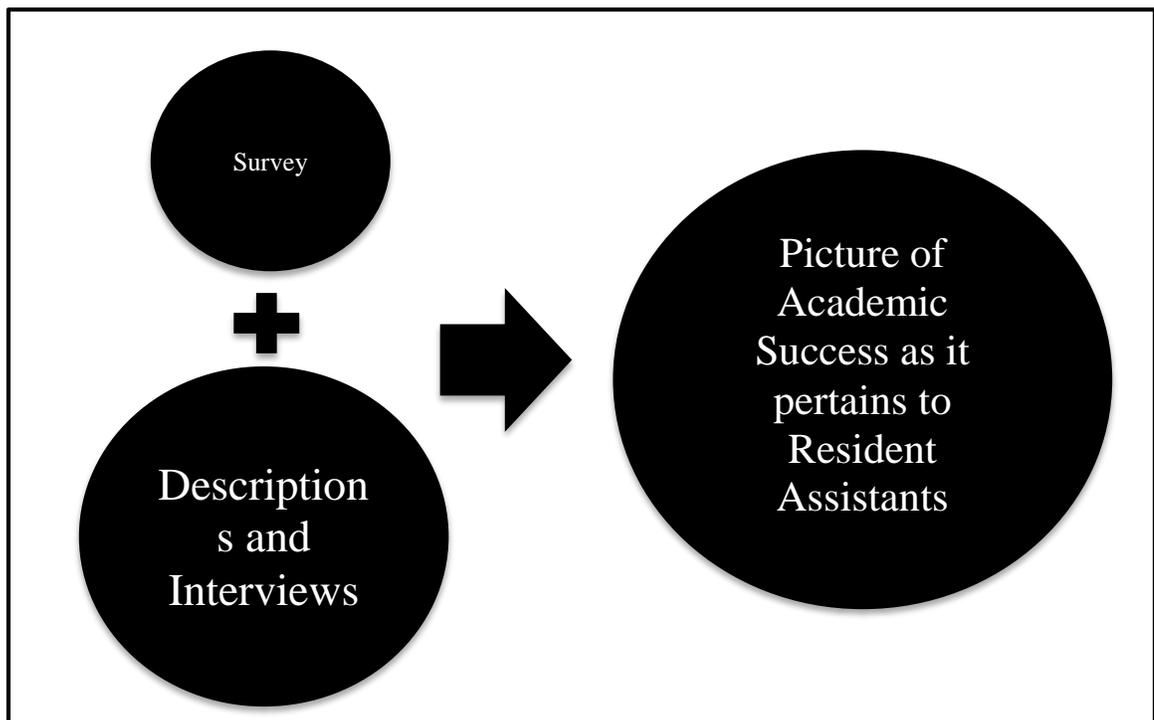


Figure 1. Concurrent triangulation.

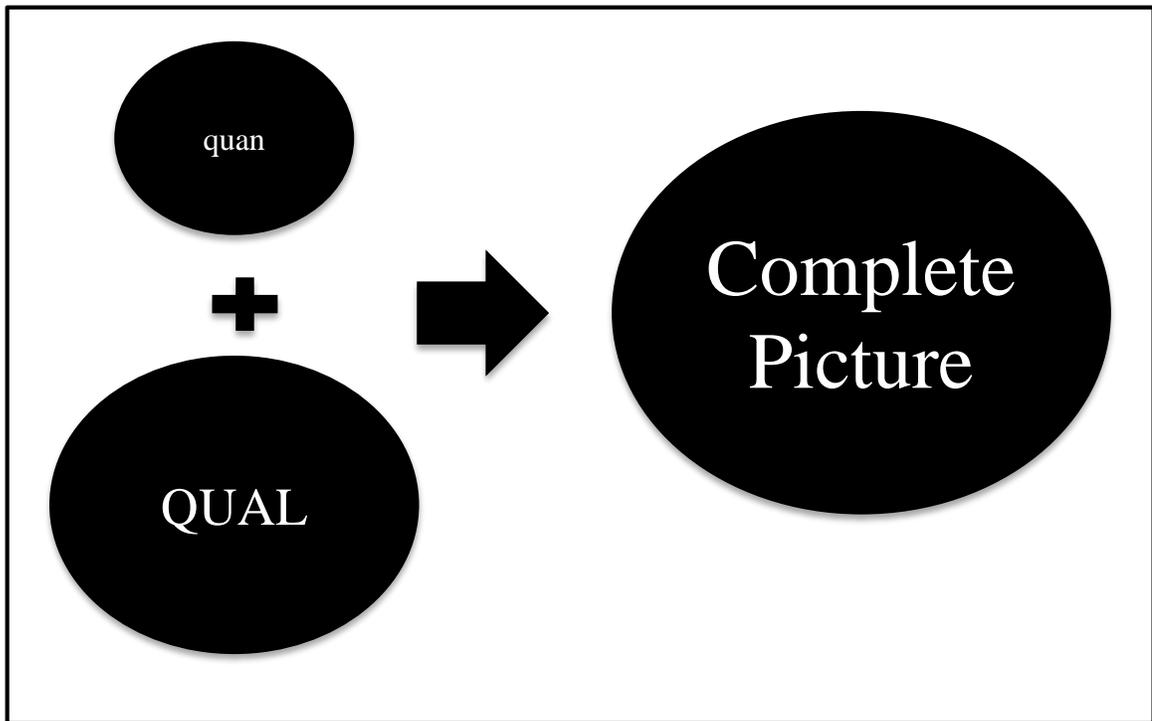


Figure 2. Concurrent triangulation in this study.

Research Questions and Instrumentation

The following research questions were established to guide this research:

1. What are the core practices that resident assistants engage in in their goal of being academically successful?
 - a. What support systems are in place for RAs to be academically successful?
 - b. How do resident assistants' experiences differ among the varied environments in which they serve?
 - c. How do the different roles of RAs affect their academic success?
2. What overall purpose are these Resident Assistants fulfilling?

Specific sub-questions were developed for each of the specific research questions, which correspond with learning outcomes found at Great Plains U:

The on-line survey instrument used in this study was created to explore the strategies resident assistants use to achieve academic success (Appendix C). It consisted of 13 questions, 5 of which were demographics, 1 of which was a request for a personal interview, and 7 that addressed specific areas of academic success and resident assistant activities and beliefs. The qualitative interview protocol built on this foundation to focus on the experiences as a Resident Assistant and how external factors affected their academic success. It consisted of 13 semi-structured questions (Appendix D).

The qualitative survey instrument was created to include the expected learning outcomes of the resident assistants at Great Plains University. The learning outcomes reflect strategic initiatives of the Residence Life Department as they work towards providing a positive, supportive and safe residential experience. The learning outcomes reflect their goal of creating communities that promote and support diverse environments that enhance experiential learning and personal development.

1. Respect

- a. The RA will foster an environment where residents listen to one another, and are aware of and sensitive to the individual and collective needs of the community.
- b. The RA will encourage residents to explore and reflects on the impact of their values, ethics, and worldview on our diverse global society.
- c. The RA will support and challenge residents to respond to differences, conflict, and disagreement with civility.

2. Involvement

- a. The RA will regularly connect with residents on an individual basis and encourage them to engage with other members of the floor, hall, and campus community.

- b. The RA will encourage active co-curricular participation in the UNL community through campus organizations and events.

3. Safety

- a. The RA will contribute to facilities' security by upholding campus policies and encourage residents to hold each other accountable as well.
- b. The RA will challenge their residents to engage in safe and healthy lifestyles.
- c. The RA will monitor residents and intervene when they notice that they are jeopardizing their own or others' physical and/or emotional safety.

4. Education

- a. The RA will facilitate a floor community where student success is a top priority.
- b. The RA will create educational programming opportunities using the 5 Pillars of Student Development: Academic Success, Broadening Horizons, Citizenship, Health and Wellness, and Finding Purpose.

Research Setting, Participants, and Sample

In order to perform research at Great Plains University, one must obtain research approval from the Institutional Review Board (IRB). The project was approved soon after submitting the initial proposal and was certified as exempt, category 2 status, which allowed participant recruitment to begin (see Appendix G). This study was conducted at a large, land grant, Midwestern institution, hereafter referred to as a Great Plains University (Great Plains U). More than 25,000 students attend Great Plains; it is located in a city of 250,000 that is growing rapidly with booming business and entertainment districts. Great Plains U is considered an urban campus; depending where you are on campus, you are only a block away from the state capital, business district, or city arena. All students involved in this study were 19 years old or older and were resident assistants (RAs) during the 2014-2015 academic year. According to the [university's] quick facts, 80 of the 6,621 students living in the residence halls during the fall of 2014 were resident

assistants. There was a pool of 175 resident assistants (personal communication with Assistant Director of Student Leadership Development and Diversity Initiatives, February, 2015) available for participation.

Data Collection

Each of the 175 students in the sampling frame was sent an initial email describing the research project. A total of 44 students chose to respond to the survey resulting in a response rate of 25%. Students participating in the survey (part one of the data collection) were prompted to contact me to submit a personal e-mail for consideration to participate in a 60 minute interview (part two of the data collection) about personal resident assistant experiences. Once the student expressed interested in participating in phase two, I sent a message stating that they had the choice of where to meet as long as it was on or near campus, quiet, and private. This allowed for the student to have some control over aspects of the interviewing process. Respondents were selected on a first-response basis; no prior relationships existed with the researcher. I provide the basic demographic information for each interview participant in the Table 1.

Data Analysis

Survey responses from the resident assistants who responded to the survey were entered into Qualtrics, an online survey management tool that makes data analysis convenient. Data screening occurred prior to data entry to ensure that each survey included in the data set was (a) 100% complete and (b) completed by a student who was at least 19 years old or older to comply with Institutional Review Board requirements. At the completion of data entry, data were downloaded into SPSS to complete data analysis procedures; descriptive statistics were established on the information gathered.

Table 1

Interview Participant Demographic Information

Interview	Pseudonym	Gender	Race	Year	Major
1	Tommy	Male	White	Senior	Finance
2	Allison	Female	White	Junior	Education
3	Patrick	Male	White	Senior	Pre-Law
4	Samantha	Female	Bi-racial	Sophomore	Education
5	Mallory	Female	White	Senior	History
6	Andrew	Male	White	Sophomore	Engineering

The transcripts of the taped interviews were coded for thematic analysis to seek and identify the structural similarities in their responses. Based on the responses, an attempt was made to create an understanding of the “recurring regularities” in the data collected (Merriam, 2009, p. 175). Once the transcribing was complete, I read through each transcription two to three times to continuously explore the text for common themes. Once I read over the interviews a few times, I coded the interviews based on key words and similar phrasing. Once I completed coding I grouped the similar interview responses into groups to create themes. Grouping the interview responses together allowed me to locate overlapping findings between the participants and better organize the emerging themes.

The intent of qualitative research is not to generalize across the entire population; instead, these themes were used to support what had already been highlighted from the data collected from the surveys. Results from all research instruments were integrated

and analyzed in an attempt to gain a better understanding of the complexities of the research.

Researcher Role-Reflexivity

To understand this research is to partly understand the motivations and lenses of the researcher. I am a 24 year old, Caucasian male born and raised in the suburbs of Chicago, Illinois. I believe that people are naturally good and that only by a horrific or tragic experience does that alter their morals and values. My faith and my family have been strong proponents of this and keeping me strong when I go through challenges in life. I believe that continuing the research and advancement to what we already know is something that can satisfy our search for discovery and new knowledge. Research gives professionals an outlet for their interests outside the professional realm and challenges the current boundaries of what we are practicing as professionals. Research leads to a better understanding and a deeper appreciation for the coursework we are interested in.

As an individual who has previously worked for a Residence Life program, I acknowledge that I came into this research with my own opinions of how Great Plains U residents react to the stressors of Resident Assistant responsibilities and academic requirements. I was a resident assistant during my sophomore year of college and have an extremely high regard for the training and hard work that these student leaders go through to help the university community. It is clear that this past experience has created some biases against GPU in my research, and I utilized member checks to ensure that my interpretations were an accurate representation of the participant's experiences as a resident assistant at GPU. The requirements of being a resident assistant varies among universities, but at the core of their job I have a deep respect for these student leaders

who give so much of themselves to a job with, sometimes, very little thank you. I believe that the my past experience of being a resident assistant and working within a university housing system has allowed me to help establish genuine and significant conversations with my research participants.

Summary

The purpose of this chapter was to describe the methods used in this research study. This included a thorough description of the participants, a detailed account of the data collection process, and overview of how data was analyzed. Results of the data collection and analysis process will be presented in Chapter Four.

Chapter Four

Findings

Introduction

The purpose of this study was to examine the experiences and needs of resident assistants at a public research institution to better understand the impact that being a resident assistant has on the resident assistant's academic success. In order to explore the students' experiences, the researcher developed the following research questions:

Research Questions

The following research questions were established to guide this research:

1. What are the core practices that resident assistants engage in in their goal of being academically successful?
 - a. What support systems are in place for RAs to be academically successful?
 - b. How do resident assistants' experiences differ among the varied environments in which they serve?
 - c. How do the different roles of RAs affect their academic success?
2. What overall purpose are these Resident Assistants fulfilling?

Quantitative Findings

The quantitative survey was sent out to 175 Resident Assistants at Great Plains University with a 25% response rate (44 responses). Tables 4 through 10 show the survey results that were collected from the Resident Assistant participants; the table results will be interpreted in Chapter Five.

Table 2

Demographic Characteristics of Survey Respondents

	N	%
Gender (N=44)		
Male	18	41
Female	26	59
Trans*	0	0
Class Standing (N=44)		
Second-Year Undergraduate Student	16	36
Third-Year Undergraduate Student	14	32
Fourth-Year Undergraduate Student	13	30
Fifth-Year Undergraduate Student	1	2
Cumulative GPA (N=44)		
4.0-3.75	7	15
3.74-3.50	8	18
3.49-3.25	10	27
3.24-3.0	14	32
2.99-2.75	4	9
2.74-2.50	1	2
2.49-2.25	0	0
2.24-2.9	0	0
Below 2.0	0	0

Trans is an umbrella term that refers to all of the identities within the gender identity spectrum.

**Cumulative GPA percentage totals 102% due to rounding.

What characteristics would you attribute to your academic success?

(Please choose five)

Table 3

Characteristics of Academic Success

Option	Answer	Responses	%
1	I make to-do lists	33	75
2	I leave my residence hall to study/complete assignments	10	23
3	I close my door to study/complete assignments	26	59
4	I limit technological distractions	11	25
5	I sit in the "T-Zone" of class either in front of class or down the middle aisle	16	36
6	I actively participate in class	21	48
7	I read materials before class	14	32
8	I print power points/faculty presentations to bring to class to take notes on	7	16
9	I highlight important information in my notes	12	27
10	I try to predict test questions based on notes	13	30
11	I formed a study group from students in the class	7	16
12	I met regularly with a tutor	1	2
13	I begin to study prior than the night before an exam	16	36
14	I prioritize tasks	30	68

Thirty-three RAs (75%) identified “to-do lists” as an important characteristic to achieving academic success. Thirty RAs (68%) identified “prioritizing tasks” as the second highest characteristic to achieving academic success.

On a scale of 1-10 with 10 the strongest relationship and 1 being the weakest relationship, what number value would you assign the relationship between the disruptive behaviors of your residents and your ability to achieve academic success.

Table 4

Relationship between Disruptive Behaviors and Ability to Achieve Academic Success

Relationship Strength Rating	Response	%
0	3	7
1	2	5
2	3	7
3	2	5
4	3	6
5	Q3	7
6	6	14
7	16	36
8	5	11
9	1	2
10	0	0

Twenty-seven (61%) of the Resident Assistants that took the survey clustered their responses when describing the strength of the relationship between disruptive behaviors of residents and ability to achieve academic success between the 6-8 response options. Interestingly, three RAs indicated no relationship between the two variables.

On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the most difficult and 1 being the easiest, what number value would you assign the difficulty of achieving academic success while being a Resident Assistant?

Table 5

Ranking of Difficulty Achieving Academic Success as a RA

Difficulty Rating	Response	%
0	0	0
1	0	0
2	3	7
3	4	9
4	3	7
5	4	9
6	9	20
7	10	23
8	11	25
9	0	0
10	0	0

Thirty (68%) of the Resident Assistants that took the survey clustered their responses for describing the relationship between achieving academic success and being a Resident Assistant between the 6-8 response options. The entire group of RAs clustered the strength of the relationship between 2 and 8.

On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being regular support and 1 being no support, what number value would you assign the support received from your hall director supervisor(s) when trying to achieve academic success?

Table 6

Support from Hall Director Supervisor

Strength of Support	Response	%
0	1	2
1	2	5
2	1	2
3	2	5
4	3	7
5	0	0
6	6	14
7	4	9
8	7	16
9	8	18
10	10	23

Thirty –five (89%) of the Resident Assistants that took the survey clustered their responses when describing the strength of support received from their hall director supervisors when trying to achieve academic success between the 6-10 response options.

Please describe the behaviors your hall director supervisor(s) engages in supporting you to achieve academic success.

The following statements reflect the general consensus of the students who responded with descriptions of how their hall director supervisor(s) support Resident Assistants in achieving academic success.

Significant Responses

- “My hall director encourages me to put my academics before my role as a RA.”
- “Conducts one on one meetings to process what’s going on in my life.”
- “I don’t feel like I can share what’s going on with my boss, I seek support elsewhere.”
- “My hall director offered support during our one-on-ones, but did not offer much further support than that.”
- “During our one on ones they ask me about my academics and make sure that I take time away fro RA duties to myself, During staff meetings they engage the staff in meaningful conversation that promote critical thinking.”
- “My boss doesn’t offer me much support.”
- “Is willing to accommodate for night when we have upcoming tests/large amounts of work to do.”
- “My boss sets GPA goals with me and sets up action plans on how to reach that goal.”
- “We have to give a weekly report as to how our classes are doing, the form allows us to write about an anxieties we have and then we will process that sheet in our one on one.”

On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the strongest relationship and 1 being the weakest relationship, what number value would you assign the relationship between the responsibilities you have for the residents on your floor and your ability to achieve academic success?

Table 7
Relationship between Responsibilities and Academic Success

Strength of Relationship	Response	%
0	0	0
1	0	0
2	2	5
3	0	0
4	2	5
5	10	23
6	8	18
7	12	27
8	4	9
9	5	11
10	1	2

Thirty (68%) of the Resident Assistants that took the survey clustered their response when describing the strength relationship between the responsibilities they have for residents on their floor and their ability to achieve academic success between the 5-7 response options.

Please order the characteristics below from most important to least important when you are describing your academic success.

Table 8

Ranking of Academic Success Characteristics

Answer	1	2	3	4	5	6
1 Achievement brought on through effort	8	12	10	8	4	2
2 Progress to degree	8	2	9	7	11	7
3 Making efficient use of academic resources	1	1	3	8	5	26
4 Establishing purpose	5	6	9	11	9	4
5 Understanding the material	15	9	9	4	6	1
6 Grade point average (GPA)	7	14	4	6	9	4

When looking at the response rates of the students who took the survey, I identified that the characteristics with the highest response rates, in order of importance, were the first and last characteristics. The remaining four factors had very little difference when comparing their responses.

This section presented the results from the quantitative survey that was distributed to all of the Resident Assistants at Great Plains University. For some of the questions, answers were not reported. In this case, the questions were analyzed with the number of complete answers and the missing answers were eliminated.

Introduction to Interview Participants

The six participants in this study were all 19 years of age or older, were considered fully enrolled with 12 or more credits, and were all Resident Assistants at

Great Plains U. Participants were recruited through a Residence Life listserv for all Residents Assistants at Great Plains U. All the participants were interviewed in a closed conference room in an academic building located at the center of campus. Five of the six participants self-identified as White/Caucasian, and one had identified as Bi-racial. The six interview participants were at least in sophomore standing taking a fulltime student course load.

The participants ranged from second-year students to fourth-year students ready to graduate that all had similar characteristics regarding their Resident Assistant experience. Four of the six interview participants were Resident Assistants in an honors residence hall on campus. I later found out that this was due to the referral of a colleague who had shared the quantitative survey link where the students could voluntarily sign up for the interviews. The students involved in the interviews each expressed a strong importance to understanding the balance it takes to be both a student and a Resident Assistant. Several attributed this to the Residence Life training that all RAs on campus attend, seeming to share an understanding that balancing both roles is a skill only possible when you learn you must succeed in both roles to maintain both identities.

Finally, all of the participants appeared to share a high level of academic commitment and self declared definition of academic success. The students each had a clear goal for themselves after graduation from the University, either graduate school or a full time job were on the horizon for them.

Overview of Themes

Three main themes emerged from the data: Strength of Commitment to the Position, Interaction of Environment and Resident Assistant, and Learning Outcomes of

Resident Assistant Training. Each theme encompasses two or more supporting subthemes. Taken together, they create a dynamic look at the experiences of the Resident Assistant at Great Plains University. The first two themes, (1) Strength of Commitment to the Position and (2) how the Environment and Resident Assistant impact one another, which helped to answer the overarching research question of how resident assistants achieve academic success. The final theme, (3) Learning outcomes of Resident Assistant Training, addressed the second overarching research question related to the purpose of this role within residence halls. The themes and subthemes are summarized in Table 9.

Table 9

Themes and Subthemes of the Data

Theme	Elements of Support
Theme 1: Strength of Commitment to Resident Assistant Position	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Positive Residence Life Experience • Academic Success • Balance of Identities • Supervisor Relationships
Theme 2: How the Environment Shapes Resident Assistant Behavior	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Organizational Structure • Modeling Success
Theme 3: Learning Outcomes	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Resident Interactions • Addressing Diversity • Encouraging Health Behaviors • Awareness of Mental Health

Theme 1: Strength of commitment to resident assistant position. The first major theme that emerged from the data was directly tied to the research question of how Resident Assistants engage in being academically successful. The participants expressed the factors that feed into their drive of being a Resident Assistant on campus. There were

elements that showed their motivations to remain in the position and they were: *positive residence life experiences, academic success, balance of identities, and supervisor relationships*. The following section is a description of each of these four findings.

Positive residence life experiences. According to the interview participants, a large motivation for them to apply and sustain the Resident Assistant position was due to the positive experiences they had as building residents as underclassman at GPU. For Allison and Mallory these experiences served as a great incentive to work within the halls and pay it forward to other students on campus. Their reasons for applying to join the Residence Hall team at GPU were:

I applied to be a RA because I really enjoyed working with people and individuals. I think it was a great for me to be on campus and involved on campus and also potentially impact other peoples' lives. That was one reason why I applied to be an RA. I also had a great experience in the dormitories my freshman year interacting with my floor and Resident Assistants in the building. -Allison

It's been for the most part very positive. It's a good environment for me. I'm very social, so being in a dorm has always been a positive aspect for me. It has a lot of stressors, but for the most part an overall positive experience living in the residence halls all four years. -Mallory

Being a part of the community and helping students transition to the University was a common thread among the interview participants. They talked about servant leadership and working to help students. Patrick had stated he wanted to stay in the residence halls because, "... the community that I had gone through and I had met my friends that way so I wanted to be a RA as well to help the incoming students." Staying in the halls was an overwhelming positive experience for the participants and staying in the halls as an upperclassman was seen as a positive in the scope of their college experience.

Academic success. All of the interview participants had their own description of what academic success means to them. The different combinations of study habits, learning styles, and earned grade point average had them experience academic success differently and resulted in a different interpretation in the way they viewed their academic success. Each Resident Assistant had referenced a number of key factors that influenced the classroom related experiences. For Samantha and Andrew, their definition seemed to focus on their household upbringing and how their parents had influenced their view of academic success.

I would say academic success is something that was probably learned in early childhood to high school level, it's where I garnered most of my academic study skills. My parents has spelling words and if I got it wrong I had to write it five times. -Andrew

I feel it's an accumulation of things. My parents definitely pushed academics before everything else. They definitely gave me the mindset that I needed and they didn't accept B+s if I was close to an A. Because of them I know how to plan and organize my time. I knew what I was capable of and what I could expect for myself once I got used to the RA role and the college environment. So I probably established my own aside fro my parents once coming to college, but they helped me in high school a lot which carried over I guess. -Samantha

Both Andrew and Samantha acknowledged how their experiences continuously shape and influence their view of academic success, but believe their parents have largely informed their foundation of academic success. The foundation of high standards is largely reinforced by the high grade point averages both students maintain at GPU which serve as their greatest motivator to excel academically.

The other interview participants attribute their academic success to their study habits, self-discipline, and balance of responsibilities. Allison, Mallory, Andrew, and Patrick had all mentioned leaving the building is a major factor in completing

assignment and being able to focus on the tasks at hand. Allison offered that, “I usually don’t study in the residence hall...it’s just easier to focus on a coffee shop or student union.” The environment motivates her to get her work done because she knows it’s that much more difficult to study on her floor. Mallory and Andrew said that their studies were hindered with distractions on the floor, they offered, “It’s always easy to find distractions when you live in a residence hall” and “It’s refreshing to leave the building away from distractions that residents may cause and experience new environments occasionally.” Tommy had offered his own explanation of academic success that differed from the others that centered on the development of the whole person in a college setting.

I think I would define academic success, obviously having a respectable grade point average and then I think a big part of it would be balance. I think a lot of college is trying to develop yourself as a person, becoming well rounded and meeting people as well as trying to obtain good grades academically. -Tommy

He shared that this allowed him to experience less stress in college and take each experience as a developmental opportunity.

The students all had core study habits that they incorporated into their academic regimen. These study habits allowed the students to create a routine that helped them retain and interpret class information that worked best with their learning styles. Although the students had a diverse set of majors across the academic spectrum, they had consistent study habits between them. The study habits that the interview participants are shown in Table 10.

The word “balance” was a common descriptor in the way Resident Assistants navigate their studies. The interview participants experience academic pressure in

different ways, and Samantha and Mallory had personal experiences as to how to best adjust to the demands of balancing both your academic responsibilities and your Resident Assistant job duties during the fall semester.

Table 10

Study Habits

Student	Study Habit
Mallory	Reading chapter assignments, sitting in the front of the class, studying outside the residence hall, and incorporating outside research
Patrick	Reading chapter assignments, group work, leaving the residence hall, and practice problems
Tommy	Reading the chapter assignments, studying starting 3-4 days before an exam, and going over the power point slides after each class
Allison	Reading the chapter assignments, studying outside the residence hall, and studying in groups
Samantha	Reading the chapter assignments, designated study time each night, study groups, and keeping a detailed planner
Andrew	Reading the chapter assignments, prioritizing effort on tests and homework, and studying outside the residence hall

First semester is when your residents have a lot of questions. So if I wanted to get serious work done I couldn't necessarily do that because I tried to keep my door open when I'm in the residence hall just so they know that I'm there. There were constant interruptions, so I spent a lot more time studying in a friend's room in a different building. Second semester students are pretty well adjusted to the residence hall and being on campus away from home. They need me less, so I'm able to get more work done. -Samantha

In general I would say for a RA, September and November are normally the two busiest months. Being able to balance is important in order to get everything done. In terms of academic life, its hard because September is when the students are getting used to the building and being away from home and then in November is when we have a lot of roommate conflicts, so that takes up a lot of time. Being aware of this in my second year was key and wasn't as stressful as my first year. -Mallory

Samantha and Mallory were the only two interview participants that did not live in an honors affiliated residence hall. and they were the only two to talk about how their residents directly impacted their academic success. There is a clear transition to the college environment that requires Resident Assistants to be more needed during the fall semester of an academic year than the spring semester. They expressed that the need to balance your responsibilities is much more demanding in the fall semester to be successful academically.

Balance of identities. While each of the participants were recruited on the basis that they were Resident Assistants on campus, none of them felt that the role of Resident Assistant played such a large role in their life that it would be considered to be their only identity. Being a Resident Assistant was only part of who they were, in addition to their RA responsibilities they were registered student organization leaders, romantic partners, friends, and students outside of the residence hall. Mallory and Andrew had stated that having a life outside the hall is not only important, but also vital if you want to remain in a positive and healthy mindset as a Resident Assistant. They said:

As great as Residence Life is, it is 24/7. You see the same people every day and you eat with the same people. When people are being loud in the middle of the night, it's normally the same people. This can get extremely monotonous, especially when you get to those stressful points in the semester. It is important to have social networks outside of the dorms and to have support groups outside of the dorms... Privacy is important, not only to be one on one with yourself, but also to have privacy in terms of there are other aspects of my life that not all of my friends know about which I think is important. Getting out of the dorms and giving other aspects of my life has been very important to me to be able to balance my life as best as possible. -Mallory

It's time consuming; sometimes you don't have time to get things done. You don't have time to study or see your friends. As a RA, you should care about your residents and often their issues are pressing and it seems easy to go right to them as opposed to your personal needs. I think

separating your personal life and work life can be difficult in certain dorms. -Andrew

Both students expressed that having this time away from the hall allowed Resident Assistants the opportunity to recharge and come back focused on hall responsibilities. By giving attention to the other areas of their lives, they said they were more likely to excel academically and give attention to the different components in their life. The people that interact with them outside the hall provide support and validate the work they are doing within Residence Life and motivate them in their studies.

Supervisor relationships. The support that the supervisors overseeing these Resident Assistants provided the necessary encouragement for these students to continue to be the positive workers they are within the halls. Many had attributed the guidance of their director as a factor as to why they continue to work for Residence Life. Tommy said, “I don’t really need my boss for academic support, but it’s nice to know he cares.” The dynamic experiences these students are having are being processed with these RAs on a weekly basis and through these relationships the RAs are receiving a support system unlike those that they may be getting from friends, family, or romantic partners.

We have meetings, weekly meetings with our RD’s, and they always talk about how you’re doing with your classes, what’s going on with them, how are your grades and assignments going. They keep us motivated and it really shows they care. We have to keep a certain GPA to stay a RA, so they make sure we don’t drop below a certain GPA and help us balance RA with our schoolwork. -Patrick

Andrew had said that his boss “really helps with the separation between academic and work life”. The weekly check-ins with their Resident Directors help keep them accountable to both their job and academic responsibilities. The GPA expectation for Resident Assistants is a 2.5 at GPU, but for the RAs who work within the honors

affiliated halls it is a 3.5. Allison had offered that “they support us by understanding student’s schedules... we are more than an employee to them, they want us to do well in school”. The idea of being students first is something that Great Plains University highly enforces among their student staff and it’s clear they the students have heard this message.

My boss right now is wonderful. He’s very big on making sure before you set your work schedule, you are sure you know what’s expected of you in your future classes. In terms of what other things they do, my boss is very aware of when I have major exams, when I have major assignments due and letting other people on the team pick up slack while you’re doing what you need to do for you. Generally, he’s really good at making sure you’re not on duty the night before an exam or stuff like that so that you’re set up in a place where, if you need to take a night away so that you can go somewhere else and study all night, then you can do that. In general, I’ve found that my boss, particularly, is very support of academic success and wants to see us success as students first and then as resident assistants.
-Mallory

The success of the residents in the hall is largely attributed to the Resident Assistants, but for that to happen they must be in good academic standing in their classes to work for this department. Allison offered, “... they support us even when we trip, we are also students and they get that...” Samantha had expressed she had a difficult time adjusting to the demands of both her job and her classes:

I know last semester I spent a lot of time in the math resource room so he had a talk to me about maybe trying to find a balance between your time there and studying here in the dorms. Finding a balance between the job and class work was kind of difficult at first. My RD helped me find the balance and reminded me that this is a job that they’re paying me for. He does support us academically he always asks if we’re going to make the dean’s list. It’s just nice to think that’s an expectation and that he believes we can do that well. He’s the one that tells me I’m a student first, so I’ve got to do what I’ve got to do with that. –Samantha

For these students, their supervisor was a key factor in being successful academically and in the residence hall as a RA. Many of them had noted they if they did mess up in their

classes that they could be honest with their Resident Directors and a success plan would be formulated to get them back on track.

Theme 2: How the environment shapes resident assistant behavior. The second major theme that came out of the participants interviews helped highlight how the environment can impact the Resident Assistant at Great Plains University. The organizational systems that existed within the residence halls appeared to have the greatest impact on the students' academic success and resulted in how the participants had functioned in their role. The elements of how the system and Resident Assistant interacted were: *organizational structure* and *modeling success*. The following section is a description of each of these two findings.

Organizational structure. At Great Plains University, there are a variety of living environments that the Resident Assistants can be placed in based on their previous experiences at the institution and where the leadership of Residence Life determining where they fit best. At GPU Residents Assistants can be placed to work in range of living-learning communities, community models, or academic related environments. Four of the six Resident Assistants that were interviewed were placed in McKinley Hall, the hall that was associated with high achieving students and being academically rigorous. For example, Andrew was a Resident Assistant at McKinley and he talked about how working in this specific building affected his Residence Life responsibilities, he said:

Little interesting things about McKinley Hall is that it's home to a scholarship program so they take all of their classes together, they live there from freshman to senior year. I noticed right away is that the community was already established. I think that's one of the big major jobs of the RAs is to establish a community and it was already done for me. A lot of the times I feel I'm not necessarily needed. My students are pretty self-sufficient especially because that scholarship program attracts a

certain individual who performs well academically, so I think that gives me a lot more times to focus on other things. –Andrew

Andrew expressed a feeling of feeling unneeded and in result he was able to focus on different areas of his life because of the extra free time. Similarly, Allison, another McKinley RA, had a comparable experience that affected the way she viewed her position. She noticed the environment had taken on a recurring imbedding process where the upperclassman helped prepare and support the transition of freshmen students into the hall environment.

I think the freshmen are pretty timid when they first move into McKinley Hall; it takes them about a semester to get fully integrated to the system... I think that's fair for any freshman, but I think the McKinley residents are a bit more competitive than other halls. The upper classman always compare the new comers to previous groups and think that the incoming class is never as good... Once the freshmen are integrated into the hierarchy of McKinley they're set. The community develops pretty naturally, so a lot of my job is done for me. –Allison

Allison conveyed that the kind of residents you have as a RA directly impacts the amount of work you're doing. When Tommy was asked to talk about his residents, he simply said, "McKinley students are known for computer science... They're in a really advanced academically pressured situation... Their academic life is pretty stressful from what I understand." Tommy stated that many of his students, freshmen to seniors, are up late at night working on projects due to the meticulousness some of their assignments need.

In contrast, Mallory and Samantha worked in two different non-honors affiliated halls. They both worked in co-ed residence halls, where every other floor was based on gender. For Mallory, her organizational structure was extremely dissimilar to McKinley Hall, many of the girls have early move in for different co-curricular reasons that have

affected the way she approached her RA duties. When asked about the students on the floor she said:

About 40-50% of the girls on my floor will be in a sorority. That affects the floor a lot because a lot of those girls move in earlier so they've already been there a week and there's a separation between the girls that rush and the girls that didn't. Generally, in my opinion, sorority girls tend to stick with their houses because they're building community there so they don't spend as much time trying to build community on the floor. That's something I have to combat and build for the rest of the floor, so that they have some sort of community on the floor.

The two non-honors affiliated Resident Assistants had approached their community development only after identifying the varying levels of students' interest in being involved on the floor. They focused on involvement in the GPU community and policy violations in the building. Samantha shared, "I wouldn't say I get too much policy violations, a handful here and there, sure, but I'm also sure I have dealt with it more than probably honors halls." These two participants reported that the structure within hall environment was rather chaotic, and that they felt the kinds of students in the hall affected the amount of time put into their responsibilities.

Modeling success. For the six interview participants at Great Plains University, their interactions between themselves and building residents were grounded in being a positive role model. The way in which the Resident Assistants choose to model success varies for each individual, but the desired outcome for each of them is that it results in helping residents find academic success in their schoolwork. For several of the participants, being a role model was one of their key motivations for becoming a Resident Assistant. Patrick spoke about a responsibility he feels to be positive influence for his students:

I think I'm supposed to be this role model, I'm supposed to have my academics in order so other people can come to me for questions. I feel like in order to be successful in the job you have to be that role model for the students... I feel like as a Resident Assistant you're more motivated to work harder because your residents look up to you, 'okay if he's doing this we should be doing this too.' It puts pressure on me to be a role model and a positive influence. –Patrick

Several of the Resident Assistants noted the age of the building residents they interact with, this motivated them in a different way and helped see their students as peers, instead of residents they need to keep tabs on. Samantha expressed how her peers and her supervisor notice how she tries to model success:

I don't go door to door asking about grades, I feel like if anything I show by example. If I'm not on my floor it's probably because I'm out studying. I don't do much other than RA stuff and I'll go out on the weeks sometimes, but studying is probably my main priority... My resident director and several other residents told me that they like way I study and prioritize and they model what I do now. I guess that's the way I've promoted self-efficacy; I just model it as much as I can the best I know how. –Samantha

Samantha felt as though her priorities at GPU were clearly visible and should help students see how she navigates the balance it takes to be successful in an academic setting. Similar to Samantha, Andrew had dismissed the idea of door knocking as an important component to modeling success. Andrew spoke positively on his success in modeling success, "I try to lead by example, I feel they really respond to this instead of just telling them flat out to act a certain way." For the participants, the support and personal relationships they had reflected the level of commitment to wanting to be a role model. Allison recognized that the way she models success was informed from a relationship with a Resident Assistant that helped her learn best practices during her first year as a RA.

There was a RA in McKinley Hall a year above me; she was very helpful when it came to program ideas and the way that Kauffman works and balancing it with your studies. It was really helpful to look at how she did stuff; it was a huge support in my first year having her there. –Allison

The interview participants had different levels of self-prescribed success as they explained the different methods they chose to model success for their students. However, for the Resident Assistants who noted leaving the students alone and role modeling their behaviors, all seemed to have a more positive result in interacting with their residents and feeling confident that they had no “red flags” on their floor.

Theme 3: Learning outcomes. The third and final theme suggested that the learning outcomes of the Resident Assistant shaped the core responsibilities of the Residence Life position. Although the environments varied across campus, the expectations were standardized so that both residents and Resident Assistants were engaging with a fundamental curriculum. At their core, the common learning outcomes that the students focused on were: resident interactions, addressing diversity, encouraging healthy behaviors, and awareness of physical and mental health.

Resident interactions. The six interview participants of this study had diverse floor environments that affected the way they tried to get their floor residents to engage with one another. As explained before, a central job requirement of the Resident Assistant position was for them to create a community on their floor, this starts with building resident interactions and respect for others on the floor. After the interview participants had gone through the experience of being a resident themselves, they all took on a different approach as to how to best create community.

Allison attempts to teach her student empathy, to look at interactions from a different perspective. Allison described a student conflict and the probing questions she

uses to help them resolve the issue at hand, “I encourage students to listen to each other in the sense of asking them, ‘Well if that was you, if you were in their shoes, how would you feel? And, ‘Make sure you’re being respectful towards one another.’” Patrick also tries to motivate his students to have positive, respectable interactions by teaching understanding from different perspectives. He creates opportunity for friendships to form, so that in result it would be in each other’s interest to respect one another for the friendships to continue and further develop:

I try to make sure everyone feels like they are a member of the community. Making sure everyone feels like they can have input into whatever’s going on. What time we’re having our floor dinner or what event we are planning next week. Making sure they all feel like they have a voice and that usually gets them motivated to participate and have healthy interactions with each other, once they become friends the respect levels definitely increase.
-Patrick

Mallory tries to use honesty with her residents to mediate any conflicts they might be having. Her floor environment is like many floors at GPU where she is trying to help the women on her floor understand their space is a common space and practices one-on-one conversations in helping demonstrate this with her residents:

I have freshmen women and they have a tendency to clique up and they also have a tendency to do things without realizing that they’re going to affect other people. Generally that’s where my job is to sit them down and talk them through conflicts... It’s very Socratic in terms of why did you do that and having them talk through it. The fact of the matter is a lot of the times I can tell them things over and over and over again, but if I don’t sit them down and explain things to them, they’re never ever going to get it. When it comes to their maturity levels and listening to others, it takes a while for them to get outside of themselves... It takes them a while to open their worldview and realize ‘I live with other people and my actions affect them.’, some of them will go all four years in college and never learn this very simple lesson. –Mallory

Mallory and Samantha’s candidness with their residents were similar; the students that were on their floor had comparable conflicts like many of the first-year student floors and

buildings. Samantha chose to take a more forthright route when discussing respect on the floor, “You’re living here, I’m living here, we’re all living here. Respect the space, respect each other and we’ll have a good year.” The participants expressed that being open and honest with the students from the start about their personal expectations as the floor advisor helped a great deal with resident interactions.

Addressing diversity. Great Plains University is a Predominantly White Institution with very little diversity. The institution has roughly 26,000 undergraduates; with about 3,000 of these students are students of color. Diversity is a topic the Resident Assistants are directed to try and facilitate into conversations to challenge students’ perspectives and provide opportunities to use critical thinking skills. The majority of the students at GPU are White, Christian, rural students who have had very little exposure to diversity prior to attending Great Plains. At a large public research institution with a majority of the undergraduate population being White, some of the participants in this study appeared to understand why diversity was such a hard topic of discussion for students at GPU. Tommy said, “Diversity in my dorm isn’t anything I’ve really had to deal with.” When the interview participants shared their experiences, common phrases and interpretations of diversity were found. Andrew reflected on his time working in McKinley Hall after he spent two years being a Resident Assistant there:

The problem with the scholarship program is that it only attracts a certain stereotype of mostly middle class white students. We haven’t necessarily had a lot of ethnic discussion because there is a decent lack of diversity with that program. –Andrew

The Resident Assistants are given a list of requirements they must fulfill throughout each semester, one of these requirements are the different categories of programs they are going to put on for their floor and/or building residents. David said,

“Every month we do one diversity event, like for February we do a Black History Month program for some sort of cultural awareness, that sort of thing.” Allison has a vested interest in combatting ignorance and challenging students point of view. When discussing her floor’s diversity in McKinley Hall, she said:

We talk about diversity quite a lot on my floor. I am very passionate about service and ethnic studies and encouraging that conversation.. I think it’s especially important in McKinley because there’s such a small amount of diversity that sometimes it’s brought up because someone made a very close minded comment and I asked them to expand upon it. I think it’s pushing their limits of what they understand too, which tends to happen pretty frequently. –Allison

Mallory had similar experiences to Allison; she felt it was a part of her job as a Resident Assistant and an educated individual to process close-minded comments with her students. Mallory explained the situations she sometimes dealt with on her floor:

In terms of diversity on my floor, there isn’t much, to be completely honest...Most of my residents are predominantly white, Christian. I’ve had a few instances where residents have come to me and said relatively racist comments and we’ve had to sit down and talk about why it is not okay to make fun of students in the international res hall. Combatting stereotypes and working on that with them has been something I’ve tried to do with my girls. Do these conversations happen every day? No. Do they happen every week? Probably not. Once a month? Yes, for sure, it just depends on what happens on the floor. –Mallory

Unlike Mallory and Allison, Samantha didn’t see it as her role to directly intervene when students made offensive comments. She created meaningful relationships with her students to have deep conversations that lead to dialogues on diversity, religion, and other taboo topics:

I feel it’s kind of hard to talk about different backgrounds just because I’m bi-racial...I found through talking there are similarities no matter how different our background is, it’s been great getting to know my residents and forming relationships with them. –Samantha

Samantha acknowledged that it might be difficult for students to engage with her because of her ethnicity, that students might be worried they say the wrong thing in front of her. Samantha recognizes that it might be difficult for students to engage with her, and it is because of this that she is proactive in creating spaces for her residents to have conversations with and without her around.

Encouraging healthy behaviors. Residence Life takes an important role in helping Great Plains University in helping students create healthy behaviors to support their academic and social identities. The Resident Assistants are responsible for putting on “health” programs on their floor and in the building on a monthly basis. Their interpretation of this message varies across the board; they address alcohol, sex, eating, sleep, and exercise. The overall goal of these programs is to try to teach strategies for students to incorporate wellness into their routine.

The theme of healthy behaviors and wellness is a collaborative effort between the Office of Residence Life, the Health Center, and the Recreation Center. These resources are available to the Resident Assistants to help put on programs to better teach healthy behaviors, Andrew said, “All I really have to do is walk into the Health Center and say that I’m a RA and have the resources I need, they are extremely helpful.” David shared the multiple events he’s held while being a Resident Assistant in an attempt to teach health and wellness to his residents:

It’s an expectation of us to do programs that are on tougher subjects like alcohol awareness or on sexual health. We planned a sex in the dark program where students can come and openly ask questions about sex or about anything like that, about STDs and where to condoms. We also have alcohol awareness things where we will bring in UNL PD in and we’ll have them ask questions or tell us statistics... Beer goggles is another event we do so residents become more aware and the effects of drinking,

they get to see how it affects their vision and overall ability to walk. It kind of throws you off balance and the look on their face really shows when it's hitting home for them. –David

Mallory and Samantha, the two RAs who are not affiliated with an honors floor, both do passive programming in an attempt to engage with their floor communities to teach health behaviors. Mallory said, “I try to do passive programming...they're pretty closed off because they don't want to talk to me about drinking because I'm their RA.” Mallory feels that because she is the RA on the floor, the students see her role as someone who cannot relate and is seen as an authority figure to not trust. So when dealing with teaching healthy behaviors as it revolves around alcohol, some of the RA participants have chosen passive programming to still get the message, and to give them space to process it without them.

Samantha has similar feelings about talking with residents about drinking, so she also employs passive programming:

I put information on post-it notes and posted them on their doors just to remember that if you do go out and drink these are some safe options: give your friends your keys, tell someone where you're going to go, drink lots of water before you start the night. I'm not naïve and I know that they do these things, I just want them to be safe and know that they have someone who cares about them. –Samantha

Samantha can relate to what the students are going through and it's a big reason she leaves the post-it notes. She says she understands why the students may not feel comfortable talking with her, but she wants to give them the tips that they may have known prior to coming to college.

Awareness of mental health. With the rising number of students grappling with serious mental health problems that are seeking treatment at campus counseling centers, Residence Life departments around the country, and at Great Plains University, Resident

Assistants have been called upon to help students seek support. As the stigma surrounding mental health continues to dwindle, student affairs practitioners have trained Resident Assistants to recognize students in need and connect them with student services that can support their needs. The interview participants were trained to be an advocate for the student services on campus, Andrew said, “I try to make sure they know about the resources on campus like CAPs and let them know I can walk them over if they need it.”

What’s important to note is that all six Resident Assistants made it a point to note that they were not trained counselors to deal with students in distress. Tommy specified, “I know I’m not trained to deal with everything, but know I would be able to recognize it and then take appropriate steps to deal with it.” The Resident Assistants were taught simple strategies on how to spot a student who may need help, Samantha said:

I try to see all of my students in a week. If I don’t see a student for a while I check in with their roommate to see what’s going on and make sure everyone’s doing okay. The more I see them, the more opportunities I have to see if something is wrong. –Samantha

Mallory and Allison explained that they have had first hand experience dealing with students in distress. They both recognized the signs and were able to put the process into motion to get these students the help they needed.

I’ve had to deal with these kinds of issues on more than one occasion, unfortunately. Generally I don’t necessarily have the skills to deal with it face to face, but I have the skills to reach out to the people that can. We have a very clear process within res. life of when you contact a supervisor, when that supervisor contacts CAPs, when CAPs contacts outside resources... Generally there’s a lot of support from above when dealing with mental health issues and how RAs process their involvement with it. –Mallory

A lot of times my residents are comfortable coming to me so it’s first setting up that openness with them. I think if they’re telling me about their mental state, it seems to me like it’s kind of a cry for help. So I encourage them to go seek help from CAPs or other resources as well on campus to

get a sense on where they are, I'll usually offer to walk with them as an option. I think the majority of the time when I do offer that up as somewhere to go, they're usually pretty receptive so I think they were looking for someone to encourage them to go that way anyways. –Allison

As Mallory and Allison discussed their experiences around mental health at Great Plains University, the participants spoke of moments where being an advocate on behalf of the student was their main goal. Mallory and Allison knew that their supervisors prepared them properly for these situations, and discussed the relief they felt once the student was connected with the proper support on campus.

Conclusion

The three central themes gathered from the interviews with the six Resident Assistants at Great Plains University show the strength of commitment that Resident Assistants have for their position, how the environment and its users impact one another, and demonstrated how these individuals work to achieve the Office of Residence Life's learning outcomes. Chapter five will discuss the effects of this study, exploring research findings in connection with previous literature to Resident Assistants and Academic Success. From this exploration, the primary researcher will suggest potential best practices for supporting Resident Assistants in attempt to help them achieve academic success and make recommendations for future research.

Chapter Five

Discussion

Introduction

The information gathered from the survey and interview participants at Great Plains University show the different layers of the Resident Assistant role and how it affects their academic success. These Resident Assistants' stories have highlighted the areas in which are not so easily seen from those that balance both the identity of a Resident Assistant and a student at GPU. Resident Assistants have clear distinctions in how they go about balancing both of these roles, and until now very little research was done on Resident Assistants as it pertains to academic success. Providing the opportunity to share these students' experiences is important to the future of Residence Life undergraduate staff members. In this chapter, I will discuss the significance of the findings as well as implications for best practices and recommendations for future research.

Summary of Themes

The three common themes of *strength of commitment*, *how the environment shapes Resident Assistant behavior*, and *Resident Assistant learning outcomes* found through the surveys and interviews gave insight to how these students manage their student role and Resident Assistant responsibilities. The participants talked about the role that their environment played, the support they received from supervisors as it pertained to their academic success in the classroom. The primary findings are listed below:

- The Resident Assistants definition for academic success was formed prior to attending a higher education institution.
- The environment in which the Resident Assistants worked in could have a direct impact, positive or negative, on a student's academic success.
- Resident Assistants manage multiple leadership roles on campus in addition to their involvement in the Residence Halls.
- Resident Assistants chose to apply for the position to give back what Residence Life had given to them.
- The Resident Assistants recognized that the position provided them the opportunity to be a role model and/or mentor for students in their building.
- Resident Assistants see their supervisors support as an essential factor to their success in the classroom and in their RA role.
- Resident Assistants motivations for persisting in the RA role change throughout their experience.
- Resident Assistants expressed a need for individualized understanding from their supervisors.
- Resident Assistants exhibited stronger confidence in their RA responsibilities if it was directly covered in fall training.
- Resident Assistants experienced challenges in dealing with students with mental health issues, trouble facilitating conversations around diversity, and time management difficulties.

Connections to Literature

As stated in Chapter Two, various amounts of research has been conducted on academic success of college students, but very little has been done as it pertains directly to Resident Assistants as they manage their goal of being academically successful and their RA responsibilities. This study will contribute to the growing body of mixed methods literature on academic success.

Strength of commitment. When the interview participants chose to apply for the Resident Assistant role within the Office of Residence Life, it was with the intent to give back and create the community that was afforded to them when they occupied the halls as a resident. Each of these interview participants stemmed from an experience or relationship that focused on making a positive impact on the students they serve. The Resident Assistants did not deny that having free room and board was a positive incentive to stay in their role, but continued to say that the monetary support that the role provides is not a strong enough factor alone to stay in the position.

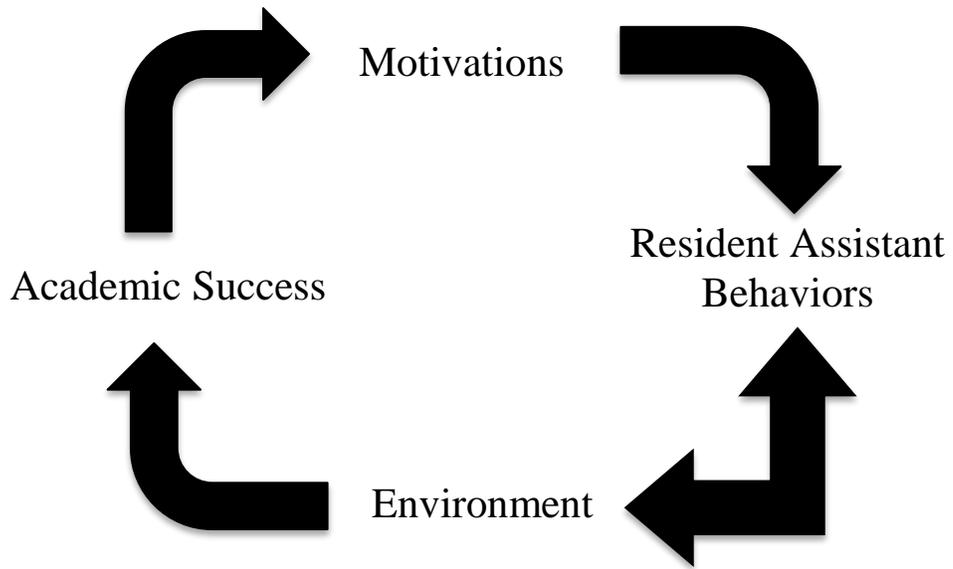
As we discuss the reasons students apply and/or persist in the Resident Assistant role, it connects back to the idea of motivation, as referenced by the existing literature in Chapter Two. The motivation for this position is drawn from two sources, their success in the classroom and the intrinsic value associated with their experience. Referring back to Shawn Van Etten's (2008) description of learning motivations show that grades are often viewed as the fundamental factor to being successful in the classroom.

In much discussion of learning in formal situation such as schools, motivation is treated as independent of what is being learned and of the

activity in which the learning is intended to occur. As a result, motivation has to be induced by positive or negative reinforcement. From early primary school through undergraduate education, grades provide motivation for learning for “successful” students (p. 8).

While these students have proven themselves to have good grades, they expressed very different views from Van Etten (2008) in that their primary drive to be academically successful is not drawn from their grade point average. After hearing the stories of the interview participants and reviewing the findings from the surveys, it shown that the learning of new knowledge and understanding the material are the key motivations behind students’ definition of academic success. The students interviewed saw the intrinsic value offered through the educational system, and that education was more about receiving a well rounded education where learning happens both in and out of the classroom. Based on these findings, a probable model of how the four characteristics: motivations, resident assistant behaviors, environment, and academic success, impact one another in what is called the Influencing Model show in Figure 3.

Figure 3. Influencing model.



This model shows that the motivations to become a Resident Assistant are caused from positive relationships that residents had with their floor, Resident Assistant, or Residence Life professional staff member. As the Resident Assistant plays out their duties and interacts with the building residents, they impact the overall environment and thus shape the experiences of the students in the hall. As the environment is informed by the Resident Assistants, the environment is impacting the Resident Assistants ability to achieve academic success. The outcome of the Resident Assistant's academic success can change a Resident Assistants motivation to persist in their role, if successful, they will continue in their role attributing their success as a RA to their ability to balance dual roles on campus. If the RA perceives that they have not been academically successful they can begin to negatively impact the building and environment, continuing the negative cycle, or discontinue their role as a Resident Assistant before it further impacts their academic success or the building environment.

As the students continue to manage multiple roles on campus, it's important to note that each of the six interview participants had talked about how they were also involved with Registered Student Organizations out of the hall. Previous literature suggested that students do better academically when students are involved in multiple organizations on campus. Astin's (1984) Involvement Theory states that involvement occurs along a continuum and that student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program (p. 519). Mallory says that by having these multiple areas of involvement

helps her compartmentalize her life and better adjust to the needs of each area of her life.

The final factor in the Strength of Commitment that Resident Assistants have to the position is how their supervisor relationships play a role in the academic success. Four students had talked about how they could not connect with their supervisor relationally and did not feel that this person did not provide any support to their life outside of their role as a RA. These outliers seem to not connect emotionally with the hall director supervisors, and I feel this most likely out of the supervisors control or based on any behaviors they exhibited while working with these Resident Assistants. Contrary to these survey responses, and overwhelming majority of survey respondents and interview participants found that their supervisors were a principal factor in their ability to excel in their position as both a Resident Assistant and a student. These relationships took on similar aspects of mentorship rapports where mentees achieve better academic success than those without these supportive relationships (Campbell & Campbell, 1997). As stated in Chapter Four, the students felt as though their supervisors helped them balance their multiple roles on campus and take ownership of their RA responsibilities.

How the environment shapes resident assistant behavior. Peoples malleability can be powerfully influenced by the environment they find themselves. There is no single version of a person, we manage multiple identities; identities are influenced and molded by the people and characteristics of an environment. The way that the interview participants manage their RA identity

was a direct outcome of the organizational structure in the building they resided and worked. The Resident Assistants all went through the same training at the beginning of the year, but the way they carry out these responsibilities is highly circumstantial based on the needs of the building residents and the way the building is structured.

This study finds truth in Bliming's (1998) writing on the five main roles that a RA holds: student administrator, role model, teacher, and counselor. The way the RAs navigate these five roles varies on the students they are serving. Much like the way that student affairs practitioners hope that RAs positively influence building residents, the same can be said for the affects of the building environments on a Resident Assistant's academic success. The Resident Assistants of McKinley Hall proved to show a relationship between themselves and the building that supported this finding. Two key factors of their Resident Assistant role in McKinley Hall that positively influenced their academic success was that their hall was not conduct heavy and the community in the hall was self-sustaining. This took a large part of their job away, creating community, and in result allowed them to work roughly 10-12 hours compared to the expectation of 20 hours. Extra time was afforded to other areas of their life, allowing for more time than the typical Resident Assistant to work towards achieving academic success.

As seen in Table 6, 63% (28) of the survey respondents believe that there is a strong relationship between the disruptive behaviors of building residents and a Resident Assistant's ability to achieve academic success. Similarly, 77% (34) of

survey respondents believe achieving academic success is difficult while managing the role of being a Resident Assistant, as shown in Table 7. These questions have provided insight to the way that Resident Assistants perceive their own role and ability to achieve academic success. As the amount of resident distractions increase, so do the number of hours worked. As one of the five main roles take precedent over the others, it takes attentiveness from the remaining roles. These findings support Cox's (2006) writing on employment among undergraduate students, "The number of hours worked to gain experience and develop skills and knowledge was associated with higher GPAs. Once students worked over 20-25 hours it began to negatively affect GPAs and becomes counterproductive to the learning process (p. 485)." As higher education professionals, we are trained on best strategies to manage multiple projects and environments as it relates to balancing our time. As a result, we assume that the students and staff we interact with are trained or knowledgeable about time management behaviors, and in result are condescending to those who have not learned this basic skill.

Learning outcomes. The second research question was intended to explore the purpose behind of the Resident Assistant position. As the position continues to evolve (Bliming, 1998), so do the functions associated with the job. The interview participants showed clear changes in their knowledge of the information associated with learning outcomes from the beginning of training to their current status as a Resident Assistant. Each interview participant articulated distinct strategies as to how to engage with building residents as it pertains to

resident interactions, addressing diversity, encouraging healthy behaviors, and awareness of mental health. The primary strategy for the Resident Assistants to facilitate the learning of these topics is through building programming.

Bliming (1998) is correct in his expectations that the Resident Assistant position will continue to evolve and develop new functions. Being in charge of an entire floor of undergraduate students has its challenges in regard to building a healthy community, but many times these students are seen as a counselor and teacher (Bliming, 1998), this can cause a RA to overemphasize these functions of their job and prevent academic success.

The learning outcomes are expected to be taught by the Resident Assistants to their building residents; each learning outcome has their own challenges associated with reaching its targeted goal, and is expected to increase use of critical thinking skills and challenge residents attitudes on certain issues.

As stated before, Great Plains University is a Predominantly White Institution; this is most likely the cause of the problem when addressing diversity within the Residence Hall. Five of the six interview participants that volunteered were White; these students are from White, Christian, rural areas who are interacting with diversity for the first time themselves. This was one learning outcome that was not being met by the standards of the Office of Residence Life at GPU. The Resident Assistants are being expected to be the teachers and facilitators of diversity within the Residence Halls when they have not been taught on how to facilitate these dialogues or navigate this climate.

In relation to navigating environments, Resident Assistants are to facilitate opportunities teach residents healthy behaviors in a college setting. This learning outcome is particularly vague with very little description of what the Office of Residence Life is looking for in these educational programs. Because of this, the Resident Assistants have a large spectrum of programming opportunities to look at: eating, sleeping, stress relief, sex, drinking and drugs, physical wellbeing, and countless others. The ambiguity provides little structure for the Resident Assistants to follow, this allowed the opportunity to take ownership of this learning outcome and facilitate programs in areas that they perceive their residents need the most help with.

As the increasing awareness of mental health rises on college campuses it's justified to employ the Resident Assistants to be on the lookout for students that may need to be connected to counseling services at Great Plains University. The attitude of this learning outcome was much more intense than the other learning outcomes as many associated this learning outcome with self-harm or suicide. The students were incontrovertibly clear that they understood that their job was not to be a psychologist, and that they should pass their observations up the chain of command to the appropriate professionals to connect students with the necessary services.

The Office of Residence Life obligate Resident Assistants with the responsibility of facilitating resident education efforts through a diverse array of programming requirements. These programs provide the opportunity for residents to get a well-rounded exposure to topics they will most likely come into contact

with while at Great Plains University. These students are dedicated to achieving their academic goals regardless of the added responsibilities of programming and resident relationships, the interview participants showed flexibility and innovation in their programming efforts in result of the loose structure of programming expectations.

Implications for Future Practice

This study explores the experiences of Resident Assistants at a public research institution, as told through the interview participant's own voices. The following are three implications for future practice in Resident Assistant supervision and student affairs at Great Plains University and similar public institutions:

- Relationships with residents were highly influential to the motivations that students have to later become Resident Assistants. Research supports that creating mentorship relationships will positively influence both the “mentor” and “mentees” academic success while they are an undergraduate student. Teaching Resident Assistants to understand what it means to be a mentor and role model will greatly increase the interactions between Resident Assistants to sustain the pool of Resident Assistant applicants and positively impact the resident education efforts that would be grounded in mentoring relationships .
- Resident Assistants perceived their ability to balance time effectively to be a crucial role in their ability to do their job well. These

perceptions often came from the difficulties of managing class projects and Resident Assistant responsibilities. The Office of Residence Life is strongly encouraged to regularly check in on the time management strategies that Resident Assistants are engaging in to be sure there are balancing both their RA and student roles effectively.

- Resident Assistants' multiple involvements on campus proved to be influential in their sense of balancing the different roles in their lives. Research supports that building stronger connections outside the hall with additional involvements helps support involvement in academic work. Understanding that students need healthy outlets from the stressors of their RA and student roles will help Resident Assistants maintain a healthy mental status.

The implications suggest that further investigation is necessary to understand their experiences, and ensure that innovative and existing practices more effectively meet the needs of Resident Assistants to be academically successful.

Recommendations for Future Research

The findings of this study demonstrated that the organizational structures, honors affiliated vs. general housing, where Residents Assistants work could play a role in impacting their academic success. Future studies may want to investigate academic success of Resident Assistants across a larger spectrum of institutions and identities. Studies that investigate the academic major, gender, number of years being a RA, race, ethnicity, and educational background and the intersection

of these identities would be beneficial to understanding how these identities come into contact with their Resident Assistant role. Creating a larger spectrum of institutions involved in the study like historically black colleges, private Christian, military schools, and smaller public universities may give the researcher a better understanding of the way different organizational structures impact academic success for Residents Assistants.

This study confirmed previous research that suggested that students who are more involved do better academically. Although the six resident assistants shared their experiences and their involvements, there was still more to be explored with these involvements. Being able to look at how the time invested in the organization, support provided by the group, and any connection to academic work may show us outside factors that affect their academic success.

As research on Resident Assistant continue to focus on academic success, studies that explore best practices implemented to support these students have been left out of the scope of literature completely. Future studies should continue to examine the degree to which environments and supervisor practices affect Resident Assistants' academic success. Longitudinal studies could be designed to measure the differences in academic success among Resident Assistants from when they start their role as a RAs until they decide to discontinue working for residence life. Understanding the different factors that influence a Resident Assistant's academic success and persistence in their role would help future Hall Directors increase systems of support for these student workers on campus.

Conclusion

This research study was conducted to explore the impact that being a Resident Assistant has on a student's academic success. Participants reported their definition of academic success and shared their experiences as to how they see their environment plays a role in impacting their academic success. This study focused on how their roles of being a Resident Assistant and a student at a large public research university informed their ability to be academically successful. Recommendations for practice include teaching mentoring skills, time management strategies, and pushing involvement outside of the Residence Hall. Recommendations for future research include expanding upon the organizational structures and identities represented, involvement characteristics, and supervisor support practices as it pertains to Resident Assistants' ability to achieve academic success. The findings of this study suggest that Great Plains University suggested that environment and supportive practices could play a significant role in impacting a student's academic success, and the findings offered several suggestions for public research institutions to better support the Resident Assistants' ability to be academically successful.

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Appendix A

First Recruitment Email

A University Housing Staff Member, sent out initial contact to the target student population of this research study.

Dear Resident Assistant,

This email is going on out on behalf of Brian Donahue, Graduate Student in Educational Administration here at [REDACTED]. He is conducting a study on the impact of being a resident assistant and its effect on a student's academic success. If you are 19 years of age or older and a Resident Assistant at [REDACTED], you are invited to participate in this research study.

You are invited to participate in a web-based online survey that will ask you a series of questions in relation to your Resident Assistant experience and academic success at [REDACTED]. Participation in this study will require approximately 5-10 minutes to complete. At the end of the survey you will have the option to volunteer for a 60-minute in-person interview that will follow up on the initial questions distributed through the survey. This interview will take place in a private conference room on campus of your choice.

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research.

By participating in this study, you will help further a body of literature regarding academic success of college students, specifically, future resident assistants. Developing this body of literature will help student affairs practitioners understand these experiences and create a support environment for all undergraduate students that work for Residence Life programs.

Any information obtained during this survey that could identify you will be kept strictly confidential. The data will be stored on the investigator's password protected computer and will only be seen by the investigator and the faculty advisor during the research period and will be deleted following completion of the study. The information obtained in this study will be published in a thesis and may be published in scientific journals or presented at scientific meetings but the data will be reported under pseudonyms.

You will not receive any compensation for participating in this project.

You may ask any questions concerning this research at anytime by contacting the investigator at the phone number below. Please contact the [REDACTED] at [REDACTED] to voice concerns about the research or if you have any questions about your rights as a research participant.

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw or skip any question at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers or the [REDACTED], or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. By completing and submitting your survey responses, you have given your consent to participate in this research. You should print a copy of this page for your records.

To take part in the survey please follow the link below:

<survey link >

Brian Donahue
Graduate Student
Educational Administration
[REDACTED]

Appendix B

Follow-Up Recruitment Email

Hello _____,

My name is Brian Donahue and I am reaching out to you in regards to the research study you have participated in: Impact of Being a Resident Assistant and its Effect on a Student's Academic Success.

First off, I want to thank you for completing the initial phase of my data collection by taking the survey. You indicated that you would be interested in partaking in a follow-up 60-minute interview to share your experience as a Resident Assistant and how it has impacted your academic success at _____

The interview will be taking place in Conference Room 209 of _____. Please respond with a date between January 26th and January 30th and times between 8am and 8pm that works best for you. I am unavailable on Wednesday from 2pm-7pm, so please keep that in mind when you are choosing your time.

I am looking forward to meeting with you and learning more about your experience!

Sincerely,

Brian Donahue
Graduate Student
Educational Administration

Appendix C

Quantitative Survey

Structured Survey Guide
Quantitative Survey

1. What is your year in school?
 - a. Second-year undergraduate student
 - b. Third-year undergraduate student
 - c. Fourth-year undergraduate student
 - d. Sixth-year undergraduate student

2. What is your gender?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Trans*

3. How many years have you been a Resident Assistant?
 - a. One year
 - b. Two years
 - c. Three years
 - d. Four years

4. What is your GPA?
 - a. 4.0-3.75
 - b. 3.74-3.50
 - c. 3.49-3.25
 - d. 3.24-3.0
 - e. 3.0-2.99
 - f. 2.74-2.50
 - g. 2.49-2.25
 - h. 2.24-2.0

5. What is your major(s)? _____

6. What characteristics would you attribute to your academic success? (Please up to five)
 - a. I make to-do lists
 - b. I leave my residence hall to study/complete assignments
 - c. I close my door to study/complete assignments
 - d. I limit technological distractions
 - e. I sit in the “T-Zone” of class either in the front of class or down the middle isle
 - f. I actively participate in class
 - g. I read materials before class
 - h. I print power points to bring to class
 - i. I highlight important information in my notes
 - j. I try to predict test questions based on notes
 - k. I formed a study group

- l. I meet regularly with a tutor
 - m. I begin to study prior than the night before an exam
 - n. I prioritize tasks between school and RA responsibilities
7. On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the most difficult and 1 being the easiest, what number value would you assign the difficulty of achieving academic success while being a Resident Assistant?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 8. On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being regular support and 1 being no support, what number value would you assign the support received from your hall director supervisor(s) when trying to achieve academic success?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 9. If applicable, please describe the kind of support your hall director supervisor(s) show in helping you achieve academic success.
 10. On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the strongest relationship and 1 being the weakest relationship, what number value would you assign the relationship between the responsibilities you have for the residents on your floor and your ability to achieve academic success?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 11. On a scale of 1-10 with 10 being the strongest relationship and 1 being the weakest relationship, what number value would you assign the relationship between the disruptiveness of your residents and your ability to achieve academic success?
1 2 3 4 5 6 7 8 9 10
 12. Please order the characteristics below from most important to least important when you are describing your academic success.
 - a. Achievement brought on through effort
 - b. Progress to degree
 - c. Making efficient use of academic resources
 - d. Establishing purpose
 - e. Understanding the material
 - f. Grade point average
 13. Are you interested in volunteering for the additional one hour-interview to talk about your Resident Assistant experience and your academic success?
 - a. Yes
Answer appears if student clicks "yes": Please provide your name and email an email for Brian Donahue, the primary investigator, to contact you to set up a meeting time to conduct an in-person interview to learn more about your experience in being a Resident Assistant and it's impact on your academic success.

Name: _____
Email: _____
b. No

Thank you for participating in this research study!

Appendix D

Semi-Structured Interview Protocol

Semi Structured Interview Guide
Qualitative Survey

1. Tell me about your experience as a Resident Assistant and what is expected of you in this position.
2. Please describe your building and floor environment.
3. How would you define academic success?
4. Discuss strategies that may contribute to your academic success as a Resident Assistant.
5. What may hinder a Resident Assistant from achieving academic success?
6. What can your supervisor(s) within the hall support you in achieving academic success?
7. How do you encourage students to listen to one another and the needs of other students on their floor?
8. How often do you participate in conversations with residents about cultural and ethnic backgrounds that are different from your own?
9. How often do you go about connecting with residents on an individual basis?
10. How do you go about encouraging your floor residents to get involved in the community?
11. Give me an example where you challenged your residents to engage in safe and healthy lifestyles.
12. How familiar are you with the physical and mental status of the students on your floor?
13. Give an example of how you have supported academic success within your floor community?

Appendix E

Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

Message:
December 8, 2014

Brian Donahue
Department of Educational Administration

Barbara LaCost
Department of Educational Administration
127 TEAC, [REDACTED], 68588-0360

IRB Number: 20141214784EX
Project ID: 14784
Project Title: Impact of Being a Resident Assistant and its Effect on a Student's
Academic Success

Dear Brian:

This letter is to officially notify you of the certification of exemption of your project. Your proposal is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance 00002258 and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46) and has been classified as exempt, category 2.

You are authorized to implement this study as of the Date of Exemption Determination: 12/08/2014.

We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:

- * Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;
- * Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
- * Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;
- * Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or
- * Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

This project should be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Guidelines and you should notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that may affect the exempt status of your research project. You should report any unanticipated problems involving risks to the participants or others to the Board.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at [REDACTED]

Sincerely,

Becky R. Freeman, CIP
for the IRB

