

THE NEXT CHAPTER: A COMPARATIVE REVIEW OF THE
EVOLVING RESIDENT ASSISTANT ROLE AT
THE UNIVERSITY OF OREGON

by

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The Resident Assistant (RA) role is unlike any other student position in the university setting. It is complicated, nuanced, and increasingly complex as the needs and expectations of residents and RAs rapidly change in a post-pandemic era of residence life. The role itself has been forced to evolve to address these changing needs. This thesis project is a comparative review of the Resident Assistant position at the University of Oregon (UO) and a further investigation into the role, its challenges, and its potential for improvement. This research explores how different institutions across the nation are implementing the RA role and how successfully these various interpretations of the role could be executed at the UO.

This project aims to address a gap in the existing literature surrounding the Resident Assistant role in the higher education and student affairs discipline. Specifically, this research will provide an institution-specific examination of the RA experience at the University of Oregon. In a broader context, this research offers insights into how the RA role and its responsibilities are interpreted across different institutions. The literature review will show that most existing literature on the role focuses on the RA's impact on residents. In contrast, less research is dedicated to the role's framework and interpretation. By reviewing the existing

literature, identifying current challenges and potential solutions, assessing the UO's current curriculum, reviewing other institutions' curricula, and collecting interview feedback, the research aims to provide evidence-based and institution-specific recommendations to the University Housing Department for improving the RA program.

In summary, this research aims to deepen our understanding of the RA role at the University of Oregon. By addressing critical issues such as high turnover rates, the impact of unionization, and the unique challenges posed in the post-pandemic landscape, we hope to provide actionable recommendations to the UO Residence Life Department. Ultimately, our goal is to contribute to a reality where the RA role is thoughtfully optimized to meet the evolving needs of residents and foster a positive residential community.

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Introduction

Background

The residential experience is a pivotal component of the college journey, shaping students' personal growth, academic success, and overall well-being. As institutions grapple with the profound impact the COVID-19 pandemic left on residence life, it is imperative to reevaluate and potentially reimagine the role of Resident Assistants (RAs), the frontline ambassadors of the residential community. In the aftermath of the COVID-19 global pandemic, the landscape of residence life has undergone significant and unprecedented changes. This immense shift in resident and professional staff needs has necessitated a recalibration of support systems, resources, and role responsibilities within residence life. The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced a variety of challenges to the higher education environment. From enforcing social distancing within communal living to vastly expanding the mental health resources and support offered to students, the pandemic completely transformed the residential experience in a matter of months. As students now navigate the unique challenges associated with prolonged asynchronous learning, social isolation, and heightened mental health concerns, the need for a supportive and inclusive residential community has never been more imperative.

Since the RA role serves as the first line of contact with residents, it has become even more critical to understand how the role's demands may need to change in this post-pandemic society. We must also consider that the pandemic impacted the students fulfilling these RA roles. Most of the existing literature focuses on how the pandemic impacted residents and how RAs can best serve these residents. However, RAs are also students and are usually similar in age to their residents. RAs and residents have experienced disruptions to their academic and social

lives, requiring adequate support systems to succeed in their designated spaces. In essence, this study seeks to transcend the immediate context of the University of Oregon by contributing nuanced perspectives and evidence-based recommendations to the broader discourse on the evolving RA role in the post-pandemic era of higher education. As institutions (including the University of Oregon) seek to create resilient residential communities after the pandemic, the findings of this study will aim to guide proactive measures that prioritize the well-being and success of both RAs and residents.

Research Questions

The primary research question is this:

- *Based on feedback from current Resident Assistants (RAs) at the University of Oregon, what changes can be made to enhance or improve the role of both RAs and residents alike?*

To gather additional information on the role's framework and its potential for positive change, I will also aim to answer the secondary research question:

- *How might the Resident Assistant (RA) role at the University of Oregon benefit from exploring and incorporating different position models/frameworks currently being implemented at other comparable universities?*

Objectives of the Study

First, the study aims to thoroughly review the role of RA and how it has evolved. To decide where the role should go next, it is crucial to deeply understand where it has been and why it has changed at pivotal moments in history. To provide relevant significance to this research, the interviews and literature review will give a synopsis of the challenges and

experiences RAs face at the UO and nationwide. Identifying and analyzing these prevalent challenges, alongside the historical context, will build a foundational understanding of the role, which will inform the rest of the research.

This study will also investigate recent issues surrounding the RA role, such as the impact of the unionization movement among student workers (including RAs) at the University of Oregon and other institutions. The interviews with current RAs at the University of Oregon will paint a vivid narrative of fulfilling this role at the UO, including motivations for applying, challenges, training effectiveness, thoughts on unionization, and suggestions for positive change within the role. Collecting these perspectives will grant the research a fresh and recent lens into the role.

Expanding the focus nationwide, the research will also comparatively analyze the RA position/framework at Binghamton University, Illinois State University, and the University of California at Riverside. It will explore the strengths, challenges, and potential applicability of these institutions' interpretations of the RA role (or related roles) at the University of Oregon.

Accumulating all of this valuable information, the research findings will be used to tailor institution-specific recommendations to the University of Oregon Residence Life department for improving/enhancing the role in the future with a focus on empowering the voices of the RAs who were interviewed and prioritizing their feedback.

Literature Review

Historical Evolution of the Resident Assistant Role

Middle Ages- Mid 1400's

University-based housing dates back to the Middle Ages, when European students traveled to Bologna, Paris, and Oxford to study (Boone et al., 2016). Far from home, these students sought living situations in informal settings, often living in housing provided by their teachers or living with their peers. (McConnell, 2018). However, by the mid-1400s, university authorities began to exert more control over student housing to address disruptive and problematic student behavior around campus (Boone et al., 2016).

1800's-1900's

As higher education developed in the United States in the late 1800s, this European model was adapted to include academic support and guidance. American colleges emphasized faculty oversight and student discipline more than their European counterparts. As a result, universities placed faculty in residence halls to live among students and enforce rules and standards. This development was not met positively by students or the live-in faculty (Boone et al., 2016). Professors were not eager to move into the residence halls amongst their students. Hence, the live-in faculty responsibility was often pawned off onto the younger, inexperienced faculty who were still learning how to teach college students, let alone live amongst them and deal with intoxicated residents, roommate conflicts, noise complaints, and visitation violations. The students mirrored this discontent of having a professor move into the dormitories.

1920's-1950's

The 1920s-1930s marked a period of reformation for student housing. Residential colleges and the appointment of a Dean of Men at men's colleges aimed to cultivate character and intellect among students and provide a healthier alternative to fraternity housing. Student housing became more than just about providing a room to live in while attending college. It became an attempt to provide a holistic home for students where they could thrive academically and socially. The end of World War 2 and the passing of the GI Bill led to massive increases in the number of individuals seeking a college education. This further accelerated the growth of residential programs, leading to an increased demand for housing and the introduction of residence counselors or hall directors (McConnell, 2018). In the 1950s, the establishment of women's colleges and the accompanying desire to provide safe and secure housing for female students near their academics led to demands for more residential support and security (Boone et al., 2016).

1960s-1970's

As societal norms evolved in the 1960s and 1970s, living-learning programs were created, and the Resident Assistant (RA) role was increasingly professionalized. RAs became integral in providing residents with satisfaction and social development and contributing to residents' academic success. RAs undertook a variety of responsibilities to foster a supportive living environment during this period. They acted as a bridge between the administration and the students, ensuring that the residents' voices were heard and that their needs were met. They played a crucial role in behavioral intervention, identifying and addressing issues such as substance abuse, mental health concerns, and academic struggles (Boone et al., 2016).

RAs also became instrumental in community building. They began organizing social events, facilitating group discussions, and encouraging interactions among residents to foster a sense of belonging and camaraderie. This not only enhanced the residential university experience but also began the crafting of the educational piece of personal/social development while living in a residence hall. RAs began mentoring residents, providing academic and social support and guidance for their long-term success in university and life.

Court cases and federal legislation during this period also shaped the role of the RA. The landmark case of *Dixon v. Alabama State Board of Education* (1961) substantially impacted the role's responsibilities. The US Supreme Court ruled that students accused of misconduct in a university setting are entitled to due process rights, including notices of charges and an opportunity to be heard. As a result of this case, RAs were increasingly involved in enforcing university policies and procedures related to student conduct.(Boone et al., 2016). They began receiving training on disciplinary protocols and participated in documenting incidents, conducting investigations, and reporting violations to appropriate university authorities.

Additionally, the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA) was passed in 1974 to protect the privacy of student education records and grant parents and eligible students (those over 18 or attending a post-secondary institution) the right to access and control the disclosure of their educational records. FERPA added a component to the RA role by requiring RAs to handle student information confidentially. RAs became responsible for safeguarding sensitive information about residential students, including disciplinary matters, mental health concerns, and personal circumstances.(Boone et al., 2016).

The passage of Title IX in 1972 also impacted the way RAs functioned in their roles. Title IX prohibits discrimination based on sex in educational programs and activities that receive federal funding. As part of their duties in fostering an inclusive and safe living environment, RAs became responsible for addressing issues related to sexual harassment, sexual assault, and gender-based discrimination within the residential communities. They received training on Title IX policies, reporting procedures, and supporting survivors of sexual misconduct (Powell, 2022).

1990's-2010's

During the 1990s and early 2000s, student populations in higher education continued to diversify. The RA role underwent yet another transformation to pivot into creating inclusive and supportive residential communities that embraced diversity and promoted equity among different identities. RAs began implementing cultural events, facilitating discussions around social justice issues, and focusing on creating inclusive living environments. This era significantly advanced RA training programs, emphasizing cultural competency, conflict resolution, and crisis management skills (McConnell, 2018). In addition, RA duties expanded to include conflict management, counseling, role modeling, fostering psychological safety, and connecting residents to university resources.

The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990 also greatly impacted the RA role. The ADA was created to prohibit discrimination against individuals with disabilities in all areas of public life, including transportation, employment, and education (*The Americans with Disabilities Act, n.d*). Title II of the ADA applies explicitly to state and local government entities, including public universities and housing facilities. As a result of this act, university housing departments (including the RAs) became responsible for ensuring that residential

facilities comply with ADA accessibility standards. Some (not all) RA programs began to provide training on ADA requirements and the RA's role in facilitating accommodations for residents with disabilities, connecting residents with appropriate on-campus resources, and advocating for necessary accessibility changes within the residence halls. These developments indicated the more significant higher education trend toward creating inclusive and supportive residential communities that promote student success and well-being for all residents.

2020's-Present

The most recent transformation of the RA role occurred due to the global COVID-19 pandemic in the early 2020s, which posed unprecedented challenges for higher education. RA's were suddenly tasked with enforcing public health guidelines, supporting residents through quarantine and extreme isolation, and fostering virtual communities amidst social distancing measures (Correa et al., 2023). The pandemic instantly demanded the evolution of the RA role, necessitating innovative approaches to community building, mental health support, and crisis intervention. RA's around the nation, once live-in student leaders, emerged as resilient frontline workers in the wake of a global health crisis.

The RA role has undergone significant changes in response to the pandemic and the changing landscape of higher education. While the core responsibilities of community building, student support, and crisis intervention remain, the approaches and methods have evolved to meet the shifting needs of students and institutions. During the pandemic, RAs swiftly adapted to enforce public health guidelines, support residents through quarantine and isolation, and foster virtual communities amidst social distancing measures. They embraced digital platforms, social media, and online tools to connect with residents, disseminate information, and facilitate community engagement.

As institutions have emerged from the pandemic restrictions, the RA role continues to evolve, reflecting the broader shifts in student affairs and higher education. A growing emphasis is placed on promoting holistic wellness, inclusivity, and a sense of belonging within the residential communities. RAs now organize programming such as stress-relief activities, mindfulness sessions, and wellness-centered events to help residents manage stress levels and prioritize self-care. While the RA role has historically encompassed various well-being initiatives, community building, event planning, and relationship building, the approaches and strategies would have to be reevaluated. The fully virtual engagement during the pandemic and the pre-pandemic methods may no longer be as effective in the current post-pandemic context.

As universities navigate this transitional period, they face the question of whether the demands placed on these live-in student leaders have become excessive. The RA role has evolved from a student enforcing rules to a multi-faceted position tasked with community building, fostering inclusion, responding to incidents and conduct issues, and promoting student development. Institutions must carefully assess the evolving needs of students and residential communities while ensuring that the expectations placed on RAs remain reasonable and sustainable.

So, will we ever go back to what residence life looked like pre-pandemic? Are these changes permanent? What does the future look like? While the future remains unclear, it seems that the changes to the needs of residents and student leaders are not temporary but rather a reflection of the ongoing and permanent shifts in higher education and student affairs.

Training/ Professional Development

RA training programs are designed to prepare students for the role's multifaceted demands. The most consistent competencies addressed in RA training include building community, role modeling, programming, administrative tasks, dissemination of information, safety maintenance, policy enforcement, peer leadership, and resident needs assessments. Some RA programs include additional competency areas such as mediation, emergency response, personal assistance to residents, and communication skills.

RAs need to be adequately trained to respond to emergencies and crises effectively, including mental health concerns and acts of violence. RAs are often the first line of defense in identifying and responding to mental health crises among residents. QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer) training is recommended for RAs to effectively recognize warning signs and intervene in potential mental health crises. Non-suicidal self-injury (NSSI) is a growing concern among college students, particularly female students (McConnell, 2018). Current RA training programs may need to begin, including specific training to equip RAs with the tools to detect, intervene, and prevent self-injurious behaviors. However, rising concerns around NSSI are a recent development. Additional research is needed to address NSSI detection, intervention, treatment, and prevention on college campuses.

The severity of this aspect of the RA role escalates quickly when RAs are faced with student death situations such as suicides, attempts, or rumors of death. RAs are the only university staff who see their residents on a day-to-day basis and may get to know them on a personal level. This puts RAs in a crucial position for supporting troubled students and observing changes in a person's level of functioning. While traumatizing, these emergencies may become an increasing reality of the RA role. Therefore, it is possible that RA training may also need to

include suicide awareness, observation skills, active listening, validation, tangible support, and self-harm resource referrals in the future.

In terms of crisis management, RAs also receive training to address alcohol and substance use among students, which can vary depending on the social networks and buildings in which they serve. Skill-building activities and procedures for addressing substance-related issues are popular inclusions in training.

Community building is another significant aspect of the RA role outside crisis management. To effectively fulfill this role, RAs receive training in empathy, communication, community building, mediation, and recognizing and responding to differences (gender, sexual orientation, race/ethnicity, socioeconomic status, etc.) Mediation training, in particular, is essential for resolving conflicts among residents. These conflicts can impact resident's emotional adjustment and academic performance. Training usually also addresses gender-specific issues as well as how to provide support for LGBTQIA+ students due to potential discrimination that may occur.

Effective training programs must be population-specific and interactive and include experiential exercises to enhance knowledge retention and comfort in implementing skills (McConnell, 2018). The effectiveness of RA training largely depends on the preparedness and communication skills of the trainers. Additionally, striking a balance between the quantity and the quality of training content is crucial. Training is often intense, usually spanning several days to a week, covering various topics relevant to the role and the residential community. The length and intensity of training can often be physically and emotionally exhausting for everyone involved, so it is vital to ensure that all training components are essential to the performance of the job.

Active learning techniques like scenario training have gained popularity in RA training (McConnell, 2018). Scenario training allows RAs to practice responding to policy violations and crises in a controlled environment, promoting skill development and confidence to handle real-world situations. Other training techniques, including case-based learning, feedback sessions, and team-based exercises, are also utilized to engage RAs and enhance learning retention. Incorporating technology into training can enhance engagement but presents unique challenges, such as distractions and dependency on digital platforms.

When designing and implementing RA training, curating a curriculum that balances fostering peer leadership with institutional responsibilities can be incredibly challenging. Other significant challenges in the role include meeting the diverse needs of housing for different residents, preventing incidents of violence, and addressing mental health issues. In training design, the focus should be on teaching procedures and expectations rather than attempting to change personal values surrounding aspects of the role (McConnell, 2018). Maintaining a strong sense of ethics while designing the training curriculum is also very important. The topics being covered in training deeply impact human lives. While complicated, it is imperative to maintain a deep sense of how the material taught will affect all those involved.

Practical training should include assessment to evaluate learning outcomes and ensure that RAs can apply their knowledge and skills. Despite the importance of the contemporary RA role, a lack of comprehensive measurement tools hinders residence-life professionals' ability to effectively assess critical components of RA performance (Manata et al., 2017). Most existing measurement tools often fail to capture contemporary aspects of the RA role, such as role modeling, conflict management, and psychological safety, limiting the assessment of RA training effectiveness, competency, and performance. To address this gap in measurement, Manata et al.

developed and tested a comprehensive measurement tool designed to capture critical aspects of the contemporary RA role in a single inventory (Manata et al., 2017). The tool identifies 11 competency domains that define the RA role, including managing conflict, maintaining physical safety, connecting with residents, fostering psychological safety, and providing academic encouragement and support. The developed measurement tool provides residence life professionals with a means to conduct more comprehensive assessments of RA training, competency, and performance.

Common Concerns/Challenges in the Role

As demonstrated in the historical evolution of the RA role, at the heart of this position is its evolving nature, which changes to address the complicated needs of residents. This habit creates many challenges for RAs, as it is difficult to be in a role that continually changes to meet the needs of others. Additionally, the evolving nature of student demographics adds another element of change. Increased diversity and international student populations present additional challenges for RAs in providing adequate support and fostering inclusivity (McConnell, 2018). RAs juggle multiple roles, such as mentor, mediator, and administrator, which can lead to role ambiguity and difficulty in prioritizing tasks. To help RAs manage their diverse responsibilities effectively, role expectations and training need to be clear and concise.

The extensive list of responsibilities associated with the role fuels RAs' challenges, like time management issues and difficulty setting boundaries. RAs often need help to balance their academic responsibilities with their role as peer leaders and community builders. This work-life balance struggle is a leading cause of burnout, exhaustion, stress, and emotional turmoil, mainly when you include the responsibility of responding to severe incidents such as alcohol-related

issues or harassment (B. Walker, 2022). In his research on personal experiences as an RA (including the author's own experiences and observations), William B. Walker highlights the demanding nature of the role and the sacrifices made to prioritize residents over personal needs. This nuance of the role can explain the recent high turnover rates among these student leaders. The risk of burnout is very high due to the live-in requirement of living, working, and studying in the same environment (McConnell, 2018).

RAs receive comprehensive training to assist them in fulfilling the various aspects of their role. Nevertheless, a significant challenge (both for professional staff and RAs) is to adequately prepare these student leaders for the emotional and psychological difficulties they can face on the job. These challenges can range anywhere from responding to emergencies to supporting students with mental health concerns and everything in between.

The existing literature also suggests that RAs of color face unique challenges, including but not limited to racism and lack of support for the specific issues they face on the job (B. Walker, 2022).

Existing Gaps in the Literature

As mentioned, practical training and curriculum measurement tools concerning the RA role could be more extensive. Even the leading models require more research to validate and refine the measurement tools. The measurement of the factors relevant to the RA role and their generalizability across different university settings requires further research. There needs to be a standardized method for evaluating RA performance and assessing the outcomes of RA programs. Furthermore, while some institutions have implemented innovative models to redefine the RA role, more research is needed on the effectiveness of these new models. More studies are

required to evaluate alternative staffing models' outcomes and identify the best practices for supporting RAs in diverse campus environments.

There also needs to be comprehensive strategies to address the significant work-life balance and burnout challenges that RAs face. While there is an overwhelming amount of research explaining why RAs are burnt out, there needs to be more solution-oriented research that details what methods or resources professional staff can utilize to combat burnout and emotional exhaustion effectively (Brandt, 2013). This is because the role has had so many responsibilities added over time that the issue is not with the people fulfilling the role or the lack of resources but with the role itself. As the role stands, there is also a need for proven effective training programs and ongoing support mechanisms for RAs throughout the year.

While there is some emerging research in this field, much greater attention still needs to be dedicated to diversity, equity, and inclusion in RA training and, especially, the subsequent support systems that the institution offers throughout the year. The institution must always ensure that RAs feel valued and supported in their roles, regardless of their identities.

Methodology

Research Design

This research used a mixed-methods approach to understand and address the challenges and responsibilities of the RA position. The mixed-method approach combines both qualitative and quantitative research methods to provide a comprehensive understanding of the role.

The qualitative component of the research involved conducting semi-structured interviews with current Resident Assistants at the University of Oregon. These interviews aimed to gather in-depth insights into the experiences, perceptions, and challenges of the RA role. This qualitative approach enables a nuanced understanding of the topic by using open-ended questions and allowing participants to share their perspectives.

The quantitative aspect of the research involved gathering survey data from the Resident Assistants who were interviewed. Participants who volunteered for the interview were asked to complete a brief survey. This survey collected demographic information about the sample population, including the number of years they had served as an RA, the building they were currently working in, and their gender, race, and ethnicity. This method allowed for a standardized measure to gather crucial information about the interviewees, helping to identify the diverse identities within the sample population.

The mixed-method approach integrated qualitative and quantitative findings to understand the research topic comprehensively. By combining these two approaches, we seek to enhance the overall validity and reliability of our research findings. One of the project's desired

outcomes is to provide specific recommendations based on the study findings. These recommendations will be shared with the residence life department.

Data Collection

Only current Resident Assistants at the University of Oregon were invited to be interviewed. Due to the short duration of the interview period (10 weeks) and the busy schedules of most RAs, the volunteer sampling method was selected. Volunteer sampling allowed maximum accessibility and feasibility to RAs interested in participating.

After the interviews were conducted, the transcripts were analyzed for recurring themes, patterns, and critical insights. The quantitative data from the interview sign-up submissions was also organized, coded, and interpreted, leading to a clear picture of the identities of the interviewed population.

Analysis of Existing Literature

Existing literature on the Resident Assistant role and related topics like student development, campus housing, and student affairs were reviewed. A comprehensive search of academic databases, journals, books, and institutional reports was conducted to identify relevant literature. Keywords and search terms related to the RA role were used, such as student housing, job satisfaction, burnout, work-life balance, support systems, and training. The relevant literature was collected and compiled, including empirical studies, theoretical frameworks, case studies, and best practices. The literature was mainly sourced from various disciplines, including education, psychology, sociology, and organizational behavior.

The literature review produced findings that identified common themes, gaps, and trends that informed the other portions of this research. The literature also clarified the consensus and disagreements in conversations surrounding the RA role and provided implications for practice and future research.

Interviews

The semi-structured interviews allowed RAs to share their experiences, perspectives, and insights regarding the RA role and its current responsibilities. The interviews covered topics such as job duties, challenges faced, thoughts on unionization, and recommendations for improvement.

Selection Criteria for Interviews

In this study, the selection and solicitation of interviewees were conducted with a focus on relevance to the research questions and the ability to provide valuable insights into the RA role, responsibilities, challenges, and experiences. The criteria for participation required that all interviewees be currently serving as Resident Assistants at the University of Oregon.

To recruit participants, all students serving in the RA role were emailed an invitation to participate. Those who volunteered to be interviewed were then asked to fill out a short survey to collect self-reported demographic data. The survey included questions about their current RA status at the UO, the residence hall they are serving in, their years of experience as an RA, and their gender identity and race/ethnicity. To gain the perspective of a more diverse array of identities, the RAs belonging to an identity-based ARC were also sent an additional community Canvas announcement, encouraging them to participate. To sign up for an interview, the RA was prompted to fill out a short survey asking for the following information (See Appendix A):

1. Whether they were a *current* RA at the UO
2. Which residence hall they are currently serving in
3. How many years they have been an RA
4. What best describes their gender identity
5. What best describes their race/ethnicity

This method ensured a direct approach to soliciting and selecting interviewees while also allowing for the collection of diverse perspectives from those serving in the RA role.

Ethical Considerations

This research study was approved by the University of Oregon IRB to ensure that the research project met all relevant ethical standards and to protect the rights and well-being of all participants. At the beginning of every interview, interviewees were provided with a detailed, informative document about the study, including its purpose, procedures, potential risks and benefits, confidentiality measures, and their rights as participants (see Appendix B for Informed Consent Document). Before they were asked to sign the document, every interviewee was allowed to ask questions and voluntarily consent to participate without coercion. Interviewees were informed that their responses would be anonymized and their identities would be protected in the final research report. After each interview, any identifying information from the transcripts was removed.

Participation in this study was entirely voluntary. The interviewees were informed that they could withdraw from the study without consequences and were not pressured or obligated to participate in any way. Steps were taken to minimize potential harm or discomfort to the interviewees during the interview process. These included interviewing in private rooms, not residence halls or housing-related spaces, using sensitive and respectful language, avoiding

invasive or overly personal questions, protecting their identity, and providing support resources if participants experienced distress.

Volunteer sampling was chosen as the method of outreach due to multiple ethical factors. Primarily, since many of the interviewees were currently serving in the role (and were applying for the role for the next year as well), it was important that they did not feel pressured or obligated to speak candidly about a role that they potentially needed to obtain basic needs (housing and food). Additionally, these student leaders often have very busy schedules, and we understood that taking 1 hour of their week for a non-compensated interview may not be accessible and feasible for many RAs, so we wanted to be considerate of that as well.

The Resident Assistant Role at the University of Oregon

Historical Context

Founded in 1876 and nestled in the Willamette Valley, the University of Oregon (UO) has a rich residence life history that has evolved significantly over the past 200 years. On-campus living was initiated at the UO with the creation of Friendly Hall in 1893 (*Friendly Hall*, n.d.). Designed by Oregon's most prominent architectural firm at the time, Whidden and Lewis, Friendly Hall was the first university dormitory designed to be Co-Ed in the United States. Men occupied the south wing, and women occupied the north wing. UO residence life started its journey, making a pivotal history in the university residential experience.

As the years progressed, the University of Oregon (UO) experienced continuous growth in its enrollment numbers. As the number of students increased, so did the demand for on-campus housing. Since the initial creation of Friendly Hall in 1893, the UO embarked on a continual project to create new residence halls. From the establishment of Hendricks Hall in 1913, to the recent completion of New Residence Hall (B) and New Apartment Style (C) buildings in 2023, UO Residence Life expanded from a single co-ed dormitory to its current state of twelve unique residence halls, housing approximately 5,500 residents. This expansion of space not only accommodated more residents but also underscored the increasing recognition of the need for academic and personal support within the concept of residence life. Over time, additional resources and services were integrated into the Resident Assistant (RA) position to enhance student development and co-curricular experiences.

Like the creation of residence halls, the RA position at the UO has evolved to become a multifaceted and nuanced role that requires a wide range of skills and competencies.

Currently, the RA position at the University of Oregon is a part-time, live-in paraprofessional role primarily working in residence halls (University Housing et al., n.d.). RAs at the UO collaborate with the Community Directors, Residence Hall Association (RHA), Faculty-in-Residence (FIR), and academic partners to create a residential community where residents feel a sense of belonging and inclusion, can connect with faculty/staff and peers, and are civically engaged.

The Resident Assistant role at the University of Oregon has evolved to meet the changing needs of the student community, mirroring the role's nationwide evolution over time. RAs at the UO work collaboratively with various entities within the university, such as the Community Directors, Residence Hall Association, Faculty-in-Residence, and academic partners. Throughout its history, the RA role at the UO has remained grounded in the principles of student support, community building, and personal development. Not specific to the UO, “the RA role has been essential in shaping the first-year resident experience and has been critical in University Housing, being a model of excellence and a hub of innovation (*Resident Assistant Position Description 2024-2025*, 2024).” By continuously adapting to changing circumstances and embracing new opportunities, RAs continue to play a vital role in enhancing the residential experience for students at the UO.

Over the years, the RA role has expanded to include more responsibilities and opportunities for leadership and personal growth. For instance, the Sally Smith and Richard Romm Resident Assistant Enrichment Fund Program “provides support for resident assistants to pursue experimental learning opportunities, share about their leadership experiences, create innovations to enhance the residential communities, and network with former RAs” (*Sally Smith and Richard Romm RA Enrichment Fund*, 2024).

Current Curriculum and Positional Agreement

The Positional Agreement

Currently, RAs at the University of Oregon serve as role models, peer educators, cultural navigators, and crisis responders to connect students needing emergency services and professional staff. An RA's presence in the first-year experience is crucial to student success, and they serve as the first line of student contact for the University Housing department. Per the positional agreement RA's sign with University Housing, they are expected to work a maximum of twenty (20) hours per week for fall, winter, and spring terms, or the equivalent of one academic year. During the academic year an RA serves, they must be full-time, degree-seeking students at the UO with a 2.5 cumulative GPA (or 3.00 if the RA is enrolled in the Clark Honors College). (*Resident Assistant Position Description 2024-2025, 2024*)

At the University of Oregon, RAs must have lived on campus for at least one term before they are appointed as an RA OR have attended an institution of higher education post-high school. Additionally, they must maintain good standing with the student code of conduct for the University of Oregon and University Housing. Background checks are conducted on each RA before their appointment, and the RA must pass to fulfill the position. RA's must also be eligible to work in the United States.

Other time commitments that UO Housing requires of its RAs are meeting with their supervisor and fellow RA team members weekly. The positional agreement clearly outlines specific mandatory training dates throughout the year that RAs must attend.

Regarding how RAs are compensated at the UO, they are provided with a campus meal plan and a furnished residence hall room, which they are required to live in. In addition to housing and a meal plan, RAs receive a stipend of \$1,320, paid in eight equal payments on the

last business day of each month. These payments begin in October and end the following May. University Housing explains that this stipend is comparable to the “books, course materials, supplies, and equipment” fee and is subject to change. At the UO, the compensation for fulfilling the RA role can affect a student’s financial aid package, so UO housing discloses in the positional description that interested candidates should meet with the Office of Financial Aid and Scholarships before they accept the position to discuss how accepting the role will impact their financial situation.

The Curriculum

The UO's Residential Curricular Model (RCM) is a comprehensive framework designed to educate students living in the residence halls. Research, best practices, institutional mission, and learning goals inform the RCM, which emphasizes the creation of just communities where all residents feel noticed, appreciated, and valued. Grounded in Nancy Schlossberg's Theory of Marginality and Mattering, the RCM aims to combat feelings of marginalization and promote a sense of belonging among residents (“Residential Curricular Model (RCM),” 2023).

The RCM outlines five learning goals:

1. Cultural Competence
2. Integrated Learning
3. Relationships in Communities
4. Well-Being
5. Responsibility

Nineteen learning outcomes measure these five learning goals. Specific learning outcomes accompany each learning goal, providing clear objectives for student development.

The RCM employs various educational strategies, both RA-initiated and staff-initiated, to facilitate learning among residents. These strategies include bulletin boards, on-campus events, community connections, door decorations, 1-on-1 RA meetings with each resident, roommate agreement forms, conduct discussions, faculty-in-residence programs, newsletters, hall councils, and resident assistant training. These strategies are designed to engage residents in reflective learning experiences and promote personal growth within community living.

Learning outcomes within the RCM are spread out throughout the academic year to ensure a progressive and holistic approach to student development. Each learning goal is addressed during specific months, with residents progressing through different stages of learning as the academic year unfolds. The rubrics to assess student progress and achievement at each stage allow for individual feedback and support to each resident.

The RCM employs a curricular approach to student affairs, integrating research, learning theory, regular assessment, teaching strategies, and learning outcomes to complete the residential experience. Aligned with institutional and departmental missions, the RCM seeks to educate the whole student and foster a sense of belonging within the residence hall communities.

Interview Results

Motivations and Expectations of the RA Role

The very first question asked in the 19 interviews was:

What motivated you to become an RA? What were/are you hoping to get out of this role?

The decision to become an RA seemed driven by personal, professional, academic, and financial motivations. For most, the desire to become an RA stemmed from a need for affordable housing. Several interviewees expressed a deep commitment to creating inclusive and supporting living environments within their respective residence halls. One interviewee remarked, “ I really enjoy helping people. So this role seemed very well suited to me because I wanted to be able to help people who have gone through similar experiences to mine my freshman year because I had a pretty, umm, difficult freshman year.”

Others cited the opportunity for personal and professional growth as a critical factor in their decision to pursue the RA role. By taking on leadership responsibilities, they hoped to develop valuable communication, conflict resolution, and time management skills. One interviewee noted, “I'm hoping to get some leadership skills and good associations out of it. There may be some networking opportunities within it, so it is like just getting to meet cool people. My community director is already writing a letter of recommendation for me, and I want to have a good time and have free housing.” The prospect of building meaningful connections and forming lasting friendships was a common theme among the interviewees. Many saw the role as an opportunity to connect with peers from diverse backgrounds and engage in meaningful conversations about personal and academic experiences. As one interviewee stated, “ After COVID, I felt like I was really, really nervous that I would not be able to make any friends like I thought I had like lost that skill forever, it was gone, and I just would be alone, and that was like,

very sad. I think that by getting to know my RA and getting to know my whole floor, I was able to revert that train of thought and, like, learn the social skills I thought I had lost.”

While the interviews revealed diverse motivations for becoming RAs, financial compensation in free room and board emerged as the majority of individuals' most common and significant motivators. For some interviewees, particularly those facing financial struggles or seeking alleviation from the burden of tuition and living expenses, the monetary aspect of the RA role at the UO is paramount. The compensation offered by the position, including the stipend, room, and meal plan, was seen as a practical way of offsetting the costs of attending university. “Financially, it definitely helps to have free housing and a meal plan. It’s a big relief for me and my family” mentioned one interviewee.

When asked what they hoped to get out of the role, the interviewees expressed a range of aspirations, reflecting their interests and priorities. A few interviewees highlighted a desire to make a positive impact within their residence halls. They wanted to create a space where residents felt heard, connected, and valued. Another interviewee stated, “ I really like the idea of a sort of community and being like a designated person to welcome people.”

The RA role is also a significant platform for career exploration and professional development, with several interviewees planning to leverage their RA experiences to pursue future roles in student affairs, the medical field, counseling, and education. As one interviewee stated, their motivation was centered around “definitely developing leadership skills and skills in terms of working with people younger than me. I wanted to become a teacher, and so things like the education field, a lot of what I do here in terms of, you know, dealing with emergencies and being a supportive person and the empathetic side of a teaching role, and those things really line up with the RA role.”

Current Understanding of the Role

After learning about their motivations for becoming an RA, interviewees were asked:

Can you describe what you currently do as an RA?

The interviewees' understanding of the role clearly mirrored what was outlined in the positional agreement, indicating that they had an accurate understanding of their role as an RA. The RA was often associated with characteristics like “multi-tasking” or “responsible for pretty much everything.” Across the responses, common themes emerged regarding the duties performed by RAs. These included fostering community engagement and cohesion, providing support and guidance to residents, enforcing policies and regulations, organizing and facilitating programs and events, and serving as a resource for resident’s academic and personal needs. The interviewees often mentioned being involved in conflict resolution or emergency response, conducting on-call rounds to ensure safety and security, and serving as liaisons between university administration and residents. The role was often described as “dynamic” and “multifunctional,” demanding adaptability, empathy, and strong communication skills to effectively address their residents' diverse needs while upholding the university's standards and promoting a positive living and learning environment.

Significant Challenges as an RA at the UO

The interview then went into the challenges that RA’s face in the role by asking:

What would you say is the most challenging aspect of your job?

Based on the responses given by the interviewees, common challenges emerged. Several interviewees described feelings of isolation and disconnection as significant challenges in their roles as RAs. This sense of isolation often stems from the “fishbowl effect,” where RAs feel constantly observed and scrutinized due to their position of authority in the halls. This can create

a disconnect with residents, who may view RAs as rule enforcers rather than peers or friends. One interviewee described how their duty to report rule-breaking activities has led to a sense of isolation. Despite forming solid friendships as a resident, which initially motivated them to become an RA, they found that their new role created a barrier between them and their residents. They explained that this disconnect was further exacerbated by the Residence Life department's treatment of RAs and the criticism they received when handling an emergency that they felt differed significantly from the scenarios outlined in training or any policy communicated to them.

Another RA, who identifies as an introvert, found the social demands of the role challenging and draining. Regular conversations with residents, while a crucial part of the job, were very taxing for her due to her limited social energy. The RA also struggled with residents' reluctance to use online scheduling systems for their 1-on-1 meetings and just an overall lack of compliance to interact with her, which led to missed meetings and additional stress. The constant pressure from her responsibilities, academic workload, and other commitments left her with little time for relaxation, further exacerbating their anxiety and feelings of isolation. This aspect of the RA experience, isolation and disconnection, is crucial to consider when creating support systems and training programs for RAs.

Emergency management emerged as a significant challenge for 26% of the interviewed RAs in their roles. This aspect of the job can involve handling crises such as drug overdoses, distressed students, or other serious incidents, often at inconvenient hours of the night. The situations that RAs are tasked with managing can range from a simple lock-out to a student overdosing on drugs and everything in between. The interviewees have stated that these situations are often confrontational and challenging to navigate, especially when dealing with

individuals who are intoxicated or emotionally volatile. To cope with this aspect of the role, one interviewee stated that they have found success in approaching these situations as a supportive presence rather than an authority figure.

After managing an incident, RAs are required to document the event in a detailed report known as an Incident Report (IR) to be sent to the residence life department. One interviewee highlighted how taxing these reports can be and how they often overlap with sleep and personal time. RAs receive training on how to handle emergencies. However, real-life situations often differ significantly, and it is nearly impossible for training to prepare RAs for the multitude of situations they may have to manage. 21% of interviewees mentioned that Title IX situations are the most challenging due to the sensitive nature of these incidents and the specific language and terminology required in the IRs. Again, they reiterated that they felt underprepared for these situations despite the training they received.

The emotional burden associated with handling emergencies can be heavy. RAs often find themselves supporting others during crises, which can be taxing. They often have to strike a balance between supporting others' mental health and maintaining their own, and according to the interviewees, that is a significant challenge in the role. The blending of work and personal life due to living in their workplace adds to RAs' challenges. The constant expectation of availability and the lack of personal boundaries have made the RA role very hard for some. The need for a continual state of readiness required for their job can lead to changes in their habits and methods of de-stressing. A notable issue that emerged from the interviews was the overall feeling of being unsupported by the department when it comes to mental health issues. Multiple RAs cited delays in connecting with mental health services after a distressing incident.

Effective communication with residents is a crucial aspect of the RA role, as highlighted by commentary from the interviews. This involves various facets, from establishing meaningful connections to coordinating meetings and handling conflicts. RAs strive to form meaningful relationships with their residents. However, the duty to report rule-breaking activities can create a disconnect in that relationship, contributing to isolation for the RA and the resident. This challenge can be further exacerbated for introverted RAs, who can quickly get socially drained in this role. Many RAs claimed they had encountered difficulties coordinating their “Flock Talks,” especially when residents did not reciprocate communication by email, text messages, or even knocking on their door. These RAs expressed that organizing mandatory community meetings has also been challenging and disheartening when only a few residents attend.

Several interviewees shared experiences in which their own identities impacted their experience in the RA role. A female-presenting RA further explained how complicated the RA-resident relationship can get based on her personal experience. She explained that the worst part of her job so far has been the negative attention and hostility she has received from her male residents. This includes being subjected to derogatory language and other frequent, negative interactions. These gender-based incidents have created an uncomfortable and challenging work environment for her as she has to continue caring for these residents, knowing the types of negative interactions she has had with them.

Another interviewee described themselves as “visibly queer” and described incidents where they have experienced negative interactions with their residents due to their identity. Another interviewee noted that they have run into identity-based issues with their white residents as a person of color. All three of these interviewees expressed frustration with the lack of training and preparation for dealing with these interactions. Hostility from residents can stem

from various factors, including stress, personal issues, or disagreements. RAs must navigate these situations while maintaining professionalism and ensuring a safe environment for themselves and their residents. However, this takes an emotional toll on the RAs, as described by the three interviewees. They all described having to navigate the hurt, frustration, and anxiety while continuing to perform their duties effectively. It is a delicate balance between being supportive and maintaining boundaries. While they aim to assist these troubled residents, they must also uphold policies and procedures set by the department. When faced with identity-based hostility, one RA expressed that they do not know what the correct response is when handling these residents. They attempted to assert boundaries firmly while also showing empathy and understanding, yet the behavior of the residents did not improve.

Time management emerged as another significant challenge for a few interviewees. Since the RA role is multi-faceted, it encompasses various duties and responsibilities requiring careful planning and execution. One RA identified punctuality, quick communication, and meeting deadlines as crucial aspects of their role that they consistently struggle with, mainly due to their Attention Deficit Hyperactive Disorder (ADHD). Despite the tasks not being overly time-consuming, they find it challenging to complete administrative tasks like preparing bulletin boards and door decorations on time.

A constant expectation of availability and an inherent lack of personal boundaries was another challenge expressed by a few interviewees. A recurring theme expressed by a few interviewees was the perception of being ‘on the job’ at all times. This perception was influenced by elements such as overnight or weekend on-call shifts, as well as the physical proximity to their workplace and community. It is important to note that while RAs are not literally on call at all times, some interviewees felt a constant expectation of availability and an inherent blurring of

personal boundaries due to their living arrangements. They live in their workplace, which can make it challenging to distinguish between personal life and work responsibilities.

This sense of always being ‘on duty’ was a significant challenge for them. This situation has led to a constant state of alertness and readiness for work, even during off-hours. These feelings were exacerbated for the interviewees who encountered situations where they felt their RA staff did not share responsibilities evenly, leading them to take on more work to ensure residents’ needs were met. This extra effort, often unrecognized, can add to the emotional burden of the RA role. It can also exacerbate pre-existing issues for some RAs, such as sleep disorders, and alter their usual lifestyle habits in ways that are not positive. Several RAs expressed the stress of feeling like they are always working, even after coming home from classes. They expressed that the only place they feel they can truly relax is off-campus at friends’ apartments or in nature. This blurry work-life dynamic, coupled with the stresses of the job and their academic, social, and professional lives, has contributed to significant challenges and strain for some RAs in fulfilling their role.

Stances on the RA Unionization at the UO

Referring to the recent unionization of undergraduate student workers at the University of Oregon in 2023, interviewees were asked for their thoughts *exclusively* on the unionization of RAs (not the student workers as a whole).

What are your thoughts on the recent movement to unionize the RAs at the UO?

Two significant stances emerged in exploring the perspectives of the RAs at the UO regarding the movement to unionize. First, 26% of the interviewees expressed confusion about the purpose of the unionization efforts among the RAs, acknowledging that they were aware of the union but had a complete lack of understanding of its specific goals and purpose. It was a common trend

among interviewees that they seemed to be aware of the union's goals during its inception in the Spring of 2023. However, after the union was established, the goals and objectives of the RA portion seemed to be much less clear. If this pattern can be extrapolated from the study's sample size to the entire RA community, it could mean that 1 in 4 RAs are potentially not included and informed in the unionization movement.

The remaining 74% of the interviewees were in support of the union but had a variety of reasons for their support. Surprisingly, only 21% of the interviewees mentioned increased compensation as a reason for supporting the union. There were positive feelings towards the recent increase in work hours, the fact that RAs were allowed to work outside their RA role (increasing from 10 to 25 work hours), and the recent rise in the RA stipend. However, while these few RAs did express that they believe they should be paid more, the overall reasons for unionizing were centered around gaining improved working conditions, re-classification of the RA role from "student leader" to university employee, and compensation considerations related to RA placement in campus residential spaces.

When RAs are selected at the University of Oregon, they are assigned to live in one of the twelve residence halls on campus. While all RA's are compensated equitably on paper, the physical amenities of the various residence halls differ significantly. The oldest residence hall, Carson Hall, initially constructed in 1949, still houses residents today (*Carson Hall*, n.d.). While renovations have been made to the older residence halls over the years, they are hardly comparable to the state of amenities and living spaces in the newer residence halls, such as New Residence Hall B and New Apartment Style C, constructed in 2023.

Some RAs have private bathrooms, and some do not. Some are responsible for overseeing more residents; some are responsible for less. On-call rounds in some buildings take

longer, while others are shorter. Every building is different in culture, size, layout, and amenities, and those disparities have created a perception of significant inequalities amongst the RAs.

While the interviewees stated that they understood that older buildings are inevitable on a college campus and that every building does not need to be precisely the same, they expressed that they wished there was some form of *recognition* of the inequalities among the RAs. The majority of RAs who voiced support for the union in terms of compensation stated that they wanted more equal compensation across the RAs, not necessarily an increase in pay for all RAs.

One of the more prominent themes that emerged from RAs who supported the union seemed to stem from one root problem- a rocky relationship with the professional staff in the department. 68% of the interviewees mentioned unfavorable interactions with at least one member of the department as part of the reason they desired representation outside of University Housing. A few RAs highlighted the potential for exploitative dynamics between RAs and various levels of supervisors. One interviewee explained that the RA role often seems to serve as the “dumping ground” for extra responsibilities or tasks needed from the Residence Life department that may not necessarily fall into the scope of their role.

63% of respondents expressed frustration with the disconnect between the expectations set by the Residence Life department and the reality of the RA role. They explained that they felt there was a lack of understanding from housing staff regarding the RA role, inadequacy of materials provided for RA responsibilities, and an overall sentiment of “they just don’t get us.” These issues point to a communication and trust gap that occurs at some point up the line of supervision. The exact point at which the RAs feel disconnected is unclear, although the general feeling is that the higher up the line of supervision, the more disconnected they are from the RAs.

Interviewees also discussed the need for transparency in dealing with empathy-driven issues vs. policy-driven responses. Several interviewees expressed concerns over the expectation to uphold policies that may not align with their values or the needs of the residents they serve. One interviewee explained how this qualm caused them to support the union.

“ I think that currently, the role of the RA has a lot of the jobs that require any sort of empathy, and Housing the department is just there for the stuff that requires policy. I think that that is a really flawed system, and I think that is why you can ask any RA if they have issues with the job. They will have a laundry list of issues because they have residents who are coming to them with issues that primarily require empathy. However, when you go to housing with a lot of the issues you have, they do not really speak with empathy. They speak with policy, and that can just be really hard.... I think there is a separation and an inherent separation by building where our RAs are not talking to each other, and I think like for us to all get together and start to talk about solutions and things we actually want from housing is going to be like extremely beneficial for us in the long run I think.”

Finally, the classification of the RA role as a “student leader” para-professional role rather than a university employee emerged as a reason for unionization among 26% of the interviewees. This classification seems to have profound implications for how some RAs perceive their role, their rights, and their relationship with the university. Most RAs view their position as a job, given the responsibilities and time commitment it entails. However, the university’s insistence on defining it as a student leader position has created a disconnect between the RA’s experiences and the official characterization of the role. Some may be wondering, “Why is there an emphasis on the classification of the role?” The classification as student leaders rather than university employees impacts the rights and protections RAs have. As

student leaders, they perceive that they do not have the same labor protections or rights to unionize as university employees do. This has led to feelings of unfairness expressed by the interviewees and a sense that their contributions to the University of Oregon community are undervalued.

One interviewee explains, “They are really specific that it is not a job, it is a role, and we are not student workers, we are student leaders, and they were very clear this is not a job and that we do not get employee worker benefits or protections... I definitely feel like the department is, as a whole, against the Union, and that does ignite the movement more.” The classification of the role influences the RAs’ relationship with the department and the university. Some RAs have expressed similar frustration with the university’s stance, feeling that it serves solely to prevent them from unionizing and undermines their contributions and value as workers. Despite this, some of the interviewees maintained a neutral stance on this issue, claiming they were sure there were logical reasons behind the classification.

So, what are the logical reasons? RAs are typically not classified as university employees due to their role being considered part of a bona fide educational program *and* because they are often compensated in the form of a remuneration of reduced room and board charges instead of an hourly/yearly salary. (*Resident Assistant and Resident Director Coverage Under the FLSA, n.d.*) This classification and compensation structure receives guidance from the U.S. Department of Labor, which indicates that university students who participate in activities generally recognized as extracurricular are not to be considered employees of their university under the Fair Labor Standards Act (FLSA). This includes students serving as resident assistants. However, it is essential to note that these stipulations are subject to interpretation and may vary depending on the specific responsibilities and compensation for the RAs. The classification of

the RA role is not a decision made solely by the Residence Life department or even University Housing, and re-classification will require in-depth conversations with many university stakeholders.

Future Areas of Improvement for the RA Role

RA's were then asked what they would like to see in the RA role in the future:

If you could design the Resident Assistant role yourself? What would it look like? Please explain.

Starting at the beginning of the year, one interviewee expressed that they would re-design training to be much more centered around preparing RAs to handle mental health scenarios, crisis management, and effective communication with residents and teammates. Overall, the interviewees who mentioned training seemed to understand how crucial training was at the beginning of the academic year for RAs. They all affirmed that training helped them feel more prepared for the role, and they would not change the timing or duration of the current training period.

A couple of interviewees expressed dissatisfaction with the current approach to creating bulletin boards. One interviewee described them as “excessive” and “impractical.” This criticism largely stems from the effort required to design and maintain these boards. Despite the visual appeal put into making bulletin boards aesthetically pleasing, the RAs note that residents rarely engage with the resources displayed on them. This lack of resident interaction raises questions about the effectiveness of this traditional method of communication. The RA's observation of a complete lack of resident interaction highlights a significant issue. Even when efforts are made to create eye-catching bulletin boards, the intended impact is not being achieved. This lack of engagement suggests that the time and energy spent on designing and updating bulletin boards might not be the most efficient use of resources.

The RAs raise a critical question: Is the time spent on bulletin boards justified? Instead of investing in this traditional method, could their efforts be better directed towards more meaningful activities? By questioning the value of bulletin boards, the RAs prompt us to consider alternative ways to communicate with residents effectively. The same interviewees also noted that Community Connection meetings need better turnout as well. This suggests that residents are not actively participating in these activities either. Given the situation, reallocating time and effort from bulletin boards to more impactful activities (such as writing incident reports or participating in in-services) could lead to better outcomes for both RAs and residents.

Interviewees also provided insights into their thoughts on structured tasks related to the Residential Curricular Model (RCM). Some of the tasks, including one that an interviewee called the “define yourself within the community” exercise, where students discussed their identities, did not seem to resonate with residents. 31% of interviewees, in some way or another, noted that the facilitation guides often call for much deeper conversations than are obtainable with residents. These interviewees expressed that exercises calling for heavier topics were awkward and did not reflect how college students actually interact with one another. One interviewee said they would make “Flock Talks” less intense and alter the format to focus more on residents’ concerns and key takeaways. This observation underscores the desire for flexibility within the RA role expressed by 21% of interviewees. RAs have a distinct vantage point due to their direct involvement with residents. They understand the dynamics, challenges, and nuances of their assigned floors. Their firsthand experience allows them the ability to tailor their approach to serve their residents best. These interviewees suggested that RAs should have the freedom to enforce and encourage behaviors within their communities based on the unique needs and identities of their residents (obviously while still complying with University Housing guidelines).

More flexibility in the RA role allows RAs to adapt their approach to suit their specific communities, ideally making them more effective RAs. However, it could also instigate a dynamic where floor cultures are further exacerbated based on the RA overseeing it- and that can result in very good or terrible environments, depending on the RA.

Another interviewee noted that while the RCM is valuable, the current approach seems to emphasize implementing a high volume of mediocre implementations instead of a few high-quality and impactful ones. They stressed that they would create unique and thoughtful content and focus on quality over quantity if they were in control of the program. While structured activities can provide a framework, it is essential to recognize that residents have diverse backgrounds and preferences. A one-size-fits-all approach will only effectively engage some, which may be something we have to come to terms with when designing the RCM. A separate interviewee mentioned a similar sentiment about the RCM, stating that it was a logistical nightmare to complete all the tasks in the facilitation guides during their midterms and that they wished the number of tasks would be replaced with fewer, more impactful tasks. Coordinating the RCM around RAs' academic schedules is very challenging, especially on a quarter system where it is not uncommon to have exams as early as Week 3 and as late as Week 8.

The interviewees generally viewed on-call shifts as a necessary aspect of the RA role, stating that they would not remove this from the role. While challenging at times, they expressed that on-call shifts allow RAs to be available for residents and handle any immediate issues that arise. However, there was a suggestion to reevaluate expectations for 24-hour shifts. The current expectations were described as "way too demanding and unrealistic," leading to burnout and decreased effectiveness when serving on duty. The interviewee explained that they would reassess these expectations to ensure that RAs are able to perform their duties effectively without

being completely overwhelmed by the on-call piece. Regarding on-call shifts, one interviewee highlighted the inequality in on-call shift durations and workloads between the different buildings.

In terms of compensation, the sentiment of more equitable compensation packages between buildings was reiterated. One interviewee expressed that an overall higher compensation for RAs is needed because the toll of being an RA far exceeds the 20 hours a week they are supposed to work. Between dealing with emergencies, mediating conflicts, and supporting their residents, having to work a job outside of school and their RA role takes away from their ability to be good RAs. The interviewees expressed that free housing and a meal plan were crucial aspects of the role and that they would not change that aspect at all. The interviewees unanimously agreed that the housing/food benefits were a significant part of their decision to become an RA in the first place.

An innovative proposal that was made by one of the interviewees may be something interesting to consider. They proposed a preliminary couple of months to a year for RAs to ease the transition, stating that it could provide a clearer picture of each applicant over a more extended period to truly determine their aptitude in the role. As the interviewee explained, residence life sifts through hundreds of applications every year, and it is challenging to select qualified candidates from a written application and a short interview. During this preliminary “trial,” RAs would shadow and work with second and third-year RAs. At the end of the trial, the candidates will be evaluated to see if they are ready to join the team as a permanent RA. This gradual integration could also reduce a sudden shift in responsibilities from no prior RA experience to taking on the entirety of the role within a week or two.

Incoming RAs could turn to their mentor RAs for guidance, fostering a collaborative and supportive work environment between the RAs. Additionally, it would provide second and third-year RAs with the opportunity to mentor incoming RAs and further develop essential skills like communication, teamwork, and leadership. This framework could enhance the learning experience for new RAs and improve the overall functioning of the RA team. However, it could also create potential power dynamics between incoming and supervising RAs that would need to be carefully managed to ensure a healthy work environment. This trial design aims to address the issue of an immediate overwhelming load of responsibilities and workload for new RAs, which could lead to better performance and job satisfaction among RAs. Regarding compensation structure, second and third-year RAs could be incentivized to take on these mentorship duties with a higher stipend than the incoming RAs. There are many ways that the compensation structure could be implemented; the vital concept to keep in mind is that there should be higher compensation if second and third-year RAs are expected to take on additional responsibilities. It would also be essential to analyze how much extra time in a work week the mentorship role would add to a typical RA schedule and ensure that compensation and workload are adjusted accordingly to prevent burnout. Overall, it is an innovative suggestion, keeping in mind that it would require time, energy, personnel, and cognizant planning to implement effectively.

Multiple RAs stated that they would change the way responsibilities are distributed within the building. This could involve reassessing the tasks assigned to RAs and considering how these tasks could be shared or redistributed to prevent overburdening specific individuals. They would also re-evaluate the expectations placed on RAs and ensure they require a reasonable workload. Another interviewee emphasized the need to balance workloads across different residence halls. Despite varying levels of work based on building assignments, compensation remains the same.

Multiple interviewees stressed that the role could improve if there were a more equitable workload distribution, and the well-being and effectiveness of the RA role would also improve.

Another interviewee also advocated for more involvement from CDs in terms of guidance, support, and direct involvement in RA activities. Since the CDs have more experience and expertise, they could provide valuable insights into the effectiveness of how the RCM is being implemented. There was also a desire for more direct and ongoing communication from the “higher-ups” in residence life (referring to anyone higher on the supervision chain than a CD). An interviewee said if they were in charge of residence life, they would increase the amount of time they spent face-to-face with RAs, directly communicating with them about decisions made that are relevant to their role. This would allow RAs to share feedback, hear directly from the “decision-makers,” and receive guidance and support from pro-staff. It would also foster a sense of trust and collaboration along all levels of supervision in the residence life team.

One interviewee noted that residents tend to blame RAs very quickly for nearly every scenario relating to University Housing. This could be due to the RA’s visibility in the role as the first point of contact for residents. They perceived that power dynamics likely contribute to the urge to blame RAs for everything. They are often seen as the authority figure representing Housing for any issues or inconveniences they face. This phenomenon likely reflects the 26% of interviewees who emphasized that they would prioritize the well-being of RAs more. This is a crucial point, as the demanding nature of the role can often lead to burnout if self-care is not prioritized. Many potential emergency scenarios are emotionally and mentally taxing for RAs. Dealing with sensitive and emergent situations requires RAs to respond with empathy, quick thinking, and the ability to provide support while maintaining their well-being. Providing

adequate resources and encouraging RAs to take care of their mental and physical health can not only benefit RAs themselves but also enhance their ability to support their residents effectively, contributing to the greater good of our entire community. They suggested that the Residence Life department should encourage this practice and provide support in implementing those priorities. A culture of validation of the emotional toll of being an RA from both fellow RAs and supervisors is a crucial component of an adequate support system. However, another interviewee claimed the RA role is fair and that they appreciate the current balance between their personal lives and their role- indicating that the work-life balance offered in the role may be working for some, but not all.

An interviewee expressed that they would put more focus on programming and community connections in the RA role; they believe that the current role design prioritizes resume-building opportunities over addressing the more basic needs of residents, such as a safe and comfortable living environment, food security, etc. They explained that they would shift the focus towards programming and community connections as they believe it would make the RA role more impactful and be equipped to foster a stronger sense of community within their hall. However, more programming in the role was not a consensus among all. Another interviewee stated that they would remove the required programming from the role, stating that hall councils and the Residence Hall Association (RHA) already do plenty of events for residents.

Finally, an interviewee said they would restructure the RA program to prioritize more cross-building communication and teamwork. They highlighted that each building gets isolated from the others, which leads to a lack of shared knowledge and best practices among RAs across different buildings. They stated that it creates a sense of disconnection among the RAs, which

negatively impacts morale and their effectiveness in the role. They passionately expressed that they would implement more purposeful interactions and events across different buildings/areas to foster a strong sense of community and to share effective practices. Inter-building collaboration would strengthen the RA community as a whole and enable them to learn from each other's experiences. Such interactions could lead to more consistent practices across buildings and enhance the overall effectiveness of the RA role.

The Resident Assistant Role at Other Universities

The second half of the interviews focused on gathering the interviewees' thoughts and insights on RA frameworks currently in place at other institutions across the nation. Various institutions have enacted distinct frameworks to address the evolving nature of resident and student leader needs in their communities. This section will introduce the three unique frameworks that were included in this study and what our current RAs thought about their potential for success at the University of Oregon.

“Specialization Framework” #1- Binghamton University

Some institutions, such as George Washington University and Binghamton University, have adopted an innovative model to redefine RAs' responsibilities. They divide the “traditional” RA role into more specific and specialized roles rather than expecting them to fulfill multiple roles. By segmenting responsibilities, these institutions have aimed to reduce student labor and improve the delivery of student services.

Interviewees were shown descriptions of the program currently being implemented at Binghamton University. Binghamton University, located in Binghamton, New York, is a public research university within the State of New York (SUNY) system. Within their residence halls and university-affiliated housing, Binghamton is home to roughly 7,500 residents who live in either traditional 2-3-person residence hall rooms or in 2,4, or 6-person on-campus apartments (*Residential Life | Binghamton University, n.d.*). At the heart of Binghamton residence life are their two live-in student staff positions, the Student Support Assistant (SSA) and the Community Assistant (CA). This model aims at reducing student labor and enhancing service delivery to cater to the diverse needs of the student community. These positions have replaced the traditional

“RA” role and now play a pivotal role in creating a conducive environment where students can develop independence, build positive relationships, and engage in holistic and personal growth.

The Student Support Assistant (SSA) serves as the frontline support, providing guidance, assistance, and resources to residents. Their responsibilities encompass various areas of student life, including emotional support, conflict resolution, safety, and community building. SSAs are expected to be present and available to residents, offering a listening ear and practical advice for navigating challenges. The SSA role is focused more on individual residents, ensuring that they feel seen, safe, and supported in all areas of their lives.

The Community Assistant (CA) is designed to enhance community engagement and student connection. The CA is responsible for organizing events, facilitating interactions among residents, and promoting a sense of community pride. They serve as ambassadors of campus life, helping students navigate university resources and opportunities for involvement. CA’s focus more on floor-wide and community-wide connections, ensuring that healthy and happy communities form where individual residents can connect with others and feeling a sense of belonging.

Key Responsibilities of the SSA:

- Being present in their assigned community and regularly available to all residents to offer support in navigating interpersonal relationships and residential needs, and being a knowledgeable peer for referral of resources to residents
- Foster an inclusive environment to build a sense of community and belonging
- Provide education to residents around conflict resolution resources as well as engage in conflict resolution and de-escalation strategies

- Serve in-person duty from 8 pm to midnight in a central location and 12 am to 8:30 am, providing on-call duty coverage to the area (or 12 am until 8 pm on weekends)
 - Attend and participate in duty shift transfer meetings (15-minute shift overlap - transfer phone and provide shift update and case transfers if needed)
 - Manage lockouts during duty as well
- Respond in person to situations requiring immediate response
- Document and report resident incidents to the appropriate supervisory staff
- Write and submit detailed Incident Reports
- Provide community-wide support to students through weekly office hours (5 per week) in a location available to residents
- Coordinate with the Community Director and an Assistant Director of Residence Life to determine follow-up planning and implementation of educational outreach efforts
- Serve as a student leader by helping students connect with appropriate resources and support services when in need
- Address student needs within the community by assisting with community gatherings in collaboration with Community Assistants (CAs) if needed
- Take initiative and think critically and creatively to solve problems and to make decisions
- Required attendance during departmental operations

- All opening and closing procedures/move-in and move-out, departmental training, staff selection and interview processes, and other department-wide events
- Serve as a representative of the Department of Residential Life as needed
- Attend regular group and individual meetings with supervisors and fulfill departmental responsibilities and duties as assigned (auxiliary tasks, etc.)
- Work successfully in a team, be self-motivated to work independently, and be flexible

Community Assistants (CAs) complement the efforts of SSAs by focusing on community engagement and student connection. They play a vital role in organizing events, facilitating interactions among residents, and promoting a sense of community pride. CAs serve as ambassadors of campus life, helping students navigate university resources and opportunities for involvement. Through their presence and proactive initiatives, CAs contribute to the vibrant and inclusive atmosphere within residence halls.

Key Responsibilities of the CA:

- Foster an inclusive community to build a sense of belonging and well-being
- Complete door tags for assigned students prior to the start of each term
- Assist with the planning, preparing, and implementation of area traditions
- Plan and implement community-wide and building-wide events as directed by Residence Life
- Participate in Week of Welcome programming for residential students, including assisting students in attending WOW events throughout the week

- Meet with individuals and groups of students periodically to connect them and University engagement/involvement opportunities
- Provide student information to supervisors on a regular basis to offer wrap-around support to students
- Maintain and update logs of student interactions
- Maintain a presence in the area that fosters relationships with residential students and refers students to appropriate Residence Life staff members
- Attend community events with residential students as needed
- Complete monthly resident recognition activities within the assigned hall (active and passive)
- Serve as a resource for hall councils and RHA through attendance at meetings and events
- Attend weekly office hours to complete administrative tasks and availability hours for residents
- Support Faculty-in-Residence events and initiatives
- Attend Academic Residential Community events and initiatives as needed
- Complete Residential Life departmental responsibilities including but not limited to:
 - Attending regular group and individual meetings with supervisors
 - Assisting with hiring and recruitment processes
 - Participating with move-in days and closing operations
 - Attending all required trainings and department-wide events

Both SSAs and CAs operate within a framework guided by shared values of inclusivity, respect, and support. They are committed to upholding university policies and creating an environment where all students feel valued and empowered to succeed.

Overall Thoughts on Framework #1

In terms of general “gut” feelings about this framework, 47% of the interviewees liked it, 32% were intrigued but unsure about its success, and 21% did not approve. The responses reveal a range of opinions about the proposed framework for splitting the RA role into two distinct positions. One of the main concerns with this framework was that the SSA role, which involves on-call duties and policy enforcement, might be perceived as more severe or even hostile compared to the CA role, which is associated with more “enjoyable” tasks and community activities. 37% of the interviewees worried that a “good cop, bad cop,” or “mean on-call rule enforcer vs. friendly community builder” dynamic may develop. Multiple RAs stated that they worried most people would prefer the “fun” tasks associated with the CA role, raising concerns about how many people would apply for the SSA role. The experience of isolation and blame that some interviewees described earlier in the interview may become more intense for SSAs when their job primarily revolves around conduct and rule enforcement.

There were concerns that residents would come to favor their CAs and potentially bully or harass the SSAs due to the spaces in which they interact with each student leader. One interviewee was particularly concerned that residents might prefer confiding in their CA for topics that would fall under the SSA’s role. This could create awkward dynamics and affect the overall effectiveness of the specialization system. These sentiments reflect the immense importance of structuring the roles and their functions so there is a balance between being liked and disliked by residents. The concerned interviewees emphasized that residents need to see

SSAs/CAs as multifaceted individuals. If residents only perceive an SSA as the on-call rule enforcer, they may not fully appreciate the multifaceted, holistic human behind the role.

In terms of compensation, there was a consensus that the SSA role appears to involve more work than the CA role. This includes responsibilities like serving on-call duty and handling severe matters related to student support. The current requirement of 5 office hours per week as an SSA was seen as a significant time commitment by two interviewees, and they worried that balancing that with academics and other commitments could be challenging. 26% of the interviewees suggested that this discrepancy should be reflected in the compensation somehow, with the SSA role being compensated higher than the CA. All of the RAs interviewed claimed that if compensation were the same between the two roles, they would apply to be a CA, not an SSA. There seemed to be a strong perception that the on-call/conduct enforcement is the worst part of the current RA role and the community-building aspect is the best, as reflected in the participant's anticipated interest in being a CA over an SSA.

The RAs who liked this framework stated they saw immense benefit in role specialization, which allows individuals to excel in more specified areas and leads to more efficient and high-quality work. Additionally, when individuals are able to work in areas that align with their strengths and interests, it can lead to greater job satisfaction. Specialization can also help ensure a more balanced workload, as tasks are being divided based on individual strengths and capabilities. The RAs who were more unsure or against the framework acknowledged the potential benefit of specializing. However, they had concerns about potential challenges during the transition from having an RA to an SSA/CA, which may cause confusion among both the transitioning student leaders and potentially the residents as well. Current RAs

who are used to handling a wide range of responsibilities might find it challenging to adapt to a more specialized role.

There is recognition that the programming aspect of the RA role is currently lacking. However, an interviewee questioned whether they needed to create a separate position to take on this aspect. They suggested that other campus organizations, like hall councils and the Residence Hall Association (RHA), already sufficiently handle residential programming. This raises the question, “Is separation necessary to achieve a similar desired outcome?” As mentioned before, splitting the RA role could help ensure a more balanced workload, preventing RAs from being overwhelmed by a wide range of tasks. With a role dedicated explicitly to programming at the hall level (versus building or campus levels like hall councils and RHA), the quantity and quality of events and community-building activities could significantly improve. However, as identified already, there are some potentially concerning challenges associated with this framework as well.

So *is* the separation necessary? Another interviewee who liked the current framework acknowledged its value but proposed a slightly different implementation. They proposed a model where instead of formally separating the RA role into two separate, distinct positions, they pair two RAs who decide who will be responsible for what based on their strengths and interests. RAs will be paired using a model similar to what residence life uses to match roommates. The two RAs will meet at the beginning of the year and sign a formal agreement to accomplish the entirety of the RA role collectively. The interviewee believed this approach would improve the current RA role by preventing an imbalance in workload and promoting collaboration and teamwork with a co-RA. They could support each other, share insights, and jointly problem-solve, leading to more effective outcomes. While one RA focuses on the community-building activities and the other handles the administrative tasks, each RA could focus on areas where

they excel, potentially leading to the desired increase in quality of work. It would also mitigate the immense transition to the SSA/CA role while attempting to obtain the same outcome.

If RAs were simply paired, perhaps a solution would be to reduce the residents-to-RA ratio. This approach could alleviate the workload and stress for RAs. However, it's important to note that even with a reduced ratio, the potential for role confusion may still exist. Residents might be unsure about whom to approach for specific issues, particularly if both student leaders retain the "RA" title. Therefore, clear communication about each RA's roles and responsibilities would be crucial for successful implementation. The effectiveness of this approach also heavily depends on the interpersonal dynamics between the RAs. If they do not collaborate effectively, it could significantly impact the framework's effectiveness. Furthermore, if the roles are not clearly defined and are left to the discretion of the co-RAs, it could pose challenges in ensuring an equitable distribution of work. However, it is an interesting idea at its core and should not be dismissed as a viable option.

Challenges/Barriers to Implementing Framework #1

Interviewees were then asked to identify any significant challenges or barriers that they foresaw if this framework was implemented at the UO.

Are there any challenges or barriers that you foresee if we implement this here at the UO?

As mentioned in the previous section, many interviewees expressed concerns about the division of the RA role into an administrative and a community-oriented role. They worry that this division could increase resentment toward the SSA from the residential community, making it harder for them to connect with residents. By removing the community-building aspects of the role, a barrier for SSAs may emerge, as residents might be less inclined to approach the disciplinary role for support, fearing potential repercussions. In the current RA

model, RAS must establish a connection with each of their residents. This connection is crucial to the role and contributes to a positive living environment for all residents. One interviewee explained that when they reprimand a resident, it strains the connection. This indicates that disciplinary actions tend to disrupt the rapport between RAs and residents, leading to potential relationship issues. The interviewee admitted that residents often tend to approach those RAs that they feel most comfortable with, even if those RAs are not directly responsible for them. This phenomenon could appear in the SSA/CA program, but with residents approaching CAs for conduct or personal issues that should be handled by SSAs, which is a valid concern related to this framework.

10.5% of interviewees stated that all the "enjoyable" parts of the RA role were found in the CA role, not the SSA role. These interviewees worried that SSAs would experience decreased job satisfaction. SSAs may be disproportionately overwhelmed and dissatisfied compared to their CA peers, which could negatively impact their performance and their relationships with residents. One interviewee mentioned that if their job were solely to write incident reports, they would not be willing to apply for the role, regardless of the compensation. While this is not the entirety of the SSA position, this looming negative perception of the SSA role is a problem. It might be less attractive to potential applicants, leading to challenges in recruiting students for the role.

One interviewee stated that based on their personal experiences as an RA, separating the community aspect from the disciplinary aspect hinders an RA's ability to support their residents effectively. However, other interviewees admitted that while they were not well-suited for the SSA role, they knew other people who absolutely were. It is also essential to consider that the division into the SSA/CA framework will likely attract new personalities,

backgrounds, identities, and leadership styles to both positions that the current RA framework does not. The change from RA to SSA/CA is one that is so drastic that it will likely transform the applicant pool of student leaders who serve residents in the halls.

Another general perception about the two roles was that the CA seemed to entail much less responsibility compared to the SSA, which involves on-call time and assisting with move-in and move-out. One interviewee suggested that this imbalance could lead to the SSA role being much more demanding and requiring more time and investment. This perceived disparity in responsibilities could further result in an imbalance of applications. Again, this negative perception of the SSA role being not only more work but more demanding and strenuous work could lead to a disparity in recruitment. Additionally, the perceived disparity in responsibilities raised many equity concerns among 32% of interviewees. They worried that it could be unfair if one role were drastically more demanding than the other, mainly if that is not reflected in compensation or benefits. This sentiment becomes even more complex when the difference in building amenities is considered, as was mentioned in earlier sections. The RAs who expressed frustration with the current inequalities in compensation reiterated that this framework would perpetuate the feelings of inequity that they feel with the current program.

Most of the interviewees believe that people who apply to be an RA are not primarily interested in the on-call rounds and incident reporting aspect of the role, which are tasks associated with the SSA role. They suggested that the majority would likely prefer the CA role. This suggests that the SSA role may need extra incentives to attract applicants. One proposed compensation framework was to offer SSAs a single room and meal plan and offer CAs a double room and meal plan. Since CAs are mainly tasked with connecting the

community together and fostering a sense of belonging, it makes sense that they live among other community members. Conversely, if SSAs must serve the disciplinary role in the halls, it makes sense that they are not living with another resident and have a private space of their own. One interviewee firmly believed that offering CAs a double room would not be a popular option and would likely impact people's decision to apply for the roles. Regardless, the majority of the interview sample believed that in order for this framework to survive, the SSA role will have to be compensated more to ensure those roles are being proportionately filled in comparison to the CA roles.

One interviewee believed that the main barrier to successfully implementing this framework was the department's reluctance to bear the cost of the separation. Between the resources it will take to draft new hiring, training, curricular, housing, and staffing changes, it will take time, energy, personnel, resources, and money to implement this change successfully. Specializing the RA role will necessitate specialized training programs, which could incur costs. Despite these challenges, one interviewee believed that investing in this framework could be beneficial. While the switch to specialization may incur a high amount of up-front costs, the long-term benefits could far outweigh the initial investment in the new program.

Another concern that arose would be the new need for two separate performance and recruitment evaluation systems for the divided roles. One interviewee worried that if one performance evaluation was much harsher or more stringent for the SSA role due to the increased seriousness of their responsibilities, it could have unforeseen consequences for the effectiveness of the model. This suggests a concern about the fairness and comprehensiveness of the potential evaluation processes for the two positions. The

introduction of two different roles could potentially lead to confusion among both the applicants and those evaluating them. This could complicate the application and selection process.

Additionally, concerns were expressed that the new evaluation methods may not fully capture the responsibilities and expectations of each role. This could impact how effectively RAs can fulfill their roles and meet the expectations set for them. Despite the division of the two roles, an interviewee pointed out that some roles, such as providing support, acting as a resource conduit, and being a listening ear, will naturally be shared by both the SSA and CA. This suggests that the expectations for the two roles will need to account for these naturally occurring shared responsibilities.

In terms of staffing numbers, the CA role, which involves planning larger group events and connecting with the broader community, might not require as many staff members as the SSA role, which involves more individualized support and crisis management. Since the two roles have different responsibilities and purposes, they may not need to be staffed in the exact quantities. In fact, one interviewee heavily advocated for having more SSAs than CAs to balance the more demanding workload of on-call shifts, incident reporting, etc. Luckily, there is some flexibility with the staffing numbers, as they can be adjusted year-to-year as we gain experience with this model and refine the overall program.

A question was raised concerning whether the SSAs and CAs would still serve on the same team (such as the current RA team) or would form two smaller, separate teams. While there are pros and cons to either decision, this emphasizes the importance of anticipating what kind of team dynamics will emerge with this new specialization system. Despite the potential for separate teams, collaboration is still possible and indeed necessary. SSAs, due to

their role, might have a better understanding of their residents, which would be beneficial in planning and executing community activities and events. This question led to another: Would Community Directors be responsible for overseeing both teams? Would we need to create a new position to oversee one of the teams? While the answer to this lies with the department's interpretation of this framework, it will be crucial to think about how separating the RA role will impact the roles of all stakeholders in the Residence Life department.

Community Impact of Framework #1

Finally, interviewees were asked to reflect on how this framework might impact the larger residential community:

If we were to implement this framework at the UO, do you think it would positively impact RAs and residents? Please explain.

While many of the interviewees saw the benefit of role specialization, such as allowing for more focused job descriptions and potentially improving the quality of work in both areas, others questioned its value for residents and expressed concern about potential bias among residents in how they perceive and interact with the two roles. As stated earlier, the concern is that residents will heavily favor the CA positions and become increasingly estranged from their SSA. There were also concerns about residents getting confused about whom to approach for different issues. However, other interviewees believed that the specialization could ultimately enhance the residence hall experience and improve the well-being of residents.

In terms of the impact on RAs (which would now be SSAs and CAs), the concern about increased negative attention for SSAs remains. One interviewee highlighted that they would be concerned for minority identities in the SSA role if they were solely seen as the

disciplinary figure in the halls. This concern highlights that a successful implementation of this framework will include lots of strategic communication with residents around the purpose of their SSA and CA. Despite these concerns, some RAs acknowledged the potential benefits of this new framework, stating that it would attract different types of people to apply, reduce the stress and workload for current RAs, and lead to more quality work on the community-building side.

Overall, the interview sample seemed intrigued yet unsure about this framework. While some were against specialization, the majority of the sample expressed either positive feelings or a cautious interest in this framework. The change from the current program to the SSA/CA program would be a significant change for everyone in residence life, and the magnitude of that change should not be dismissed. There are lots of logistics to decide on, and the implementation strategies that the department chooses will influence these student leaders' perceptions of this framework. The diversity of views regarding this framework underscores the inherent complexity of transitioning from the current model to a specialized one. It is clear that this framework must be carefully considered and thoughtfully implemented to balance the needs of SSAs, CAs, residents, and the broader university community. Further research and consultation with all stakeholders will be crucial in refining the proposed framework and ensuring its successful implementation. Ultimately, the goal should be to enhance the residential experience for all while also supporting the effectiveness and wellbeing of the SSAs/CAs who play such a vital role in shaping that experience.

“Mentor Framework” #2- University of Illinois-Urbana Champaign

Our second framework comes from the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign (UIUC), another prestigious public research university. With 35,000 undergraduate students and 15 undergraduate residence halls, UIUC is home to a large number of residential students (*UIUC Facts and Rankings; Undergraduate et al.*). At UIUC, two live-in student positions are tasked with ensuring the well-being of residents and communities: the Resident Advisor (RA) and the Senior Resident Advisor (SRA). Their RA position is relatively standard, but the exciting addition of the SRA position is what makes the UIUC framework unique. After a student leader has been an RA for one academic year, they can re-apply as either an RA or an SRA. SRAs are responsible for the same duties as the RAs, with some unique additions to capitalize on their ability to be a mentor and support resource to first-year RAs.

SRA's are responsible for the following in addition to their RA duties:

- Serve as a training coach for new paraprofessionals as they transition to the RA role throughout the year (September Training; January Mid-Training, and as new staff is added at times)
 - Participate in Coaching training series
 - Implement either 1-on-1 or small group coaching based on the number of new staff
 - Leads debrief sessions during paraprofessional training
 - Complete a check-in meeting during the first four weeks of classes with new paraprofessionals to discuss transition issues and provide any assistance needed
 - Provide feedback on the Coaching Program
 - Moves in early to start official training and coaching responsibilities

- Provides additional leadership in weekly Staff Development meetings
- Assist with floor coverage when there is a staff vacancy
- Takes on additional leadership roles within the Residential Community

Overall Thoughts on Framework #2

In terms of initial “gut” feelings, 78% of the interviewees liked this framework, 17% were unsure, and 5% did not like it.

The interviewees who supported this framework acknowledged that a significant skill gap exists between first-year RAs and returning RAs. Interestingly, this sentiment was primarily expressed by first-year RAs. These participants admitted that they were much more confident on-call when they were with a returner due to their superior knowledge and experience in the role. They also appreciated the involvement of returners during training, especially during the interactive incident response simulation known as “Life in the Halls.” They found that the training portions that allowed returning RAs to take a mentoring role were highly beneficial to them. One first-year participant highlighted that they have had a returner who has served in a mentor-like role for them, “they can provide guidance and feedback in such a personal and unstructured manner that we do not really get anywhere else. It makes me a lot more comfortable to admit I did something wrong or reflect on my experiences as an RA.”

Overall, the majority of the sample population supported the implementation of the SRA position, considering it fair for returners to receive higher compensation and additional responsibilities. However, many interviewees prefaced that the method and amount of increased compensation for SRAs would change their viewpoint of this framework depending on how well it aligned with their personal opinion of how much returners should be compensated. While the specifics of how much more SRAs should be paid are still uncertain and would need to be

negotiated with various stakeholders, a question emerges: *How do we translate the value of an SRA into a form of compensation that entices them to mentor and is obtainable given the department's resources?*

One interviewee enthusiastically described this framework as an “effective and sensible next step for the RA program at the UO.” The participants generally appreciated the role of returners in the RA ecosystem and deeply valued their experience and input. They all saw value in returners leading debrief sessions, implementing coaching, and conducting check-in meetings, as they provide a more comfortable communication channel for new RAs than going to a pro-staff supervisor. As described in earlier sections, the RAs emphasized the value of “real-world” experience over theoretical training. It was a common sentiment that RAs who have dealt with challenging situations can provide more practical advice than any training exercise presented by pro staff. They emphasized that specific skills, like boundary setting and handling emergency situations, are best learned through experience. Another common sentiment revealed that some returning RAs are already unofficially serving in this mentor-like role by advising first-year RAs and providing ongoing support and guidance to their new teammates. The participant pool essentially felt that returning RAs naturally have to take on a mentoring role for first-year RAs despite not currently being compensated, given the current framework. However, they prefer the specific designation of an SRA and a formal structure for their additional responsibilities over the current framework.

One interviewee made a very interesting observation regarding the effectiveness of the SRA role. They claimed that SRAs would be very effective personnel to deliver the aspects of standardization that the department distributes to the different RA teams, except they could likely deliver it in a way that RAs will appreciate and understand, serving as a critical translator for

policy and expectations among different levels of the supervision line. “SRAs should also have a detailed knowledge of the inner dynamics of their RA teams and should be able to translate what housing wants into practical applications in their buildings and teams.”

Those opposing this framework's main concern was the creation of a potential hierarchy within the RA teams, leading to feelings of superiority, inequality, and division. They believed that all RAs, regardless of their tenure, should be respected equally. There was an additional concern about a specific bullet point in the role description:

- *Takes on additional leadership roles within the Residential Community*

One interviewee pointed out the vagueness of this role responsibility and worried that it could entail a wide range of tasks and time commitments. It could mean attending an extra meeting a week or taking on more prominent, more demanding roles that they did not initially sign up for. This highlights the importance of ensuring that the SRA role is framed in a way that accounts for student’s academic, professional, and personal lives *and* fits seamlessly with their regular RA duties.

In terms of SRA selection, nearly all interviewees agreed that SRAs should fulfill an application process rather than an automatic promotion for becoming a returning RA. They stated that this would encourage better performance from candidates seeking to become SRAs and allow returning RAs to choose whether they want to take on the additional responsibilities. Unprompted, a promising 37% of respondents expressed that they would be excited to fulfill a role like an SRA, claiming it would be an excellent skill development experience.

Challenges/Barriers for Framework #2

Following suit for the first framework, interviewees were then asked to identify any potential challenges/barriers associated with implementing this framework.

Are there any challenges or barriers that you foresee if we implement this here at the UO?

Some RAs expressed concerns that some RAs, particularly those primarily interested in the benefit of free housing, may only do the bare minimum and not try to excel in their role. They worry that this lack of commitment could extend to SRAs as well. If one or multiple SRAs on a team “slack off” or do less work, it could potentially negatively impact the team’s dynamics and the first-year RAs’ perception of SRAs. They also emphasized that first-year RAs tend to feel a little excluded when they first start, so it will be crucial that SRAs are welcoming and inviting to new RAs. Additionally, one interviewee had concerns about clique formations within the RA community if SRAs and RAs were formally distinguished as different. Such categorizations within any community can lead to the formation of cliques, which could hinder a healthy team dynamic. This suggests that there should be quality selection and performance evaluation strategies specific to the SRA position to ensure candidates are suitable for the position.

The idea of check-in meetings with new RAs was appreciated. The first-year respondents, especially, emphasized that they would love a check-in meeting with an SRA where they could ask questions, get feedback, discuss transition issues, and just talk to someone who understands the role. However, potential issues with mentorship among RAs were highlighted, as some RAs noted that inconsistencies in the quality of mentorship could affect the quality of guidance provided to new RAs. This inconsistency could be due to a lack of commitment to the role, but it could also simply be due to a lack of experience with certain

situations. One interviewee also astutely pointed out that scheduling check-in meetings with RAs could *not* occur while SRAs are simultaneously trying to do Flock Talks with their residents, as that would make scheduling a logistical nightmare. They suggested that during team meetings every Tuesday, some time would be carved out of that meeting to allow SRAs to check in on the RAs they are assigned to. They also highlighted that

One interviewee stated that the SRA position could become confusing for incoming RAs if not every returner was an SRA. This could lead to confusion of roles and responsibilities between SRAs and non-SRA returners, especially if incoming RAs confide in non-SRA returners for guidance, even if it is not officially their role. Another interviewee expressed that they were enthusiastic about this framework but proposed that the SRA be titled something else as “Senior Resident Assistant,” which could easily be confusing with the class standing and may cause confusion on who is holding the role.

16% of respondents highlighted the significant time commitment associated with the SRA role as a potential concern. They mentioned the need to return early from breaks for training sessions, the potential burden of additional responsibilities, and the challenges of balancing SRA duties with academic and extracurricular commitments. Due to their mentorship relationship with RAs, the respondents acknowledged the natural role of returners in setting the culture for their RA teams. However, they emphasized that SRAs should keep in close contact with their supervisors to communicate if they feel the workload of the SRA role outweighs what was initially expected of them in the role. The respondents expressed that if SRAs were expected to return early/stay later than RAs or assist with floor coverage during staff vacancies, they would expect substantial compensation for these additional time commitments and sacrifices.

One respondent cited the financial aspect of securing additional compensation for SRAs as a definite barrier to implementing this framework. Additionally, the same concern of building placement and the disparity in amenities and compensation was reflected in this framework, as respondents stated the same issue would apply. On the topic of compensation, one interviewee who was opposed to this framework stated that they felt it was unfair for returning RAs to be compensated more; however, they believe it would encourage more RAs to return for more than one year.

The idea of providing in-services/ additional training specifically for SRAs was suggested. This could help SRAs balance their new additional job responsibilities with their increasing academic and extracurricular commitments as they progress through their degree. One interviewee worried that many SRA candidates may underestimate the time commitment of the role, leading to an inability to properly fulfill their role responsibilities.

Community Impact of Framework #2

Interviewees were then asked to identify how this mentorship framework would impact the larger community:

If we were to implement this framework at the UO, do you think it would positively impact RAs and residents? Please explain.

58% of respondents believed that having a SRA could provide valuable support and mentorship for new RAs, particularly in situations where an RA is unsure of how to proceed. One interviewee pointed out that the presence of an SRA can also help with RAs who join partway through the academic year due to extenuating circumstances or others vacating the position. This could lead to a more manageable experience for RAs and indirectly benefit

residents by fostering a strong leadership team in their building. It could also provide professional development opportunities for the SRAs, as they can demonstrate job improvement and promote their leadership experience on their resumes.

Including the *option* for returning RAs to take on more responsibilities as SRAs for additional compensation was reiterated as the best way to approach selection. The respondents were in consensus that it is best if returning RAs can choose to remain regular RAs. One interviewee expressed that this role will likely be so popular they worry about the competitiveness of being selected.

47% of the respondents directly stated that this framework would benefit both residents and RAs, primarily through the creation of a more effective RA team. A more formal leadership structure within the RA staff will be a beneficial addition. One interviewee admitted that residents likely won't know (or care) about the difference between an RA and an SRA. While residents may not realize the extent of the benefits, a well-supported and confident RA is likely to connect with residents more effectively. The respondents greatly appreciated how this framework acknowledges the greater understanding and experience that returners bring to the job, something that the respondents feel is currently overlooked.

In conclusion, the proposed framework is seen as a positive step towards acknowledging the experience that returning RAs bring to the job and enhancing the overall effectiveness of the RA team. However, careful consideration and planning would be required to address potential challenges and ensure the successful implementation of this framework.

“Support Framework”#3- University of California at Riverside

Our final framework was selected from the University of California Riverside, a public land-grant university and one of the ten schools under the University of California system. With

30% of the entire student population living on campus, UCR is home to roughly 8,000 residents (*UCR Admissions, 2024*). While they still have a “traditional” RA role, an Assistant Resident Director (ARD) supports their residence life department. The ARD serves as a 4th-year student leader on staff and supervises and guides student staff members. The ARD lives in the community and works to support RAs and Program Advisors in their duties and individual growth within the department. The ARD meets frequently with their assigned team and supervisor(s) and serves on a departmental committee(s). The ARD serves on an on-call duty rotation in a supervisory role where they assist RAs with responding to after-hours community needs, policy violations, and emergencies (*Student Staff Positions, n.d.*). The ARD position is compensated with room and board and an additional stipend for 20 hours of work per week.

The key responsibilities of an ARD are as follows:

- Assist with the daily supervision of RAs by providing mentorship to each RA
- Assist in the planning and coordination of all staff training
- Assist with the recruitment and selection processes related to career and student staff
- Oversee the coordination and scheduling of all area programming: educational, social, cultural, and passive events
- Attend programs held in the area as directed by the CD
- Adjudicate and coordinate lower-level conduct cases that occur in the area
- Participate in the ARD duty rotation to respond to emergency and non-emergency situations
- Support community development by initiating disciplinary and counseling processes
- Support community development by managing and facilitating conflict mediation meditations as needed

- Participate in the ARD duty rotation to respond to emergency and non-emergency situations
 - Must remain within the duty radius and approved areas when on duty
 - Staff will serve on a duty rotation on all weekdays, weekends, holidays, and campus closures
- Support community development by initiating disciplinary and counseling processes
- Assist professional staff with special projects as needed
- Collaborate with other Housing and University staff (facilities, dining services, support services, and police)
- Availability for emergencies and other duties as needed
- Serve on one departmental committee

These are the primary responsibilities of an ARD, but there is an additional option to specialize the ARD position in addition to these essential tasks. There is much flexibility here for the department to pick and choose where extra support is most needed. The specialization options allow candidates to apply to an area that interests them and allows for added support in some regions of residence life. The specialization options are as follows:

- **Assistant Resident Director for Recruitment and Development (ARDRD)**
 - Serve as the primary liaison between professional and student staff for staff, development, and training.
 - Assist with logistics for a training program, including Fall, Winter, and all ongoing staff developments for all student staff.
 - Assist with maintaining an accurate budget for all recruitment, selection, training, and development costs.

- Evaluate the effectiveness of all student staff training programs by administering and analyzing program session evaluation forms and attending student staff training committees.
- Assist with the distribution of training schedules, uniforms, and manuals to 170 student staff.
- Develop and maintain an informative presence on the Residential Life Discord.
- Develop, plan, and facilitate the end-of-the-year banquet for all student staff.
- Assist with logistics for student staff recruitment events, interview days, and placement meetings.
- Assists with the design and placement of marketing materials for student staff recruitment.
- Evaluate the effectiveness of all student staff recruitment events by administering and analyzing program session evaluation forms and attending student staff selection committees.
- Support community development by initiating disciplinary and counseling processes.
- Serve on both the Recruitment and Selection and Training and Development committees.
- **Assistant Resident Director for Academics**
 - Assist all ARC staff, specifically PA-As, with designing programs that meet the needs of each community.

- Oversee the scheduling of programs and staffing for the Student Housing Academic Resource Center (SHARC).
 - Create and maintain a master calendar for all PA-As and SHARC-related programming in on-campus housing.
 - Assist professional staff supervisor in evaluating the effectiveness of academic programs and initiatives in the residence halls, apartments, and family housing.
 - Work with the Academic Resource Center to coordinate the scheduling of residence hall and campus apartments tutors, study group leaders, and supplemental instruction
- **Assistant Resident Director for Residential Experiences**
 - Assist all Program Advisors for Residential Experiences (PAREs) with designing programs and initiatives that meet the needs of each ARC, following the Experiential Living-Learning Community Engagement Model.
 - Oversee the scheduling of programs and staffing for their team.
 - Create and maintain a master calendar for all Experiential and Transitional-related programming in on-campus housing.
 - Assist professional staff supervisor in carrying out and evaluating the effectiveness of transitional programs and initiatives in the residence halls, apartments, and family housing.

- **Assistant Resident Director for Programming**
 - Assist with the daily supervision of Program Advisors for Community Experiences (PACEs) by providing mentorship to each PACE and individualized team support and feedback on each PACE's performance.
 - Assist with the coordination and scheduling of large-scale and community-wide educational, academic, and social programming while supporting the programming core values.
 - Attend PACE programming sponsored by an assigned team and all large-scale programs in other buildings.
 - Interact with residents and student staff in various buildings and areas.
 - Support other program advisor teams (ARD of Academics, ARD of Residential Experiences, ARD of Leadership, PACEs, PAREs, and PAAs).

- **Assistant Resident Director for Leadership**
 - Serve as the Co-Advisor for hall councils
 - Attend meetings, training, and developments for RHA/NRHH/
 - Assist the Building/Community President in recruiting efforts for each residence hall/campus apartment RHA Council.
 - Assist the Vice President of NRHH in recruiting efforts for NRHH.
 - Assist the professional staff with planning and coordinating fall, winter, and spring training for RHA and NRHH.

- Support other program advisor teams (ARD of Academics, ARD of Residential Experiences, ARD of Programming, PACEs, PAREs, and PAAs).
- Develop and implement leadership initiatives to promote the development of student leaders.
- Have the opportunity to attend and serve as a Co-Advisor to student leaders attending student leadership conferences.
- Support programming core values of the Department of Residential Life while supporting the purpose and mission outlined in all governing constitutions of RHA/NRHH.
- Create and maintain confidential files for student group members.
- Provide both written and verbal constructive and developmental feedback to student leaders.
- Assist or coordinate and plan off-site training and development for student leaders.
- Support and participate in programs related to RHA and NRHH

Overall Thoughts on Framework #3

In terms of initial “gut” feelings, 50% liked this framework, 39% were unsure, and 11% did not like it. The interviewees who favored this framework expressed that the ARD position provides a significant step up in responsibility and a valuable addition to resumes for a few high-achieving student leaders. They claimed they greatly appreciate the ARD role for its potential to provide support and guidance to RAs, acting as more relatable than pro-staff but more

knowledgeable than RAs. One interviewee described it as the “perfect liaison between RAs and upper housing.”

These interviewees also loved the specialization option to cater to different career aspirations of students, providing flexibility and more tailored resume-building opportunities. Another positive sentiment was that the ARD position could help with handling lower-level conduct cases that RAs might not feel confident addressing, thereby reducing the burden on Community Directors. One interviewee described that most all RAs leave the program by their senior year (which would usually be their 3rd year as an RA) and they loved the idea of an ARD because it could potentially entice more people to stay in residence life in their fourth year.

The interviewees who were unsure or against the ARD role cited concerns about the power dynamics that could arise from students having authority over other students and residents, especially in the context of adjudicating conduct cases. One interviewee stated that they were against the framework because they were personally uncomfortable having an additional person oversee them, especially if that person is a peer. 21% of respondents thought it would be problematic to allow an undergraduate student to weigh in on conduct cases, stating that it could lead to interpersonal issues and a strange power dynamic. Because the ARD is living, interacting with, and currently a student, these interviewees worried that potential conflicts of interest could arise, such as if an ARD had to weigh in on a case where they knew people involved in incidents, or even worse, one of their friends or someone they were romantically involved with. One interviewee suggested that if ARDs had to weigh in on conduct cases, that they only do so for buildings that they are not a resident in and they must identify any prior conflicts of interest beforehand.

Some were also concerned about the increased workload and time commitment associated with the proposed framework. They suggested that an increased compensation would be necessary to account for this increase. One interviewee suggested that the department benchmark the compensation against similar roles at other institutions to ensure they are offering a competitive rate. The significant responsibilities of this role for an undergraduate student (including being on various committees and having an extra level of duty rotation) were seen by some as overly burdensome and too much for the described candidates. Interestingly enough, the interviewees against this framework also cited that most people leave the program by their senior year and expressed that they were concerned that recruitment could be a challenge if all the eligible students leave the program at that point in their academic career. Something seems to be deterring RAs from returning for a third year. Understanding why RAs hesitate to continue the program beyond their 2nd year in the role is essential and will require further research. One third-year interviewee suggested that integrating upward mobility for RAs in the form of SRAs and ARDS will likely help, as there will be positions that will reward and recognize them for their experience and commitment to residence life. 26% of respondents expressed that they personally would not pursue this role as their professional goals do not align well with the role.

To mitigate potential challenges recruiting students for this role, one interviewee suggested that the role be opened up to anyone who has previously served as an RA for a whole academic year at the UO. This would potentially allow any returning RA to apply to be an ARD, widening the applicant pool. Clear communication about expectations from the department and cognizant planning of the role's responsibilities into the typical schedule of an undergraduate student will be crucial for a successful implementation of the role.

Many participants were interested but unsure about how the ARD position would fit into the UO community. They had many questions about how the role would be implemented, what the training would look like, and how the ARD would be equipped to fulfill the position. Many raised concerns about redundancy between the ARD and the current Community Coordinator (CC) position. They were uncertain about the benefits of having an undergraduate ARD vs. a typically graduate-level CC. The main difference that was noted was the different levels of education and the level of responsibility and experience. The interviewees noted that CC's are strategically placed in buildings that need a little extra support, usually due to their size. They recommended that ARDs do not need to be placed in buildings that already have CCs, indicating that they could provide support in other buildings.

However, some were concerned that introducing the ARD role in a building where a CC already exists could drastically confuse RAs and residents in terms of who to approach for what reasons. This suggests that ARDs should not replace CCs, as they are likely better to handle bigger buildings with more conduct cases. ARDs can provide lower levels of support compared to CCs, but support nonetheless! Many of the ARD specialization roles create support for various stakeholders such as Assistant Directors, ARCs, RHA/NRHH, and Faculty-in-Residence. There was also debate whether the ARD was considered part of RA on-call or pro-staff on-call, with most participants agreeing that the ARD should not be considered pro-staff on-call.

Challenges/Barriers for Framework #3

Interviewees were then asked to identify any potential challenges/barriers associated with implementing this framework.

Are there any challenges or barriers that you foresee if we implement this here at the UO?

Several potential challenges and barriers to implementing framework #3, specifically concerning the role clarity and structure. Some interviewees were confused by the proposed on-call responsibilities and duty rotation for the ARD role, stating that they were unclear. They again suggested that ARDs should likely be considered part of the RA duty rotation and not part of the pro-staff duty rotation, due to the nature of conduct cases that pro-staff must respond to and the level of training and experience required to adequately respond to those situations. The uneasy feelings about ARDs weighing in on conduct cases was reiterated, as the interviewees admitted that conduct cases can vary widely, and sometimes involve interactions with parents. Balancing confidentiality and parental expectations can be tricky, and some interviewees were worried how parents may perceive an undergraduate student having authority in issues of conduct.

As mentioned before, the ARD position could create some unwanted power dynamics between themselves and the RAs. The position seems to place the student leader in a position between overseeing and being part of the RA team. This could lead to awkwardness and impact the person's well-being if they do not have any external support or sense of belonging within their role in the bustling residence hall environment. They either need to have a sense of community within the RA team, or within the pro-staff team. This concern, coupled with many previous concerns highlights a distinct question about this role: *Where do they fit in as an*

undergraduate student fulfilling a role closer to pro-staff level? What things can we change about the role to make the ARDs fit into our community as student leaders?

The overlap with the CC role was again a concern brought up surrounding the ARD role. This raises questions about the necessity of the ARD role and how it would benefit the department in ways that aren't already covered by RAs or professional staff. One RA questioned the implications of the ARD role on the current housing hierarchy. They wondered if the CC role would remain or be replaced by the ARD, or if the ARD and CC would share responsibilities or if they would overlap in role responsibilities at all. When considering the ARD role, it will be imperative to plan it's purpose around the CC role and how both can coexist in the community by bringing unique strengths to the overall operations of the department.

A more minor detail caught the eye of one astute interviewee. According to the current framework at UC Riverside, ARDs must have a valid drivers license and be able to operate department-owned vehicles. The interviewee suggested the removal of such a requirement, expressing confusion as to how it relates to their role and citing that it may be an unfair barrier to some applicants.

The balancing of academic workload and role demands again emerged as an important consideration when deciding the ARDs fit into our community. The same interviewees expressed that proper compensation and understanding from superiors. The high availability requirement during evenings and weekends was seen by some interviewees as quite demanding. This could add stress to a student leader's already demanding schedule, especially if they serve as pro-staff on-call (which again the interviewees advised against). One third-year interviewee (academically a graduating senior) worried that the ARD role would be a lot for many fourth-year students as they wrap up capstone projects, take their hardest classes, and search for jobs post-graduation.

However, the interviewee also said fourth-year student typically take on more prominent leadership roles within their organizations and a leadership role like that is currently lacking for RAs.

One interviewee noted that designing and performing training for the ARD position could be difficult, as they will likely be smaller in numbers, but their unique specializations may make it harder to provide a standardized training for all people in the position. The interviewee also worried about the ARDs having to move in earlier than RAs to be on-site to help with RA training, stating that the earlier in the summer student leaders have to move back in, the more opportunities like study abroad, internships, and job opportunities are taken away due to lack of availability. Training for the ARDs may include portions that are standardized for all ARDs, and break-out sessions or days where ARDs are trained on the aspects of the specialized tasks they will be performing. One interviewee expressed that ARD training could be formatted similar to RA training with workshops, simulations, and role-playing exercises to enhance their effectiveness in the role.

Community Impact of Framework #3

Interviewees were then asked to identify how this mentorship framework would impact the larger community:

If we were to implement this framework at the UO, do you think it would positively impact RAs and residents? Please explain.

47% of respondents stated that the ARD position would be beneficial for residents. They mentioned that the presence of another student in certain emergent situations could be less

intimidating for residents. This could make it easier for residents to communicate and express their concerns. Despite the potential benefits of having another student present, the need for professional staff in certain situations was also acknowledged by the interviewees. They stated there are certain situations like when residents are combative or unstable when they would only be comfortable calling pro staff, and not an ARD.

One interviewee felt that the specialization aspect was hugely beneficial to both RAs and residents, stating that it will have an apparent impact on residents through the academic programming, mentorship, and leadership activities that they assist with. It will also benefit RAs by providing additional support to the team and allowing returning RAs to take on a larger role and pick a specialization that fits their interests and career aspirations. The ARD position also has the potential for mentorship to the RAs, similar to the purpose of framework #2, although this position would not as direct or as comprehensive as the SRA role. They also stated that ARDs would be quite supportive to various aspects of residence life, depending on the specialization, such as RHA/NRHH, ARCS and Faculty-in-Residence, department committees, and the RA program.

Two interviewees stated that having an ARD who works with “upper housing” as a student leader who has experience in the RA role could be greatly beneficial to RAs as they can advocate for that group of student leaders. They expressed frustration that many CDs have not been RAs themselves, which they feel impacts their ability to effectively manage a team of RAs. Having an ARD that CDs can consult would likely improve their ability to advocate for and understand the reality of the RAs they lead. This suggests that the ARD position could serve as an effective bridge between the pro staff and the RA teams, improving that relationship and building trust and connection throughout the different areas of residence life. On this note, it

could be beneficial for residents to have someone to talk to as well. Someone who has direct access to pro staff in housing, but is still a student and can communicate and connect the two groups.

Since 39% of the interviewee population was unsure about how successful this framework would fare in our community, one interviewee proposed a sort of trial run for this position with select returning RAs to identify potential issues and make adjustments if necessary.

Recommendations

Evidence-Based Suggestions

Based on the analysis of the Resident Assistant role at the University of Oregon, I recommend implementing the following strategies:

- 1) **Facilitate Open and Frequent Dialogues with RAs:** A stronger relationship can be achieved through more open and frequent dialogues between pro-staff and student leaders about how the role can be improved going forward. Encourage an environment of open dialogue between professional staff and RAs both in contexts relating to the union, and not. Regular check-ins, office hours, and informal conversations can create a space for RAs to voice their concerns, share their experiences, and receive guidance and support. It will also allow them to get to know the people behind the position titles in the department and form relationships with staff other than their CD.
- 2) **Emphasize Two-Way Connection:** Recognize that building a strong relationship is a two-way process. While professional staff should actively engage with RAs, it is equally important for RAs to meet halfway and actively participate in these efforts as well. Encourage RAs to take ownership of their personal and professional development by actively seeking out opportunities for communication and collaboration.
- 3) **Foster Direct Connections:** While CDs play a crucial role as the main liaison between professional staff and the RAs, prioritize direct connections between the two groups. Facilitate opportunities for professional staff to interact with RAs outside of formal meetings and disciplinary contexts, fostering a more personal and supportive

environment. A theme that emerged from the interviews when the RAs talked about interacting with pro-staff was often on the basis of addressing something negative—either discussing a crisis situation the RA responded to, a disciplinary context, or some other formal setting like training. It is crucial to recognize that if interactions between Resident Assistants (RAs) and professional staff are primarily limited to disciplinary or negative situations, it can hinder the development of a positive and productive relationship. When RAs only interact with professional staff in the context of addressing misconduct, policy violations, or other problematic incidents, it can create an adversarial dynamic and breed an environment of mistrust and apprehension.

- 4) **Promote Relationship-Building Activities:** Organize team-building activities, social events, or informal gatherings that allow professional staff and RAs to connect on a personal level. These interactions can help build trust, understanding, and a sense of community and unity.
- 5) **Encourage and Teach Self-Care Practices:** Actively encourage and teach RAs various self-care practices that can help them identify ways that they personally can manage stress, maintain their mental and physical well-being, and prevent burnout. This could easily be included as in-services on the topics of mindfulness, time management, and healthy coping mechanisms.
- 6) **Provide Guidance on Work/Life Balance:** Offer guidance and support to RAs in establishing clear boundaries between their RA role and their personal lives. Encourage them to set aside dedicated time for self-care activities, hobbies, and social

interactions outside of their RA responsibilities. Provide resources and strategies for effective time management and prioritization.

- 7) **Create designated “Off-Duty” Spaces⁴ and Times:** Identify and designate specific spaces and times where RAs can truly be “off-duty” and free from the expectation of being available or responsive to RA-related matters. This could include designated relaxation areas within the residence halls or specific hours during which RAs are not expected to be “on duty” (obviously rotating different times for different RAs as someone should always be available to respond to incidents).
- 8) **Promote a Culture of Wellbeing:** Foster a culture within the Residence Life Department that prioritizes and normalizes self-care and work-life balance. Lead by example by encouraging professional staff to model healthy boundaries and self-care practices (could be especially helpful for live-in staff as RAs live on campus too and can more closely relate to living and working in the same spaces). Celebrate and recognize RAs who effectively manage their well-being while fulfilling their responsibilities.
- 9) **Consider Upward Mobility Options for RAs:** Consider creating positions or pathways that allow RAs to directly advocate for their experiences and perspectives in conversations with professional staff. This could include the SRA position from Framework #2 or the ARD position from Framework #3. The important consideration here is creating spaces for RAs in professional staff meetings and conversations and allowing them to have a voice.
- 10) **Conduct Feedback Assessments:** Engage with RAs to understand their preferred methods and settings for providing feedback. This could involve surveys, focus

groups, or one-on-one conversations. Tailor the feedback channels to their preferences, ensuring they feel comfortable and empowered to share their insights.

- 11) Determine Who Should Receive RA Feedback:** Determine the appropriate department stakeholders who should receive direct feedback from RAs. These could be CDs, the Director of Residence Life, or other relevant decision-makers. Prior to seeking feedback, ensure that clear communication channels and positive relationships are established between RAs and these stakeholders.
- 12) Recognize RAs as Student Experience Translators:** Acknowledge and value the unique perspective RAs bring as direct witnesses to the student experience within the residential communities. Encourage professional staff to actively seek out and consider RA insights when developing policies, programs, or initiatives that impact residence life.
- 13) Foster Collaboration and Openness between RAs and Pro Staff:** Cultivate an environment where RAs feel their voices are valued, and their feedback is actively sought and incorporated into decision-making processes. Celebrate and recognize instances where RA advocacy has led to positive changes within the residential community.

Framework-Specific Recommendations

If exploring Framework #1...

Based on the interview feedback, it is unclear how successful Framework #1 would be at the UO. However, if the department was interested in exploring the idea of specialization, I recommend the following:

- 1) Acknowledge the Magnitude of Change:** Recognize that transitioning to an SSA/CA model would be a substantial shift for the department, professional staff, and student leaders themselves. Openly communicate the scope of this change and provide ample opportunities for feedback, discussion, and addressing concerns from all parties involved.
- 2) Offer Competitive Compensation for SSAs:** To attract and retain talent for the SSA role, it is essential to offer competitive compensation that reflects the demanding nature of the role's responsibilities. Higher compensation for the SSA not only recognizes the value of their contributions but also helps alleviate any potential discrepancies in applicants between the SSA and CA. However, it is also important to note that the interviewees were selected to be *RAs*, meaning they currently fit as desired applicants for the *current* framework. By separating the RA role into two, it is likely that the specialized roles will attract new types of applicants, and some may be attracted to the SSA role even if it is compensated the same as the CA role. To determine this, future research will need to be conducted to gauge the community's interest in fulfilling the SSA and CA role.
- 3) Humanize the SSA role:** Emphasize the human aspect of the SSA role, recognizing that these individuals are students first and foremost. This must be emphasized to residents. Provide comprehensive support systems, including mental health resources, mentorship opportunities, and professional development programs, to foster both their personal and professional growth in the role.
- 4) Capitalize on the Lack of RA Stigma:** As the SSA and CA models are relatively new, there is an opportunity to shape its perception from the outset. Leverage the lack

of preconceived notions or stigma associated with these roles. The term “RA” carries a certain stigma with it, as many students are familiar with the role through pop culture, movies, media, and stories from older siblings, parents, grandparents, etc. Unfortunately, the stigma often only encapsulates one aspect of the RA role, which is the “rule enforcer” aspect. As most people will be unfamiliar with what an SSA or CA is, the department has a chance to define them in a positive light from the outset.

- 5) **Develop a Comprehensive Implementation Plan:** Take the time to lay a strong foundation for the transition by developing a clear and detailed implementation plan. This plan should address key aspects such as recruitment strategies, training programs, role definitions, performance evaluation metrics, and ongoing support mechanisms for both roles.

Framework #2: University of Illinois- Urbana Champaign

Based on the interviewees' sentiments, this framework was the most popular choice; therefore, I recommend it the most.

- 1) **Frame the SRA position as a “teacher” or “mentor”:** Emphasize that the primary purpose of the SRA role is to provide guidance, support, and mentorship to first-year RAs. SRAs should be positioned as experienced peers who can share knowledge, offer advice, and facilitate the professional development of RAs. This framing will help create a more collaborative and inclusive dynamic between RAs and SRAs.
- 2) **Conduct a Feasibility Assessment:** Carefully assess the additional workload and responsibilities associated with the SRA role to ensure that it remains manageable for full-time undergraduate students. Collaborate with current

RAs and professional staff to map out the potential duties and time commitments and make necessary adjustments to maintain a reasonable workload.

- 3) **Utilize SRAs as Advocates and Liaisons:** Leverage the unique perspective and experience of SRAs by involving them in advocacy efforts and communication channels between RAs and professional staff. SRAs can serve as liaisons, representing the voices and concerns of RAs in departmental meetings or advisory committees. Their insights can inform data-driven decisions and contribute to the continuous improvement of the residential experience.

If you want to do Framework #3...

Suppose the Residence Life Department decides to implement Framework #3. In that case, it is important to remember that the interview sample was also unclear on how successful this framework would be at the UO.

- 1) **Conduct a Feasibility Assessment:** Thoroughly evaluate the additional workload and responsibilities associated with the ARD role to ensure that it remains manageable for full-time undergraduate students. Collaborate with current RAs, professional staff, and other relevant stakeholders to map out the potential duties, time commitments, and potential challenges. This assessment will help determine whether the ARD role is feasible for students while maintaining their academic and personal commitments.
- 2) **Gauge Interest and Gather Feedback from RAs:** Conduct research to gauge the level of interest among current RAs and potential candidates for the ARD role. This

can be done through surveys, focus groups, or one-on-one conversations.

Additionally, solicit feedback from professional staff and other stakeholders to understand their perspectives on the potential benefits and challenges of implementing this role.

- 3) **Initiate Stakeholder Meetings:** Organize meetings with key stakeholders, including RAs, professional staff, faculty members, and administrators, to gain a holistic understanding of how the ARD role would fit into the existing Residence Life community. These meetings should facilitate open discussions, address concerns, and explore potential strategies for successful implementation.
- 4) **Develop a Comprehensive ARD Role Description:** Based on the feedback and insights gathered, develop a detailed role description for the ARD position. Clearly define the responsibilities, qualifications, training requirements, compensation, and reporting structure. Ensure that the role aligns with the department's mission and values while addressing the identified needs of the residential community.
- 5) **Establish Communication Channels:** Outline clear communication channels and protocols for ARDs to effectively serve as liaisons between RAs and professional staff. This may include regular meetings, feedback mechanisms, and opportunities for ARDs to represent RA perspectives in decision-making processes.

Conclusion

Recommendations for Future Research

To further enhance our understanding of the Resident Assistant (RA) role and its impact on university housing, the following recommendations for future research are proposed:

Firstly, it would be beneficial to conduct interviews with students holding similar positions at other universities, such as Binghamton University and UC Riverside. These institutions may have different structures, policies, or cultures that could provide valuable insights into the RA role. By comparing and contrasting the experiences of RAs across different universities, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of the challenges and opportunities associated with this role.

Secondly, it is important to acknowledge that the students in these roles have much more to say. Their voices are crucial in providing a first-hand perspective of the realities on the ground. Therefore, future research should aim to capture these voices in a more in-depth manner. This could involve conducting more detailed interviews, focus groups, or even ethnographic studies to gain a deeper understanding of their experiences.

I would also recommend that the department conduct similar interviews with ARC-associated RAs and non-ARC-associated RAs at the UO to see how their experiences are similar or differ. This type of research could reveal if the ARC communities are more successful than non-ARC communities, which could inform the next steps for the department.

Lastly, it is recommended to research the CDs or Community Directors, as they serve as the bridge between housing and RAs. Their perspectives can provide valuable insights into the

dynamics between the housing department and the RAs and how these relationships can be improved. Including their voices in the conversation can help to create a more holistic picture of the housing environment. By implementing these recommendations, future research can contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the RA role, ultimately leading to more effective strategies for improving university housing.

In conclusion, this thesis has provided a wide-ranging exploration of the Resident Assistant (RA) role at our institution. Through in-depth research and analysis, we have gained valuable insights into the responsibilities, challenges, and opportunities associated with this role.

The RA position is not just a job; it is a pivotal component of the university housing system. RAs play a crucial role in fostering a positive living environment, promoting academic success, and facilitating personal growth among residents. However, they also face significant challenges, including balancing academic responsibilities with job demands, managing conflicts, and navigating the complexities of peer leadership. These challenges can strain RAs' time and energy, potentially hindering their capacity to support residents and cultivate an enriching residential experience.

This research has highlighted the importance of ongoing support and training for RAs, as well as the need for clear communication and collaboration between RAs and housing administrators. Furthermore, it underscores the value of recognizing and appreciating the contributions of RAs to our university community.

In closing, the Resident Assistant role is a complex and multifaceted position that significantly impacts the university housing experience. Through this thesis, I hope to have shed light on this important role and provided a foundation for future research and discussion.

The lessons learned from this study can guide our institution in its ongoing efforts to create a supportive, engaging, and enriching residential experience for all students.

Appendix

Appendix A: Pre-Interview Sign-up Survey

Resident Assistant Research Project

Amiya Fulton

1 hr

8:30am - 9:30am, Thursday, June 13, 2024

Pacific Time - US & Canada

Thank you for your interest in participating in this interview. My name is Amiya Fulton and I am a graduating Senior from the Clark Honors College here at the UO! This project is my undergraduate thesis project and it aims to investigate the Resident Assistant (RA) role at the University of Oregon to better understand the challenges, opportunities, and potential for enhancing this position at the UO in the future. Your insights and experiences are valuable in shaping recommendations to University Housing to improve this role for residents and RA's alike.

Please see [Informed Consent Document](#) for more information on confidentiality, procedures, and interview details. You will only be asked to sign this document during your in-person interview after you have been given the chance to ask questions.

Enter Details

Name *

Email *

Location *

Knight Library Study Room (I will contact you with room number)

Microsoft Teams

Are you currently a Resident Assistant (RA) at the University of Oregon? (For this project, we are only interviewing current RA's at this institution. If you do not meet this criteria, you are not eligible for an interview but thank you for your interest) *

Select...

Which Residence Hall are you currently an RA in? *

Select...

How many years have you been an RA? *

Select...

What is your Gender Identity? *

Which of the following best describes your race and ethnicity?

Caucasian/White

African/African-American/Black

Asian

Indigenous/Native American/American Indian

Latino/Hispanic

Pacific Islander

Middle Eastern/North African

Two or More Races

Other

Appendix B: Informed Consent Document

Informed Consent Form

Title of Study: The Next Chapter: A Comparative Review of the Evolving Resident Assistant Role at the University of Oregon

Principal Investigator: Amiya Fulton, Clark Honors College Student Researcher

Introduction:

You are being invited to participate in a research study conducted by Amiya Fulton, a Clark Honors College student researcher at the University of Oregon. The purpose of this study is to explore and better understand the Resident Assistant (RA) role at the University of Oregon, with a focus on challenges, opportunities, and potential improvements.

Procedures:

If you agree to participate, you will be asked to take part in a semi-structured interview. The interview will cover topics related to your personal experiences as an RA, challenges encountered, training received, and thoughts on alternative frameworks for the RA role. The interview will be recorded for transcription and analysis purposes.

Confidentiality:

Your participation in this study is voluntary. All information provided during the interview will be kept confidential. Your identity will be anonymized, and any identifying information will be removed from the interview transcripts. The data will be securely stored and accessible only to the student researcher.

There are minimal risks associated with participating in this study. You may experience some discomfort or self-reflection while reflecting on your experiences as an RA. The benefits of participating include contributing valuable insights that may lead to improvements in the RA role at the University of Oregon. Your interview will be used to tailor the thesis's recommendations for future improvements in the role and the final recommendations will be given to the University Housing Residence Life department for potential future implementation.

Again, your participation is completely voluntary and you have the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequences. If you choose to withdraw, any data collected up to that point will be excluded from the study.

If you have any questions or concerns after your interview, you may contact the student researcher at amiyaf@uoregon.edu By agreeing to participate in this study, you acknowledge that you have read and understood the information provided in this consent form. You agree to participate voluntarily, and you may withdraw at any time without penalty.

I, the undersigned, consent to participate in the study as described above

X Participant's Full Name _____

X Participant's Signature _____

Investigator's Statement (Only for Student Researcher to Complete)

I have explained the nature and purpose of the study to the participant, and I have provided an opportunity for them to ask questions. I believe the participant understands the information provided.

X Investigator's Full Name _____

X Investigator's Signature _____

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