

**Analyzing My Experience in SUNY New Paltz's Department of Residence Life: A
Performative Autoethnography**

Angeline Gomez

State University of New York at New Paltz, Honors Department

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Professor Jason Wrench

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Abstract

In this paper, I write about my experience as a Resident Assistant at the State University of New York at New Paltz's (SUNY New Paltz) Department of Residence Life. I explore and give a historical analysis on the history of residence life and the fundamental of the Resident Assistant role. By elaborating on the critical aspects of SUNY New Paltz's Department of Residence Life, I can find and pinpoint the weakness of the department. I then elaborate on the crisis faced at New Paltz during the Spring Semester of 2020, the following COVID-19 affected academic year, and how these critical points exploited the department's weaknesses. By using my experience to detail this analysis, my understanding of the inner functions of the department, and my knowledge of its operation pre- and post-COVID has made me an ideal person to point to potential opportunities for change. The inconsistencies seen throughout the department pre-COVID have negatively affected how the department has reprimanded and expected specific behavior from Resident Assistants post-COVID. Through adjustments in their methods of operations, diversifying the professional staff, and creating opportunities to establish crisis management planning, the department of residence life can decrease RA burnout, improve retention and satisfaction, and generate a position worth applying for.

Keywords: residence life, resident assistant, covid, suny new paltz

Analyzing My SUNY New Paltz's Department of Residence Life Experience: A Performative Autoethnography

Before going into my undergraduate years, I knew I wanted to be heavily involved on campus. Being active in my high school community kept me going and motivated me to do well in my studies. I met my friends through these programs, grew closer to staff and faculty, and learned all-around more about what it means to have a tight-knit community by participating in the events that create and foster community. I thought that being involved in Residence Life would provide that for me. I would live with the people I work with; live with the residents I would help and serve and create and organize opportunities to cultivate engagement and fellowship — all the while bolstering my leadership skills.

Before I became a Resident Assistant (RA) at the State University of New York at New Paltz (SUNY New Paltz) in August 2018, I had an unclear perspective on the job. From the outside, it looked simple. Sit in the office at least once a week, walk around the building every hour to ensure the building and residents are safe, create a program every month on something of interest, make door-tags once a month, and design a new monthly board. However, nothing is ever what it seems. In August 2018, I was thrown at wolves. I quickly learned what the world of residence life was and meant. And it was not until a water crisis and an unprecedented global pandemic exposed the failings of the Department of Residence Life.

Considering the shortcomings of this department, I believe sharing my experience and exposing the pitfalls of the department will help bring awareness and a sense of clarity and perspective that the Department of Residence Life seems to lack. Acknowledging my background in residence life, being an RA for a year and a half, and being Senior Resident

Assistant (SRA) for one year, I have seen and interacted with different levels of the department in varying capacities.

Autoethnographic Approach

Autoethnography takes many approaches and forms. Poulos (2021) defines an autoethnography as an “autobiographical genre of academic writing...” drawing and analyzing on the interpretations of “lived experience[s] of the author... connect[ing] research insights to self-identity, cultural rules and resources, communication practices, traditions, premises, symbols, rules, shared meanings, emotions, values, and larger social-cultural and political issues,” (p.13). The word itself can define the purpose and goal of the writing style. Breaking the word apart and examining its root origins, auto or autós refers to the self, ethno- meaning people, and graphs, root word -graphia which means writing, is then defined as ‘self people writing’ or the self-writing of people. This form of writing, primarily used in social sciences, introduces personal narratives and self-insight on culture and way of life, the way an outsider may never fully understand. In my case, writing from the perspective of a Resident Assistant in Residence Life both pre-and post-COVID compared to the existing literature from directors and student life professionals on Resident Assistant provides incomparable insight and examples that heighten my storytelling.

I used my experience to dictate the way my research would form. Having worked in the department for three years, with a six-month break in the middle, I have had the opportunity of being exposed to several functioning bodies of the department and its corresponding set of issues. My observations and drive for this study came to life in the Fall of 2020, six months after

my hiatus and six months after the RA role changed from what I knew it to be. The once joyful and esteemed position of RA, with immense opportunities and possibilities, was replaced with a cold administrative and enforcing title that illuminated the growing discrepancies in the post. So my question now is, in what ways have the events of Spring 2020 exposed the issues in the Department of Residence Life?

My Experience

The resident assistant position is a unique key role in the world of on-campus university living. RAs are intuitive, natural leaders, carers, organized, and multifaceted individuals capable of juggling multiple things at once — all items used to describe those who take on the position. For example, if a group of RAs asked why they applied for the job, the answer would not range much. ‘It’s simple; I want to help people have a better college experience.’ I had the same motive, to help integrate students into campus life, just as my RAs had.

The dream for any RA, I think, is always to be an RA in a corridor-style building. We have all seen the iconic residence hall in movies, the ones we first lived in that formed our knowledge of RAs, the ones where we first felt at home. The day I received my official letter of hire and placement — 5 April 2018 — I remember eagerly scanning the email to find which corridor building I would be living in. To my slight disappointment, at the time, I was placed in a suite-style building for second-year students and upperclassman. I spent the following five semesters from August 2018 to May 2021 working in Shawangunk Hall with eight staff, including my RD.

As RA and SRA, I encountered many residents, staff, and even supervisors. I can describe my first semester as RA as the perfect storm. Stepping into a staff of majority returning RAs, I had little difficulty integrating myself into the team. The staff dynamic can make or break an RAs experience in the position. Luckily, my first three semesters and those three other staff allowed me to work in a caring and responsible team. As a first-year RA, many things are unknown about the position. The constant demand of being 'on-call,' being trapped and bombarded by residents and their latest issue, being forced to create eye-catching programming, and the long hours at night writing incident reports are not things mentioned when you first apply. But it quickly consumes the position and all you know it to be. During my first year as RA, an average day involved one or two classes, a staff meeting of some sort, my work-study job, and either duty or a program. The job was 24 hours, seven days a week, regardless of whether we were on-call or not. The intensity of the position and the demand of attention the residents required affected my academic performance my first year — spending several late hours writing incident reports and being forced to take midterm exams during office hours and miss work. Dealing with several underage drinking cases, a handful of severe roommate conflicts, and a fair share of Title IX cases, I became insensitive to my residents' issues by the end of my first year as RA. And by my second year and third year, I tried my best not to be in the building to avoid getting sucked into the petty issues between residents and have time to exist as a college student.

But despite all of this, my first three semesters of RA became some of my favorite memories. I had a great staff who understood the role and position of RA but also knew the importance of balancing profession, student life, and everyday life. I participated in several

campus and residence life events and programs, including a Resident Assistant Conference during my Spring 2019 semester. I learned to work with a diverse and constantly changing staff, adjust to the departure and arrival of team members, remember to put differences aside and complete the task at hand. I learned how to think quickly on my feet and stand my ground, regardless of a resident's level of incoherence and inebriety. And more importantly, I met the life-long friends I have now in this position. Nothing bonds a group of people better than a shared experience.

I had a multitude of different responsibilities as an RA. On top of the general description of the RA role (mentioned later under Paraprofessional Staff), RAs pick positions within their staff, operating similar to the way school clubs and organizations run. These roles are Treasurer, Programming Coordinator, Hall Government Liaison (2), Cultural Advocate, Social Media Coordinator, and Senior Resident Assistant (Office Coordinator). In my first year, I was one of two Hall Government Liaison, advising a group of residents who participated in Hall Government, a body created to allow residents to advocate for changes and advancements they — and their neighbors — want to see throughout the building and the campus. It was a great opportunity that allowed me to engage with residents throughout my building, investigate their concerns and needs, and be a part of a larger campus organization that promoted fellowship. In my second year, I was my staff's Cultural Advocate (CA). I was responsible for fostering a culturally diverse and inclusive community through programming, social media campaigns, conversations, and general building advertisement. Although highly underrated, under-organized, and ill-supervised, this position plays an integral role in the RA staff. With a constantly growing diverse population of students, it is essential to understand the dynamics that appear for students

of color entering a historically and predominately white institution (PWI). The bad-rep CA has carried along requires RAs to attend an extra meeting a month to talk about concerns among the staff, the residents, and a combination of the two. I have seen it help many RAs learn the appropriate language when talking about specific ethnicities and cultures and educate on things outside of race and gender that make individuals advocate for the inclusion of all, I.e., people with disabilities. I served as a Senior Resident Assistant for the last two semesters in this position. This role served primarily as an administrative position, scheduling, emailing, training, and overseeing different groups of staff, residents, and the building.

My changing supervisors from the first to the second year saw some challenges as paraprofessional staff dynamics also changed. A few of my staff members disliked the professional change and felt unsupported by the new director. A much younger individual and someone in close age to many staff members, respect became a challenge for the staff. Once the water crisis and COVID came into play, it became even more challenging to take some of those same directives seriously. In my fourth and fifth semesters, -- Fall 2020 and Spring 2021 -- the RD decreased effort to create time for staff bonding. Although it was a COVID school year and operations ran remotely, the failed establishment of a positive and trusting staff made for an awkward year. Staff members were divided and un-respected. In addition to ignoring simple responsibilities even more, RAs did not perform their significant duties correctly. It was a challenging time being a student last school year and even more formidable being a Resident Assistant throughout it. No one could have predicted the circumstances that would have emerged from the pandemic nor the stress it would pose on RAs. The change in the position responsibilities, however, said it all.

I use my experience and perspective as a tool of critical reflection to understand the methods of the Department of Residence, its inner-workers, its shortcomings, and point out its potential to improve (Jensen-Hart & Williams, 2010). As an individual impacted first hand by the decisions of this department and the more incredible institution of SUNY and SUNY New Paltz, the perspective of a Resident Assistant living through the realities of this role in two completely different worlds¹, creates an opportunity to tell a story like no other. Unable to produce and include the perspective of my fellow staff members and co-workers, I use my experiences, whether first or second-hand, to acknowledge the well-rounded story of what it means to be an RA at New Paltz. And what the department needs to do to improve the working conditions. The sole financial benefits of ‘free room and board’ are no longer enough to compensate for the work performed by these student leaders. I incorporate methods of autoethnography to uncover my statements inside the ‘cult’ that used to be Residence Life. A once profoundly united group of individuals, who, despite their differences, bonded over this single shared identity, dismantled at the break of the world. From its introduction to the Western Hemisphere to its current elusive title, the RA position has evolved so much. For many who have never understood the RA position, this paper adds a new narrative to the discussion of Residence Life and Resident Assistant by a student who has recently graduated from the role.

History of Residence Life

“The job description and role of the resident assistant (RA) have evolved as American and global societies have changed and as higher education has advanced,” (Boone, et al., 2016,

¹ *Two completely different worlds* refers to life *before* COVID and life *during* COVID

p. 39). This ever-changing role has created difficulty explaining what we, as resident assistants do and offer to students. It has become more than just watching over students in a building but creating and facilitating an experience that correlates with their academic experience and enhances their mental stability throughout their four years. Boone et al., (2016) revisit the first installation of the role, Resident Assistant, dating back to the Middle Ages, when students throughout Europe would make their way to France and England to study, finding themselves home insecure. The first model that took form in Europe made its way to the Colonial States. In place of student RAs, which we see today, and instead of having a separate proctoring² staff, the faculty members serve as educators and disciplinarians. However, this model did not last long. Students did not appreciate their faculty staff living and disciplining them instead of overseeing their education. It was not until the Morrill Land-Grant College Act of 1862, which allocated federal aid to “create colleges that benefit the agricultural and mechanical arts” (Senate, n.d., para. 1), encouraging the establishment of a more “secular education,” (Boone, et al., 2016, p. 40) and moving away from the need for residential colleges. Women began to become more prevalent in universities only when college housing and residence halls were established as a means of ensuring security and structure to [the] new populations of women students (Boone, et al., 2016, p. 40) in the late 19th century. The establishment of these residence halls led to the implementation of a student-led position tasked to manage the on-goings of the buildings; thus, the RA position was born.

² Proctors, historically, in the United Kingdom are university officers who are appointed with disciplinary functions as a means of protecting and guarding students to ensure their safety. The term was brought over during the colonial times to explain the role in a university but has then sense changed in North America.

SUNY New Paltz Residence Life

The Department of Residence Life “strives to enhance each resident[s] ... experience by providing a variety of participatory opportunities for personal development through creating a purposeful living-learning environment that fosters leadership development, citizenship, and civility, while embracing the celebration and understanding of diversity,” (SUNY New Paltz, para. 1). The purpose of these departments in any academic setting is to ensure safe living situations for their students while also providing them with recreational opportunities. As a service organization, “whose basic function is to serve [their own] clients.”

Before the college of New Paltz was affiliated with the State University of New York System, in 1938, New Paltz was home to the State Teacher's College of New Paltz (History of the Campus, para. 4). When it joined the SUNY system in 1948, New Paltz opened its first residential building three years later with what was then called College Union (SUNY New Paltz, What's in a Buildings Name, sec. 32). The multi-purpose building housed a dining hall, music hall, mailroom, and reading room alongside hosting students. Located near the two closest academic facilities, Old Main and van den Berg Hall, pre-dating the construction of College Union, now Shango/College Hall, became the blueprint for New Paltz's expansion. The university quickly began developing its residential offerings to students in 1958 by opening two new buildings, Bouton and Capen Hall (SUNY New Paltz, What's in a Buildings name, sec. 23). With over 500 students living on campus, New Paltz constructed eight new residential construction throughout the '60s, Bliss, and Scudder in 1962, Gage in 1963, and Ashokan, Awosting, Minnewaska, Mohonk, and Shawangunk in 1968, the University of New Paltz was now home to a little over 2,400 students. With the final construction of three additional

residential buildings in the 2000s, the residence life department became essential to college students' experience.

Now fifteen residential buildings, fourteen paraprofessional staffs, and over 3000 students living on campus, in a typical year, the mission of Residence Life can be broken down into these simple terms: keep residents safe and entertained. However, this stated mission is easily overlooked and does not incorporate the complexity of what it truly means to be a working student in residence life.

Application Process

The once most prestigious position on campus, the resident assistant, is historically one of the most challenging positions to get on campus. An application with over four rounds of interviews and evaluations, the department recognized raw talent and intuition over pre-meditated responses. Their ability to distinguish students apart has allowed them to weed out the “high-performing students” (Berg & Stoner, 2016, p.27) over the mediocre worker student. “Selecting Resident Assistants is integral to the success of housing operations on college and university campuses,” (Berg & Stoner, 2016, p.27), so it is vital to any department to ensure their paraprofessional staff are top tier students who are eager and willing to learn, have a good sense of direction, are quick on their feet, and can manage the complexities of being a college student while taking care of college students.

“To attract the best possible candidates for anticipated vacancies, selection process coordinators form timelines, construct interview questions, and create comprehensive marketing plans,” (Berg & Stoner, 2016, p.27). The application process for RA at New Paltz is a five-step

process. Like other universities, as Berg and Stoner (2016) recount from Upcraft's 1982 article, this includes a “combination of written applications, individual interviews, and group interviews,” (p.27). To apply for the position, you must have one year of experience of living in on-campus housing, and with this requirement, the earliest you can apply is the second semester of your first year.

The first round is the initial application and recommendation letters. Every spring semester, residence life opens its application process to look for new hires to replace the graduating and other students. It is a highly competitive process where around 30-50 new students get hired every so often — with some cohorts being more significant than others. The application, typically remaining the same each year, asks students a series of questions of why they are applying, some of their experiences with other programs on campus, what they would bring to the position, etc. Each RA must have a Grade Point Average (GPA) of at least 2.75 each semester and a 2.75 cumulative GPA. Recommendation letters from an employer and a resident director are necessary for application and deter candidates before an interview. Each candidate is automatically offered a first interview upon completion and submission of the application. After weaning out a few candidates, those who passed the first interview move on to the most complex and most scrutinizing level of the application process, Group Process Day. An all-day event, typically reserved on a weekend day, Group Process Day serves groups of about 8-10 candidates to see how they function and work together as a team. Since working in residence life means working in a team, it's the most important part of the application. Everyone who passes Group Process Day is now in the pool as a potential candidate. Although not as intense as group Process Day, the final two steps still provide a great deal of information on the candidate. The second

interview serves as an opportunity to see if a candidate has a basic sense of common sense. At the same time, the final step, the 'RD Social', is an opportunity for the Resident Directors (RD) to engage and interact with the candidates in an informal setting.

The application process provides a great deal of insight into the department's inner workings because it is the first exposure outsiders must have of how the department operates. However, the application process relies heavily on the participation of the existing paraprofessional staff, signing up to help with interviews, and working all day during group process day as the judges of candidates, making or breaking whether they enter the pool. The intensive application process would make it seem that residence life only allows the best to work for them. However, with two interviews, a day dedicated to analyzing how people work in a team, and a day devoted to the RDs, who supervise and interact with the staff daily, to interact with potential new RAs, the process is exceptional unnecessarily extensive at the same time.

Although the hiring process mainly takes place during the end of the spring semester, a selected number of candidates from the pool are picked up midyear to replace any gaps left in staff. These gaps are due to those graduating in December, studying abroad in the Spring, or those who no longer wish to continue their position for several reasons.

Training

Current practices in RA training consist of three programs "pre-service training, in-service training, and academic courses," (Koch, 2016, p.81). At SUNY New Paltz, RAs typically take part in pre-services and in-service training. Each semester, RAs go through a week of training to help them prepare for the upcoming semester. The training sessions happen in the Summer before the Fall Semester and before the Spring semester. The Summer is, by far, the

most intensive and, by the record, the most beneficial training session offered by Residence Life. Unfortunately, my experience has not allowed me to participate in any winter training until my last semester as RA, Spring 2021. But from my experience and that of my close friends, Summer training is the most conducive and beneficial to the RA experience. They design Summer training to teach new hires, SRAs, and returning staff their responsibilities while giving them time to meet and bond with their new staff members. They dedicate a day to newly hired RAs and SRAs, learn more about their new positions, and begin staff training the following. In addition, they separate time for in-house training and bonding and time to prepare and get the building ready for residents on move-in day.

Each training session typically goes over the newly updated conduct handbook, which introduces many changes in vocabulary in the legislation, training sessions with the Psychological Counseling Center (PCC), Title IX training, and incident training. “As paraprofessional staff members that have oversight for a community of fellow students that live on-campus, [RAs] are also the first line responders that are responsible for student safety and for responding to emergencies on an on-call basis,” (Thibodeaux, 2021, p.2) and keeping RAs at their best and ready is integral to the overall work by the Department of Residence Life. With each semester, the professional staff has added and changed the training sessions to implement new department changes, if any, which happen if not every semester, which has been the theme the past three years I have been working in the department, every year. These sessions include programming, department staffing, incident reporting, student conduct, and the overplayed ‘self-care session.’

In-service training, training sessions scattered throughout the semester to encourage active learning and growing for RAs, was postponed my last year because of the onset of COVID-19. Typically, the department would plan a series of training or events that would count toward our in-service requirements to cover any gaps left during the summer/winter trainings. These trainings are usually based on specific topics like, alcoholism, drug abuse, toxic masculinity, cultural appropriation, time management, etc.

The Staff

Resident Director. “Supervising Resident Assistants (RAs) on college and university campuses is one of the most critical roles of housing staff” (Berg & Brown, 2019, p.31). Although there are fifteen residential buildings at New Paltz, the residence life department comprises of fourteen paraprofessional staff with one professional staff member, the Resident Director. The Resident Director is the pack leader and focuses on encouraging and fostering trust within the staff, making sure the team is thoroughly trained and ready for any possible situation or incident. “While a certain level of annual staff turnover is expected to occur after each year, residential communities and staff teams are impacted differently when an RA leaves unexpectedly during the academic term” (Berg & Brown, 2019, p.32). It is then the responsibility of the RD to assess the gaps created in their staff and find a new candidate who compliments the strengths and weaknesses of the current staff. This will then allow for a smooth transition for the latest and existing staff members but to have an effective team working together for the needs and demands of the residents.

Berg and Brown studied the work of Komives, *The Relationship of Hall Directors' Transformational and Transactional Leadership to Select Resident Assistant Outcomes*. They saw when RDs supervised RAs in a “transformational versus transactional leadership” style, RAs were found to be more motivated, and their needs were best supported when an “individual approach” was used (Berg & Brown, 2019, pp.34–35). The RD is the closest and best resource an RA can have outside of the paraprofessional field. RDs typically have experience in the position of RA, so they can relate and share their expertise, helping advise on different ways to approach a problem. In many universities today, RDs live in residence halls full time. Their homes are the residence halls, and it is up to them to make sure students are following their rules, the rules of the university, and the rules of the state.

Paraprofessional Staff. After a series of changes were made that led to the creation of on-campus housing for students, universities across the United States had a plethora of ways they managed and regulated the student body. They used housemothers and retired military officers to enforce university policy and maintain an orderly function within the residence halls, often asking and relying on the support of students to track and ensure policy follow-through of the residents (Boone et al., 2016,). However, it did not take long for a series of strict university policies to be reformed and dismantled by the federal government. Between 1962 and 1972, policies that guided student behavior within the dormitories changed from “...strictly enforced curfews for men and women, sign-in and sign-out logs, strictly enforced dress codes, strict rules governing the use of alcohol, limited visitation privileges for men and women, to no curfews,

abandonment of dress codes, more tolerant attitudes about student drinking, open visitation, and coed residence halls,” (Boone, et al., 2016, pp. 40–41).

In 1967, (Arvidson, 2003, p.33) the National Association of Women Deans and Counselors (NAWDAC) advocated for implementing five primary roles for RAs:

1. Help establish the environment within the hall;
2. Assist groups and individual students;
3. Advise student activities;
4. Enforce rules and regulations; and
5. Assist with administrative responsibilities.

Although the RA role was advocated and defined over 50 years ago, the role and responsibilities have remained par with the 1967 definition of an RA. Three years after this implementation, Elizabeth A. Greenleaf, president of the American College Personnel Association, then highlighted three “residence hall staff functions” (Boone, et al., 2016, p. 42) aligning with the roles as indicated by the NAWDAC:

1. Provide an academic environment to challenge students
2. Act with a counseling role, and
3. Offer activities for social and cultural interaction

This new predictive on the position of the RA altered the role forever, moving away from a strictly disciplinary position to a more “counselor, advisor, *and* disciplinarian,” (Boone et al., 2016, p. 42). Each time the job was re-organized, and new responsibilities added, the complexities of the position grew with them. A traditionally authorial role, designed to ensure

students were following the rules and regulations set on by the state and the university; the RA was now serving as an educational and recreational resource to students, as well as a person to talk to when an incident, whether mental, emotional, physical, or spiritual, would occur.

In 1982, the functions of the RA were remolded to fit the changing and more modern times and the changing and growing concerns of the student body in the late 20th century. Boone et al.

(2016) outline Upcraft and Pilato's (1982) six-point list that ascribes the most current job functions of the RA:

1. Provide personal help and assistance;
2. Manage and facilitate groups;
3. Facilitate social, recreational, and educational programs;
4. Inform students or refer them to appropriate information sources;
5. Explain and enforce rules and regulations; and
6. Maintain a safe, orderly, and relatively quiet environment.

“Once relatively straightforward, the RA position has become multifaceted, routinely affected by court decisions, legal mandates, and societal influences. And while the *fundamentals* of the RA role remain the same—helping, guiding, addressing rule infractions—the *fullness* of this position has never been more apparent” (Boone et al., 2016, p. 48). To fully understand the responsibilities and demands of this position, you must actually step into it. The role of a residence assistant is not for the faint of heart, and at SUNY New Paltz, the demand of the growing student body has resulted in additional responsibilities outside of the previously mentioned functions of the RA role. At New Paltz, the resident directors uniquely designs each

paraprofessional staff to cater to the specific needs of the building and its resident demographic. A typical RA staff at SUNY New Paltz consists of six resident assistants and one senior resident assistant. In halls with larger student capacities, the number of resident assistants can go up to eight or nine, still with one SRA for each hall.

The SRA serves as a liaison between the resident assistant staff and the resident director and between the night host staff and RA staff. As the SRA, I oversaw the maintenance of the building. For example, if there were issues with plumbing, the kitchen, the laundry machine, or something was found and reported broken, I submitted the paperwork to fix the situation. I also served as an advisor to my RA staff and supervisor to my night host staff. As the Night Host supervisor, I trained them, held monthly meetings, scheduled one-on-one meetings, and duty, and planned and organized Night Host Appreciation and team bonding activities. For the RAs, I served as an extension of the RD in terms of experience and know-how. I scheduled and kept track of monthly duty, assigned office responsibilities, scheduled one-on-one meetings, created training presentation plans and held daily office hours for residents. The SRA was a regular RA with heightened administration and managerial expectations.

“The job responsibilities of RAs are demanding, and the position is filled with multiple stressors, including role ambiguity, role conflict, and burnout, which can lead to attrition and reduced job satisfaction,” (Berg & Brown, 2019, p.31). The position of RA is challenging, demanding, rewarding, and exhausting. Like SRA, the RA position holds many of the same responsibilities, including sitting duty, creating programming, non-clinical counseling, mediations, and incident/mandated reporter, and excluding building maintenance. However, the RA and SRA positions are no longer the only positions that cater to the residential student body.

To get the complete picture of a modern RA staff at SUNY New Paltz, you will need to understand the role and tole of the Community Mentor (CM). After the construction of Esopus Hall, New Paltz introduced “Communities at New Paltz,” a living-learning community for first-year students dedicated to fostering like-minded individuals a sense of belonging and fellowship in their first year.

This department emerged to cater to the growing student body New Paltz was seeing. You will find two staff with CMs: the Esopus staff, the first to introduce this program and who cater their community to first-year students, and the Shawangunk staff, my old building, who introduced the Transfer Living-Learning Community in August 2018. CMs work in a programming model called “Living-Learning Communities,” where all the students live in a centralized area instead of dispersed throughout the buildings. At first, any new student or parent would be amazed at the care and time residence life puts into these students by creating something geared to an experience like a first-year or a transfer student. In the past, there have also been Transfer Assistants for Programming (TAPs) who were not part of the residence life staff but lived in buildings with high concentrations of transfer students and geared their programming towards transfers. Similar to the Transfer CM, they helped create a safe and smooth transition for transfer students.

Each member of the staff, despite their classification, plays a vital role. Anytime a team becomes one person short — which residence life has seen a multitude of times — RAs now see themselves overextended and overworked, frequently without the proper compensation. There have been issues where either my staff or other staff have seen cuts in the middle of the year, where staff dynamics altered, and little to no attention was paid by the department to repair the

damage left by that staff member and that cut. When one staff member's position is undermined by another member or the entire, it creates a toxic and unprofessional work environment that the department does not give time to help lessen and find the root of the cause. The training, in this case, is an essential part of becoming an RA. There is time set aside for staff to become familiar with their positions and those of their colleagues, and it teaches us how to respect the responsibilities we have despite the arrangement of alphabet letters in front of our names.

Issues Found/Turning Point

When it came to writing this paper, many issues came to light. I was aware that the RA position, and the residence life department, had a set of issues regarding consistency from each RD and subsequently from each staff. However, when the Water Crisis affected campus and when the COVID-19 Pandemic, a month later, was announced in the United States in March of 2020, the RA position changed again.

Pre-2020 Issues

One of the most prominent issues that have affected the department's success has been the lack of consistency seen at the professional staff level. The professional residence life staff at New Paltz has is known as a place for past New Paltz RAs to turn their paraprofessional experience and turn it into a career. Several departments in the university have a method of in-hiring — hiring old students to work for them instead of reaching out to the qualified groups of people with a diversified experience and getting a new set of eyes into the way things operate in New Paltz. This case of in-hiring at the residence life department creates several issues. Lack of

ideas and experience prevents the department from growing and trying new methods to enhance the experience of the RA better. Leadership styles stay the same, desire to change diminishes, and the department remains complacent in their ways. In-hiring also creates issues within the supervisor-to-employee relationship. There have been instances where you have an SRA working and having fun with their RA staff to become their boss. With a history of engaging in colligate events and activities that may not always be appropriate, that same SRA now being the RD of people they just had a class with last semester and were drinking with, making for uncomfortable situations. Sometimes it creates a lack of respect, and in other conditions, it makes it hard to follow instructions from someone you used to hang out with.

Staying at the professional level in resident life, I have seen each hall operate at different capacity levels, one staff never held to the same standards as the other. However, we are all given the same training from the department. In-house training for each staff is not regulated through the department to ensure each team is trained in the same manner. Albeit each residence hall has a different student demographic and the needs of first-year students, transfer students, returners, and upperclassman are different, these students all go through the same issues. Homesickness, roommate conflicts, post-school stress, academic insecurity, mental health concerns, and policy violations are not single issues experienced by one specific group of students. However, the emphasis given by hall on these issues — on top of other things — is all different.

I have seen the standards for programming, door tags, monthly boards, community/hall engagement, and incident training differ from hall to hall. I have also seen the expectations for resident assistants vary from hall to hall, creating a different understanding of what the RA role means to each member of staff. Before my last RD, my first RD had extreme expectations in the

way we would approach programming and community building with the residents in our sections. On top of our mandated programming requirements, we were highly encouraged to create section-specific programming to cater to the residents we oversaw. Section-specific programming was not a department-wide mandate, and this expectation was demolished when the current RD of my building transferred over. Other staff had varying programming expectations wherein one building. A program would have to check whatever number of boxes an RD had set compared to other halls passing and creating any program, despite the number of attendance and quality and content of the program. Different expectations that varied dealt with amounts of conversations that happened between residents and their RAs, in hall programming during snow days, and approval to not be in one's residence hall during an off-duty weekend.

The RA position was difficult enough with the demands set by the department and grew increasingly more difficult when every RD demanded and required more, and in some cases less from their staff. The shown inconsistency created hostility between RA staff as some were overworked, and few were barely held to the even standard by the department. This bitterness, matched with the hostile fluid conditions of "...dealing with such difficult problems as alcoholism, suicide, homophobia, racism, date rape, eating disorders, and stress," (Dodge, 1990, p.A39), results in increasing amounts of burnout among RAs after their first or second year in the position. "Officials at several institutions say few resident assistants quit each semester because the job becomes too trying," (Dodge, 1990, pp.A39–A40), and the same can be said for RAs at New Paltz. There is little to no support for RAs after dealing with high-stress situations. I have seen and experienced incidents that have required all day's attention, giving us little time to eat, decompress, or attend to other responsibilities. Although this part of the position, the position

does not demand or require a lack of self-care and attention to deal with someone else's problems. I have seen RAs miss a day worth of meals, sleep, class, work events, and personal events to attend to a resident's needs without the compensation or space provided by the department to decompress and speak on the way the resident's issues affected our mental wellbeing.

One of the most famous lines from my first semester as RA was recounting an Incident Report (IR) I wrote, the most extended paper I wrote all semester, including those for my classes. Astonishingly, the work performed by RAs is the least talked about until one starts and is in the position. Residence life trains us to be equipped and ready to handle any and every situation. They shove down our throats a plethora of resources to give to these students when encountering any stress, but when the tables turn. An RA who needs these resources finds PCC saying, "Oh, you are an RA, let's talk when I come to your hall for a check-in," instead of dealing privately with you about your mental health concerns in comparison to the non-RA students. The school and Department of Residence Life make sure to provide any and every resource possible to residents who experience any mental or Title IX incident. Still, we have failed to receive any support to talk through and debrief after dealing with two title IX incidents and a party with underage drinking in a dorm room while being threatened by the resident. The lack of attention from the department, the wavering constrictions of RD's from each hall, and the growing responsibilities throughout the years have contributed to the high levels of burnout. Burnout, as defined by Maslach et al., (1996) by Berg and Brown (2019) "a syndrome of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment that can occur among individuals who work with people in some capacity," (p.32) that we see affect the population of a

resident assistant. There are very few RAs that have not experienced burnout at some point in their careers. The longer you are RA, the harder it is to become affected by residents' situations, and the coping skills of an RA become compromised. I have seen RAs who have not received the proper response and support from the department revert to inappropriate coping mechanisms to 'get the job done,' and even that has not grabbed the attention of the department.

Mental health concerns — depression, anxiety, and suicidal thoughts — and Title IX incidents are among the highest incidents seen on campus, yet most go undetected. RAs are the first to know “that one of their students is experiencing mental distress,” (Thibodeaux, 2021, p.2), but are the last to receive any help or treatment from the department when the mental distress comes from the RA. I have seen the department knockdown and deal with challenging issues regarding the student body but fail to respond to Title IX incidents between RAs. Sometimes, it can be discouraging to see your department ignore your problems for its convenience. Keep those who have committed these acts working to protect and help others going through that same thing. Similar to this, one semester, my staff got a new member mid-year, where under strange circumstances, suspicion of a Title IX incident led a RA from one hall to move and transfer over to mine. The problem with this is that the department lacks accountability for its staff. If a person is not held accountable for their actions, people will assume that it is okay because their position is not in jeopardy.

Other issues facing the department were themed residence learning communities and marketing of the RA position. “Residential learning communities organize on-campus living arrangements so that students with similar interests live in close physical proximity, increas[ing] opportunities for out-of-class interactions and supplementary learning.” (Frazier & Eighmy,

2012, p.11). However, residence departments fail to realize, acknowledge, and address the tension created within themed learning communities. Many times, these communities are the first and primary connections residents make. Whether by choice or design, living and constantly hanging out with the same people has created unnecessary issues within these student bodies. A growing number of incidents within communities like the Transfer Living Learning Community have resulted in low retention rates from one semester to the following, negative feelings from the residents to the Community Mentor, and poor interest for the upcoming academic year. Learning communities are meant to be spaces that continue and facilitate learning outside of the classroom and create companionship with like-minded individuals interested in pursuing and achieving similar goals. The Department of Residence Life was unintentionally turning something with an excellent opportunity into a breeding ground of roommate conflicts that are overextending the work done by RAs and inhibiting the ability of the CMs to perform their responsibilities. Frazier and Eighmy (2012) also note that “learning communities also provide an opportunity for academic affairs and student affairs personnel to work together to create a holistic learning experience for students,” (p. 13). But the difference between this approach and that of New Paltz’s is that the faculty staff is not integrated into this programming, but the professional Residence Life staff are. New Paltz only has five living-learning communities with a class attachment. Other communities like the Sustainability Community, the Rivera House Community, and the East-West Living Learning Community may have credit opportunities but rely heavily on programming to engage and create community among the residents.

The final issue relates to the marketing of the position and job satisfaction. According to Davidson (2012), job satisfaction comes from “remuneration, opportunities for advancement, the

work itself, or other factors” (p. 79). For a long time, job satisfaction at New Paltz has been meager, not only for RAs but for RDs too. Throughout my time at New Paltz, I have seen many RDs leave New Paltz, leaving the department scrambling behind to find a replacement RD. Failure to find new RDs has left the department to spread their current RD staff thin, supervising over 15 students in two different buildings with a combination of over 500 students with various issues, needs, and for the staff, style of leadership. Davidson (2012) recounts “trends in recruiting and hiring resident directors, [where] more than half of [the] senior housing offices... reported declines in the pool of available resident director (RD) candidates also noted the departure of RDs after only one year of employment,” (p. 80). In the same group of senior housing officers, over 50% “reported the necessity of conducting a last-minute search for [an] RD,” (Davidson, 2012, p.80). The difficulty in retaining workers and keeping them satisfied at the professional level has shifted from the reasons professional staff leave to those of paraprofessional staff leaving.

Moving to the marketing of the position, it is essential to point out that when applying to this position, residence life does not advertise the amount of policing performed by RAs. Nor do they explain the amount of personal and emotional time we as RAs give students when faced with a mental health/another form of crisis. Until we go through training, we do not learn or are exposed to the extreme battle scenes RAs deal with beyond underage drinking and smoking. I have seen this position marketed differently throughout my time at SUNY New Paltz, attracting different students who do not know what it means to be an RA. Advertising around this position has usually focused on programming, free room-and-board, and building relationships with others, but not once have I seen advertising focused on the non-clinical that happens every day

between residents and RAs. Because there has been little to no consistency in their approach to garner the specific type of student residence life is always looking for, the quality and work ethic of the RA begins to diminish. Before I became an RA, the position was serious, done to improve the college student's experience and obtain skills that would help you navigate life outside of the university. However, with the constant alterations made in marketing, the department no longer seeks students with potential, but students willing to work, whether understanding the role or not. And because of the quality of the RA has changed drastically throughout the years, so has the relationship between Residence Life and the Resident.

Water Crisis and COVID-19

In 2020, not one person could have predicted the events we would all encounter. Unfortunately for New Paltz RAs, they had a real-life experience with an unprecedented crisis one month before the 21st-century pandemic, the Water Crisis of February 2020. Fortunately for me, I was studying abroad at the time of the problem but was visiting New Paltz the weekend before the crisis and was there on the announcement day. It is a day I remember quite well as I was recovering from a bug after drinking and eating food prepared from the contaminated water. The report came in on Monday, February 10th, 2020, at 10:34 am and read:

“Dear Members of the Campus Community:

We have received a notification from the Village of New Paltz that they are investigating the local water supply due to an odor and taste problem.

The Village is encouraging residents to avoid using the water at this time.

They hope to have this issue resolved as soon as possible. We will share updates with the campus community as soon as we receive them,” (Campus Update, New Paltz, personal communication, February 10, 2021)

After this email, four more emails were sent on Monday, February 10th, six emails on Tuesday the 11th, including the email announcing the cancellation of classes for the remainder of the week, and a series of update emails the following week with four emails sent out on Wednesday the 12th, one on Thursday the 13th, three on Friday the 14th, one on Saturday the 15th, and two on Monday the 17th, the day students were instructed to return to campus.

Although highly unprecedented, it depends on the water of an alternate source at an entity. As an entity that encourages low-level water use and instates program challenges to encourage common water usage when our water sources are being cleaned and repaired, implementation failure and pre-planning for a water-related emergency are foolish. To this day, water remains highly used and dependent on resources. With ongoing issues in the United States of water insecurity and contaminated water, organizations' priority should include crisis planning regarding the natural elements and heavily demanded resources.

When I left New Paltz that Monday to return to my study abroad program, the residence life staff was thrown into a heap of problems. With little information coming down the food chain, residents' first communication and dispatch were utterly in the dark. RAs and RDs had little to no ability to reassure the residents. Higher universities officials ultimately left out the Residence Life Department on what was going to be said and what the plan will be, actively creating unnecessary distress on the student body by keeping this first line of communication out of the conversation. As a result, RAs and even RDs were unaware of what was going on and

were given information at the same time as residents. When residents came up to ask about the information distributed in the emails, both the pro-and paraprofessional staff were unequipped to give a proper and well-informed response. From a distance, I was overwhelmed from the universities constant email spam, following up every few hours in a day on the news of the situation. Hearing what happened on the ground was even more so. Residence halls were handed cases of waters for those who waited and stayed to brave out the storm, while other students rushed out of the town and back home. The insecurity of what was going on and what was going to be said next by the school kept RAs on high alert, without proper information to share with their residents and their own parents. In two days time, the majority of students returned home for the week and New Paltz was able to resolve the issue. However the damage on RAs was already done. After dealing with a completely unprecedented issue that sent everyone home, a higher threat came a month later. The residence life staff then fell to the same shortcomings.

The COVID-19 pandemic affected SUNY New Paltz in two distinct ways: the first way took place between March–May 2020, when the pandemic was first announced, and general public information was limited; the second way took place August 2020–May 2021. Since other, better-qualified institutions failed to report on this virus's severity, judging the automatic reaction of the university against the pandemic would be unfair. Despite that, their approach to residence life while in a pandemic and the growth of problems added to the department would have been handled better by avoiding re-opening residence halls altogether.

Being abroad at the time of the pandemic prohibits me in the way of understanding the conditions and requirements that came up for the RA in March 2020. However, being abroad gave me a unique perspective on university support in a time of a global pandemic. In one week,

‘normal college life’ ceased to exist. While study abroad programs were getting canceled left and right, life domestically took longer to catch up to the harsh realities of COVID-19. The week following my program cancellation, I returned home from my study abroad. Those at New Paltz had no idea what was in store. Overnight, the reaction of the US government and the New York State Government changed drastically. A few days away from Spring Break, SUNY New Paltz provided its students with as much information as possible, given government briefings and their best judgment. Extending Spring Break by an extra week to hash out the Spring semester plans, the Department of Residence Life did the same. In the middle of their hiring process, they too shifted to remote operations. After the two-week hiatus, RAs willingly returned to campus with a new set of expectations, virtual programming for residents both at home and on campus.

The Department of Residence Life moved all on-campus residents into suite-style buildings, restricting one resident per room and occasionally one resident per suite to confine living situations. Having friends experience life first hand, I could see how the new demand of online learning created challenges and fatigue with the new requirement of performing virtual programming. However, as someone at home recovering from traveling back to the states, my knowledge of this falls short. The confinements were anything but harsh and little guidance was given over their behavior and whereabouts — a complete 180 from their approach the following Fall 2020 semester.

There were a set of expectations that came along with SRA. Having worked with two SRAs and befriending other SRAs, I knew the level of work and dedication it took to be in the role. But being SRA during a global pandemic presented a new set of challenges that I assumed would be training preparation. However, that was not the case. Aside from the training sessions

that touched on the temporary COVID policies, the department did not explain the isolation and high demand I would encounter this year by working in residence life. An in effort to mitigate the potential spread of the Coronavirus, many institutions, like New Paltz, implemented methods of self-isolation (Szkody, 2021). Similar to their quarantining and self-isolating the remaining students in the Spring of 2020, Fall 2020 saw identical tactics. However clever the idea of isolating students in a college study to limit the spread of COVID, social support from the institution and the department fell short. Szkody (2021) states, “given that social support can be protective against the negative effects of distress on mental and physical health, the lack of support may negatively impact individuals during their self-isolation,” (p. 1002). And this reigned true not only in her study but in the high amount of mental health cases New Paltz RAs saw during the 2020–2021 academic school year. After six months spent indoors, the lack of institutional support in a period of extreme isolation created an unnecessary amount go problems for residents and Resident Assistants. With excessive demand on checking in on residents, very few people were there to check in on the mental status of RAs performing the work that ensured the safety of everyone.

We, the SRAs, however, were fortunate enough to have the opportunity to opt out of the position because of COVID but primarily because of their inability to pay us. At the same time, with the insufficient amount of information provided to us a month before training and willing leave your staff, in my case, with someone they knew and trusted, would have created more challenges than what we saw. If the Department of Residence Life gave any support, it felt highly distanced. SRA Training was unorganized at best and saw gaps in the structure and information requiring each SRA to perform as seen fit by their building's needs and the

assistance provided by their RD. Which has seen different levels of support and guidance from building to building.

Despite all the outreach efforts, it is easy to encounter uncooperative and unresponsive residents. However, this was put to the extreme when each of my residents refused to participate in any events actively. When residence life focused on wellbeing and safety, many of the same students who had to supervise these students did not receive the same level of attention. In contrast, departments like AC² with their monthly community check-ins in collaboration with the Educational Opportunity Program (EOP) and Scholar's Mentorship Program (SMP), SMP with their laptop outreach initiative. In addition, SMP and EOPs celebratory events for their graduating seniors strived to engage students and preserve specific circumstances during the most challenging academic year.

In addition to the lack of support, the department was incredibly inconsistent with how they reprimanded residents when it came to breaking COVID-19 policies. Considering the pandemic, the university implemented a select number of emergency COVID policies to reduce the potential spread of the virus and ensure students' safety. Although the semester was largely virtual, having students live on campus resulted in some of the harshest and, in my opinion, ridiculous policies. One of these campus regulations was the ban on visitors allowed in halls that were not one's own. Residence life personnel were instructed to write up any students who were disobeying this campus policy; however, the department did not enforce these policies equally.

I had several cases of residents who actively went against this mandate. Between August, when the incidents started, to November, the residents remained living in the dorms until the end of the semester. Several incidents like this occurred throughout the fall semester, and seeing the

same incidents repeated with no follow-through from the department; RAs brought their concerns to the department asking for policies that would reprimand students, especially those with multiple infractions. However, in the spring, like the incident before, another student who was actively involved in campus organizations, including but not limited to an Electoral Board member of the Student Association, was caught on three separate occasions inside a residence hall that was not his, remained unpunished by the department of residence life and was awarded the distinguished senior award.

Reflecting on this, it is important to acknowledge my failings as a paraprofessional. I, along with *many* other paraprofessional staff members, disregarded this policy while enforcing it because our bubbles were the coherent paraprofessional staff. And while my RD said it was “alright” to do, once he reported me, my job and housing situation on campus for getting caught once, in comparison to the others for getting caught more than two times, was on the line. The department was quick to let go of an SRA, who came willingly came back and volunteered their time while leaving residents who continuously walked around without their masks and brought non- New Paltz students into the dormitory halls for the entire semester. This inconsistency in treatment created a lot of resentment between RAs and their RDs. In this same year, other staff dealt with incidents far worse than COVID infractions, yet those incidents were swept under the rug. The department picked and chose which incidents to focus on and which ones to ignore—and primarily ignored major COVID infractions. Historically, it continues to ignore issues relating to Title IX regarding paraprofessional staff.

Although COVID exasperated the inconsistency of the department, relating to RD expectations and expectations of the department, it also created new depths of burnout for RAs.

RAs were constantly isolated and forced to over-police on an issue many saw as unnecessary. My staff members and I would try not to leave our rooms to not catching the same group of residents doing the same thing they got in trouble for the week before. An effort from the top levels was not matched to the steps we were making, and the only advice we received, as unpaid workers, was to “go to a spa to decompress.” The department focused more on providing a ‘gift promised to the 2020 senior RA staff their jackets,’ then answering our demands on the proper compensation we deserved. Getting help from the Psychological Counseling Center also proved even more challenging in a virtual setting, and support from other departments was slim to none.

Conclusion

The Water Crisis and COVID-19 Pandemic exposed and brought to light the list of the ongoing problems the department was already facing. Burnout, job satisfaction, and retention were significant issues before 2020 and were only exasperated when it became evident of the department's incapability to crisis manage and pre-plan. When it came to writing this paper, it was essential to explore the department's weaknesses, not to discredit their work or actions, but to point at an opportunity for improvement. The department has created incomparably excellent and terrible experiences for its paraprofessional staff. Although immensely and increasingly difficult, the position of the RA is essential. The proper support can alter the perspective of what it means to be an RA and attract more students to apply and be considered for the position.

For the department to truly become as effective as they say they are, fundamental approaches to their internal structures must change. First, the Department of Residence Life requires diversifying its professional staff. The experienced staff genuinely represent the student

body's diversity and diversify the team in the form of experience. The department requires proper crisis management planning, and it needs to create department-wide expectations that all RDs follow instead of the select few who do now. Finally, resources for RAs need to be made that provide them a space to debrief after dealing with high-level incidents and give these policy enforcers a chance to hang out in a room where they are not just RAs but college students trying to get through the semester.

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