Analyzing the Role of the Resident Assistant in Academic Support

by

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Abstract

This study examined the role of the resident assistant (RA) in academic support, including the historical and emerging trends of the RA providing academic support, as well as student perceptions of the RA. A comparison of RAs in many universities drew attention to differences in role construction of the RA. RAs were found to have an active responsibility in academic support to students. While RAs performed duties typical of their traditional role, they were also involved in emerging programs such as living-learning communities, early warning alert systems, and faculty-to-residence programs. Universities should consider the ramifications of implementing these emerging programs as well as effective selection and training of RAs in order to provide support systems critical to student success.


Chapter I: Introduction

University residence life personnel, professional and paraprofessional, foster a community where student learning takes place outside of the traditional classroom. In general, residence life staffs oversee the well-being of students, particularly focusing on areas of social, emotional, physical, and academic development. Residence life staff act as role models for students, acquaint students with their peers, make referrals to various campus resources, encourage involvement in their campus and local communities, and develop intentional educational programming.

Statement of Problem

In higher-education, an important issue discussed amongst faculty and staff is a university’s student retention and persistence rate. Levels of attrition at higher-education institutions have remained high despite increasing enrollment (Tinto, 2006). Recent research has identified several factors contributing to student persistence. Students receiving satisfactory grades their first semester are more likely to persist than students who are not successful (Shaffer, 2009; Williford & Schaller, 2005). Academic performance during the first year is strongly correlated with students’ decisions to stay or leave college, more so than other characteristics such as high school grade point average or standardized test scores (Shaffer, 2009).

Given the diverse educational backgrounds and ability levels of students, college-level academia requires a skill-set foreign to many new college students. In addition, some residence life offices have challenges of supporting sophomore-level students, whose needs differ than those of the incoming freshman class (Araujo & Murray, 2010; Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Vuong, Brown-Welty & Tracz, 2010). The challenge falls upon university faculty and staff to
create and deliver innovative strategies maximizing student success, and encourage students to effectively take advantage of resources and opportunities available on campus.

The role of the resident assistant (RA) in academic support is different across universities for a variety of reasons, including organization of the residence life office, expectations of the position, and physical features of the residence hall. The average student living on campus will spend considerable amounts of time in the residence hall (Schroeder & Jackson, 1987). Therefore, RAs have many opportunities to facilitate meaningful academic-related conversations, provide educational resources, tutor, and refer their residents to academic support. However, RAs may face formidable challenges when it comes to providing meaningful initiatives to support academics, or maximizing the effect of referrals to on-campus resources.

There has been very little research focused on RAs’ impact on student persistence and academic achievement. This study focuses on the ways RAs can increase the quality of interaction between students and faculty and/or educational resources on campus in order to positively contribute to universities’ retention and timely persistence goals.

Research Questions

As a Resident Director at Northern Michigan University, I am interested in examining the function of the resident assistant and the role of the position in providing academic support. This includes the historical roles RAs have performed and current roles RAs perform when providing academic support. My initial goal for the study is to gather and organize the theories, practices, and strategies RAs use to implement academic support both at my institution and those at other universities. From my research, I hope to answer the following research questions:

1. What are the historical and emerging trends related to student perceptions of resident advisers/assistants with regards to academic support?
2. What are the best practices of resident advisers/assistants concerning academic support for the residents they are responsible for in a university setting?

Definition of Terms

A few terms unfamiliar to an outside reader are explained below.

**Resident Assistant / Resident Adviser / RA** – While the term may vary by university, RA refers to an undergraduate student employed by an institution of higher education who lives and works in the residence halls. The RA’s general function is serving the other students in their assigned area of responsibility.

**Facilities** - an administrative unit responsible for the oversight (preventative maintenance, repairs, construction, renovations, and upkeep) of the physical facilities at a university.

**Housing** – used as another definition for “Facilities”

**Student Affairs** – Clark (2008) provided this definition of student affairs: “A general term on college and university campuses used to describe the work of professional and paraprofessional staff members who serve as support personnel to the academic greater mission of the institution, including the augmentation of student learning by creating educational opportunities outside the classroom. Although they are not typically faculty members, they serve the students through offices such as career services, judicial affairs, residence life and housing, counseling services, and student development. The reporting structure for RAs is generally included within the framework of divisions of student affairs”

**Residence Life** – In this study, residence life is used to describe the department within student affairs administering student housing on college and university campuses. Residence life includes administrative, assignments, student staffing, and programming functions of the
department. Residence Life Offices are committed to enhancing student learning in a holistic manner.

**Living Learning Community/Program** – “Living-learning programs can be described as communities in which students not only pursue a curricular or cocurricular theme together but also live together in a reserved portion of a residence hall” (Inkelas, Vogt, Longerbeam, Owen & Johnson, 2006, p. 40).

**Academic Support** – The definition of academic support varies depending on the institution. However, academic support commonly refers to support services directly relating to areas of instruction, research, or other curricular goals. Examples of academic support are one-on-one academic advising, tutoring, study groups, library services, and other strategies used to support curricular activities. For the sake of definition, co-curricular activities will not be considered as academic support.

**Best Practices** – methods or techniques identified as exemplary in the field of study. Practices outstanding in application and supported by research are recommendable approaches for improving the quality of service.
Chapter II: Review of the Literature

Historical Role of Resident Assistant in Academic Support

Resident Assistants are often at the forefront of student development in residence halls. RAs’ day-to-day activities are centered on providing assistance to residents living in their community. The role of the RA generally coincides with Astin’s (1984) theory of development: The quality and quantity of students’ involvement influences the amount of student learning and development (Astin, 1984). Astin argued that students learn best by becoming involved. By fostering student involvement, RAs help students feel like they matter to peers, staff, faculty, and family. Additionally, students who have a sense of belonging and are appreciated are more likely to grow, develop, and succeed in college (Upcraft, 1995). RAs, due to the unique nature of their position are influential to students in areas of academic support.

A Brief Review of University Housing and Effects on Student Learning

Historically, housing staff have performed a variety of functions, including the following: security of facilities, maintaining hygiene and order, providing counseling to students, and encouraging opportunities for students to become involved with governmental organizations within the dormitory (Palmer, Broido, & Campbell, 2008). Williamson (1961) concluded that university housing had an educational function, but such a function was not necessarily integrated with the curriculum of the university. As studies investigating the educational impact of student housing were completed, dormitories eventually changed to residence halls. Such a name change is not attributed to the fact students spend a majority (70%) of their time on campus in residence halls (Schroeder & Jackson, 1987), but rather to the educational impact a residence hall can have upon a college student.
Extensive research has been conducted on the positive impact of residence halls on student learning [See Astin (1993b); Blimling & Schuh, (1981); Chickering, (1975); Feldman & Newcomb, (1969); Palmer, et al., (2008); Pascarella & Terenzini, (1991, 2005); Schroeder, Mable, & Associates, (1994); Schuh, (1999)]. Students who live on campus were more likely to be satisfied with their college experience and are more likely to persist (Palmer et al., 2008). Students who live on campus tend to interact with peers and faculty more often than students who live off campus, and these interactions are positively associated with educational outcomes including retention and graduation (Palmer et al., 2008). Lastly, “Residential effects on student learning and development are greatest in residential environments that are intentionally designed to achieve those effects” (Palmer et al., 2008, p. 91). Overall, students who live on campus help improve retention and student engagement, increase interaction with faculty and peers, are more likely to persist to graduation, and report higher satisfaction with their college experience (Pascarella & Terenzini; 2005; Shaffer, 2009).

A residence hall today is expected to be an environment providing positive experiences in areas of social awareness and responsibility (for self and others), interpersonal communication and cooperative living, and personal and educational development (Astin 1984, 1993; Chickering, 1975; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Schuh, 1999). Experiences from living in residence halls are associated with a holistic approach to student learning, augmenting the traditional curriculum with learning outside the classroom. Residence hall physical design has also changed to increase the quality and quantity of student-student interaction (Brandon, Hirt, Cameron, 2008; Strange & Banning, 2001). Residence life’s role shifted as residence halls evolved into places where learning opportunities occurred outside the classroom.
Northern Michigan University: Background & Role of RA

Northern Michigan University (NMU) is a four-year public, coeducational university located in Marquette, Michigan. Of its 9,252 students, approximately 8,615 are undergraduate, 637 are graduate students (NMU Institutional Research). NMU has more than 300 full-time faculty, of which 80% have terminal degrees in their fields of study. NMU offers 180 degree programs, and without going into great detail, has well-regarded honors, study abroad, first year, and leadership programs. Many facilities are renovated and technologically up-to-date, and every full-time student is provided a laptop computer.

NMU’s Housing and Residence Life Office (HRL) requires most students to live in the residence halls for their first two years of enrollment. Students who have reached junior status, have lived in residence halls for four or more semesters, are twenty-one years of age or older, are commuting, are veterans, or are taking eight of fewer credits are exempt from the housing requirement at NMU. The intention of NMU’s housing requirement is “to provide students with a living environment rich with opportunities for personal growth and social development, especially those which result from interaction with others, participation in community development activities, and involvement in other aspects of campus life” (Housing NMU Citation). HRL’s approach applies most student development theory (Astin, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 2006).

NMU has ten, three-floor residence halls on campus, housing approximately 2,600 students. The majority of NMU residence halls are suite-style living with two students to a room and four students sharing a common bathroom. Each floor of the residence hall is divided in half, containing two “houses”. One house, on average, contains 45 students, led by one RA. The six
RAs in each building are continual training and supervision by one professional resident director (RD). Approximately 55 RAs serve within the residence halls on NMU’s campus.

Students interested in becoming RAs at NMU undergo a typical selection process, and if selected, complete a two-week training workshop before the beginning of the fall semester. The workshop is comprehensive, including sessions on developing positive relationships with students, advising house government, identifying on-campus resources, emergency procedures, and skills useful for interpersonal communication. Academic support is also included; in particular RAs learn the importance of interpersonal communication when getting students to open up about academics. Particularly, RAs learn procedures and policies during training and apply most of their training when interacting with residents. The RA position description mentions the following duties and responsibilities explicitly related to academic support:

11. Develop, implement, and supervise social, recreational, educational, and developmental activities (including those pertaining to academic support and career exploration) for students living within his or her assigned area, involving students in activity planning, implementation, and problem resolution.
12. Assist with the promotion of campus programs, activities, and services offered by other departments and organizations” (NMU RA Paraprofessional Manual).

RAs with strong rapport with residents are more likely to pick up on student trends of absenteeism, doing poorly on exams or assignments, and other barriers to successful academic performance. RAs can use this knowledge in several ways such as having academic-centered conversations with residents, assisting with student-initiated programming ideas, introducing students to organizations, or positively influencing students to take advantage of tutoring services or other resources on campus. To be noted, RAs are instructed to not be experts for
student issues but rather are expected to be aware of resources available and refer students when appropriate.

Historically, the role of the RA at NMU for academic support has taken both passive and active approaches. For example, two RAs hear about a student struggling in a sociology class. One RA has a conversation with the student and recommends the student take advantage of tutoring or speaks to their professor. This approach may be less effective than the second RA who is willing to walk the student to a study group, walk-in tutoring, or to an academic adviser. Students may not know where resources are located or they may be timid about speaking to advisers or professors. Taking a more active approach, some RAs have worked to bring campus offices into the residence halls. Successful collaborations with student affairs personnel in NMU’s Academic and Career Advisement Center (ACAC) produced evening programs focused on developing study skills, helping with test preparation, or answering questions relating to curricular or career goals. NMU’s Center for Student Enrichment frequently partners with Housing and Residence Life to promote involvement with student organizations, on campus events, or volunteering opportunities.

RAs at NMU who have been perceptive, were aware of ways to vary their approach with different students, and consulted with supervisors on the best course of action were highly regarded by their residents. RAs have developed strong communities promoting learning outside of the classroom and opportunities for personal growth. However, when the RA position requires attention to many different unique responsibilities, academic-focused conversations and initiatives directed at students may not have received as much attention as they should. Investigating the role RAs have played in academic support at other institutions will produce comparative information meriting discussion.
Role of RA: Universities Elsewhere

Seeking information about the role of the RA in academics at other universities, I contacted various residence life offices at a variety of institutions via email. Corresponding with various housing officers from public Midwest universities, I received responses from participants who referred me to job descriptions for RAs and their living-learning counterparts (covered later). Others explained procedures and processes the department expected or required the RA to follow. Such information included how the RA held academic conversations, made referrals, or corresponded with academic affairs officials for involvement in hall programming. Although formal research studying RAs is limited, RA job descriptions are numerous and readily available. Examining RAs at other universities through job descriptions, responsibilities, training, and operating procedures identified similarities and differences in RA role construction.

The role of the RA in community and student development is well documented in multiple journals (ACUHO, NASPA, and the Journal of College Student Development). Common duties for RAs include getting residents in their house/floor to know each other, responding to emergencies, having an on-duty policy, advising a house council, serving as a role model, enforcing the student code and documenting violations. Creating an atmosphere conducive to basic student functions such as the ability to sleep and study is universal to the RA position. However, specific RA job descriptions highlighted differences of providing academic support.

Many RA job descriptions contained responsibilities such as, “the RA provides programming efforts that foster social and academic development,” “has intentional and meaningful conversations with residents about academic habits, etc,” and “advise residents of campus resources.” University of Wisconsin-Madison emphasized:
[C]ontributing to academic programming under the direction of the Academic Program Coordinator/Residence Life Coordinator, being a visible academic role model – model a commitment to academics, attend class, model strong student habits and engagement with academics…, engaging residents in regular conversations about academics in intentional ways, and facilitating or referring student to study groups.

The Academic Program Coordinator is a live-out student employee responsible for coordinating academic support alongside the RA; the Residence Life Coordinator is a professional staff member (C. Bergman, personal communication, November 14, 2011.)

From these descriptions what is important to mention is not the origin of the job descriptions, but the degree to which academic support was mentioned within the job descriptions. What are the differences in practices and the documented outcomes between university residence life offices when RAs provide academic support for their residents?

Specifically, one senior housing officer at Michigan Technological University provided background on RA contributions to academic support. Such responsibilities included inviting faculty in for formal and informal events (hall programs or luncheons), outreach to residents when faculty member emails the Dean of Students with concern (the RA is not privy to confidential information i.e. student was absent from class or performing poorly on exams), and informing supervisors of struggling students for discussion in an Early Intervention Team (J. Cooper, personal communication, November 17, 2011). Another senior housing officer at Ferris State University provided a similar account, stating the RA was expected to know their residents well, refer them to resources and look out for students who are struggling in any capacity. RAs were involved when connecting academia to the residence hall; RAs brought in faculty, tutoring and other resources to the residence hall community (J. Shaffer, personal communication,
November 21, 2011). Both explanations were helpful when understanding RA involvement in academic support outside of NMU.

**Emerging Trends in Academic Support Systems: Redefining the Role of the RA**

**Living-Learning Communities**

A recent trend in university housing has been the use of Living-learning communities. LLCs seamlessly bridge student academic experiences in ways applicable to their everyday lives and reinforce learning from the traditional curriculum (Inkelas, et al., 2006, Kuh, 1996). Simply put, LLCs are “Programs in which undergraduate students live together in a discrete portion of a residence hall (or the entire hall) and participate in academic and/or extracurricular programming designed especially for them” (Soldner & Szelényi, 2008, p. 15). Living-learning programs vary in structure, by their academic focus or other reasons and have been used to scale down the size of the institution (Shapiro & Levine, 1999). Crimmin (2008) stated that LLCs provide “greater opportunities for faculty and peer interactions, coordinated learning activities, and an academically and socially supportive learning environment” (p. 8).

Most LLC programs house approximately 50 students, usually in one reserved residence hall floor (Soldner & Szelényi, 2008). For example, at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, students have the option to self-select and apply to various LLCs based on their academic program or other interest (housing.illinois.edu). Additionally, LLCs have been structured into honors-type programs (Daffron, 2009). As to the organizational structure, LLCs are supervised by residence life professionals, faculty members, or both are partnered. Collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs units was one of the strongest indicators of success for LLCs (Soldner & Szelényi, 2008). Students living in LLCs have academic discussions with their peers more often than students living in traditional residence
halls (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003). Key factors believed to have contributed to the success of LLCs were opportunities for quality interactions with faculty outside of the traditional classroom, intentional academic programming/coursework for students, and an environment allowing meaningful interactions with peers (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003). Important considerations influencing success of LLCs were programs where students self-select or undergo an application process for admittance, the pre-enrollment characteristics of students, and student effort towards participation in the LLC (Astin, 1993; Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Soldner & Szelényi, 2008).

Research on the classification of different living-learning programs can be found through The National Study of Living Learning Programs. This study was used to gather information about living-learning programs across the country, to study differences between traditional residence halls and living-learning communities, and to establish a link between living-learning communities and student learning. Although the pilot study sampled students attending large public universities, the most recent study involved 46 institutions who hosted more than 600 living-learning programs and sampled 22,000 students (Inkelas, et al., 2006, Soldner & Szelényi, 2008). Not surprisingly, Soldner and Szelényi (2008) found significant differences across the spectrum in all categories of data among the 613 LLCs surveyed. Differences in LLC programs across universities included: size of student participation in LLC, admission criteria, reporting structure, budget, fees charged, roles of the program staff, co-curricular activities in the LLC, faculty involvement, and courses taught. Some LLCs offered formal coursework to students who lived in the community, others did not. Level of faculty participation increased when faculty was responsible for the supervision of the LLC. Faculty involvement with LLCs besides teaching obligations were putting on workshops for students, faculty mentorship, attendance at social
events, serving on advisory boards, and academic advising (Soldner & Szelényi, 2008). The study concluded a wide range of student outcomes across all LLCs. Not all living-learning programs emphasized curricular learning; others focused on increased social interaction with peers and faculty. Therefore, this study was helpful to categorize the types of living-learning programs, rather than use differences to make comparisons on the effectiveness of each living-learning program. Classifications of programs could be used on an institutional-level to suggest implementation of such programs and define the structure and resources required for a LLC.

In living-learning communities, what role does a student-staff member play? Benjamin (2007) compared the Peer Mentor (PM) role of Iowa State’s Learning Communities to traditional descriptions of RAs. A PM was responsible to hold office hours and actively plan and participate in learning community activities, but not required to be a mediator, typical of the RA. The study used focus groups to analyze responsibilities of PMs. Nineteen out of 31 PMs participated in the study, and of the 14 learning communities on the university’s campus, 10 were represented in the study. Each learning community had a separate PM job description designed to serve the goals and needs of the learning community program. Commonalities between job descriptions included:

- Acquainting students with and referring them to resources, attending training, meeting with supervisors, working in conjunction with residence hall staff, planning activities, holding office hours, spending a specified number of hours on peer mentor duties, and attend/assist with a learning community class (Benjamin, 2007).

Benjamin found PMs understood their role in the learning community by use of job descriptions, interview processes, participation in training, and previous experiences in the learning community. Paraprofessional student employees in learning communities in different universities
had varying responsibilities and serve in capacities reflecting both the role of an RA and a PM, depending on the institution and program. Other studies such as Stassen (2003), Tinto, (2003), and Zhao (2004) further examine the effect of student outcomes in living learning communities.

**Increasing Student-Faculty Interactions in Residence Halls**

Student interaction with faculty has been tied to increased satisfaction with college more than any other type of involvement (Astin, 1984). Students who frequently interacted with faculty were more likely than other students to have positive experiences across all areas of their college experience, including student friendships, variety of courses, their environment, and the administration of the institution (Astin, 1984). Furthermore, student-faculty interaction is also tied to positive academic outcomes: college GPA, degree attainment, graduating with honors, and enrollment in graduate programs (Astin, 1993). Astin (1984, 1993) believed higher education institutions needed to find ways to encourage student involvement with faculty. Although Astin’s works were published nearly thirty years ago, they still remain a theoretical foundation for those involved in student affairs. Student interaction with faculty has also improved personal and intellectual growth, career choice, and is correlated with positive student outcomes (Kuh, Douglas, Lund, & Ramin-Gyurnek, 1994; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Whitt (2008) emphasized the need for partnership between academic affairs and student affairs, and provided guidelines for institutions considering such partnerships.

Astin defined student involvement as “…the quantity and quality of the physical and psychological energy that students invest in the college experience. Such involvement takes many forms, such as absorption in academic work, participation in extracurricular activities, and interaction with faculty and other institutional personnel” (Astin, 1984, p. 528). Student interaction with faculty outside of the classroom can be developed into several forms of
programming. Universities have introduced purposeful programming which increased positive student-faculty interaction in the residence halls. Many university campuses have led initiatives with the goal of linking students to faculty. For example, MIT and Dartmouth provided opportunities where faculty are placed in front of students outside of a classroom. Faculty who participated in discussions were invited to a meal or a social event planned by the students hosting the event (Dartmouth Office of Residential Life; Orlando, 2006). Such initiatives could be described as faculty-in-residence programs. As mentioned by Browne, Headworth, and Saum (2009), faculty-in-residence programs serve both faculty and students in a beneficial way. Faculty members are immersed in a residence hall environment and have frequent interactions with students and staff and learn about student life in the residence halls. Students receive interaction with faculty on a more personal level they might not receive in a classroom.

Communication of common understandings and goals between student affairs and academic affairs staff in the formation of a faculty-in-residence program is critical to the success of such a program (Browne et al., 2009). Additionally, Browne et al. (2009) mentioned several obstacles and how they are overcome when pursuing faculty-in-residence programs. First, reluctance of faculty participation (due to various barriers) was settled by intentional faculty selection/invitation. Next, miscommunication among collaborators about the importance of learning outcomes was overcome by creating trust between faculty and staff. Last, premature abandonment of residence hall programming due to poor attendance was remedied by RAs gathering student leadership and input for the format of such academic programs (Browne, et al., 2009). To be noted, Browne et al. did not provide any quantitative data documenting the impact of such faculty-in-residence programs, though they have received attention in practice among other institutions (Bridgeforth, 2010).
Early Alert Warning Systems

Students who are performing poorly in academics trigger a university response from an early alert system. An early alert system as defined by Cuseo (2004) is a formal, proactive, feedback system through which students and appropriate university personnel are alerted to early red flags in academic performance, such as frequent absenteeism or poor performance on midterms. Early alert systems include both midterm grade reports and pre-midterm alert systems. Specifically, midterm grade reporting required students with very low midterm grades to speak to an academic advisor or academic dean, who made referrals to necessary support services. Pre-midterm alert systems analyze student behavior during the initial 4-6 weeks of class and employ similar intervention strategies (Cuseo, 2004). Barefoot (2002) found that more than 60% of 991 postsecondary institutions reported midterm grades to first-year students along with feedback on their academic performance. Furthermore, 10% of the institutions with early warning systems obtained student-privacy waivers allowing this information to be shared with students’ parents. Early alert systems require a concerted effort from faculty, who may be hesitant to comply with midterm grade reporting due lack of time or other reasons (Barefoot, 2002). The reporting of midterm grades may not specify the cause of poor performance and require additional information from faculty (Cuseo, 2004). Tinto (1993) concluded that an intervention provided after midterms may come too late to prove effective. Many schools have seen significant results in areas of student retention and persistence through implementation of early alert systems (Shaffer, 2009). However, Shaffer stated the role of residence life staff in the support of early alert systems had not been researched significantly and merited further study.
In his research, Shaffer surveyed directors of housing and residence life in American colleges and universities who were members of the Association of College and University Housing Officers – International (ACUHO-I) to determine the existence of early alert systems, the reasons why the systems exist, and barriers to their implementation and success. The study involved quantitative methods with some qualitative responses for open-ended questions. Surveys were sent to 733 members, and 273 (37.9%) participated in the study. A pilot study was conducted on a smaller scale by 12 housing officers from state universities in Michigan, Indiana, and Illinois, which allowed for modification of the survey before the final study was completed. Shaffer acknowledged self-reported perceptions of senior housing officers can be viewed as a limitation to the study.

For results of the study, 187 (67.3%) respondents indicated some form of an early alert system existed on their campus, 68 (24.5%) indicated no program existed, and 23 (8.2%) responded “no” or “I don’t know”. Of the 187 institutions with early alert systems, 119 (63.6%) involved residence life staff in the program and 68 (36.4%) did not involve residence life staff. Residence life staffs were found to play a role in planning and implementing early alert systems on their campus, but did not play a large role in training individuals who implement the systems. 65 institutions (57.5%) reported residence life staff received reports of midterm grades for some (n = 46, 40.7%) or all of their residents (n=19, 16.8%); 48 institutions (42.5%) reported staff did not receive grade reports.

When making contact or connecting with residents, residence life staff commonly used methods of telephone, e-mail, and one-to-one meetings with residents receiving poor or failing midterm grades. Most institutions used prepared materials when guiding conversations with residents, created actions plans to address areas of concern, and made efforts to follow up with
residents after initial contact with residents. Shaffer included perceptions of senior housing officers on major barriers to early warning systems; lack of collaboration between student affairs and academic affairs, lack of resources, and lack of understanding were the most reported barriers.

Interestingly, residence life staff was more perceptive of student concerns of a non-academic nature, such as roommate conflicts, personal issues, family issues, or financial concerns than those of an academic nature (Shaffer, 2009). Concerns from students least assessed by residence life staff were commitment to major, study habits, and potential learning disabilities. Shaffer contended residence life staff is trained to watch for aspects of outside-the-classroom behaviors, due to their traditional role. However, residence life staff must be watchful for both academic and non-academic concerns. Further studies can examine the role of the RA in early alert systems, the extent of training and awareness the RA receives for such programs, and possible successes and barriers to programs involving RAs in early alert systems.

**Student Perceptions of Academic Support Provided by Residence Life Staff**

The following section is intended to examine student perceptions with regards to services provided by residence life staff. Feedback from students is useful for two main reasons: to describe the current satisfaction of services provided, and in turn to use feedback to improve current strategies and resources or create new initiatives. Feedback from other universities can be used to make comparisons and consider successful academic support programs.

**Northern Michigan University**

Northern Michigan University administers the Student Perception Survey each semester to every student living in the residence halls. The survey was first given in 1986 (C. Holm personal communication, November 30, 2011). The 44-question survey includes a variety of
questions in several categories, the number of questions in each category is in parentheses:

House (9), Services (4), House Government (2), Hall Government (2), Resident Advisor (10),
Resident Director (4), Facilities (7), and On-Campus (6). Students provide responses by selecting
“Strongly agree,” “Agree,” “Disagree,” “Strongly Disagree,” or “N/A”. Students can omit
questions, and each question allows the student the opportunity to provide comments for
clarification. Responses are anonymous. The survey is available for students to take online for
approximately two weeks near the end of the semester.

Students are sent an initial email from the director of Housing and Residence Life which
provides an explanation of the survey and instructions on how to complete the survey. RAs and
RDs can view who has or has not completed the survey. A few additional follow-up emails sent
to students who have not yet participated are provided. Residence Life Staff makes an effort to
encourage as many students as possible to complete the survey, which likely contributes bias on
survey results, and as such, should be noted when considering limitations. Concerning rate of
returns, SPS for Fall 2011 semester received 2330 out of a possible 2515 responses, yielding a
92.6% return rate. However, though rate of return on SPS data for the Fall 2011 semester was
available, results had not yet been compiled and will not be included in the study.

The SPS includes two questions about the RA and academic support. “My resident
adviser seems interested in my academic success” and “I am not aware of the type of academic
assistance my resident adviser can provide.” Prior studies found there was no direct link between
students’ perceptions of a supportive living environment and improved academic outcomes.
However, students’ overall conceptions of a supportive campus climate did contribute to their
intellectual development (Inkelas et al., 2003). Students living on campus were more likely to
perform better academically, but used on-campus resources in the same frequency as students
living off campus (Araujo & Murray, 2010). These two studies reiterate the need to evaluate an RA role of providing academic support.

For example, NMU’s Academic and Career Advisement Center (ACAC), an academic support office on campus, made approximately 20,200 formal contacts with students, and NMU’s All Campus Tutoring served students approximately 6,482 times throughout the 2010-2011 academic year (J. Gadzinski, personal communication, October 20, 2011). Students are clearly using support services, but how many of these students live in residence halls? How many seek assistance more than once?

The two questions about academic support were first asked on SPS during the Fall 2005 semester. The time span of data includes all semesters from Fall 2005 to Winter 2011 (twelve semesters). For the purpose of this research, I have included a graph of the longitudinal study for student responses on these questions (see appendix A and B). Longitudinal studies offer the ability to identify variations in growth and examine causal relationships between variables at earlier or subsequent events (Bauer, 2004). This longitudinal study differs slightly from a traditional model where participants are tracked over a time period. Student dynamics on campus change frequently due to NMU’s two-year housing requirements, and as such, tracking a single group of students cannot be performed with the data available.

Data from SPS were obtained from NMU’s Housing and Residence Life. For both questions, the total amount of students answering the question and their individual response were included, during the semester of enrollment when the survey was taken. For the question, “My resident adviser seems interested in my academic success,” total responses marked as “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” were combined and “Strongly Disagree” and “Disagree” were combined. Likewise, for the question, “I am not aware of the type of academic assistance my resident
adviser can provide,” participants selecting “Strongly Disagree” and “Disagree” were combined and “Strongly Agree” and “Agree” were combined. After calculating percentages based on the number of responses for each question, line graphs were created to analyze trends. Please reference the appendix for all data collected from SPS.

For both questions, approximately 23,000 student responses were logged over 12 semesters. In regards to the question, “My resident adviser seems interested in my academic success,” 71% of students during the Winter of 2006 and 82.9% during the Fall of 2009 agreed. The two above percentages represent the range of data through all semesters where data was gathered; on average 78% students agreed their RA was interested in their academic success. “I am not aware of the type of academic assistance my resident adviser can provide” received similar responses with a range of 67.8% of students during the Fall 2005 semester to 80.8% of students during Winter 2010 responding disagree; on average 76.4% of students were aware of academic assistance the RA could provide. Line graphs of these data revealed a stagnating trend for responses on both questions (Appendices A & B). Overall, SPS data reflected that a majority of students feel the RA is interested in their academic success and are aware of academic resources the RA can provide. However, on average, a considerable percentage (at least 20%) of students were not aware of resources and the RA was not interested in their academic success. Data from future surveys could be used to test the effectiveness of any initiatives developed by Housing and Residence Life. Given the stagnating trends for the data present on both questions, HRL would be able to see if student perceptions were influenced by new programs centered on the RA providing academic support.

Universities Elsewhere
As a preface, studies on student perceptions from other universities varied by design or intended area of research. Studies included in this section were those whose common elements were directly related to RAs and the academic performance of their residents. For example, the focus of one study is student involvement in the residence hall, but as part of a larger survey, researchers included questions about the RA being capable at directing academic help. So while the survey targeted a different research topic, valuable student feedback concerning RAs and academic support can be studied. Student perceptions are useful when analyzing the strategies, initiatives, or environments used by residence life staff and evaluating the effectiveness of each. Both perceptions of students living in traditional residence halls and living-learning communities are included in this section.

Arboleda, Wang, Shelley, and Whalen (2003) studied predictors of residence hall involvement, including interactions with the RA. The researchers used a 66-item survey, which included student attitudes toward their RA. Residence hall directors and RAs distributed the survey; incentives were used to increase return rate. 1,186 out of 1,779 students (66.7%) students answered the survey. The researchers used Cronbach’s alpha to test reliability. Particular questions directly referencing the RA and their alpha values were: “RA is knowledgeable of campus and community services (.77), RA is good at directing academic help (.73), resident studies mostly in residence (.65), (resident is able to study in the residence halls (.64).” Several factors, such as “RA shows enthusiasm for job” could be manipulated to convey an academic meaning but were not included. The methods and data are overall reliable, though two of the parameters (resident studies…& resident is able to study…) are considered questionable due to their alpha values for describing internal consistency. Arboleda et al. determined that students who had more interactions with their RA during the semester were more involved with house
activities, and found students who were more likely to be involved in group study or had frequent academic conversations with peers were more likely to be involved in house activities. As involvement has been strongly tied to student retention, students who are more involved will find time to interact with the RA and have more time to have academic discussions with peers or be involved in study groups. (Astin 1984, 1993; Pascarella & Terenzini 1991, 2005; Tinto 1975, 1993, 2006; Arboleda, et al., 2003). This study helped establish RAs who fostered involvement in their residents mutually benefitted in areas of academics.

Sophomores living in a LLC were more satisfied with their living environment compared to sophomores living in traditional residence halls (TRH) (Crimmin, 2008). The research methods included an initial questionnaire followed by a focus group. The questions assessed student level of interaction with staff and whether students felt residence life staff was supportive of their social and academic goals. The data gathered (n=275; p=.001) examined whether students were satisfied with their living area by type of residence area. Furthermore, this included survey questions which asked students if their residence hall staff was generally academically supportive. As for qualitative data, the study’s findings included traditional residence hall (TRH) student interactions with residence life staff. TRH students reported positive experiences after having interactions with faculty through programs hosted by the RA, and they believed RAs were helpful acquainting students with academic assistance, and made an effort to try and help the student with academic concerns. The study noted a difference in academic supportiveness of students’ peers based on their living environment. Three of twelve students in TRH viewed their peers as academically supportive; whereas, eight of nine students in LLCs reported their peers were academically supportive. All LLC students participating in the
focus group viewed their residence hall staff as academically and socially supportive and would recommend their LLC to new freshmen (Crimmin, 2008).

Clark (2008) assessed various factors that influenced RA performance. Rather than training, classes, or other programs used to improve RA performance, the study examined RA evaluation scores as reported by residents. Clark then compared the scores to RA GPAs, number of residents the RA served, and whether students the RA served were first year students, upperclassmen (academic class). This study was completed over three years. Methods included collection of performance data used during formal evaluation processes of RAs and an online instrument students used to evaluate their RAs. Over 50% of 3,100 students participated and evaluated approximately 90 RAs each year. The study used both a Bivariate Correlation test and a Linear Regression to assess relationships and test significance. Cronbach’s alpha for the testing instrument revealed at least a .915 for each of the three years of the test, indicating the consistency and reliability of the instrument.

Clark’s results included the following: The number of residents a RA was responsible for and student rated performance was an undetermined relationship, though interestingly as the number of students the RA had in their house decreased, their evaluation score increased. RA experience (time in position) and student evaluation scores was also an undetermined relationship. Three factors were significantly related to performance, RA GPA, RA ethnicity, and academic class of student. Gender was not significantly related to RA performance. However, no single factor had a correlation across all three years of the study. Such a coincidence might be attributed to personal characteristics of the RA or other factors, but should be taken into account. Clark concluded that the study could be used by housing professionals to discuss selection, placement and retention criteria for RAs. As Clark analyzed resident perceptions of RA
effectiveness in a broad sense rather than reporting performance for specific duties (i.e. academic support), the study was somewhat limited for this paper, but is inherently useful to understand factors contributing to RA success. Specifically, if certain factors attribute to RA success, housing professionals may consider GPA and academic class as criteria used not to predict RA success, but used as a method to evaluate RA candidates during selection processes.

Another study documented student feedback for their living-learning environment and academic support provided by residence life staff and whether students viewed their residence hall environment as academically supportive (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003). A survey was distributed to a sample of 4,269 students living in the residence hall system in a Midwest public university. Of those, 1,531 students lived in a living-learning community; the remaining participants were students living in traditional residence halls serving as a control. A total of 2,833 (61.2%) participants returned their surveys. Analysis of variance (ANOVA) tests were used to gauge whether living-learning participants perceived their living environments to be academically supportive. Other methods used included composite measures created with exploratory factor analysis with orthogonal rotation and an alpha model used to test reliability. In other words, combined scores for a specific category of questions (i.e.: Is the living environment academically supportive?) were calculated and used to evaluate and test reliability in the category. Students in LLCs reported their living environment was academically supportive (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003). Specific questions included: “I think staff in my residence environment spend a great deal of time helping students succeed academically”, and “I think students in my residence environment are well aware of the campus academic support services available to them.” Overall, the alpha reliability on “Perceived residence hall as academically supportive” was .73 (Inkelas & Weisman, 2003).
This chapter has described the role of residence life staff in academic support. First, understanding the practices of RAs at NMU and universities elsewhere help establish some of the traditional functions of residence life staff in academic support. The chapter also examined some of the emerging trends used in university housing. Living-learning communities and the role of student staff provided examples of differences in student learning from traditional residence halls. RAs have emphasized the need for intentional programming in residence halls involving faculty. RAs are involved in early alert systems used to intervene with students. Finally, student perceptions have helped test the effectiveness of academic support methods used by residence hall staff.
Chapter III: Results and Analysis Relative to the Problem

Researchers, student affairs personnel, and faculty have frequently sought strategies to increase student retention and persistence—outcome measures tied to the mission of higher education. Student success overall is assessed by the learning acquired both in and out of a classroom. Though student affairs and academic affairs usually operate independently of one another, researchers have examined partnerships between the two groups (Boyer, 1987). Partnerships between student affairs and academic affairs created many different types of programs, including early warning systems, faculty to residence hall programs, and living-learning communities. Findings from this review include positive outcomes regarding both student performance and satisfaction with their university experience. Therefore, the common ideas to be analyzed in this section are fairly straightforward. First, partnerships between student affairs and academic affairs contribute to a holistic education of students, but barriers to success in these partnerships still exist. Second, residence life has historically been successful in the co-curricular development of students, but successful emerging trends in university housing stress attention to academic support. Finally, student perceptions are critical used in conjunction with other evaluative processes to refine programs or initiatives.

Residence halls where the traditional curriculum was integrated into the living environment improved student learning. Formalized living-learning communities created seamless-learning environments by grouping students by class registration or academic major interest or other interest (Kuh, 1996; Inkelas & Weisman, 2003; Inkelas et al., 2006; Shapiro & Levine, 1999; Soldner & Szelényi, 2008). Furthermore, students living in living-learning communities were more likely than traditional residence hall students to establish mentoring relationships with faculty (Inkelas et al., 2006). Additionally, residence life staff and faculty
often worked collectively to support students in living-learning communities (Benjamin, 2007; Soldner & Szelényi, 2008). Faculty to residence programs increased student interaction with their professors outside of the classroom in meaningful ways (Bridgeforth, 2010; Browne et al., 2009; Orlando 2006). Last, early alert warning systems were readily used by universities to intervene with students who may need critical academic assistance (Barefoot, 2002; Cuseo, 2003; J. Cooper personal communication; J. Shaffer personal communication; Shaffer, 2009).

Faculty and staff in the intervention process ensure students use on-campus resources, speak to an advisor, and take additional steps to improve. All of the above studies present significant challenges to the success of the programs included in this review. Communication and trust, establishment of clear and shared goals, and selection methods were the most common barriers concerning faculty and staff collaborations. In these studies, faculty and staff worked around barriers and implemented programs with the intention of improving the overall quality of the university’s curricular and co-curricular education. Student feedback has provided evidence to the success of many programs in residence halls, including living-learning communities, early alert warning systems, etc. Such studies provide accounts of success to universities looking to introduce similar programs to their campus (Barefoot, 2002; Clark, 2008; Crimmin, 2008; Cuseo, 2003; Inkelas & Weisman, 2003).

Residence life personnel ranging from senior housing officers to RAs were found to play an integral part in academic support. Through analysis of job description, procedure, and various studies, RAs were trained on procedures in academic support. Additionally, RAs handled different responsibilities based on the type community they were placed in, such as a living-learning community. RAs are expected to be positive role models and exhibit excellent student behavior for their residents. RAs are expected to know their residents and notify their supervisor
when they witness a student who is frequently not attending class or has admitted they are struggling academically (C. Bergman; J. Cooper; J. Shaffer personal communication). In consultation with their supervisor, RAs will follow up with struggling students and refer them to resources (Benjamin, 2007).

RAs are a valuable resource in tune with residents’ needs and are able to develop educational student programming involving faculty members that students will attend (Browne, et al., 2009). Paraprofessional student staff in LLCs served a largely academic role, leading academic discussions with residents, teaching a class, or inviting faculty to the residence hall, but also shared duties common of an RA (Benjamin, 2007; J. Cooper personal communication; Soldner & Szelényi, 2008). Sophomore students settling in their academic career may have difficulty adjusting to the RA position (Clark, 2008; Graunke & Woosley, 2005; Schaller & Wagner, 2007). These studies present implications residence life offices should consider when discussing RA selection criteria. Formal training of RAs is critical to the development of competent and effective employees. RAs in all capacities (TRH & LLC) need to be aware of the expectations of the position and understand their role in the community in order to maximize effectiveness (Benjamin, 2007; Clark, 2008). Successful programs stressed the importance of being an RA and a student, developing a community, and creating opportunities for outreach in the university community (Brunt & Ebbeling, 2008).

This chapter discussed the common elements of all studies in previous chapters. Research has supported the RA is a critical individual in the front lines of supporting students in their overall university experience. While considerable amounts of time are invested in helping students make a transition to college and developing their communities, RAs have an established role in providing academic support to their residents. Research supported RAs involvement in
current best practices of academic support, including student to faculty interactions, educational programming, early warning systems, and student referral to academic-related resources.
Chapter IV - Recommendations and Conclusion

Recommendations

Several recommendations are offered from the results of this study. First, student affairs and academic affairs must provide quality training and guidance to faculty, staff, and student workers but specifically to resident assistants when developing new programs aimed at the academic support of students. RAs generally have strong relationships with students and are in positions to provide quality information concerning students’ study habits, class attendance, or personal problems likely to affect their academic performance. Peer mentors in LLCs have quality interactions of an academic nature with their residents. RAs in traditional residence halls might benefit from adapting strategies from LLCs into their areas. Second, living learning communities, academic interventions, and faculty-to-residence initiatives are strong, proven programs every university should consider when searching for ways to integrate academic support into student residence. Adaptation of these programs may prove useful for universities whose current models of programming are not reaching their full potential. Successful programs have surely not been created overnight. Collaborations between academic and student affairs require considerable resources and involve significant challenges, but the eventual positive outcomes in student satisfaction and student retention and persistence clearly merit attention.

Areas for Further Research

Very few formal studies directly examine the RA in any capacity, let alone academic support. Future research should investigate the resident assistant and the importance of their role to students. Specifically, considerations for testing RA effectiveness might include examinations of RA training programs, factors contributing to RA success in the service of their residents, and the supervisors’ ability (Hall/Resident Directors) to provide effective leadership to RAs. Future
studies could incorporate mixed methods, such as surveys and focus groups. Such research might include cross-sectional analysis and the perspectives of students (residents), RAs, RDs, senior housing officers, and where applicable faculty involved with the residence halls.

For example, an ideal study would examine the learning outcomes of students who participated in a faculty-to-residence program the RA developed alongside student leaders. This study would best be conducted through a focus group. Specific questions would test whether or not students were aware that the RA was involved with planning the program, ask the student what were some of the lasting effects of the program (did the program affect the student’s GPA, increase involvement in class, or improve the relationship with the faculty member?) if the RA was interested in the students’ academic success, or if students were more aware of resources the RA could provide. Gathering student opinion on areas the program did well and could improve would also be paramount for future programs. These data could be used in a cross-comparison to NMU’s SPS the following semester and help further establish best practices worth consideration.

Conclusion

Many universities have developed programs or initiatives with the intention of providing effective academic support. Universities containing successful programs could be touted as flagship institutions for their work in their specific area of support. Certainly, every university values the academic success of their students, but some institutions may be unaware of ways to increase rates of student retention and persistence. Others may view these initiatives as cost-ineffective, or perceive resistance from faculty, staff, and students upon implementation. Regarding the emerging trends discussed in this paper, universities should consider adapting the best practices of universities with past success, and introducing pilot studies to improve student performance. Additionally, RAs are clearly a valuable resource to be viewed as a foundation of
support contributing to the success of our students living on campus. RAs are situated so close to a university’s most important resource, the student. Academic support initiatives actively involving residence life staff as an equal partner to academic affairs will improve the quality of education a university can provide and keep our students enrolled. Therefore, higher education’s faculty and staff must consider collaborative approaches of the highest quality service when meeting the needs of today’s college students.
References


Figure A: My resident adviser seems interested in my academic success. Each plotted point represents the average number of students responding “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” on the survey question for the given semester. Created with data from Northern Michigan University Student Perception Survey. Used with permission from Housing and Residence Life.
Table A: My resident adviser seems interested in my academic success.

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Note: First section of table contains total of student responses as selected on the survey. The second section of the table reports the student percentage of a student response. Finally, the last section of the table combines “Agree” and “Strongly Agree” responses into “Agree” and “Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree” responses into “Disagree”. Used with permission from Housing and Residence Life Office of Northern Michigan University.
Appendix B

Figure B: I am not aware of the type of academic assistance my resident adviser can provide. Each plotted point represents the average number of students responding “Agree” or “Strongly Agree” on the survey question for the given semester. Created with data from Northern Michigan University Student Perception Survey. Used with permission.
Table B: I am not aware of the type of academic assistance my resident adviser can provide.

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<td>86</td>
<td>90</td>
<td>1016</td>
<td>84.67</td>
</tr>
<tr>
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<td>25</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>27</td>
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<td>55</td>
<td>42</td>
<td>62</td>
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<td>35</td>
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<td>1456</td>
<td>2185</td>
<td>2023</td>
<td>2261</td>
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<td>2369</td>
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<td>2024</td>
<td>2226</td>
<td>1792</td>
<td>24644</td>
<td>2053.67</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

| Strongly Agree | 5.22| 8.07 | 5.12| 4.39| 2.94| 3.67| 3.70| 3.87| 2.86| 3.89| 4.04 | 4.08  |       |
| Agree          | 26.93| 23.35| 23.41| 18.45| 19.85| 17.33| 17.47| 15.94| 16.86| 15.31| 19.68 | 16.86 |
| Disagree       | 47.41| 46.18| 48.26| 52.01| 49.68| 51.84| 50.36| 51.74| 51.45| 50.19| 48.62 | 47.15 |
| Strongly Disagree| 20.44| 22.40| 23.21| 25.16| 27.53| 27.16| 28.48| 28.45| 28.82| 30.61| 27.66 | 31.91 |

Note: First section of table contains total of student responses as selected on the survey. The second section of the table reports the student percentage of a student response. Finally, the last section of the table combines “Agree” and “Strongly Agree” responses into “Agree” and “Disagree” and “Strongly Disagree” responses into “Disagree”. Used with permission from Housing and Residence Life Office of Northern Michigan University.