

## **Introduction to the 2016 Special Issue of *The Journal of College and University Student House Resident Assistants in College and University Housing***

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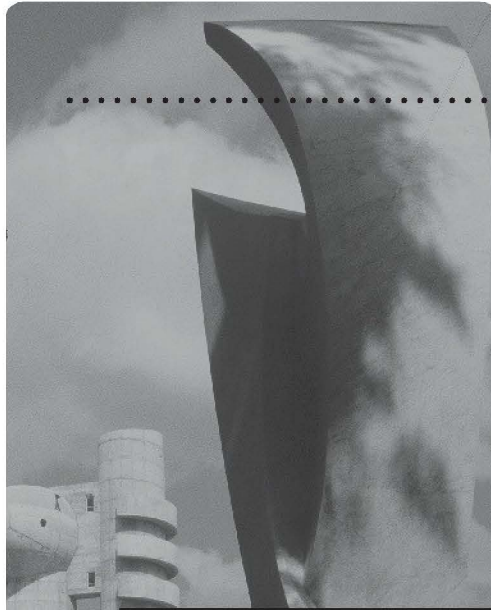
### **Abstract:**

Residents Assistants (RAs), the student paraprofessionals who serve as live-in, frontline staff in residence halls, have been called "the foundation of nearly every residence hall program across the country" (Blimling, 2003, p. ix). Although the RA position is not ubiquitous internationally, there are similar positions in many institutions abroad (see, for example, Cousineau & Chambers, 2015, for a description of RAs in Canada). Almost all U.S. college and university housing operations use resident assistants (Bowman & Bowman, 1995; Carns, Carns, & Wright, 1993); they plan and implement programming, enforce policy, mediate conflict between students, and refer students to campus resources (Blimling, 2003). As the college student population has become increasingly diverse and as many students come to college with or develop increasingly serious psychological problems (Kisch, Leino, & Silverman, 2005; Kitzrow, 2003), the job of the RA has become more complex (Jaeger & Caison, 2006; Paladino, Murray, Newgent, & Gohn, 2005; Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2011).

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### **Article:**

**\*\*\*Note: Full text of article below**



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RESIDENT ASSISTANTS (RAs), the student paraprofessionals who serve as live-in, frontline staff in residence halls, have been called “the foundation of nearly every residence hall program across the country” (Blimling, 2003, p. ix). Although the RA position is not ubiquitous internationally, there are similar positions in many institutions abroad (see, for example, Cousineau & Chambers, 2015, for a description of RAs in Canada). Almost all U.S. college and university housing operations use resident assistants (Bowman & Bowman, 1995; Carns, Carns, & Wright, 1993); they plan and implement programming, enforce policy, mediate conflict between students, and refer students to campus resources (Blimling, 2003). As the college student population has become increasingly diverse and as many students come to college with or develop increasingly serious psychological problems (Kisch, Leino, & Silverman, 2005; Kitzrow, 2003), the job of the RA has become more complex (Jaeger & Caison, 2006; Paladino, Murray, Newgent, & Gohn, 2005; Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2011).

Because of the increasingly complex nature of the position, RAs have been seen as being at risk for role conflict (Deluga & Winters, 1991; Everett & Loftus, 2011) as they try to satisfy competing and sometimes incompatible demands of the role. Role conflict further puts RAs at risk for burnout and stress (Fuehrer & McGonagle, 1988; Nowack, Gibbons, & Hanson, 1985). However, being an RA has also been considered to have a number of benefits to the RAs themselves, as well as to their residents, such as the development of leadership skills; however, there is relatively little empirical research about the positive impacts of being an RA, especially compared to the research on burnout.

Given the widespread use of resident assistants in college and university housing and the importance of the position to residents’ safety, sense of community, and social development, as well as the smooth operations of the hall (Blimling, 2003), there is surprisingly little current scholarly literature about resident assistants. At

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the midpoint of the second decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, the focus on the training, development, and experiences of this critical population of student leaders is even more important.

As editors of this special issue, we were pleased with the large number of submissions we received and with the extremely positive reaction that housing colleagues have had to the focus on resident assistants. In putting together this special issue, it was our intention to provide a broad look at resident assistants, encompassing topics from recruitment and selection to training and assessment to outcomes. We particularly sought to provide scholarship that could guide practice and further research. We are grateful to the authors whose work is featured in this issue.

How has the RA role changed over time? Katherine B. Boone, Denise L. Davidson, and Mark Bauman provide helpful context about the history of the resident assistant position. They trace the evolving complexity of the RA role and pose challenging questions about the future of this important role.

Recruiting a diverse staff of RAs is a challenge faced by many campuses. C. Daryl Healea and Patrick J. Hale use a theoretical framework of multicultural organizational development to explore the cultivation of the diversity of an RA staff through the examination of recruitment processes at a predominantly White institution. Their study highlights four core themes influencing the recruitment of a diverse RA staff.

The process of selecting RAs can be a time-consuming task, often involving multiple staff members and a multi-step process. But does this rigorous selection process predict strong

RA performance? This is the question explored by Stephen A. Berg and James C. Stoner. They discuss the implications of their findings and offer suggestions for improving selection processes.

In 1998 *The Journal of College and University Student Housing* published a comprehensive study by Bowman and Bowman about RA training practices. Since that time, surprisingly little research has been published about RA training programs. This is particularly surprising given the importance of the RA role and of effective training, as well as the investment of staff time required by training. In this issue Virginia A. Koch presents the results of a national study of RA training inspired by Bowman and Bowman's (1995, 1998) work. Her research reveals changes that have taken place in RA training since the 1990s. She provides recommendations for ways to improve RA training today.

The development of leadership skills is frequently listed as an important potential outcome for resident assistants. Using data from the 2009 Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership, Sherry L. Early explores the impact of mentoring on the leadership capacity of resident assistants and whether demographic characteristics of the mentor or mentor type make a difference.

Mimi Benjamin and Laura Davis sought to find out what RAs perceived they had learned as a result of their experiences in the position. Through a qualitative case study, they highlight the learning outcomes of the RA position and identify five broad categories of learning reported by the RAs. They conclude with recommendations for ways to leverage the learn-



ing opportunities of the resident assistant role.

Finally, Danielle K. Molina addresses RAs' roles as front-line emergency responders and how that role impacts their professional identity. "On Becoming Batman" is the result of a year-long ethnographic examination of one residential life staff and the way that the hero identity shaped how RAs understood their role.

It is our hope that this special issue on RAs will provide further guidance to housing and residence life professionals about this well-known but under-studied position. We also hope that this focus on RAs will inspire increased empirical research on all aspects of the resident assistant role and experience.

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