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Future Role of Resident Assistants in Housing Programs at Public, Four Year Colleges and Universities

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FUTURE ROLE OF RESIDENT ASSISTANTS IN
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COLLEGES AND UNIVERSITIES

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study was to explore possible changes in the role of resident assistants in public college and university housing programs. The following questions were used to guide this study: (1) What is the current role of student paraprofessionals, otherwise known as resident assistants, in public college and university housing programs? (2) What do practicing professionals and resident assistants in public college and university housing offices perceive as the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the resident assistant position? (3) How do housing professionals and resident assistants perceive that the role of resident assistant will change?

Since the focus of this study was on the future of the resident assistant’s role with consideration for the impact the external environment may have on that role, a SWOT analysis was employed to help establish a framework for this study. A SWOT analysis examines the internal strengths and weaknesses of an organization and conducts an environmental scan to help determine the opportunities and threats that exist in different aspects of the organization’s external environment. I focused on three aspects of the external environment: technology, social, and demographics.

Seventeen housing programs across the country took part in this naturalistic inquiry. Focus groups, individual interviews, and document collection were used to gather data. Three sets of stakeholders from the seventeen institutions participated: housing directors, professional staff members responsible for selection and training of resident assistants, and two returning resident assistants. Responses from all three stakeholders were analyzed for emerging themes. I reviewed the supporting documents to find additional information that might support or clarify information given by the stakeholders. Findings were reported through summaries of the data along with supporting quotes.

The results from this study clearly show that the role of the resident assistant is continuously evolving into a more complex and demanding role particularly in response to the factors that exist in the various aspects of the external environment. Implications of the findings are discussed and recommendations for housing professionals have been given to help provide insight and guidance in planning for the future role of resident assistants.
CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Colleges and universities in the United States have deliberated and debated since the early 1800s about whether they will provide housing for their students and how they will do so. The first housing structures, called dormitories, were built to provide shelter and a place to store belongings. Until the late 1960s the primary mission of housing programs was to assign students to dormitories and to control students’ behavior. In 1968 the *Tomorrow’s Higher Education Project* was released by the American College Personnel Association. The project focused on promoting learning environments that “maximize the integration of students’ cognitive development with the development of the whole personality” (1975, p. 341). The project’s report “asserted that, if higher education was to have an impact on student learning, changes in academic and student affairs programs were required” (Schroeder & Mable, 1994, p. 10). In response, many housing programs broadened their missions to not only house students but to provide an environment that would challenge and support students to grow and mature.

Astin (1977) and others (Pascarella, 1984; Schroder & Mable, 1984) have shown that students who live in residence halls during their undergraduate experience tend to have a higher level of satisfaction with their collegiate experience, do better academically, and typically are more involved than their peers who live off-campus. Further, Waldo (1986) found students’ experiences in their immediate interpersonal environment were just as or even more important than their grade point averages when deciding to return to the institution.

Environments that promote success both personally and academically do not just happen; rather, housing programs purposely plan to provide services and programs that will create these environments. Examples of such services and programs are: providing educational activities that will help students develop competence in handling daily life situations; promoting interaction with faculty through living/learning programs; offering leadership and employment opportunities; and providing assistance in handling crisis or conflict situations. Many of these programs and services are carried out by trained student paraprofessionals otherwise known as resident assistants. A review of the history of housing on college and university campuses shows that students have been placed in this role as early as the colonial days.

A review of this history also shows that the number of roles placed upon this student paraprofessional position has grown tremendously. However, such growth may have caused difficulties recruiting and retaining quality resident assistants. One housing director, who participated in the pilot focus group for this study, stated:
The RA’s job keeps getting more complex and we haven’t taken anything away from them. We keep adding to their plate. And I think that is one of the reasons why we’ve had difficulties recruiting RA’s. I think that is one of the reasons why we have difficulty retaining them. Our [housing directors] expectation of them is to be God-like. (personal communication, May 2002)

I had heard other colleagues echo this belief and observed this development. I shared the concern of not being able to recruit quality candidates and retain those resident assistants who had an excellent performance record. These observations of professional staff members led me to conclude it was time to re-examine the role of the resident assistant in housing programs.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to explore possible changes in the role of undergraduate student paraprofessionals in public college and university housing programs. The following questions were used to guide this study:

1. What is the current role of student paraprofessionals, otherwise known as resident assistants, in public college and university housing programs?
2. What do practicing professionals and resident assistants in public college and university housing offices perceive as the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the resident assistant position?
3. How do housing professionals and resident assistants perceive that the role of resident assistant will change?

Since the focus of this study was on the future of the resident assistant’s role with consideration for the impact the external environments may have on that role, SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis was employed to help establish a framework for this study. A SWOT analysis examines the internal strengths and weaknesses of an organization and conducts an environmental scan to help determine the external opportunities and threats that exist in the organization’s external environment; it is usually the first stage of strategic planning (Bryson, 1995).

I understood that I was not developing a strategic plan; however, I believed that this concept would be helpful in conducting this research and in analyzing the data. There was also support from James Banning (1995) that “an environmental scanning process should provide an early warning system to identify the future challenges and opportunities for housing organizations” (p. 33).

This study was exploratory in nature and the following qualitative methods were used to gather data: focus groups, individual interviews, and document analysis. Three separate populations were targeted: housing directors; professional staff members responsible for recruitment, selection, and training of resident assistants; and resident assistants. The inclusion of all three groups helped provide a wider and richer source of data that have made the findings more applicable and helpful.
The timeline of this study was as follows: focus groups took place in July 2002; individual telephone interviews with the professional housing staff were completed in September 2002; document analysis began after the interviews with the professional staff; scanning of the publications started after the focus groups and continued until December 2002; and the individual telephone interviews with returning resident assistants were conducted between October 2002 and January 2003.

Definitions

The following terms that were used in this study.

**Student paraprofessionals:** Although there are several definitions for student paraprofessionals, the definition offered by Winston and Fitch (1993) was used:

A paraprofessional is defined as a student who is selected, trained, and supervised in assuming responsibilities and performing tasks that are intended to (1) directly promote the individual personal development of his or her peers, (2) foster the creation and maintenance of environments that stimulate and support residents’ personal and educational development, and/or (3) perform tasks that ensure the maintenance of secure, clean, healthy, psychologically safe, and esthetically pleasing living accommodations. (p. 317)

**Resident assistant:** A resident assistant is a student paraprofessional who lives on a floor with students in a residence hall and is responsible for carrying out a variety of tasks, such as enforcing university policies, providing educational and social programs and activities, responding to crisis situations, serving as a resource referral, and building a community both on the floor and in the residence hall.

**Housing program:** Housing program refers to a college or university department that provides housing accommodations on campus and is responsible for the oversight of facility operations, programming, and staffing.

**Residence life:** Residence life is a department within a housing program that is responsible for providing an environment that promotes student development and growth.

**Professional housing staff:** Full-time professional staff members in a housing program are responsible for coordinating the recruitment and training of resident assistants.

**Residence hall:** A residence hall is a facility that houses enrolled students and is located on campus. Residence halls may have different configurations such as rooms with double occupancy with community bathrooms, suites, or apartments.

**Environmental scanning:** Environmental scanning is “a process that identifies and evaluates trends, events, and emerging issues of import to the institution” (Morrison, 1987, p. 9).

**SWOT analysis:** SWOT analysis is a study of the internal strengths and weaknesses of an organization as well as the external opportunities and threats that exist in the organization’s external environment (Bryson, 1995).
Significance

One housing professional stated “we have yet to significantly examine our own systems, assumptions, and the primary delivery agent for our student learning and development objectives--the Resident Assistant” (Minor, 1999, p. 6). Winston and Fitch (1993) expressed this view, stating “frequently, position expectations are uncritically adopted year after year without regard to changing student populations, staff interests and expertise, and institutional or departmental goals” (p. 319). By examining the current role of the resident assistant and the influences from three external environments, this study will provide insight and guidance for planning for the future role of resident assistants.

Resident assistants play a significant role in housing programs. Upcraft and Pilato (1982) stated:

Most residence hall programs rely on paraprofessionals to deliver all or part of their services and programs….Resident assistants are responsible for developing the educational potential of residence halls; this is a very big responsibility, considering all the ways students’ lives are affected by living in residence halls. (p. xi)

In 1988, Winston and Ender asked 200 chief student affairs administrators if they used student paraprofessionals. Of the 118 survey respondents, 85 reported that they used student paraprofessionals. Of the 118 institutions, 81% employed student paraprofessionals in the residence halls.

Another observation made regarding the significance of this position came from Ernest Boyer, as cited in Blimling’s *The Experienced Resident Assistant* (1993). He stated that:

The resident assistant (RA) position was one of the most demanding assignments on a college campus. RAs confront daily the realities of dormitory life. Beyond the ordinary, day-to-day hassles, they must deal with accidents, abuse of alcohol, depression and questions about birth control and abortion. It is a 24-hour-a-day job, one that involves not just keeping order and finding light bulbs, but becoming deeply involved in shaping the lives of students and helping college accomplish its fundamental goals. (p. i)

Because of the significant roles resident assistants play in housing programs, there are numerous sessions at housing and student affairs conferences pertaining to recruitment, selection, training, and supervision of resident assistants. At the 2002 Association for College and University Housing Officers-International (ACUHO-I) conference, there were 12 sessions focusing on this position. Over the past several years, housing professionals attending various sessions pertaining to resident assistants have voiced their frustrations and concerns regarding the difficulties in recruiting qualified candidates for the resident assistant position. In one case, concerns raised at one regional housing association led to the creation of a task force to examine issues related to the resident assistant’s job satisfaction, recruitment, and training. ACUHO-I also convened a
think tank to discuss these issues with its leadership council. This housing association also offered a substantial grant to study this issue.

Not only have the roles for resident assistants changed, so have the external environments that impact the environment within the housing programs and residence halls. As stated earlier, Winston and Fitch (1993) observed that it is common for position expectations to stay the same “without regard to changing student population…” (p. 319). I have observed that college housing departments have made some changes within their systems to meet the demands of consumers and institutions’ internal and external environments. One example would be the changes in facilities that are being built. Incoming students now demand their privacy, many of the first time incoming students have never shared a room or a bathroom with a sibling. To remain competitive with the off-campus housing market and to attract students to the institution, housing departments are building apartments with individual bedrooms with bathrooms rather than traditional residence halls with double rooms and community bathrooms.

Another example of meeting an external environment demand is the wiring of residence hall rooms for ethernet connection. Several years ago colleges and universities placed major emphasis on incorporating technology both inside and outside the classrooms. Housing programs felt obligated to do their part to meet this need. In many cases, they spent large amounts of money to wire existing halls so that each resident would have the ability to connect to the Internet from her or his room. It is common to find that plans for new residence halls most likely include wiring for ethernet connection.

The changes in residence halls so students can have single rooms and easily connect to the Internet have created new challenges and problems for resident assistants who aim to help students interact with each other on a personal basis. Just as housing programs are making changes to their services based on the trends and demands from both the internal campus environment and the external environments, this researcher believes, as does Minor (1999) and Winston and Fitch (1993), it is time for housing programs to consider the impact external environments may have on resident assistants.

Limitations of the Study

There are inherent limitations in research employing qualitative methods. First, results cannot be generalized to a larger population; rather, it is up to the individuals who read this study to determine whether the findings apply to their resident assistant programs. Even though I understand this concept, I believe the findings will be applicable to most housing programs at public four year institutions.

The second potential limitation is observer bias. I have worked professionally in housing for approximately 16 years. As I was knowledgeable about resident assistant positions I had to avoid making assumptions or reaching unsubstantiated conclusions during the interviews and focus groups.

Another limitation is the use of environmental scanning. As Morrison (1993) points out that the scanner has to “make choices but recognize that scanners consciously or unconsciously take a passive and conservative stance that maintains the status quo by accepting the quiet tyranny of the most likely future or base line scenario” (p. 17). Other limitations are addressed in chapter three.
In addition to the limitations addressed, there are delimitations in this study. Several decisions were made that limit the scope of the findings. One such decision was to exclude private institutions. Even though roles of resident assistants at public and private institutions are similar, the external environments affect these institutions differently. This decision was reaffirmed when the pilot focus group was conducted. Due to the limited number of the potential participants for the pilot focus group, I invited two directors from private institutions to participate. During the group interview, a noticeable difference existed between the private and public institutions as to how student demographics affected the housing program and the resident assistant role. Higher family incomes can and do affect students’ expectations and levels of parental involvement, to cite one issue.

Another decision was not to interview current students or non-housing staff as to their perceptions of the resident assistant role. It was felt that it was not feasible to add this to the study because it would be difficult to ascertain if those stakeholders had ever observed resident assistants in their roles. Often new resident assistants will comment that they never knew, as students, that the resident assistant had so many responsibilities or, if they did know, they might not have applied for their positions.

A third decision was not to focus on gender differences. Based on my sample selection process, I could not determine that gender of participants would be balanced. Secondly, the magnitude of data that would be collected and compared, both within and between stakeholder groups, would prove to be unwieldy to include gender.

The fourth decision was to limit the study to schools that housed at least 2,000 students. Most housing programs have a ratio of one resident assistant for 30 to 60 students. Therefore, most housing programs of this size have at least a staff of 33 resident assistants. Judging from personal experience, at least 25% of the 33 served in this role for more than one year. From each institution participating in this study, two returning resident assistants were selected to participate. Returning staff were used since data collection was done between October, 2002 and January, 2003 and the new resident assistants did not have the experience or the time to form substantial perceptions of their roles.
CHAPTER 2

REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

The purpose of this study was to explore changes in the role of the undergraduate student paraprofessionals in public college and university housing programs. To begin this exploration, the study started with an overview of relevant literature pertaining to the use of student paraprofessionals. First, the history of residence halls is presented. The next section narrows the focus to the use of student paraprofessionals in the residence halls. The last section of this chapter discusses the concept of a SWOT analysis and how this concept provided a framework for this inquiry.

Student Paraprofessionals

History of Student Paraprofessionals

The practice of using students to provide services for American universities and colleges has been documented as early as the colonial period. Students were first hired as tutors to help other students with their studies. Proctors, who were also students, were responsible for supervising and enforcing campus policies in the living areas. After World War II, administrators in higher education realized that student involvement in the everyday affairs of the institution was “invaluable in training students for democratic leadership, community participation, and in personal development” (Aceto, 1962, p. 23). Increasing enrollments and overburdened schedules made it difficult for administrators and faculty to give students the time and attention they needed. The use of experienced students was seen as a solution to this problem. Students were hired to work in orientation programs, teaching positions, academic advising, and counseling outreach programs (Aceto, 1962). The last significant research regarding the use of students in helping positions was completed by Winston and Ender in 1988. These researchers surveyed 200 institutions and found that 72% of the respondents used student paraprofessionals in university programs such as housing, orientation, advising, career centers and student activities.

Definition

In their 1988 study, Winston and Ender used Ender’s (1984) definition for student paraprofessionals as “undergraduate students who have been selected and trained to offer services or programs to their peers. These services are intentionally designed to assist in the adjustment, satisfaction, and/or persistence of students as applied to the educational experience” (p. 6). The key element that distinguishes a paraprofessional from other student employees on campus is the focus of promoting individual development among students they serve, not just providing support for a department. Therefore, the selection,
training, supervision, and evaluation of paraprofessionals is more thorough than with many other student workers.

**Benefits to Institution**

Paraprofessionals benefit institutions in several ways. Institutions can usually provide more services to the students for less money. Professional staff can use their time in more productive ways, as the paraprofessionals will usually handle day-to-day tasks. A less obvious benefit is that “peer helpers may be more effective or as effective as professionals when dealing with many developmental concerns” (Ender & Carranza, 1991, p. 536). “Student growth in intellectual, psychosocial, moral, and ethical areas can be attributed largely to the challenges to ideas and values they experience. These challenges come primarily from other students, forcing reflection and consideration of present behavior” (p. 534).

**Benefits to Paraprofessional**

There is a paucity of recent literature or research on the benefits of the paraprofessional experience for students. Heath, cited in Ender and Carranza (1991), stated that “personal development of college students can be enhanced through programs that expect and encourage students to take responsibility for growth in others and provide opportunities for students to assume alternative roles” (p. 535). There are many anecdotes from student paraprofessionals about what they have learned as a result of their positions. For example, paraprofessionals report growth in skill areas such as communication, mediation, public speaking, critical thinking, multi-tasking, budgeting, programming, advising, and problem solving.

The array of skills and experiences are easily transferable into the students’ professional careers. In some cases, the experiences help students to make career choices or at least establish the baseline criteria for what they may desire in their professional lives (Ender, 1984). In a study regarding student perceptions of the outcomes of paraprofessional experiences, Hardin (1999) found that:

Students report growth and development within a wide range of personal and professional competencies. They also convey an enthusiasm for the work that the jobs entail as well as for the relationships that they have developed with peers and professional staff. (p. 219)

Research specific to the benefits or outcomes of the resident assistant position occurred over twenty years ago. In 1978, Ames, Zuzich, Schuh, and Benson sent a questionnaire to 69 resident assistants and 21 administrative assistants at Arizona State University. Both groups were asked to name the top five benefits of the resident assistant position. Both groups reported the top three as “personal growth and development, compensation, and the development of a sense of responsibility” (p. 15). Resident assistants also reported a private room and the friends they made as benefits of the experience.

Lillis and Schuh (1982) conducted a study that examined the “perceived effect of the resident experience on major life activities, and the perceived effect of the experience on selected skills that the former RAs might have developed as part of their resident assistant experience” (p. 36). Their sample consisted of 59 former resident assistants from Indiana University. A questionnaire developed by Lillis and Schuh was sent to
former resident assistants with a 61% response rate. The results showed that
“interpersonal and group skills, such as communication skills, teamwork skills,
counseling and advising skills, and confrontation skills, were influenced more than
personal skills, such as budgeting and planning and organizing skills…” (p. 38).

Lillis and Schuh (1982) noted limitations of their study. Their sample consisted
of former resident assistants who were graduate students at the time they served in this
position. Typically, resident assistants are undergraduate students. Another limitation
was that only a third of the respondents were women. As Lillis and Schuh pointed out,
typically more women than men are hired as resident assistants; therefore, the ability to
generalize the results was limited.

**Characteristics of Paraprofessionals**

Sherwood (1980) discussed the core characteristics needed for paraprofessionals
to be successful in their roles. Paraprofessionals should be knowledgeable of the services
and programs offered by the institution so they can refer students to the appropriate area.
They need to find a balance between their roles as peer helpers and as students. Time
management, flexibility, and the ability to prioritize are skills needed to find that balance.
Paraprofessionals also need to communicate effectively with diverse audiences.
Paraprofessionals should possess self-confidence in their leadership abilities. They must
understand and promote the mission and philosophy of the department they serve. Ender
(1984) stated that applicants for these positions should possess “the human qualities of
objectivity, honesty, capacity for relatedness, emotional security, integrity, patience,
commitment to the helping process, and the ability to demonstrate empathy” (p. 14).

**Student Paraprofessionals in Housing**

This study focused on student paraprofessionals who were, at the time, employed
by campus housing programs. There are several titles given to this position such as hall
counselor, resident advisor, and resident assistant. Winston and Fitch (1993) went a step
further than Ender (1984) when defining “paraprofessional staff” as those individuals
who serve in housing programs that focus on student development. They stated:

A paraprofessional is defined as a student who is selected, trained, and
supervised in assuming responsibilities and performing tasks that are
intended to (1) directly promote the individual personal development of
his or her peers, (2) foster the creation and maintenance of environments
that stimulate and support residents’ personal and educational
development, and/or (3) perform tasks that ensure the maintenance of
secure, clean, healthy, psychologically safe, and esthetically pleasing
living accommodations. (p. 317)

This is the definition employed in this study.

**Roles as Reflected in the History of Campus Housing**

The difference between the definition that Winston and Fitch (1993) gave and the
one quoted previously from Ender (1984) reflects the numerous roles that the resident
assistant position entails. Knowing the history of campus housing and the issues facing
housing programs will help the reader to understand how these roles have evolved and become so numerous.

The need to house students seeking higher education has been an issue since the Middle Ages. In 1262, approximately 10,000 students descended upon Bologna, which had a population of 5,000. Oxford in 1257 had 3,000 students while Paris may have had 30,000 (Cowley, 1934). These students were as young as fourteen and usually had little or no money. Eventually, students started to live together and rented houses which later became known as hostels. Self-governance was practiced in the hostels and students were free to leave one hostel for another. During the eighteenth century, benefactors of Oxford and Cambridge Colleges saw the need to start hostels in England for those students who were poor and could not afford any other type of accommodation. At this point, the colleges started to take more interest in the hostels and eventually took over the management of all of the hostels (Cowley, 1934).

Self-governance in the British hostels was replaced with a formalized structure that included “deans, proctors, and beadles” (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997, p. 42). These officials lived in the housing units and enforced policies. Unencumbered with enforcing policies, the faculty, known as the “Dons,” had the ability to freely interact with students and would often develop long lasting relationships. This organizational structure allowed for “the residential colleges at Oxford and Cambridge to develop into highly significant educational agencies” (Cowley, 1934, p. 709).

Meanwhile, in the United States, the founders of higher education were unable to replicate the residential college complexes of Europe. It was cost prohibitive to build the quadrangle halls found at Oxford and Cambridge because the funds had to be used to build classrooms and laboratories (Cowley, 1934). However, some colleges in the colonies were built in unpopulated areas where there were no established homes to house the students, so founders built dormitory structures that housed as many men as possible in wide open rooms. This type of housing lacked privacy, and the conditions became intolerable at times. Again, unlike the residential colleges at Oxford and Cambridge, the faculty and tutors were expected to live in the dormitories and enforce policies to control the young men’s behavior. Since the founders were devoutly religious, their goal was to save the souls of the students. “Professors and tutors were expected to pray regularly, morning and evening, with their students, and if a youngster misbehaved they believed with certainty that they were exorcising the devil when they whipped him” (Cowley, 1934, p. 708).

This system eventually created a very disruptive dynamic between students and faculty. In some cases, faculty suffered at the hands of students who were dissatisfied with the living conditions or the rigid policies. Cowley (1934) stated that students at Dartmouth would frequently show their discontent by standing outside of their faculty rooms late at night blowing tin horns. At Harvard, a tutor lost his eye when he tried to stop a riot. Unfortunately, discipline became the primary focus of the administration, thus the opportunity to make the halls into educational agencies such as Oxford was lost.

Due to issues of discipline and poor facility conditions, leaders in higher education became critical toward the idea of dormitories. One such critic was Reverend Manasseh Cutler. In 1800, he stated that the halls were “the secret nurseries of every vice and cages of unclean birds” (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997, p. 41). Henry Philip Tappan, President of the University of Michigan, stated that:
The dormitory system is objectionable in itself. By withdrawing young men from the influences of domestic circles, and separating them from the community, they are often led to contract evil habits, and are prone to fall into disorderly conduct. It is a mere remnant of the monkish cloisters of the Middle Ages, still retained in England, but banished from the universities of Germany. (Cowley, 1934, p. 711)

Tappan was an advocate for the German higher education system, which did not place importance on what the student did outside of the classroom. The German model for higher education emphasized classrooms and faculty. Therefore, little attention was given to students’ social lives and where they lived. Tappan’s belief in this philosophy was shared by other presidents. In some cases, as at Michigan, dormitories were converted or destroyed, and many campuses, particularly in the Midwest, did not build halls.

When the Civil War ended, there was a large influx of men seeking higher education. Any funding that was available went to creating classroom space and hiring faculty, not building dormitories. Towns and cities started to grow up around the colleges that provided housing opportunities for students to board with the townspeople. Cowley stated that “the number of students in dormitories had diminished from 53 percent in 1870 to 24 percent in 1905” (p. 712).

In the late 1800s and early 1900s, the issue of housing students resurfaced through some unexpected avenues. Vassar, Wellesley, Mount Holyoke, and Smith, all women’s colleges, were founded in the middle of the nineteenth century. They all had dormitories and required their students to live in them; women could not live in boarding houses and in hostels, as it was strongly believed that women were not equipped to deal with the issues that might prevail. Some of the graduates of these colleges went to universities in the Midwest to teach and brought with them the strong belief in the residential experience. They served as the deans of women and lived in the dormitories. The term “house mother” seems to have originated from this position (Cowley, 1934). It has been noted that the women who came together as the National Association of Deans of Women devoted a great deal of time discussing the issues of housing and thus helped to heighten the standards of housing for students (Cowley, 1934).

The second unexpected influence came from the alumni. Alumni wanted the collegiate experience to exist for the students of the future. As is the theme often heard today, the alumni felt that they gained more from the extracurricular activities than from the classroom. An example of alumni influence occurred at Columbia, which had no dormitories when established. The alumni demanded that there be dormitories. Columbia’s board of trustees, hearing this demand, approved of raising funds to build a hall. When asked to comment on the importance of the action taken by the trustees, Dean Van Amringe stated in the New York Evening Post of November 21, 1896:

Since the acquisition of the new site, there is, perhaps, no single matter connected with the college that has received more general attention and more hearty commendation that the dormitory system. It has been looked to by students and alumni as a means of supplying what the college has always lacked, an
opportunity to cultivate what is distinctly known as college life…(Cowley, 1934, p. 763)

In addition to the impact of women’s colleges and alumni, townspeople were also an influence as they were frustrated with students’ rowdy behavior and demanded colleges take more responsibility for controlling it. For some townspeople neither the income from nor stigma attached to boarding students was worth the cost incurred so they withdrew their residences from the list of housing options. This caused a shortage of housing which, in turn, found students living in situations that were not considered satisfactory by university officials. One example occurred in 1825 at the University of Georgia; when the board of trustees found out that students living off campus were “associating with every tramp and politician who came to town,” they modified policies to require students to live in the dormitories (Coulter, 1928, p. 54).

In the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century, several presidents held the belief that “good housing contributes to academic success, and the securing of proper housing is as important as providing proper classroom instruction” (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997, p. 336). Harper at the University of Chicago, Lowell at Harvard, Abbott at Michigan State, and Hadley at Yale promoted dormitories that would extend beyond living environments into educational agencies. For example, Harper took a different approach to dealing with discipline. He removed the responsibility of enforcing policies from the faculty and placed it in the hands of the students. The halls had their own house committees, counselors, and a head student. At Michigan State, Abbott divided the halls into districts and each district elected a student captain and lieutenant to enforce policies. Kuhn (1955) wrote that the responsibilities of personal assistants at Michigan State University were: “inspecting rooms each morning, maintaining a quiet atmosphere, and reporting violators of college policies to the faculty member in charge of the hall” (p. 207). Hadley, before becoming president of Yale, expressed concern that Yale, which was growing larger, would lose what he felt was a semblance of those residential colleges of Oxford and Cambridge. His opinions influenced other institutions, such as Princeton. In creating its graduate programs, Princeton built facilities to house graduate students together (Cowley, 1934). Lowell, when giving his inaugural address at Harvard, “urged that dormitories, especially for freshmen, be built and that everything within reason be done to develop undergraduates as people as well as students” (Coulter, 1934, p. 760).

There were several events and trends between 1900 and 1960 that had significant impact pertaining to student affairs practice that ultimately would lay the groundwork for housing programs to include a student development focus in their mission. After World War I, there was a major personnel movement in higher education. The Army, which had trained personnel in the areas of mental testing and counseling, had its “psychologists transpose to the colleges the many techniques of counseling and diagnosis perfected in army personnel” (Brubacher & Rudy, 1997, p. 335). As Brubacher and Rudy pointed out, the “field assumed more and more of the aspects of a distinct profession, growing out of the stage of ‘sentimental intuition’ and entering that of systematic differentiation and specialization of personnel functions” (p. 335). Furthermore, the 1937 Student Personnel Point of View placed a significant emphasis on educating the whole student. There were now distinct roles for faculty and student affairs professionals (Schroeder & Mable, 1994).
After World War II, the GI bill opened up higher education to all veterans. This resulted in huge enrollment increases and a shortage of campus housing. Initially, housing programs could not build new dormitories as institutions lacked the funds. However, the passage of Title IV of the Housing Act of 1950 provided “financial assistance to educational institutions in providing loans for housing repairs and additions as well as construction of new facilities for students and faculty” (Frederiksen, 1993, p. 172). Housing programs quickly started construction of dormitories that housed large numbers of students. Little attention was given to creating facilities that would promote a sense of community and foster personal development.

The 1960s brought major changes to housing programs. “Students’ demand for freedom from control and supervision resulted in the establishment of coeducational halls, the implementation of visitation or parietal hours, the elimination of curfews and dress codes, and the provision of drinking for students of legal age” (Schroeder & Mable, 1994, p. 8). Students did not want to be supervised by housemothers and campus officials. They demanded to be treated like adults, not children. At this point, major changes occurred with staffing the dormitories. Housemothers were replaced with residence educators who usually had completed graduate work and now were responsible for developing the whole student, not just controlling students’ behavior (Schroeder & Mable, 1994). In addition to those changes, increasing enrollments and construction of new halls created a need for additional staffing, which was filled by hiring more student paraprofessionals.

The focus of developing the whole student was reemphasized in the Tomorrow’s Higher Education (THE) Project created by the American College Personnel Association in 1968. The project focused on promoting learning environments that “maximize[d] the integration of students’ cognitive development with the development of the whole personality” (American College Personnel Association, 1975, p. 341). Housing programs responded to the THE project by diversifying the role of the residence educator and resident assistant. In addition to enforcing campus policies, they were to conduct educational programs and activities addressing such topics as alcohol awareness, human sexuality and personal safety. Authors Hoyt and Davidson (1967) stated that the wide range of roles for resident assistant included “policeman functions as protecting the physical plant and controlling noise as well as such personnel assignments as teaching study habits, referring students to personnel specialists, and helping each resident feel accepted as an individual” (p. 251).

From that point, the responsibilities of the resident assistant have grown. Buhrow (1999) stated that “we are asking the RA to be all things to all people--a peer helper, community developer, administrator, cheerleader, mentor, friend, sanitation engineer, and policy enforcer” (p. 12). Not only did the number of roles increase over the years, so did expectations. One housing administrator voiced his concern regarding the number and kind of expectations that housing professionals have for resident assistants.

In addition to knowing about every office and service on our campus, we expect them to be our front line of defense and triage unit in myriad areas as dating violence, eating disorders, sexual identity, sexual abuse, substance abuse, first aid, fire safety, policy enforcement, community development, cultural insensitivity, and every other “ism” in our broad lexicon. (Minor, 1999, p. 6)
I have observed that the roles of resident assistants such as policy enforcer, receptionist, helper, referral agent, referee, planner, and programmer have evolved over the years. However, it seems that the external environments have made the resident assistant’s position even more difficult to carry out than ever before. For example, demographic information shows that more people with mental illnesses are entering college than ever before due to advances in medicine. Kay Redfield Jamison, a psychiatry professor at John Hopkins, cited in Kelly’s (2001) *Lost on Campus* stated, “The very effectiveness of modern treatment means that a lot of people who never would have made it to college are stable enough to go to universities. Colleges are dealing with a lot of kids who are very sick” (p. 52). Aside from the increase of students coming with psychological disorders, there are more students coming that feel “frequently overwhelmed” (Twenge, 2001, p. B14). Both trends have placed a major burden on counseling centers on campuses across the country (Kelly, 2001; Levine & Cureton, 1998; Twenge, 2001). In some cases, the wait to see a counselor can be weeks, and there are many students who are not comfortable seeking the counseling services. In the meantime, these students may act out or go into depression which then affects the living environment. Other students will expect the resident assistant to change the disruptive student’s behavior when, in reality, this is rarely possible without the help of a counselor.

Levine and Cureton (1998) addressed another demographic trend that impacts the resident assistant’s role. That trend is the increase in racial diversity of young adults between the ages of fifteen to nineteen. Findings of the U.S. Department of Commerce 1996 report indicated that the number of Hispanics, Native American Indians, and Asian Americans have all increased while the number of Caucasians and Blacks have decreased. This diversity in the residence halls can provide positive opportunities for cross-cultural exchanges. However, less than positive situations such as roommate problems that are based on race or ethnicity can result. The resident assistant is then called on to help the roommates or suitemates resolve the situation and educate the students on cultural and sensitivity awareness. This is not a new role for the resident assistant, but there will possibly be more situations in the future that the resident assistant will encounter.

Another external trend occurring in the general society that is reflected in the campus culture is the decrease in civility and tolerance (Levine & Cureton, 1998). Today’s students also try to circumvent the rules or just blatantly disregard the rules because they feel the rules are not important. All of these trends will have an impact on the resident assistant who is trying to establish a community on his or her floor while trying to enforce the policies that residents have deemed useless. For these reasons, further study of the trends, events, and issues that occur in the external environment and of the opportunities or threats they pose is crucial.

### The concept of a SWOT Analysis

In a SWOT (strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats) analysis, assessing the internal environment helps to identify the strengths and weaknesses of the institution. A strength is “some significant aspect of your operations that is done exceedingly well and is highly likely to affect the performance of your institution in a major way” (Hunt,
A weakness is defined as “some inadequacy in a major activity or resource that reduces the institution’s ability to achieve its goals” (Hunt, et al., 1997, p. 95). To begin the assessment, a comprehensive list of the services, programs, and operations is compiled. After completing the list, the actual assessment occurs. One method of assessing the internal environment is to see whether students and other stakeholders believe the services, programs, and operations are meeting their needs.

Bryson (1995) defined stakeholders as “any person, group, or organization that can place a claim on an organization’s attention, resources, or output or is affected by that output” (p. 27). Parents, students, staff, and faculty would all be considered stakeholders for public institutions.

The next step in a SWOT analysis is to assess the external environment. This process is commonly known as environmental scanning. Environmental scanning is “a process that identifies and evaluates trends, events, and emerging issues” to determine if they pose a threat or an opportunity to the organization (Morrison, 1987, p. 9). Specifically, threats would be considered as “factors or forces that limit and constrain or even threaten goal and mission achievement” and opportunities are “factors or trends which tend to enhance goal and mission achievement” (Hunt, et al., 1997, p. 93). There are several models that specifically speak to higher education that outline this process (Jonsen, 1986; Morrison, 1987).

Jonsen (1986) described six aspects of the external environment that should be scanned. In each of the six areas, he gave pertinent examples about how the area could impact institutions of higher education; in addition, he offered questions for each area to help the scanner. The first area is the demographic environment, which not only entails tracking the changing demographics of the student population but recognizing differences within geographical regions. He gave the example of a 1999 prediction that the number of high school graduates was projected to be nine percent less than in 1981 for the nation at large (Jonsen, 1986). If planners use this number, they get only a part of the picture as different regions present different pictures. The southeastern, western, and south central regions of the United States saw an increase rather than a decrease in the number of graduates during the time period. To help scan the demographic environment, Jonsen suggested asking some of the following questions:

1. What are the short-run demographic trends in the college’s catchments or service area?
2. What are the characteristics of the college-going age group in that area with respect to high school graduation rates, college graduation rates, types of colleges attended, and so forth?
3. What is the ethnic and racial composition of that population, and what are the historical differences among these groups relative to educational achievement?
4. What is the socioeconomic composition of that population, and what does that predict about college interests and aptitude of future college-age cohorts?
5. What is the size and what are the characteristics of the adult population in the college’s immediate geographical service area with respect to educational
achievement and socioeconomic status (factors that strongly influence educational participation)? (p. 8)

The second aspect is the economic environment. Even though the economy “does not exert a direct influence on institutions of higher education, the institutional revenues are affected” (Jonsen, 1986, p. 9). Increasing competition for state appropriations has resulted in decreased amounts given to public institutions. In turn, raising tuition to bring in more funding may result in students enrolling in community colleges. The type of employment opportunities and the job market that exists in the surrounding area of the institution are other factors that should be considered when scanning the economic environment. Jonsen suggested asking the following questions:

1. What is the general economic condition of our service areas and its region?
2. What are the short-and long-term economic trends in our area?
3. What is the current manpower situation in our service area, and how is it likely to change with respect both to employment rates and to the structure of the job market?
4. What are the trends in personal income?
5. What are the trends in revenues of local, state, and federal governments as they affect our funding, and what are the claims on those revenue sources from other government-funded functionaries?
6. What are the trends in state and federal tax policies as they affect philanthropic contributions?
7. What are the possibilities for economic growth and for change in the structure of employment—locally, regionally, and nationally—as they may affect enrollment and financial support?
8. What are the implications for private colleges and universities of the increased fundraising efforts on the part of public institutions? (p. 10)

The third area to study is the political environment. Any institution that receives federal funding will be impacted by politics. State institutions, more so than private, have become more vested in the political environment as more of the governing boards consist of political appointments. Jonsen posed another set of questions to address this environment:

1. What are the political dynamics of the state, and how are those dynamics represented at the local level?
2. What are the national political dynamics, and how are they represented locally?
3. How does the institution involve itself politically at the state and national level: directly or through state or national associations?
4. What is the mechanism for the state’s decision making in higher education, and what branches other than the legislative and the executive are involved? (p. 11)
The organizational environment is the next area to be scanned. This environment pertains to the other colleges and universities that are present in the geographical region and must “be understood in its potential both for competition and for cooperation” (Jonsen, 1986, p. 12). The following questions can be asked to help assess this environment:

1. What are the relevant other higher education institutions in the college’s or university’s service area?
2. What is the quality of the institution’s relationships with these other institutions? Do they tend to be competitive or cooperative? Are those relationships conducive to meeting the institution’s needs and goals?
3. What is the institution’s relationship with the elementary and secondary school districts?
4. What is the institution’s relationship with professional associations and accrediting bodies?
5. What is the institution’s relationship with other educational providers, including corporate training programs?
6. What is the institution’s relationship with the corporations and government agencies that hire its graduates?
7. What is the institution’s relationship with quasi-political agencies that relate to it formally or informally? (pp. 12-13)

The technological environment was another aspect to be scanned. A key point is that the use of technology is far outstripping both planning and policy making, and institutions are hard pressed to understand the future as it relates to the role information technologies will play in the delivery of instruction, as well as in the conduct of research and administration in higher education. (p. 13)

Questions to help get a better grasp on this environment include the following:

1. What is the information society, and does the rapid development of new ways to deliver, represent, and process information foreshadow a general social or cultural revolution?
2. What are the educational implications of that revolution?
3. Is the institution in the mainstream of the information society?
4. Does the institution have formal academic programs that need to adapt themselves to changes in information technologies brought about by the information age?
5. What use does the institution make of computers, and what future use is demanded by changes in student interests and needed access to training?
6. What improvements in the efficiency or effectiveness of instructional providers through the capabilities of the new information technologies?
7. How will the information revolution alter the structure and function of the library?
8. What new markets can be opened up through the institution’s employment of new technology to reach off-campus students? (p. 14)

The social environment is the last area to be scanned. This area may be the most difficult to grasp and predict because, unlike the others, there is relatively little hard evidence or statistics that can be used. Jonsen suggested the following questions:

1. What are the trends and countretrends in the social milieu?
2. What are the larger cultural trends that will influence the nature of higher education?
3. What is the changing socioeconomic composition of the population in the institution’s geographical environment, and what are the implications of this, for the institution, in terms of student preferences related to academic programs and campus social climate? (p. 15)

Another model for environmental scanning in higher education, developed by Morrison (1987), stated that “the objective of scanning is to identify signals of new trends and developments which could become emerging issues possibly affecting the institution’s future” (p. 19). Like Jonsen (1986), Morrison directed the scanner to look for signals of change in the social, technological, economic, environmental and political environments. To start the several step process of scanning, Morrison (1993) suggested that one quick way is to interview the decision-makers regarding their thoughts as to the critical trends and developments.

The next step is to pull together magazines, newspapers, newsletters, conference materials, and other mediums. After sources are pulled together, developing the taxonomy is the third step in this process. The five areas—social, technological, economic, environmental, and political-- make up the elementary taxonomy (Morrison, 1993, p. 16). From there, the scanner develops the taxonomy and tailors it to the institution. Identifying criteria to use while scanning the materials is the fourth step in Morrison’s scanning model. Morrison suggests the items being scanned be interpreted as to whether they:

1. represent events, trends, developments, or ideas never before encountered
2. contradict previous assumptions or beliefs about what seems to be happening
3. represent new twists to old arguments
4. can be linked to other abstracts previously written or seen
5. discuss new patents, inventions, and/or research results
6. have implications for long-range program or management of the institution
7. contain polls or forecasts by experts
8. contain statistical descriptions graphically describing changes. (1987, p. 16)

Morrison’s fifth step is to rank and evaluate all of the trends, events, and issues in terms of how they may affect the institution. For each issue, the scanner asks “(1) the probability that the event will occur in the time period, and, if the event occurs, (2) the extent of its positive impact on the institution, and (3) the extent of its negative impact” (1987, p. 17).
Conclusion

As higher education has changed over the years, housing programs have reacted to those changes to meet the demands from both the internal and external environments. Reacting to those changes has caused a dramatic increase in the number of responsibilities added to the resident assistant position without accompanying thought regarding the consequences for the paraprofessional and the housing program. Housing professionals discuss the issue of not being able to recruit the most qualified candidates as they did in the past. They are worried that the general student population does not see the resident assistant position as a prestigious leadership position as it did in the past. There is also the concern of not being able to retain staff, who can be a valuable asset. All of these issues may be compounded, particularly at institutions that are currently building or renovating residence halls, by the need to hire more resident assistants than ever before.

Housing professionals must take a proactive stance regarding future planning of the resident assistant position. However, based on my experience as a housing professional, it is often difficult to find the time and energy to really take a proactive approach while constantly reacting to the needs and demands coming from both the internal and external environments. Therefore, I used the concept of a SWOT analysis as a lens for framing this inquiry. Qualitative methods have provided housing professionals with information that will be easily accessible, geared to housing professionals, and useful for future planning.
CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore potential changes in the role of the resident assistant in public college and university housing programs. This exploratory study was guided by the following research questions: What is the current role of student paraprofessionals, otherwise known as resident assistants, in public college and university housing programs? What do practicing professionals and resident assistants in public college and university housing offices perceive as the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the resident assistant position? How do housing professionals and resident assistants perceive that the role of the resident assistant will change?

Using a Qualitative Approach

As seen in the literature, the role of the student paraprofessional in housing has been evolving since the creation of this position, and the role can vary from institution to institution. Even though housing programs will typically have a written description outlining the roles of the resident assistant position, the description is usually general in nature and does not address the unwritten or unspoken expectations that originate from the campus and housing culture. The literature shows that housing programs have evolved into complex environments as they try to meet the needs and demands of their various constituents.

The complexity of the resident assistant’s working environment and that of housing programs suggested a naturalistic approach in order to anticipate the future role of the resident assistant. Guba and Lincoln (1981) described a naturalistic approach as similar to peeling an onion. Naturalistic inquirers must focus on:

The multiple realities that, like the layers of an onion, nest within or complement one another. Each layer provides a different perspective of reality, and none can be considered more “true” than any other. The layers cannot be described or understood in terms of separate independent and dependent variables; rather, they are intricately interrelated to form a pattern of “truth.” (p. 57)

Another rationale for using a naturalistic approach is provided by Patton (1980). He stated that a qualitative approach is appropriate when the researcher answers yes to the following question: “Do decision makers and information users have philosophical or
methodological biases that lead them to prefer qualitative methods, thus increasing the likelihood that they will find the results of a qualitative evaluation particularly believable, credible, understandable, and useful?” (p. 89)

Based on my professional housing experience, I believe that housing practitioners prefer having results from research that are relevant and rich in description that can be applied to various types of environments that may exist. Gay (1996) also supported the use of qualitative studies in educational environments, as she believed “that behavior is significantly influenced by the environment in which it occurs” (p. 209). To provide findings that were rich with description and applicable for housing programs, I used a qualitative approach that involved multiple methods, populations, and sites to collect data.

**Qualitative Methods**

**Focus Group Interviews**

Focus groups can help the researcher “obtain perceptions on a define area of interest in a permissive, nonthreatening environment” (Krueger & Casey, 2000, p.5). Krueger and Casey (2000) stated that focus group research is “a process of disciplined inquiry that is systematic and verifiable. It is not the type of scientific research that seeks to control and predict, but it is the type that seeks to provide understanding and insight” (p. 198). Krueger indicated these advantages with focus groups:

1. It is a socially oriented research procedure that allows the researcher to observe the attitudes and experiences of informants.
2. There is the flexibility to explore unanticipated issues not possible in a survey.
3. Focus group discussions have high face validity. The technique is easily understood and the results seem believable to those using the information. Results are not presented in complicated statistical charts but rather in lay terminology embellished with quotations from group participants. (pp. 34-35)

Krueger (1994) stated the following limitations of focus group interviews:

1. The researcher has less control in the group interview. Group members could potentially influence the direction of the discussion causing detours and raising irrelevant issues.
2. Data are more difficult to analyze and comments must be interpreted within that context.
3. Groups can vary considerably thus it is recommended to include enough groups to balance the idiosyncrasies of the individual sessions.
4. Groups are often difficult to assemble and they must be conducted in an environment conducive to conversation. (p. 36)

There are several general rules when planning for focus groups which are provided by Morgan (1997): (a) use homogenous strangers as participants, (b) rely on a relatively structured interview with high moderator involvement, (c) have 6 to 10 participants per group, and (d) have a total of three to five groups per project (p. 34).
To create a homogenous group I purposely selected participant samples from a limited source. To further control the make-up of the groups, screens were used. Screens are the characteristics that a researcher uses to identify the individuals who would be participants in the focus groups (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Taking these steps likely results in free-flowing conversations among participants within the groups as the participants tend to be more comfortable with each other.

A structured approach when facilitating the focus group is helpful particularly when there is a “strong, preexisting agenda for the research” (Morgan, 1997, p. 39). Having a moderator for each focus group is one tool to create a structured discussion. A moderator is needed to keep the discussion focused and moving so that all questions may be addressed. Another tool that brings structure to group discussions and insures a greater consistency in questioning between groups is an interview guide. Krueger and Casey (2000) stated that an interview guide, on an average, has twelve questions “divided up into five categories: opening, introductory, transition, key and ending” (p. 44). Questions are generally open-ended to generate various responses and discussions. These researchers advised spending at least ten minutes with key questions; therefore, there should be only two to five key questions to keep the group time within an hour to an hour-and-a-half (Krueger & Casey, 2000). Having an interview guide helps in making the group interaction occur effortlessly; it allows for the facilitator to ask additional questions when appropriate and to bring focus back to the discussion.

When determining the size of the groups, the researcher must factor in the amount of information a participant may contribute to the discussion (Morgan, 1997). Small groups usually work better if they are homogenous and participants are highly interested in the topic. Smaller groups allow for more time for participants to talk. There is concern that if the group is too small and the participants have a low level of interest in the topic, the discussion will not be as productive. Larger groups may be advisable when participants may be strangers and the researcher wants general information or reaction to a topic. Large groups can be counterproductive as there is a greater likelihood for discussions to occur simultaneously that could result in loss of data since it is difficult to transcribe these conversations.

It was suggested earlier that there should be three to five groups for a project. Less than three groups is problematic for the researcher to distinguish whether the content of the discussion was based on the dynamics of the group. Also saturation is not likely to be achieved with less than three groups. To have more than five groups can be time consuming and potentially unproductive if saturation has been achieved by the fifth group. Morgan (1997) suggested that the “safest advice is to determine a target number of groups in the planning stage but to have a flexible alternative available if more groups are needed” (p. 44).

**Individual Interviews**

Another method used to collect data in qualitative studies is the use of individual interviews. Krathwohl (1998) gave the following reasons that individual interviews might be useful:

1. Exploring, probing, and searching to determine what is especially significant about a person or situation.
2. Determining how individuals perceive their situation: its meaning to them, what is especially significant about it to them, what might be significant to others but is less so or unimportant to them, how it came to be what it is, how they think it will be changed in the future.

3. Getting responses from individuals who might not respond to or might not understand a questionnaire.

4. Finding explanation for discrepancies between observed and expected effects.

(p. 286)

Deciding on the amount of structure that will be put into place for the interview depends on the purpose. An unstructured interview could provide numerous answers but makes it difficult to be able to generalize the data across all of the interviews. An interview that is totally structured where questions are in an order and the interviewee is given alternatives to choose from to answer the question does not provide the interviewer an opportunity to seek clarification or additional information. Partially structured or semistructured interviews allow for the interviewer to ask open-ended questions. The difference between the two is that the partially structured interview gives the interviewer the ability to add questions or modify the existing questions (Krathwohl, 1998).

Purposive sampling in selecting interviewees is a typical tool. Many times the researcher is looking to the interviewee to “fill in a missing piece of information, to check another person’s statement...to cover a kind or type of person not yet interviewed and to find those who can extend in depth what is already known or take it into new areas” (Krathwohl, 1998, p. 294).

**Document Collection**

Collecting documents is another method used in qualitative research. Documents may provide new information or information that may support or not support data previously collected (Gay, 1996). Guba and Lincoln (1985) stated that documents are free from subjectivity that participants may show when asked to share information regarding systems and procedures that exist in their environment.

**Population (Stakeholders)**

In order to provide results that would be rich in description, applicable and credible to the reader, it was important to include three different groups of stakeholders in this study. Additionally, when conducting a SWOT analysis Bryson (1995) suggested that stakeholders from within the organization who represent the following levels be asked to give information and feedback: (1) top policy and decision makers, (2) middle-management, and (3) frontline staff. The top policy and decision maker is the link between the organization and aspects of the external environment that may pose as opportunities or threats to the organization. Housing directors matched this stakeholder criterion. Middle-management is responsible for translating policies and procedures to the frontline staff. Therefore, professional housing staff members who were responsible for the recruitment and training of resident assistants formed the second group of stakeholders.

The third group of stakeholders were returning resident assistants. College housing programs are dependent on resident assistants as they are seen as frontline staff.
Resident assistants understand day to day operations and can provide critical feedback about services and students’ needs. Returning resident assistants were specifically targeted due to the fact that data collection was done between October 2002 and January 2003 and new resident assistants did not have the experience or time to form substantial perceptions of their roles. Each set of stakeholders had a unique perception and set of realities regarding the different aspects of the environments that ultimately affected the perceived role of the resident assistant in some manner.

Another important point was that the three different sets of stakeholders came from the same institutions meaning that the housing director, professional staff member, and two returning resident assistants, from each of the seventeen institutions, were interviewed. I chose to interview two resident assistants rather than one from each institution so that I could have two different perspectives.

This purposive sampling not only allowed me to compare and contrast between seventeen different sites but also between the different stakeholders’ perspectives within the same institution. It also provided an opportunity to seek clarification of information and fill in missing gaps of information.

**Sample Selection**

During the late spring of 2002, I contacted the ACUHO-I central office to obtain a list of housing directors who were registered for the July 2002 annual conference. I also obtained a list, from this office, of ACUHO-I member institutions that met the following criteria: (a) were four year public residential campuses that housed at least 2,000 students and staffed their halls with student paraprofessionals; and (b) were institutions which employed housing directors who had oversight for both the administrative and residential components of their housing program. The lists were cross referenced to develop a list of housing directors who were registered to attend the conference and who were from the institutions that met the desired profile for this study.

From this list of 59 names, 40 names were drawn randomly. The selected 40 housing directors were sent an e-mail describing the study and inviting their participation in the focus groups that were to be held, on site, during the upcoming conference. Five housing directors declined the invitation, so I randomly drew five more names from the nineteen housing directors who were not originally invited and e-mailed them an invitation. Initially, 15 housing directors responded positively to the invitation and, later at the pre-conference, three more housing directors who were originally invited were recruited. Once a housing director accepted an invitation for the focus group, I e-mailed or gave that director the informed consent form and questionnaire (Appendix A and D). Due to one no-show, 17 housing directors participated in the focus groups held during the conference.

Housing directors who participated in the focus groups gave me the name of the professional staff member in their housing program who was responsible for selection and training of resident assistants. I called each named professional staff member to invite her or him to participate in an individual telephone interview. All 17 professional staff members agreed to participate. From each professional staff member I obtained a list of the returning resident assistants from their respective institutions. From each list I randomly selected two resident assistants and contacted those resident assistants by
telephone to invite them to participate in an individual telephone interview. Thirty-four resident assistants, two from each institution, agreed to participate.

Research Design

At the beginning of this chapter, I presented a general overview of three different methods: focus groups, individual interviews, and document collection that were utilized in this study. In this section, I will specifically discuss how those methods were designed and employed in this research. Prior to employing any of the methods, approval for the research was granted by the Human Subjects Committee at The Florida State University in June 2002 (Appendix A).

Focus Group Procedures

Krueger and Casey (2000) suggested using an interview guide (Appendix B) to help with focus group discussion and to insure greater consistency in questioning between groups. Following their guidelines, an interview guide was developed. There were a total of ten questions. The first question served as the opening question. Participants were asked to give their names and the names of their institution. This question helped the participants to become familiar with each other. The second question introduced the topic by asking if the participants were former resident assistants and, if so, what the primary responsibilities were of their position. If a participant was never a resident assistant, then the person was asked her or his perception of the role of the resident assistant. This introductory question helped participants consider whether the role has changed over the years. The third question asked the housing directors to list the roles resident assistants play in their housing programs. Answers to this question provided information pertaining to the first research question and provided a transition into the key questions.

The next six questions served as key questions. The first of the six questions asked participants to remark on the what they believed was the perception that their resident assistants have regarding the resident assistant’s role at their institution. The next question asked what specific trends, events, and issues existed in the internal campus environment that impacted the resident assistant’s role. The next three questions asked how each of the three aspects of the external environments impacted the role of the resident assistant. Those three aspects are technology, demographic, and social. Next, the participants were asked which of the three aspects they foresee having the greatest influence on the role of the resident assistant in the next twenty years. The fifth key question asked if there were any other factors that had not been discussed that would impact the role of the resident assistant. The last key question asked how they anticipate the role of the resident assistant changing in the next 20 years. The closing question asked participants if they had additional comments to share.

In addition to the guide, an introduction script was developed (Appendix C). It helped the facilitator do the following: Thank the group for their willingness to participate in this study, restate the purpose of the study and the focus group, and remind them that they could withdraw from the study at any point. Then the facilitator asked if there were any questions.

I decided to have another person serve as the facilitator (moderator) for the focus groups because I was concerned that I would become too involved in the discussion and
not be able to make important observations. The facilitator was a faculty member who has years of experience working in university settings with college students and administrators. She had no housing experience and therefore was unbiased in her observations. Having a second person provided another set of eyes and ears and enabled me to debrief with her after each focus group. Serving as the assistant facilitator, I operated the tape recorders, took notes, and observed individuals’ verbal and non-verbal communication.

A short questionnaire (Appendix D) was also developed to collect demographic information regarding participants’ housing programs and general information regarding the trends, issues, and events that occurred at their institutions that impacted the resident assistant’s role. In addition, the questionnaire helped prepare participants for the questions asked in the focus group.

**Pilot Focus Group**

A pilot focus group was conducted in May 2002 at the ACUHO-I conference planning meeting. Five housing directors and one associate director for residence life participated. Private and public institutions were represented and each employed resident assistants. The group interview lasted seventy-five minutes. Afterward, I asked various questions of the participants to obtain feedback on the focus group process. This was followed by questions pertaining to the questionnaire they filled out prior to the interview.

The participants gave helpful feedback. They suggested that a time limit be placed on each question as they could have talked non-stop. They appreciated the introductory question which asked them to discuss their resident assistant experience or perceptions of their resident assistant. Several felt that it helped put them into the right frame of mind to discuss the resident assistant role. They stated that the questionnaire that they completed prior to the pilot focus group did not prepare them for the questions that were asked in the focus group. Overall, they felt that their colleagues would be interested enough in this research that they would be willing to participate.

During the debriefing, the facilitator and I discussed several of our own observations. First, there were too many questions for an hour-long focus group. Secondly, the discussion did digress and participants went on tangents. The facilitator, unsure of whether the content was pertinent, would look to me for the course of action to take. Working together, we were able to get the group refocused on the question that was asked. Another observation was that, at times, I wanted to join the discussion so I realized that the role of assistant facilitator would indeed help me focus and listen to, rather than join in, the discussion. The participants got involved in the discussion and exchanged ideas. The only draw back to this is that participants spoke at the same time which made it difficult for the transcriber when transcribing the tapes. Another major observation was that the screens were important to use. The differences between the private and public institutions when comparing the three external environments became apparent. For instance, one of the participants from a private institution stated that the typical family income for her institution’s student population is well over $100,000. Therefore, all three aspects of the external environment-- technology, demographics, and social-- may have a different impact on the housing program and the resident assistant position. Another observation I made after receiving the transcript from this pilot group was that there would be large amounts of data to analyze.
Based on the feedback and observations, I made changes to both the interview guide and questionnaire (Appendix B and D) to help focus the group discussions so more in-depth discussion could occur and the time would be used wisely. Changes to the questionnaire were made to help gather the top trends, issues, and events pertaining to the three aspects of the external environment. Answers from the questions were sorted through to find repetitive issues and trends. I then replaced one question on the interview guide to focus in on the top five issues and trends that were most often noted by the housing directors. I also deleted several questions from the original interview guide because I would be able to obtain that information in the individual interviews with professional staff members and resident assistants.

**Focus Groups Conducted at ACUHO-I**

I assigned each of the 17 housing directors who agreed to participate in the focus groups to one of the three groups. All focus groups were held during a break in the conference schedule so that none of the participants missed a program or committee meeting. Due to the conference schedule, group discussions were kept to one hour and held in one of the rooms used for conference programs. The room was very convenient for participants to access and was arranged to allow participants to sit in a circle. Two tape recorders were used to audio-tape the discussion.

Once the participants had settled in their seats, the facilitator utilizing the script welcomed the group. Since all the participants were housing directors, and many knew each other professionally, the groups were homogenous. This allowed “for more free-flowing conversations among participants within the groups but also facilitate[d] analyses that examine[d] differences in perspective between groups” (Morgan, 1997, p. 35). Participants asked questions of each other regarding their rationale for and outcome of decisions or programs that were implemented at their institutions. On several occasions, the discussion digressed and the facilitator and I needed to refocus the group. At the end of the discussion, I thanked them for their participation and told them that I would send each participant a copy of the transcript to make corrections and add omitted information.

The tapes were transcribed, and I listened to the tapes to make corrections to the transcript for each focus group before sending it to the participants. Before I mailed a copy of the transcript along with self-addressed envelope to each participant, I e-mailed them to let them know that I was sending the transcriptions. I asked them to return the corrected transcripts in the envelope provided by September 2002 if they had any changes.

**Individual Interviews**

Individual telephone interviews were conducted with the two other stakeholder groups. The first stakeholder group to be interviewed was the professional housing staff members responsible for selection and training of resident assistants. As compared to the first group of stakeholders, the professional staff members were expected to offer richer detailed data due to their more current, direct experience with resident assistants. After the completion of interviews with professional staff, I interviewed two resident assistants from each of the institutions in the study. Inclusion of the resident assistants was essential as they were the target of this study. Since resident assistants are frontline staff, they were able to verify or give new information that was not given by the directors and professional staff members.
Individual interviews allowed me the opportunity to hear additional perspectives regarding the role of the resident assistant and to seek clarification or elaboration on specific roles at the respective institutions. Another rationale for conducting individual telephone interviews with professional staff members was timing; there was not to be another national conference until the following summer, nor was there time at the ACUHO-I conference to have transcriptions made and prepare for group discussion. There is no national conference for resident assistants, so conducting focus groups with these stakeholders would have been logistically impossible.

To help generalize the data across all the interviews, a partially structured interview design was used. This design gave me the ability to modify and add other questions. As with the focus group design, I developed an interview guide for each set of stakeholders (Appendix G and H). However, during most of the interviews, I did ask additional questions to follow-up or clarify the information that directors had discussed in the focus groups and/or from the housing documents that I received. In the next two sections, I discuss the interviewing procedures for each set of stakeholders and the design of the interview guide.

**Individual Interview Procedures for Professional Staff Members**

Once I received the name of the professional staff member from each of the housing directors, I called each person to invite her or him to participate in the study. In two cases, I e-mailed the staff member after unsuccessful attempts to make contact by telephone. All professional staff members agreed to participate. I scheduled an hour-long appointment based on the participant’s availability. I explained that I would e-mail a questionnaire (Appendix E) along with the informed consent form (Appendix A) for completion and return by e-mail prior to the interview. The questionnaire asked for general information that gave me background knowledge about the resident assistant position. There were two questions asked to gain more information on trends and issues at their institutions. I also asked if there were any changes or plans to make changes in the staffing pattern within the housing department, in general, and then specifically related to the resident assistant role.

In the interview guide (Appendix G) used for the interviews with the professional staff members, the opening question helped participants think about how the role has changed over the years. The next four questions were categorized as introductory questions. The first of the three questions asked what perceptions other staff, faculty, and students have regarding the resident assistant role. The second question asked what they perceived to be the one thing that resident assistants would change about their role. The third question asked what they perceived the resident assistant would say as to how they have changed because of the resident assistant role. The fourth question asked the professional staff member if there had been a decline in the number of applications for the resident assistant position and, if so, to what did they attribute this trend. Those four questions targeted the current strengths and weaknesses of the resident assistant role.

Following the introductory questions were the key questions. These questions asked the professional staff members to elaborate or clarify answers that were given in the questionnaire regarding the current trends and issues on their campus and how the three aspects of the external environment impacted the role of the resident assistant. Additionally, professional staff members were asked which of three aspects from the environment would have the greatest influence on the resident assistant role in the next
20 years. The key questions were focused on determining the opportunities and threats existing in the three aspects of the external environment as they pertained to the role of the resident assistant. At the end of the interview, I asked participants to give any additional information they felt was relevant to this research. I also explained that I would send a copy of the transcript for their review to make any corrections or additions.

All seventeen telephone interviews were conducted during the month of September 2002. The audio tapes from each of the interviews were transcribed verbatim, and I listened to each tape while reading the transcript to make corrections. Then a copy of the transcript, a thank you note with a small token of appreciation, and a self-addressed stamped envelope was sent to each staff member through the mail. I asked the participants to return their comments and corrections to the transcripts in the envelope provided by early October 2002.

**Individual Interview Procedures for Resident Assistants**

After randomly selecting two resident assistants from each of the lists I had obtained from the professional staff members, I called each selected resident assistant to invite her or him to participate in my study. If I was unable to contact the resident assistant after numerous attempts, I drew another name from the respective list. During the initial contact, I explained the purpose of my research and my plan for conducting an hour-long telephone interview. All agreed to participate and interviews were scheduled. I explained that I would be e-mailing the informed consent form and questionnaire (Appendix A and F) for their completion prior to the interview and asked that they be returned via e-mail. The questionnaire asked each resident assistant for general information as to why they were initially interested in the position, the trends and issues that had impacted their role, and the three aspects in the external environment that had an impact on their role as a resident assistant.

Very few resident assistants returned the questionnaire and informed consent forms. When I called them for the actual interview, I asked them if they had read the informed consent and, if so, if they had any questions and were they willing to participate. If they had not read it, I read it out loud to them and proceeded to ask if they had any questions and if they were willing to participate. After they agreed, I started the tape recorder and then went through the questionnaire.

The interview guide for the individual interviews with resident assistants was also divided up into three sections (Appendix H). The first section was comprised of opening questions. I asked the participants why they wanted to be a resident assistant initially and why they decided to return for another year in this position. The next question was how they have changed because of their role. Four introductory questions followed which targeted the current role of resident assistants. Participants were asked to discuss what they believed their role was in the housing program, how they would change the role, and how they thought other parties outside of housing perceived their role. All of the opening and introductory questions were used to help determine the strengths and weaknesses within the role of the resident assistant.

The next five questions were the key questions which focused on the trends and issues raised by the housing directors and professional staff. The resident assistants were also asked how technology, demographics, and social aspects impact their role and which of the three would have the greatest impact in the next 20 years. In closing, I asked the participants to recall the training they received and if there was anything that they wished
had been included but was not that would help them in their role. The last question asked if they would like to share any additional information pertaining to what was discussed earlier.

All 34 interviews with the resident assistants were conducted between October 2002 and January 2003. The tapes were transcribed and I listened to them and made corrections. I sent each resident assistant a copy of her or his transcript, a thank you note with candy, and a self-addressed stamped envelope through the mail. I asked the resident assistants to return their transcript in the enclosed stamped envelope by a certain deadline, if they had any corrections or additional information.

**Document Collection**

At the point that I contacted the professional staff members to schedule an appointment for the telephone interview, I asked them to send either through mail or e-mail the following documents from their institutions: resident assistant job description, resident assistant training schedule, and resident assistant manual. As I was conducting the individual interviews, I scanned editions of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Planning for Higher Education* starting Fall 2001 through Fall 2002. I selected *The Chronicle of Higher Education* because of the focus on current issues and trends found in the external environment. *Planning for Higher Education* was also selected based on its broad focus and strategic planning for higher education. The specific objective in scanning these two publications was to gain a better awareness as to what was occurring in the technology, demographic, and social aspects of the three external environments that could impact the resident assistant’s role.

**Method of Analysis**

Analysis began when I received the questionnaires from the housing directors prior to the focus groups. The questionnaire provided general information regarding demographics of their housing programs and trends, events, and issues occurring at their institutions that impacted the resident assistant role. The top five trends, events, and issues repeatedly reported on the questionnaire were presented to the focus groups for further discussion. Additional themes emerged from the focus groups, as noted during the group discussions and while debriefing with the facilitator.

The audio tapes from the focus groups were transcribed verbatim. I then coded the data for additional themes that may have been missed by the facilitator and myself during the group discussion and debriefing. Pulling together the different themes that emerged, I was then prepared to ask the second group of stakeholders their perceptions of those themes during their individual interviews. I also noted, during my coding of the focus group transcriptions, any trend, issue, or event specific to an institution so I could ask the professional staff member and the resident assistants from that institution for further clarification as to the impact on the role of the resident assistant.

When I received the transcripts from the individual interviews with the professional staff members, I coded the data for any new themes so that I could follow-up with the resident assistants to seek clarification and their perceptions as to the impact on their role. Furthermore, as I received the requested documents from the housing programs, I reviewed them to find additional information that might support or clarify information given by the housing directors and professional staff members. In some
cases, there were other themes that emerged from the documents that I asked the resident assistants to comment on to clarify the specific role, expectation, or content of training.

Managing the Data

After the last deadline for stakeholders to return the transcriptions with additions and corrections, I used the *long table approach* (Krueger & Casey, 2000) which entails sorting, cutting, and pasting of data. This process, albeit time consuming, enabled me to break down the data into manageable pieces. First, I took each group of stakeholders and separated out the responses for each question and pasted the responses to the specific questions on a large sheet of poster paper. For example, one sheet of paper contained all the focus group responses for the question regarding the primary role of the resident assistant. Another sheet contained all the responses from the professional staff member regarding the question of what impact, if any, does technology have on the role of the resident assistant. I also separated the data by institutions so that the responses to the questions from all the three sets of stakeholders at that institution were pasted on to the same sheet.

I then analyzed specific questions by comparing and contrasting the responses within the separate stakeholder groups and later I did the same for each institution. As I analyzed the data, I considered the frequency of what was said, specificity of the response, and extensiveness. For the SWOT analysis, I then categorized data from all three sets of stakeholders as strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, or threats to the resident assistant role.

Scanned Articles

The articles that I copied after scanning *The Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Planning for Higher Education* were thoroughly analyzed for trends, issues, and events that pertained to one or more of the three aspects of the external environment: technology, demographics, and social. These aspects could impact the role of the resident assistant. They, too, were categorized as either opportunities or threats.

Trustworthiness

When judging the quality of the analysis in a qualitative study, the reader should be concerned with trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is comparable to scientific rigor that is in a quantitative study. When determining the scientific rigor of a study, reliability and validity need to be addressed. The same is true for qualitative research; however reliability and validity are conceived differently and therefore referred to in different terms. Krathwohl (1998) noted the terms that Guba and Lincoln devised to describe qualitative research that parallels quantitative research description. Credibility is analogous to internal validity, transferability parallels external validity, dependability is equal to reliability, and confirmability is comparable with objectivity.

Credibility is demonstrated by having the researcher’s interpretations found to be credible by the reader and the participants in the study. Triangulation was used to establish credibility. “Determining the consistency of evidence gathered from different sources of data across time, space, or persons, by different investigators or different research methods” defines triangulation (Krathwohl, 1998, p. 694). I used multiple data sources that consisted of housing directors, professional staff members, and returning resident assistants from seventeen different housing programs in the United States. In
addition, multiple methods were used to gather data: focus groups, individual interviews, and document collection. Using data from different sources, collected via different methods, further helped to ensure the data was “not overtly influenced by one point of view” (p. 431).

Meeting the criteria for transferability can be difficult particularly since I used a small purposive sample. Therefore, the findings are not generalized to other settings (Guba & Lincoln, 1989). It is the reader who must decide whether findings can be transferable. The use of multiple sources, sites, and methods did provide a rich description for a reader to understand the nature of the resident assistant role.

In regard to dependability and confirmability, I established an audit trail that would allow for any interested party to replicate this study and understand the logic used in the analysis. The audit trail consists of the audio tapes and transcriptions from focus groups and individual interviews, documents collected, completed questionnaires, and field notes. The tapes and transcriptions which identify the participants will be destroyed two years from the end of this study to protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Summary

The purpose of this study was to provide information regarding the current roles of resident assistants and to explore the possible changes in the role of the resident assistant. More specifically, I sought to understand the internal and external environmental aspects which impact this position. The use of qualitative methods was appropriate, given the complexity of the position and the various aspects of the environment that impact it. Focus groups, individual interviews, documents, and publications provided for rich data. The study’s findings and their implications are presented in the following chapter.
CHAPTER 4

FINDINGS

The first section of this chapter contains profiles of the housing programs and participants that participated in this study. The second section provides the reader with richer insights into the current role of student paraprofessionals in housing programs and addresses the first research question: What is the current role of student paraprofessionals, otherwise known as resident assistants, in public college and university housing programs? The third section of this chapter contains the SWOT analysis which addresses the second research question: What do practicing professionals and resident assistants in public college and university housing offices perceive as the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the resident assistant position? The fourth section concentrates on the third research question: How do housing professionals and resident assistants perceive that the role of the resident assistant will change? As I present the findings, I will be integrating data from all four sources: focus groups, interviews, documents from the housing programs, and articles that were read.

Profile of Participating Housing Programs and Participants

Seventeen housing directors participated in one of the three focus groups held at the 2002 ACUHO-I annual conference. The directors were from four year, public, residential campuses that house at least 2,000 students. Each campus staffed their halls with student paraprofessionals and employed housing directors who had oversight for both the administrative and residential components of the housing program. Table 1 gives a brief sketch of the housing programs that participated in this study.
### TABLE 1

Profile of Participating Housing Programs

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Housing Program</th>
<th>District*</th>
<th>Enrollment</th>
<th>Housing Capacity</th>
<th>Number of Resident Assistants</th>
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*District was determined by ACUHO-I 2002 Membership Directory

Central District: Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Michigan, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, Ohio, South Dakota, Wisconsin

Southern District: Alabama, Arkansas, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Mexico, Mississippi, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Puerto Rico, South Africa, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia


Among the 17 housing directors, 9 were female. All but 5 of the housing directors had served as a resident assistant during their undergraduate experience.

After conducting the focus groups, I interviewed via telephone the professional staff member from each of the seventeen housing programs who was responsible for the selection and training of resident assistants. In this group of stakeholders, 7 were female and 15 of the 17 were resident assistants as undergraduates.

Then I interviewed via telephone two returning resident assistants from each of the institutions. Of the 34 resident assistants interviewed, 19 were female. There were 17 resident assistants who classified themselves as seniors, 14 classified themselves as
juniors, and 3 classified themselves as sophomores. The majority of resident assistants lived in traditional style residence halls that had double rooms with a community bathroom that housed predominantly first-year students. The average number of residents per resident assistant was 43.

Resident Assistant Role

As noted previously, Boyer stated:

The resident assistant (RA) position was one of the most demanding assignments on a college campus. RAs confront daily the realities of dormitory life. Beyond the ordinary, day-to-day hassles, they must deal with accidents, abuse of alcohol, depression and questions about birth control and abortion. It is a 24-hour-a-day job, one that involves not just keeping order and finding light bulbs, but becoming deeply involved in shaping the lives of students and helping college accomplish its fundamental goals. (Blimling, 1993, p. i)

In 1999, Buhrow stated: “we are asking the RA to be all things to all people--a peer helper, community developer, administrator, cheerleader, mentor, friend, sanitation engineer, and policy enforcer” (p. 12). In 1999, Minor voiced concern regarding the number and kind of expectations that housing professionals have for resident assistants.

In addition to knowing about every office and service on our campus, we expect them to be our front line of defense and triage unit in myriad areas as dating violence, eating disorders, sexual identity, sexual abuse, substance abuse, first aid, fire safety, policy enforcement, community development, cultural insensitivity, and every other “ism” in our broad lexicon. (p. 6)

Based on these statements, it is clear that the role of the resident assistant has changed just during the last ten years by the addition of more individual and cultural issues. My hope with this study was to uncover the current roles of the resident assistant by asking interview questions and reviewing documents that pertain to the resident assistant’s position.

Housing Directors’ Perceptions of Current Roles for Resident Assistants

During the focus groups, housing directors were asked to list two or three primary roles of the resident assistants in their housing programs. They listed the following roles: community builder, policy enforcer/disciplinarian, referral agent, programmer, mediator, academic promoter, administrator, role model, agent of the state, interventionist, transitional agent and friend. While the majority of the housing directors just named the roles, several briefly described what was expected in those roles or clarified what the roles were at their specific institution.

In regard to the role of community development, one director stated that “at a large institution like [institution J], we expect our residence hall counselors to make the environment seem small. They do that through community building.” Another director echoed that “the primary focus at our place in [institution E] is the community building. It is a large university and we try to break that down as best we can into smaller units for
building community.” A director commented that “we expect the RAs to really help people get to know each other and feel a sense of place on the floor. So knowing the residents on the floor is really very important.” A different housing director emphasized that community building was to be done by establishing personal relationships rather than through programming.

In reference to the role of policy enforcer or disciplinarian, one director noted that resident assistants “are responsible for maintaining an environment that is safe, respectful and damage free.” Resident assistants are to confront student behavior that disrupts the community. Another housing director stated, “the enforcement role is seeing to it that there is reasonable order on the floors.”

Potentially separate from the policy enforcer role is the new role of agent of the state. Even though only one director discussed this role, other directors in the group verbally acknowledged that the new state and national laws that require college campuses to report various crime statistics such as the Clery Act might impact the ability of the resident assistants to build meaningful relationships with their residents. As this director commented:

Some of their discretion about how they interact with students has been taken away and they are an arm of the state. I certainly never considered myself like that when I was an RA, but I consider it now at a public institution.

The role of creating an academic environment and promoting academic initiatives was also briefly discussed. At one institution the primary role of the resident assistant is to “establish an academic environment…to help reward and recognize academic achievement.” Another director expects that resident assistants will “help establish the kind of atmosphere that supports student in their academic success.” Reaching out to the faculty and the academic community is an expectation of one of the roles of the resident assistants at another institution.

Even though the role of serving as a role model is not new, it appears that it has taken on more importance due to the trend of housing more first-year students than upper-class students. One director commented on her experience as a resident assistant at the institution at which she is currently the director of housing. Her role as a resident assistant was much more administrative, however “because we don’t have the older student to act as role models, our residence hall counselors have had to assume some of that responsibility for community building, that role modeling.” Similarly, another director, while discussing the demographic changes at her institution, pointed to the fact that:

Seventy-five to eighty percent of freshmen now live in residence halls at [E institution]. As we lose the maturity of returning students, which is being done intentionally on our campus because of the importance of living on campus for first-year students, it makes it much tougher for the staff dealing with immaturity and for us as far as trying to get leadership development going in the halls.

Finally, the role of serving as resource and friend was discussed. One director stated that resident assistants were expected to be able to help students identify problems
and then refer those students to the appropriate resources. Another director remarked that her resident assistants should hopefully be seen as the person that residents will go to with their problems and that the resident assistant will serve as a resource. At one institution, the director believed that in order to serve as a resource, resident assistants need to be friends to their residents. She stated: “We hopefully teach them [resident assistants] how to be friends to students, not someone that is feared but someone that can assist, help them make that transition.”

**Professional Staff Members’ Perceptions of Current Roles for Resident Assistants**

Professional staff members were asked to fill out a questionnaire (Appendix E) prior to their interviews. One question listed a variety of roles and specific responsibilities. They were asked to note which roles and responsibilities that resident assistants were responsible for in their positions at their institution and to note any additional roles that were not found on the list. All institutions required resident assistants to be on-duty for their hall or area. When a resident assistant is on-duty, she or he is required to remain in the hall during the evening she or he is assigned and to conduct rounds in the hall to check for any safety and security issues and confront any policy violations. The resident assistant on-duty is the first to respond to any crisis situation in the hall.

In most cases, the professional staff members reported that while the resident assistant is on-duty, she or he is also required to sit at the hall’s front desk. There, the resident assistant may be required to handle administrative tasks such as filling out maintenance requests, answering the telephone, scheduling appointments for the supervisor and handling basic inquiries from residents. Other administrative responsibilities that professional staff members noted were the following: designing bulletin boards for the floor, making decorative door tags for each resident, and conducting health and safety inspections of residents’ rooms. Additional roles that were required by several institutions included: tour guide for housing and the university, member or advisor to hall government, and participant in the resident assistant selection process.

During the interviews with the professional staff members I learned about more roles or changes to established roles. One institution required its resident assistants to perform academic interventions. The professional staff member at that institution stated,

I would say as a division, as well as definitely a department of residence life, we are moving towards more concentration on academics and how we can assist our students succeeding academically and stay at the university, which is kind of the emphasis of the academic interventions.

I asked the resident assistants from this institution how they carried out this role. One resident assistant explained that she tells her residents that she will be meeting with each resident to conduct an academic interview where they will discuss both grades and school. The other resident assistant said that he met with his residents and had a brief discussion regarding their grades. Both resident assistants noted that this was only the second year that resident assistants were required to perform these interventions and that it was still unclear as to when the interventions were to occur during the spring. One
resident assistant remarked about how this past fall went compared to last year when the intervention was performed one time and the program was stopped. He stated,

It [academic intervention] got dropped last year. I think they are trying to redo it this year. We did not do the second phase yet because it is not into the second semester, but we did do the first one. I think it maybe ran a little bit more successfully this year because they had a little bit more knowledge of how to prepare people before we actually started. We had a short training session as to how to do it, and they maybe had a little bit more insight as to tell us what to try and do and what directions to take.

Another institution was piloting an academic intervention program that appeared to be less formal than the first institution. Resident assistants would meet informally with residents to ask how the residents were doing academically. These resident assistants were not given the residents’ grade point averages as was done at the other institution. The professional staff member at this institution commented: “this [academic intervention program] is an extra added responsibility for most of our RAs now.”

Another role, programmer and the development and facilitation of programs or events for the residents, is not new. In many cases programs exist to address certain general issues such as safety, diversity, wellness, academics, and social. At many institutions, the housing department will have a programming model that it requires the resident assistants to use. However, as one professional staff member pointed out, due to the living/learning programs that exist in their halls, the resident assistants are now required to develop programs that match with the theme of the living/learning program. For example, this institution has a math, engineering, and technology living and learning program so the resident assistants are expected to have programs that address these disciplines.

**Resident Assistants’ Perceptions of Their Current Roles**

When the resident assistants were interviewed I asked each person either “What is the role of the RA in the housing program at your institution?” or “When asked by prospective students and their parents what your role is, what do you tell them?” Their answers varied but there was an overwhelming reply that they are like a sibling or friend to the residents on their floor and a resource for the residents. One stated: “There are several different roles an RA can become. I let them know I am kind of here as a big brother, a friend, a tutor, an English paper writer, anything.” Another one stated:

Basically, like I tell most of my residents, I’m like your older brother. I am not trying to tell you what to do, I am not really the police, but I am mainly here to tell you how things are, how the rules are, what you should and shouldn’t do, but I’m not going to make you do anything.

This next response gives a little different rationale as to why this RA saw the role of sibling as important.

I think the RA is kind of like the older sibling. I mean, it is said that they [RAs] are liaisons between residents and housing, but I think they are more like the older
sibling. They are someone there so that if the resident needs something they can go ask the RAs who are more like their age, rather than the hall director who can seem a little more intimidating, or even housing who might seem more intimidating and official.

The next statement comes from a resident assistant who saw his role as friend.

First and foremost I try to be a friend or somebody who they can come and confide in, that type of deal. That is my main purpose that I see in my role as resident advisor.

A second resident assistant stated:

Basically, I am just a friend. I am just a friend to everybody on the floor. I don’t see it [resident assistant position] as a power position …. I am more into the relationship with the residents and making sure they are okay and assessing their needs, basically.

A third resident assistant remarked that “We are just here to be their friend if they need anything.” It should be noted that that housing directors and professional staff suggested that being a friend was a role that the resident assistants played in their program, however, it was the role of the community builder that was most mentioned by directors. A few resident assistants specifically stated that they were community builders while others stated this indirectly. One stated:

I look at myself as being more of community builder. A lot of people just have misconceptions about RAs being out to get you, wanting to just tally everything you do wrong, but I am basically just here to assist them in getting acclimated to campus and adapting to different things.

Another resident assistant mentioned that his role was:

To create a community on the floor and to create an environment for living and learning so that you [the resident] could have a good academic environment on your floor with residents that know one another and interact well with one another.

Then this resident assistant commented: “The RAs basically try to improve the community as best as he or she can so that residents in that community can have the best, diverse, and fun experience during their years living on campus.” Another resident assistant stated that she was there “to help them [residents] belong to a community and help to ease their transition into the college community.” A different resident assistant pointed out that “I basically try to keep the guys together, build a good, strong sense of community.” One more resident assistant stated,
We are here first and foremost to facilitate community here. By that I mean, we are here to help in any single which way. If you have any concerns regarding just the general community, the atmosphere, everything that is going on here on campus, I am supposed to be your field guide in some ways. Direct you in directions and answer your questions to the best of my knowledge, and field you to the ways where you can get your definite answers. In terms of the rules and stuff like that, I’m here to maintain the community standard.

The last quote pertaining to this role was “I would tell them that my main job as an RA is to establish a floor community that is a healthy living and learning environment.”

Besides the role of friend, resource, and community builder, several resident assistants mentioned that they were policy enforcers, mediators, role models, university representatives, programmers, and liaisons. The specific roles of liaison and university representative were never mentioned by directors or professional staff members. One resident assistant stated: “Basically my role is to act as a liaison between the departments….” Another said: “My main role is to be here as a liaison for the university, as a direct liaison for the university in terms of questions, in terms of everything.” A third resident assistant said: “They [campus departments] see us as the liaisons between students….” Yet another resident assistant said: “We are their [student affairs] eyes to the campus, we are the ones who are heavily involved with student life and the students here, and so they really look to us for advice.” Therefore, it should be noted that resident assistants do recognize themselves as being liaisons which is a new addition to the role of the resident assistant.

Document Analysis of Resident Assistant Job Descriptions

During the document analysis, I read the resident assistant job descriptions received from all the participating institutions. Job descriptions varied a great deal as to how and what roles and responsibilities were stated. One housing program actually put the percentage of time that was to be spent on the role and its responsibilities. When the resident assistants were asked if the percentages were realistic, one stated he didn’t know what I was referring to and the other resident assistant said she vaguely remembered that it was in the description. I would also note that the job description for that institution was several pages long compared to the typical one or two page descriptions from the other housing programs. Some of the job descriptions contained broad statements such as “Assist in the development of an educationally supportive living environment by providing effective, educational activities and consistent monitoring of the floor environment” or “Exhibit an attitude of loyalty to the University…and their policies. In addition, they [resident assistants] should maintain a cheerful, cooperative, and positive attitude.” Others were more specific, such as “Know the names and become acquainted with residents” and “Work up to 6 desk hours per week.” Generally, the job descriptions did address, in various degrees, the following roles: community builder, programmer, policy enforcer, administrator, role model, and resource referral. Only two descriptions mentioned the role of liaison and one discussed the role of advisor. No description referenced the role of tour guide however one could say it is included in the frequently seen statement “Other duties as assigned.” None of the descriptions noted that the resident assistant is an agent of the state, not even the description from the housing program that brought this up during the focus groups. Most descriptions do contain the
statement that resident assistants are to abide by all housing, university, and state and federal policies and laws. Only one of the job descriptions listed the role of friend or sibling substitute. Most descriptions stated it was an expectation that resident assistants build relationships with residents.

**Summary of Resident Assistant Role**

It is evident the roles of the resident assistant have become more complex, and as one housing director shared: “Really, it’s hard to sum it [role of the resident assistant] in just a few sentences. I know it’s a difficult job and I know it has certainly changed.” According to the findings from this study, the roles have not really changed. Rather, more roles have been added to the position. In previous times, the resident assistant roles were: policy enforcer, programmer, community builder, administrator, resource referral, role model, and friend. Now it seems the following roles need to be added in the resident assistant’s position: mediator, liaison, university representative, transitional agent, academic interventionist, tour guide, advisor to student groups, sibling substitute or surrogate sibling, and agent of the state.

Establishing the current roles of the resident assistant was the first step in this study. The next step was to look at the strengths and weaknesses of the resident assistant position and how certain aspects in the external environment present opportunities or threats so that housing programs may be able to plan and prepare for the future. The need for this information was apparent when two of the housing directors responded to the question regarding the primary roles of the resident assistants by saying that they were struggling to figure out those roles because of the changes with facilities and other events and trends at their institutions.

**SWOT Analysis**

A SWOT analysis was done to answer the second and third research questions: What do practicing professionals and resident assistants in public college and university housing offices perceive as the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the resident assistant position? How do housing professionals and resident assistants perceive that the role of the resident assistant will change? This analysis examined the strengths and weaknesses of the resident assistant role, but only focused on three aspects in the external environment: technology, demographics, and social, instead of the six as prescribed by Jonsen (1986) when looking for any opportunities or threats that exist in the external environment.

This section will be divided into five parts. In the first and second part of this section, I examine the strengths and the weaknesses of the role as perceived by the professional staff members and resident assistants. Due to time restraints for the focus groups, I was unable to ask housing directors for their perceptions. Next, I examine all three sets of stakeholders’ perceptions as to the opportunities and threats that may originate from the three aspects of the external environment. Throughout the third and forth parts, the reader will note that I have integrated, where appropriate, the information found during the scanning of the two publications. The fifth part addresses the perceptions as to how the role of the resident assistant will change.
Perceived Strengths of the Role of the Resident Assistant

To identify the strengths, I asked the professional staff members what they thought resident assistants would say were the benefits of being a resident assistant. The following comments from four different professional staff members highlighted the majority of responses from the professional staff members.

Definitely they would say the responsibility regarding timeliness and deadlines. I think all of them will say that their administrative skills have increased, as well as their time management skills.

I think they see the benefit of the position as really having given them some real work experience, some real opportunities to be in front of groups, and lead groups, and see what it is like to kind of balance being a peer and being in charge at the same time, without being on a power trip.

I would guess that they would probably talk about some of their own skill development, such things as mediation techniques, interpersonal skills, ability to deal with high level of crisis situations while maintaining a sense of sanity and helping manage change in a pretty significant way. They might also mention interpersonal benefits. Clearly they like the fact that they can be a community leader and make connections with other students. I also hear them report that they really value their connections with other staff members and a sense of “Gee, I have made friends here that will last a long time. A few of these individuals are people I can go to for anything at any time.”

I do believe that when you talk with RAs they will say that it is a great leadership opportunity for them. They’ll also say that they are getting very involved with campus life, because they are.

Feeling like one is a part of the university was another benefit that professional staff mentioned in response to this question. One staff member responded “Most of our kids [students] are looking for an identity when they get here, and once they become an RA they at least have a group to be part of.” In addition to feeling involved, several staff members spoke about the relationships the resident assistants developed saying that those relationships are one of the reasons resident assistants want to return to this position. A staff member answered: “I do know that a lot of them have some very strong relationships with their staff and students.” Another staff member stated: “I think they really enjoy the role model, mentoring, and supervisory relationships that they have with hall directors and graduate students. I think that relationship is a very strong factor in their willingness and excitement to return the following year.”

One response from a professional staff member was a little different:

Their experience as a resident assistant might make them [the resident assistant] take a closer look at their own personal identity. Sometimes it leads them to change the course of their lives, whether it be by choosing a different major or even a different field.
I then asked the resident assistants how they had changed because of this position. A majority of the resident assistants stated that they were better at managing their time, organizing tasks and priorities, and thinking before speaking. One resident assistant responded:

I think I am a lot more responsible. The time management thing has definitely played a big part. I think it [resident assistant position] has gotten me to be more organized about my life period. I guess I feel a lot more grown up now.

Another resident assistant stated:

I am learning really good time management skills, having to balance all my RA work as far as bulletin boards and putting on programs and everything, along with schoolwork and keeping a high GPA. It has really taught me a lot of time management.

While this resident assistant commented:

I used to be a pretty quiet person once upon a time. I think it has improved my social skills. A lot of times it helps with my time management. Sometimes you have too many things on your hands, but you know that you have certain RA responsibilities and you’re like, “I’ve got to still be able to do this, this, this and this.” It gets kind of strenuous. It gives you a glimpse at how busy real life can be. You are not always going to be so sheltered, and you don’t always have free times. It teaches you that you’re going to have to sacrifice, make choices, and prioritize.

Yet another resident assistant remarked:

Probably I am better at thinking before I speak, better time management, just matured overall, a little more, which might be also just because I am older, but also because of the position.

Two resident assistants discussed that they felt more involved and found places within their institutions. One noted: “I have definitely learned a lot more about the university. I have gotten involved with other organizations on campus because of this job. That has really helped me out with that.” Another resident assistant stated, “It gave me a chance to be myself, and it gave me my own niche. Once I was in place as an RA, I felt like I had my place in the college community.”

Additionally, resident assistants discussed how the position helped strengthen their interpersonal and social skills, confidence, and ability to adapt to change. One resident assistant observed that the experience “Has improved my listening skills because I get to listen to what people have to say. I am just aware of my surroundings a lot more. It has changed me a lot.” Another resident assistant answered:
I definitely think I am way more open and way more understanding and a better listener…It has helped me grow as a person in terms of my social skills. I know how to handle a lot of situations. It has helped me grow emotionally in terms of maturity as well.

One more resident assistant pointed out: “I have learned to be more willing to adapt to different changes. I basically have learned that change is something that can be good.”

Several resident assistants spoke about how they had grown in respect to being open minded and seeing the potential for different views and becoming more diverse. One stated:

I’ve learned so much about so many different kinds of people and what works best. Nobody is the same, but still, it has helped me learn how to look for what they need.

Another resident assistant remarked:

The job has allowed me to see a much broader case of views than just being a resident and having my group of friends that I hang out with every day. I get to meet people that I don’t normally get to meet, and see their views. It has broadened my horizons a lot.

Then this resident assistant commented:

I think I have grown quite a bit socially and have had an opportunity to meet people kind of out of other social circles than those that I typically have a chance to interact with.

This resident assistant had observed how she had changed since she started her undergraduate experience.

I am more diverse. I am African American, so I mainly hung out with African Americans, and I had people who were of other ethnicities on my floor, but I never really hung out with them. Now that I am an RA I only have maybe 3 or 4 African Americans on my floor, so all my girls [all different ethnicities] are always in my room or wherever. Especially last year, I was the only African American female on my staff, so I was forced to be more diverse, and this is what I really love.

Also noteworthy was the comment from one resident assistant who spoke to the applicability of the career skills one learns or strengthens in this position.

Perhaps not so much for me, because I know what to expect after I leave. I have been in the workforce so I kind of understand how that works, to a certain degree. I think it gives the person who takes the position a chance to see how life outside is via learning the skills it takes to be a successful student resident advisor. I just...
think that is something that can roll over, another learning experience in college outside of the books, learning how to network, how to deal with folks and so forth.

As all the resident assistants interviewed for the study had returned for a second or third year, it was important to ask why they returned to shed further light on the strengths of this position. Most said that they returned to the position because they had a great experience. A few stated that they returned because of the compensation package. Some stated that it was because they enjoyed being on a staff, and they received good supervision from their supervisor. Several responded with more specific reasons. One said:

I try to build the community as strong as possible because I know that I am still friends with the people I was in the hall with my freshman year. I just want to build that community and help them [new residents] along the way.

A second resident assistant stated:

I decided to return because I really made lasting relationships with my girls from last year. I met so many different people, and I just got a lot out of it. I gave to my girls and they gave to me. I learned a lot from them.

This resident assistant gave the following reason for returning to the position,

Just being in the position allowed me to meet so many other people around the dorm. It was a lot of fun just helping educate them on different things that I felt were important, whether it be the proper use of alcohol or just trying to teach responsibility and personal choices, and it ended up being an amazing experience. I wanted to come back and do it again and help out.

Another resident assistant remarked:

My first year with the residents was a positive one. Although I wasn’t able to touch all of them, I was able to touch some of them by the way I behaved and the way I present myself personally.

From these conversations, it was easy to see what the professional staff members and resident assistants perceived as strengths that exist within the role of the resident assistant. Clearly the resident assistant position gave these students the opportunity to feel more involved and connected to her or his institution, to improve interpersonal and communication skills, along with developing potential long-term relationships. Additional strengths of this position are the ability to recognize and respect different opinions and lifestyles and the ability to be more flexible and patient.

To further assess the strengths of the position, I asked professional staff members and resident assistants what they believed would be the perceptions of other students, student affairs staff, and faculty regarding the role of the resident assistant. A few
professional staff members prefaced their answers by stating that they did not want to over-generalize, while others admitted that they had not really ever asked this question or sought out this information. In regard to what they thought would be the students’ perceptions, the responses varied; many stated that the perceptions were dependent on the type of interaction that the resident assistants had with students. Two participants stated that they believed students saw the resident assistant position as prestigious, while two other participants believed the opposite. Several, such as this professional staff member, spoke about how students see the demands of the resident assistant position. He stated:

I think they see it [resident assistant position] as a real strong leadership position on campus. It is highly respected. At the same time, I think they see it as kind of a real demanding position, one that requires a lot of time. I don’t know that they feel like they have time to put that much effort into the job.

Another staff member spoke about research that was done several years ago that looked at student perceptions of the resident assistant position at his institution. He shared that the “overwhelming feedback we got, particularly from people in terms of why they might not be interested in being an RA, was that they thought it was just too much work, that they are expected to do an awful lot.”

Generally the staff members felt that student affairs professionals outside of housing really appreciated the resident assistants and saw them as having the pulse of what was going on in the general student body. One staff member stated:

I do think that the student affairs division sees the RAs as a key link to the students. It is a way to deliver their services; it is a way to get to the student through the RAs. They see them as a valuable resource to them.

There was concern that sometimes the resident assistants may be taken advantage of by the student affairs administrators because they “have the idea that our RAs are the catch-all communicator for all things in student affairs.” Or there is a “huge expectation of the amount of knowledge that the staff [resident assistants] should have.”

When professional staff members were asked to speak to the faculty’s perception of the role of the resident assistant, most voiced that faculty probably don’t have a perception of the resident assistant role. As one participant stated:

I think that the faculty probably thinks that the RAs are there primarily to keep the students under control, and some [faculty] will understand that they do other things that vary from that. But in general, in my interactions with faculty and hearing faculty speak, when they do address a student affairs issue that is kind of what they think we are here for in general. I think they would extend that to the RAs.

Among the housing programs that incorporate living and learning or faculty associate programs, the professional staff thought that faculty who participated in the programs really did understand the role of the resident assistant and appreciated their presence in the hall. This is seen in the comments from three professional staff members.
General faculty probably don’t have much of a clue, but those that are associated with our living/learning programs, I think would say that the RAs are instrumental in perpetuating the success of the academic program as well as helping the students in those buildings assimilate to the campus climate and be successful here.

We do have a faculty associate program here and we have about 80 folks who are involved in that, faculty and staff members who volunteer to sort of mentor a particular residence hall floor. I think they tend to have a pretty positive perception of what the RAs are doing and what is happening on the floors and that type of thing.

Right now we have three living/learning communities, one in honors, one with our natural sciences and then key academic which is for our first generation students. I think if you talk to those folks [faculty], they would tell you that they love our students [resident assistants], they love working with them and that the majority of the learning happens outside of the classroom. And, I think that they get that. But with the rest of the faculty, it has really been a struggle.

Resident assistants, on the other hand, did not hesitate to answer questions pertaining to perceptions. In regard to the question about the student’s perception of the resident assistant’s role, the resident assistants also recognized that there could be differing perceptions depending on the type of interaction that a student had or hasn’t had with a resident assistant. One resident assistant stated: “They probably think we are mean, telling everyone what to do, not friendly.” A different perception is that students “look at it [resident assistant position] as something that they are limited as to what they can do if they become an RA, as if that takes up their entire life, and if you an RA, that is it.” None of the resident assistants stated that the position was seen as prestigious or a highly respected among students.

The majority of the resident assistants thought that student affairs administrators felt very positive about the resident assistant role. One resident assistant said:

We are their [student affairs] eyes. We are their eyes to the campus, we are the ones who are heavily involved with student life and the students here, and so they really look to us for advice.

Another resident assistant commented:

RAs have a big influence on what residents think is important on campus, especially if they are new students, “This is something important to go to, something fun to go to, this is something where you will meet a lot of people. It is worth your time” or “This isn’t something that is worth your time.”

Interestingly, there was only one resident assistant who discussed that the student affairs administrators looked to the resident assistant to be the community standards:
We are supposed to set an example of what a student could be in terms of personal, social, academic, career wise. We are supposed to be those types of community pillars. They look at us as if we are representing the university.

Generally the resident assistants reported the faculty had either no idea or just some idea as to the role of the resident assistant. A couple of resident assistants recognized, just as the professional staff did, that faculty who had been involved in the faculty associate or the living and learning programs had a better understanding of the resident assistant position along with a certain amount of respect and appreciation for the resident assistant. One resident assistant stated:

Well, I think some of them [faculty] do because we have the ones who teach the classes that some of our halls have, we have required classes if you live in that hall, they have the reserved classes. I think the professors who teach those classes understand.

The resident assistants who gave the following comments were from the same institution. The first resident assistant stated:

I think some of them do. We have a faculty associate program that tries to intermix faculty members who want to get involved with the residence halls. They match up a faculty member per floor and we will interact in social activities, maybe going to dinner down in the cafeteria some night with whomever on the floor wants to go. Or maybe we’ll go bowling and we’ll invite them along. It kind of is intended to be kind of a bridge between getting residents to feel comfortable to interact with professors and stuff like that. I know that several faculty members do acknowledge some of the things we do and try and support that pretty vigorously because they feel it is a pretty important aspect in their educational process.

The second resident assistant said:

I think they [faculty] have a lot of respect for us because we do a lot. We do focus so much on the academic. We have faculty associates on every floor, even in our suites and apartments, they have faculty associates. I have two media specialists. They are very involved and they invite us to their house. They really care about how the girls are doing. We include them as much as we can, and we want them to come and do programs on our floor….They see us in a good light.

The responses from both groups of participants did shed additional light as to the strengths and weaknesses of the position. For some this position is seen as a valuable asset to the campuses. However some of the responses gave an insight as to the perceived weaknesses which will now be explored.

**Perceived Weaknesses of the Role of the Resident Assistant**

Weakness, in the context of this study, is defined as “some inadequacy in a major activity or resource that reduces the institution’s ability to achieve its goals” (Hunt, et al.,
This investigation included an attempt to identify inadequacies in the role of the resident assistant that may limit a housing program’s ability to either recruit or retain good resident assistants. As was noted in the last section, the participants gave responses to the questions regarding their perceptions of what other students, staff, and faculty perceived as the role of the resident assistant. Most of those responses were considered weaknesses.

Another way to ascertain the perceived weaknesses was to ask both the professional staff members and the resident assistants, “If given the opportunity, what would be one thing the resident assistant would change about their role or responsibilities?” To help participants focus on roles, they were asked not to focus on compensation issues.

Responses from the professional staff members varied a great deal. One stated: “The one thing that would probably stand out would be rounds at 2 o’clock in the morning.” Visitation hours for this institution end at 2:00 a.m. so the resident assistant, who is on duty, has to walk through the hall to enforce this policy. Another one stated:

The programming model. It is very inconsistent from building to building. We have 15 different facilities, and of those 15 different facilities, you may find anywhere from 10 to 12 different programming models with different expectations. Currently this program is very decentralized.

This professional staff member mentioned the following:

There are a number of administrative type things. Once every three to four weeks we do what are called room and resident interactions and there is a report from that that has to be turned in. They [resident assistants] have to meet with every student, or at least attempt to meet with every student. That is potentially, depending on the floor and the number of students they have, a challenge. In addition to meeting with them, they are supposed to write down a very small amount of information about that interaction. We ask them to do facility reports and we do ask them to do weekly reports.

A different staff member believed:

A lot of them would not like to have to do the discipline--have to be the people who confront policy violations. I think that is probably the type of thing that they dislike the most about their position. They love doing the programming, some of them even like doing the conflict mediation. But the confrontation over policies and stuff, I think is the biggest one. A close second to that would be the “living in a fish bowl” thing, where you are an RA 24/7, and wherever you go, people treat you as an RA.

Another one noted:

I thing that they often get frustrated with our decentralized nature of the autonomy with our resident directors. They will make friends with the next hall over and get
frustrated that so-and-so has different expectations, or “My resident director imposed some quantitative expectations on me for programming and X [another resident assistant] didn’t, that’s not fair.” They are very into equal is fair here.

This staff member believed that her resident assistants would like to change the requirement of working the main desk.

I would say that for them it would probably be desk hours. Right now, the way it works is that we have them work desk and they work 75 hours a semester. Anything over that, we pay them….I think they really feel like if they weren’t at the desk, they could be using that to be in more contact with the residents on their floor.

One more staff member stated:

This academic intervention thing has not necessarily been super positive. I think, if they got rid of anything, they would get rid of that or they would get rid of duty.

With regard to the preceding quote, the academic intervention was a new program in which the resident assistants were to meet individually with each resident and discuss the resident’s academic progress and write a report on what was discussed. The plan was for the interventions to occur three times a year. Also the resident assistants were going to be given a copy of the fall grade point averages for each of their residents so that they could address any successes or difficulties the residents might be having.

A large number of resident assistants responded that they really couldn’t think of any way they would change the position, and they were happy with it the way it is. None of the resident assistants suggested taking away the role of policy enforcer. A few echoed the professional staff members’ thoughts that they would change the number of administrative responsibilities particularly related to paperwork and the number of required meetings. One resident assistant shared:

Definitely less staff and staff-oriented meetings. We are required to have one-on-ones, small staff, and big staff. Then we have monthly staff development…. When you’re a student and you have got all this stuff to do, it no longer feels like you are getting better at being an RA, it feels like another meeting you have to go to. I don’t know. They seem to be adamant about making us do this. They don’t really seem to want to change.

Another resident assistant commented: “There is quite a bit of paperwork and hanging signs and going to quite a few meetings that sometimes seem not to have as much of a point as they could.” Only two stated they would change the programming requirements. The most interesting theme that emerged from the responses of a few resident assistants was how they felt unsupported by their supervisors. One said:

I think I would change the way people respond to us. I think that our bosses are not the nicest people. Sometimes they say things that they shouldn’t say. I
haven’t really had it as much on me, but when they say, “You can be replaced” at every meeting, that is kind of not encouraging.

Another resident assistant suggested:

I would want us to be taken more seriously by our supervisors…. Sometimes we just are kind of the workhorses and just kind of do stuff and our feelings aren’t really considered.

Even though the professional staff member for that resident assistant did not mention this as something residents assistants would change, he stated later in the interview that he believed his resident assistants were not receiving good supervision and that was frustrating, not only for resident assistants, but also for himself. A resident assistant from another institution wished to:

Have more support from the top, both through public safety and through my resident director and area director, and on up the chain….I have more respect for her [housing director] than I would say all the resident directors and assistant directors on campus combined, just because she really is an advocate and a cheerleader for us. That makes our job almost in some ways worthwhile--to know that there is someone else supporting you.

The apparent weaknesses that emerged from the data centered around four general themes. First, the resident assistant position does not appear to be viewed as a prestigious leadership position. Second, the position is seen as demanding too much time. Third, for the most part, students and faculty have a very limited view of what the resident assistant position entails. Last, a perceived lack of support from supervisors has a negative impact on the resident assistant’s experience.

Environmental Scan

The next stage of this study was to conduct an environmental scan to help determine the opportunities and threats that exist in the external environment that may impact the role of the resident assistant. Due to time, I decided to limit which aspects of the external environment should be scanned. Technology, demographics, and social aspects were the three that were chosen due to their relevancy to housing programs. Each aspect was examined separately and, thus, will be presented in this manner.

Technology Aspect

All participants were asked whether technology affected the resident assistant role and, if so, how. An overwhelming number of participants equated technology with computers. It is important to note that all of the housing programs participating in this study have Ethernet connections in their halls. The participants’ responses highlighted trends, issues, or events in the area of technology that could be categorized as opportunities. They are followed by those that could be considered threats.

Opportunities found in technology. Several housing directors believed that technology had positively affected the resident assistant by providing resources for
programming, bulletin boards, etc. Having forms and reports that can be accessed by computer can make the administrative function of the resident assistant position easier. A professional staff member believed:

It certainly has enhanced the role for the RA because they can have distribution lists and groups and listservs and so there might be more interaction between residents but it is not the face-to-face interaction, it is through Instant Messenger and listservs and what not. They’ve been able to develop websites that give them [residents] instant information rather than having to search posters and bulletin boards for information. It is in their [residents’] rooms waiting for them on their computers.

One professional staff member pointed out that housing programs have the ability to create forms on-line that allow the students to help themselves rather than requesting help from the resident assistant. Students are able to fill out maintenance requests, housing applications, and other forms which lighten the administrative responsibilities for the resident assistants.

Many of the resident assistants echoed that the Internet has really given them many opportunities to find bulletin board, programming, and door tag ideas. Some resident assistants spoke about how the use of e-mail improved communication among the staff and with their supervisors. One resident assistant stated that he checks his e-mail more than his answering machine. Another positive impact is for resident assistants who have responsibility for an area that may be spread out between floors or buildings; by using e-mail, a website, or listservs resident assistants are able to quickly distribute the information.

When scanning *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, some interesting articles were found regarding trends in technology. They could be seen as opportunities by both the student and the housing programs. One trend internal to housing is the IBM Internet Laundry System that was scheduled to be launched at several universities in the fall of 2002. This laundry system allows residents of the hall to log onto a web site, find out if there are available washers in the hall, and then receive notice via e-mail when their laundry is finished (*The Chronicle of Higher Education*, 2002, A6). In addition to housing programs that provide forms and services on-line for students, there are other entities on campus with services on-line which residents can access from their rooms. Counseling centers, such as the one at University of Wisconsin at Eau Claire, have created websites that enable students to learn more about the services offered at the center, to get reliable information about common emotional issues, and to e-mail a counselor to set up an appointment. All of this can be done in a discreet and non-threatening fashion. Even though it is not on-line counseling, it has helped students access the counseling center without feeling awkward (Carlson, 2002). The health center at Washington University in St. Louis “uses a Web-based program allowing students to request appointments, renew prescriptions, and get lab-test results” (p.A49).

Based on the data, the technology aspect will provide opportunities that will continue to impact the role of the resident assistant in the future. There will be more resources available for both the staff and residents. There is potential to eliminate or streamline administrative tasks currently performed by resident assistants. In addition,
the ability to communicate in a quicker and possibly more effective manner is seen as an opportunity. Through the use of listservs, websites, and Instant Messenger there is an ability to create a community between residents who are not physically housed near one another.

Before discussing the negative impact of technology, it is important to note that many of the professional staff members in this study are struggling to figure out how they will deal with the changes that technology is bringing to the housing environment. One stated:

I think it [technology] really is helping them create community in ways that we don’t see. I would never have thought of doing a floor listserv as a way to build community or to get people to communicate with each other. So just getting them to sort of tap into that technology, and you know, I’m not very technology savvy at all. I guess it is not so much getting them, as much as allowing them to be able to define that as community building; whereas for me, community building means getting people out to know each other, not just their sign-in names. It is sort of a battle between what I consider to be traditional community and allowing students to build community in their own sort of technology way. I think that the technology can have an impact on their job. It is just a matter of 1) getting them the resources so they can utilize it; and 2) allowing them to be creative with that and not just sticking to the traditional views, but also knowing that they need to get some of those traditional views. I just don’t think you can resolve a roommate conflict by all four being online. But maybe you can. Maybe that’s me needing to get out of “The old way works the best.” People will be in one room, IMing their roommate in another. I’m like, “Just come over and talk to them.”

**Threats found in technology.** Some housing directors have also seen how technology has negatively impacted the community the resident assistant is trying to build and maintain. The most obvious issue is that the students isolate themselves in their rooms, and it has been difficult to get them to come out for programs. Another issue is the level of interpersonal interaction—not just between residents but between the resident assistant and the residents. One director commented that the resident assistants are part of the generation that really is plugged into technology, and that they, along with their peers, seem to have “less practice in their interpersonal skills as technology allows people to not deal with conflict and avoid confrontation.”

A professional staff member brought up the issue of cell phones and how they have affected students’ level of involvement in campus life. She stated:

The students’ reliance on cell phones...makes it harder for the new residents to get involved and acclimated to on-campus living. The RAs find a whole lot more homesickness because students are just constantly on their phones. They don’t have to worry about sharing them with their roommates, talking with their boyfriend, their girlfriend, their family members a lot more than if they didn’t have that handy technology. They will call them just at the drop of a hat.
This behavior does impact the resident assistant who is trying to get these students involved and help them overcome their homesickness. It is predicted that by 2005, at least 85 percent of college students will own a cell phone (Danis in Olsen, 2002).

One resident assistant noted that everyone has a cell phone, and when they are on the phone late at night, because they don’t want to disturb their roommates, they go out and talk in the hallway which wakes many of the other residents. Another resident assistant spoke about her frustration with both cell phones and the Internet.

Mainly I am finding it harder to get people away from what they are used to because a lot of people here just stay to themselves for a lot of things. They are in their room on the computer, they are always talking on the Internet, or they are talking on the cell phone. You can’t have a program without somebody’s cell phone ringing. A lot of people, instead of being here and enjoying themselves and being out interacting with other students, they are just on their phones or on their computers, or something like that.

Most professional staff members spoke about computer usage and its effect on community building. One staff member posed this rhetorical question when responding:

How do you develop a community when everybody wants to sit in their rooms and do things very much alone and on their own time? Being with other people in a group really is not valued, and it is not comfortable for a lot of our students.

Two other professional staff members brought up the issue that there are increasing numbers of discipline cases that involve either computer tampering, downloading of pornography, or harassment done through Instant Messenger. Along the same line, another staff member spoke about how the students communicate differently on-line than they might face-to-face which can make it frustrating for both the resident assistant and the professional staff to understand what the student might be feeling.

Students don’t even communicate in full words. They don’t spell the word, they use some cute little symbol that means that, and it has really eroded face-to-face personal communications. When I look at a student’s e-mail and then I have the student in my office, I am always surprised at how bold they are on the e-mail with their choice of words and their choice of tone, yet when they get in the office it is really not that way. It is hard to decide what the real feeling is.

As noted previously, residents’ use of Instant Messenger has impacted the resident assistant role. One resident assistant stated:

It is a lot easier to type something into a screen than it is to say something to someone’s face. The guy that lives next door to me, he’ll be IMing me and I’ll be like, “Dude, come over if you want to say something.” There have been a couple of times when people might be playing their music too loud and someone will Instant Message them and be like, “Hey, turn your music down,” and they might
use a couple of swear words or something, but they definitely wouldn’t say that to their face.

Another resident assistant talked about two roommates who would only talk to each other through Instant Messenger.

Three resident assistants raised another issue pertaining to technology—bandwidth usage. According to these resident assistants, it was being restricted due to residents’ downloading, gaming, or file-sharing. One article in *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (Carlson, 2001) highlighted one of the institutions in this study. The article cited that the technology staff at that institution had been in discussion with student leadership about posting the names of residence hall students who were hogging the bandwidth. The hope was that the other residents would eventually confront those students or that those students would be embarrassed.

In addition to bandwidth issues are those related to copyright violations. In various articles in *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, it was noted that over the past two years the recording and movie industry have started to take action regarding the illegal downloading of copyrighted material (Carlson, 2001, 2002; Carnevale, 2001; Kiernan, 2002). The recording industry has sued several college students while the movie industry is allowing the universities to handle the infringements and is not pursuing the students directly—at least for now—but that could change. Campuses have started to put various procedures in line to handle these copyright issues. Some are taking an educational approach which typically involves the residence life staff in this endeavor. Others are shutting off the Internet connection and taking the student through the judicial process. Regardless of the approach, the students who live in the residence halls who are downloading or sharing copyright materials are quickly identified, while their peers off campus are most likely using another Internet provider, making it more difficult to identify them.

Another issue involving computer usage focuses on the amount of time that residents spend on playing video games or surfing the Internet. The issue is that students are not managing their time well, which may cause problems completing academic work. One resident assistant had observed this issue with one of his residents and he even admitted that he too finds himself playing spades, a card game, on-line for a whole afternoon when he had originally planned to complete a homework assignment. Another resident assistant voiced a concern that he had a friend who suffered academic problems one semester because he got so involved in playing a computer game with other residents. He also sees residents on the floor not doing anything but playing computer games. He believes that “Video gaming is a problem…I think that is something somebody needs to look at.”

Isolation, illegal use of computers, academic problems, and erosion of interpersonal skills are current trends and issues that limit or may even threaten the resident assistants’ roles of community development, conflict mediation, and programming. Resident assistants are already recognizing how technology has impacted their position, and some are starting to be concerned about the negative impact on the residents.

It is apparent that technology can enhance the role of resident assistants as it provides additional resources for both the staff and residents. It is hoped that technology
will ease the burden of the resident assistant when it comes to administrative tasks, such as filling out maintenance requests, room condition reports, and other types of paperwork. On the other hand, the major threat that technology brings is the isolation of students which greatly impacts the ability to build community and to help the students get involved in campus life.

**Demographic Aspect**

Demographics is the second aspect of the external environment targeted in this study. Once again, the findings are presented first followed by the opportunities and threats that may exist in this aspect. All participants were asked: “What, if any, impact do demographics have on the role of the resident assistant?”

**Ethnicity and disabilities.** Responses from the housing directors tended to focus on ethnicity and disabilities trends and issues found in their housing population. One director commented that the resident assistants at her institution were targeting the African American population with their programming efforts because White students typically had left the campus to attend other social activities. However, it had become an issue that White students who did not go out did not feel welcome at the housing sponsored programs. Those resident assistants were challenged to find a balance in planning programs that would address both populations. Directors at the midwest and northwest institutions noted the increase of Hispanic and Latino students and a concomitant language barrier. Two other directors noted that they have more residents with disabilities. One director commented that his resident assistants dealt with “a lot of roommate conflicts as a result of the some of the disability issues,” which in turn burns out the resident assistant who is dealing with these issues. An interesting note was that one institution had hired a resident assistant who was blind. The director stated that it was the first time they had done this, and they were excited to see how this would work.

When professional staff members were asked this question, the response from two staff members particularly stand out from the rest. The first one remarked:

> We run about 12 to 14% African American students on this campus. Other schools in the state tend to run 3, 4, or 6% or something like that. I think that has been a very positive thing for us. We have been dealing with issues of diversity that I think a number of other campuses are just kind of discovering now as African American students move from being sort of invisible to being a very significant part of the campus and a very visible part of the student population. Now, conversely, one of the things that we face as a challenge is the fastest growing ethnic group is Hispanic and Latino in our state.

Another staff member noted her observations regarding this aspect.

> For many of the RAs, I don’t think they have had a lot of exposure to people of difference before they get here, people different from themselves. But when they get here, they’ve just kind of got not only students from around Florida who are different, but certainly from other areas of the country, as well as international students. It just becomes this kind of melting pot, which can be a pretty intense environment at times. I think it has tremendous value and I think the RAs really see that, but one of the places that they get the most uncomfortable is when that
tension is causing conflict. When those cultures come together in a celebratory way, I think the RAs really benefit from that and enjoy that tremendously and try and foster that kind of environment…I think we do ask the RAs to try and build community among a number of people who have had several different living experiences, and that is a hard thing. That, in itself, could be a job, to try and bring those people together who are at different levels of preparedness to be able to even do that. Some students don’t have any interest in doing that, and their parents are not particularly supportive of them doing it, either.

Most of the resident assistants answered that they had not seen any trends or issues in the demographics of the campus population. They said that the majority of the student population was Caucasian and in-state, and that it would most likely remain that way. This observation is interesting as an article in The Chronicle of Higher Education reported that minority enrollment had risen nationally. “Minority enrollment rose by 3.3 percent between 1998 and 1999, the latest year for which data are available. This is a slight increase from the previous year…” (Young, 2002, p.A54). Young noted that most minority students are attending public institutions due to the lower cost of tuition.

Interestingly, one resident assistant, who responded like the majority of the resident assistants, stated: “I wish I had more minority students on my floor….One [African American resident] doesn’t really challenge anything. It doesn’t challenge me.” Another resident assistant stated:

The only place I see it [diversity] really is I see it in race on my floor. When I was here as a freshman, in the fraternity quad, it was predominately, if not almost exclusively, White males or American White males. On my floor alone, I have got two Black kids on my floor, which I have never seen in the fraternity quad. That is really it.

When I asked if having only two African American residents impacted his role as a resident assistant he responded:

I thought when they [African American students] came in that it may, that I might have some problems, but I have never had a single problem with either of them. They are both rooming with white people, and they get along great. They are out whenever the hall is going to play soccer…

One different note regarding ethnicity was a response from an African American resident assistant who thought that the increase in Latino and African American students had helped her in her role.

I think it actually helps my role, because I am African American, so I can identify more with minority students and kind of be that role model for them, to show that you don’t have to go back home to what you know, because you can make it.

A resident assistant at another institution, who is Hispanic, voiced her frustration that at her institution “minority means African American, it doesn’t mean anything else.” Since
becoming a resident assistant she has been working on getting more programs for Hispanic students.

Gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students. Only one director commented about the impact of the increasing presence of openly gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students. He stated:

Sexual orientation also is a very big issue, I think… I see that as an issue that we’re going to have to deal with, and it is with our floors, parents, everything like that. I think it is something that is really, really going to come out more in the future.

A professional staff member remarked:

We have a lot of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered [students]. That is a trend that we’re dealing with. We educate our RAs on how we can make sure that our communities on our floors are very welcoming and inviting for all students. We are starting to see more openly GLBT students. So we’re starting to deal with a little bit of that.

One professional staff member noted that most of the halls at her institution were not gay, lesbian, or bisexual friendly. She also raised the concern that when training staff on sexual orientation issues it appears that some central staff in her housing program expected every resident assistant to celebrate different sexual orientations. Meanwhile, due to resident assistants’ level of personal development, they may be struggling with just understanding and tolerating different sexual orientations.

A few of the resident assistants did address the trend of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students being out in the residence halls. One resident assistant reflected on how things have changed since he was a first-year student.

I was a freshman in the summer of 2000, and since then I have noticed an increasing number of homosexuals and bisexuals who have been more open with themselves. It is more of a, “I’m not going to do anything about it, this is the way I am.” Whereas, when I first came, I remember it was more of a subtle kind of thing, a “Don’t mention it,” kind of thing. It has kind of gotten a little easier for everyone to deal with it, I think.

Another resident assistant stated that at his institution,

The homosexual [students] are more open or they are less afraid to say, “I’m a homosexual” or “I’m gay” and stuff like that. That is what I’ve seen, more people are more open and residents are less hostile compared to the past, where if you were gay or you were homosexual, I could not have any kind of interaction with you, where now if you are, “Okay, he’s gay” they might make a few jokes and laugh about it a little bit, but they don’t get to the point where they get hostile with a person.
Even though in my scanning of the two publications, I did not find information pertaining to the number or percentage of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students that are out about their identity, I did find an article regarding the new trend of coed roommates and how it has helped gay students to have a better roommate experience. Allowing males and females to live in the same room in the residence halls has recently happened at only a few colleges. At Swarthmore, it was done “in part to provide a residential alternative for gay students. For some, finding a same-sex roommate comfortable with her or his sexuality was difficult” (Borrego, 2001, p. A 29).

**Opportunities and threats found in the demographic aspect.** The increasing numbers of students from different ethnic backgrounds, students who have disabilities, or different sexual orientations will challenge both resident assistants and their residents. Previously in this chapter, I reported that several resident assistants thought they had benefited from meeting people different from themselves and that had broadened their views. Therefore, with an increase in the diversity of students, more opportunities will exist for resident assistants to meet other people who are different from not only themselves but their circle of friends. On the other hand, there is the potential threat of creating more conflict among residents that resident assistants will be required to mediate.

**Social Aspect**

The social aspect was the next area in the external environment examined for opportunities and threats. Four of the five issues that housing directors noted as impacting the role of the resident assistant were placed in this category. Those four were: a) mental health issues, b) parental involvement, c) conditions and configurations of the facilities, and d) alcohol and drug use. Each participant was asked if these four issues impacted the resident assistant role. Participants were given the opportunity to discuss any other social issues or trends that have impacted the role of the resident assistant. Due to the fact that an array of complex issues and trends emerged in this discussion, I present all of the issues and trends and then categorize the findings as opportunities or threats to the role of the resident assistant.

**Mental health issues.** The majority of the housing directors responded that mental health issues have impacted the role of the resident assistant. One commented:

> We certainly have more severe forms of mental illnesses now. It’s not typically an event, it is a few students with repeated events over a long period of time that suck the energy right out of an RA and everybody else with whom they have contact.

Another voiced her concern about the resident assistants not knowing who has a mental illness and what actions are to be taken when a student exhibits symptoms of the illness. She pointed out that:

> The RA has absolutely no clue about what difficulty residents on the hall might have until there is a crisis, until there is an incident and we’re looking at an RA to be in a position to try to help. We had a situation where RAs mistook a psychotic break for a bad drug experience and the police came and they did too and the
student ended up not getting the kind of medical attention that they needed for quite some time because nobody understood what this was that was causing it.

Creating additional anxiety for the resident assistants is another issue related to mental health. As one director mentioned:

I think the most significant impact I’ve seen over the last few years has been the increase of mental health issues. I remember when we started as a chief housing officer, about ten years ago, you had one page of people that had emergency issues and you voluntarily got the list of drugs that they were on and now it is a booklet….On the RA’s part I think there is a lot of anxiety in terms of trying to teach them how to deal with situations with that.

The professional staff members acknowledged that there appears to be an increase in the number of students who have a mental health illness who are living in the residence halls. In some cases, it appears that students are more willing than in the past to disclose what illness(es) they have and what medications they are taking to control the illness(es). However, the real issue that will most likely impact the resident assistant and the hall community is with the students who have not been diagnosed and treated for mental health illness or those who refuse to take their prescribed medication. One professional staff member noted the complexity of trying to distinguish the existence of mental health problems when students are turning to various methods of self-destructive behaviors.

It [mental health illness] obviously manifests itself in different ways. In some students, it is going to manifest itself in the alcohol use; that is their coping strategy for whatever mental health issues they’re having. In some of our other halls, alcohol isn’t prevalent but other self-destructive behaviors are prevalent. Eating disorders or self-mutilation kinds of things, we have seen those on an increase.

A professional staff member stated that he too has seen an increase in the number of eating disorders and that some of those students have been institutionalized one or two times prior to coming to college to help manage their illnesses but have relapsed.

Even those students who do not have a mental health illness will most likely experience and struggle with common emotional issues such as homesickness, relationship issues, sexual identity, and drug or alcohol abuse. And, in some cases, it is the actions of their peers that may cause them emotional trauma, particularly when a fellow student threatens or commits suicide. This was the case at one institution that was a part of this study. A student committed suicide a couple of weeks prior to the interview with the professional staff member. The student hung himself out a window of a residence hall during the day, and hundreds of students witnessed this tragic event. This staff member discussed the fact that students were coming forth sharing that they saw the body and for “a lot of kids who had dealt with suicide at high school--maybe a friend had attempted it or maybe having successful suicides in high school--all those feelings are rushing back.” As the staff member pointed out, this event alone can affect a large
number of students who will need the help of the resident assistants or counselors to help process the emotions and reactions.

Unfortunately, the institution described above was not the only one in this study that had a death by suicide in or directly outside their residence halls. Two other institutions in this study had a death by suicide during the fall 2002 semester. At one institution, a former resident assistant jumped from a ten story residence hall to her death. At the other institution, a resident had been found dead of an apparent drug overdose in his residence hall room.

One resident assistant stated that she had seen an increase in mental health issues since she had started college. She also stated there are “A lot of emotional problems, more than I was expecting. A lot more.” Another resident assistant also said that there was an increase in mental health problems among the residence hall students and believed that there needed to be better training on how to handle psychological issues. Several other resident assistants stated that they were not aware of any residents who had a mental illness but that they had residents who were experiencing some emotional problems due to dysfunctional families and relationship issues. Also, some of their residents were having a harder time socializing. One resident assistant in particular had a great deal of experience dealing with residents who had Attention Deficit Disorder. She spoke about how the residents would try to use their disorder as an excuse, and she would not let them get away with it. In addition, she kept a close eye on those residents and was able to tell when one of the residents was not taking her medication. She would hold that resident accountable by asking the resident why she was not taking her medication.

**Parental involvement.** The second issue is parental involvement. Even though all of the directors noticed an increase in parent inquiries on behalf of their students, they didn’t believe that resident assistants were affected by parental involvement as much as the directors had been. However, one commented that she believed that the resident assistants were often put in the middle of situations, and another thought that the parents expect the resident assistant, along with the housing staff, “to be like the answer to solve their family problems that they weren’t able to handle for 18 years. Now we are supposed to fix it yesterday.” Another noteworthy observation related to parent involvement was how needful students have become over the past ten years. A director commented:

They [students] have not learned how to take care of themselves because the parents have been taking care of them. When they get to campus they don’t have those skills to take care of their own problems, therefore we hear a lot more from our parents who continue to want to do everything for them. It is almost like the parents need for their children to be needy so that they have some self-worth because that’s what they’ve done, just kind of over-indulged some of their students. Unfortunately, sometimes we recruit these same needy students as RAs and we find ourselves trying to foster this, “Let’s be a little more independent”…As an example, when I interviewed an RA candidate this year, one of the things I asked her, “Where will you get ideas for programming?” [the candidate answered] “Well, my parents know everything, so I’ll call my parents to find out ideas.” I’m thinking there is something wrong with this picture.
The professional staff members also recognized the increase in parent involvement. They reported that, over the years, the number of parent interactions via phone, e-mail, and in person has steadily increased. They recognized that the resident assistant might initially receive a call from a parent, but as soon as that parent realizes the resident assistant is a student they will usually stop the conversation and go to the professional staff who has the authority to make the changes the parent is requesting.

On the whole, the resident assistants reported that they rarely received calls from parents. For those who did, the parents were trying to locate their children because they had not heard from them in the last twenty-four hours. A few resident assistants did state that even though they did not directly receive calls from parents, they knew that parents had called the housing staff in the central housing office to complain about various issues that had occurred in the halls.

**Conditions and configurations of residence hall facilities.** There was little focus group discussion regarding issues of conditions and configuration of residence halls. One director did state “Students today want more privacy than those buildings can afford and that may be a deterrent in trying to create the community in the buildings.” The rest of the directors in that focus group either nodded or verbally agreed with her statement. Most directors concur with Kellogg (2001) that “a new generation of students arriving on campuses expects better housing with an emphasis on more space, more amenities, and more privacy than previous generations ever would have thought possible” (p. A37). In addition, it should be noted that most of the institutions in this study were experiencing rising enrollment which typically results in wait lists for housing requests. Many of these campuses were in the process of renovating or building new facilities. Another housing director recognized that new construction or renovations have resulted in more suites or apartment style housing which allows the students to isolate themselves, making it more difficult for resident assistants to build the community. Another housing director commented that her housing program had difficulties recruiting resident assistants because the students did not want to live in the halls that existed at this institution.

Several of the professional staff members noted that these new or renovated halls were suite or apartment style housing that would be open year round, a new concept for their residence life programs. Each staff member spoke about the necessity of making decisions as to the role of resident assistant and how that role would most likely change with these new facility designs and availability issues. At one of these institutions, the title for the paraprofessional position that staffed their new apartment housing was changed to community facilitator. The name change occurred because the primary role of the paraprofessional is to build a community. One professional staff member hoped that offering apartment style housing would help to recruit upperclassmen to apply for the resident assistant position. Upperclassmen typically move to apartments off campus to take advantage of those facilities.

One resident assistant observed that due to a residence hall renovation, parking spaces had been taken away which caused frustration with the residents. Another resident assistant commented about the construction of new halls:

There is a lot of building….They are doing two new halls that will be open in the fall….I think for me, that has kind of given me more pride in the school, which in
Alcohol and drugs. A majority of the participants in this study seemed to agree that alcohol and drugs have impacted and will always impact the RA role. However, as the housing directors pointed out, the greatest impact stems from the way institutions are being asked to combat the alcohol and drug issues. One director stated:

I don’t know that our RAs are facing that much of a different experience from what I faced as an RA with alcohol. But we are far more cognizant of it. I think we have a much higher standard in terms of RA behavior toward alcohol than there ever was when I was one. It was far more casual.

Another group member echoed that “[alcohol] was much more part of the college experience than a problem.” Research conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute, at The University of California at Los Angeles, shows that the trend of freshmen using alcohol is rising. “The percentage of students who drank beer frequently or occasionally grew from 45.8 percent at the beginning of freshman year to 58.5 percent by the end” (The Chronicle of Higher Education, 2002, p. A40).

Regarding the drug issue, one director voiced his observation that students as a whole do not see anything wrong with using marijuana. Therefore, he questioned how difficult it might be for resident assistants to enforce a drug policy when they, like most other students, have the same belief. How does a resident assistant resolve the conflict between their personal beliefs and the policy she or he is asked to enforce was the question posed to the rest of the directors in his focus group. One director answered that maybe the resident assistants should not be confronting alleged drug violations. Another director stated that the resident assistant should not have to confront an alleged drug violation on her or his own but should get the campus police involved. The remaining three directors did not respond. The first director’s observation regarding marijuana use is substantiated by the reported increase in the number of drug arrests on campuses for 2000. Nicklin (2002) wrote that “Drug arrests at the nation’s colleges increased 10.2 percent in 2000, a rise that some college officials attribute to a more casual attitude among students toward drugs, particularly marijuana” (p.A32).

Two professional staff discussed which issues they had already dealt with during the fall 2002 semester pertaining to alcohol and drugs. One stated:

We’ve already seen quite a few incidents of alcohol poisoning. But most of the drinking is happening off campus and they come back to the halls at night and they’re in the bathroom throwing up or sick, passed out. So we are continually dealing with that.

A second staff member remarked that staff at her institution, were experiencing issues pertaining to binge drinking.

Probably not as many students go out Thursday, Friday, and Saturday and have five beers and hang out. We’re having more and more that go to detox because
when they do go out, they run 15 shots of tequila or whatever, and end up in the hospital. The RAs are the ones who end up doing follow-up and making sure people are okay and they get the first call.

The resident assistants made comments regarding either the usage of alcohol and or the enforcement of alcohol policies. One resident assistant stated: “I have definitely seen more of alcohol everywhere, and it seems like every night all the freshmen are out partying. I just don’t see how they can do that. I never did that, I never have.” Another resident assistant gave her opinion about this trend regarding alcohol usage.

It is probably the trend that impacts the campus the most just because of things that go on and events that can happen when people are intoxicated. I think that is the biggest trend that our college right now has to worry about.

One resident assistant, who attends an institution that was named as a top party school by The Princeton Review, recognized the increase in both the policing done by the campus police and by the resident assistants themselves. As he shared: “We have to do more policing in our building than we would have a couple of years ago when it was more lax before we were the number one party school and all that.”

**Additional trends.** Besides the four issues noted above, a few additional trends and issues were identified and discussed by participants. One trend highlighted by only one of the housing directors was the increasing number of students who have criminal records who want to live in housing. He explained that in one situation there was a student who had been charged with murder but his case had not been to trial and, therefore, he could not be denied admission into the institution or housing. Another director spoke to what she thought was an increase in students who were involved in gangs coming to her institution and continuing to be involved in the gang related activities. When I interviewed the resident assistant from this director’s institution, I asked if gangs were present in the halls. He said he did not see gangs or gang related activity in the halls. He did state, however, that he had observed gang activity in the city where the campus is located.

One professional staff member cited a lack of socializing as a trend that had not been discussed before in focus groups or interviews.

Some of the things I think are interesting just as a trend nationally, even in the past four or five year, students’ attitude socially are much more negative than I think they were. Maybe not necessarily more negative, but not as positive. They are just kind of like, “No, I really don’t care to hang out with you and I really don’t care what you think.” Not necessarily real negative towards other people, but not necessarily always real open and accepting. I think that there has been a little bit of an attitude shift and that affects our staff and students.

When I interviewed the resident assistants from that institution, one did say she saw this trend particularly with one group of first year students that resided on her floor. This group of women had all gone to high school together and they obviously are only interested in each other. She said:
It is not that they don’t seem genuinely nice, it’s kind of one of those, “Hi, you’re standing at my door talking to me, why are you here? I don’t need anything, so you can leave now.” They are only interested in what they are doing.

This, of course, was frustrating for the resident assistant who continued to explain how she tried to get residents involved by asking them what they like to do so she could set up a program that would provide an opportunity for these residents to get involved. Then, when she asked if they would participate in the activity, they promptly replied: “No, but thanks.”

A few resident assistants spoke about the conservative environment in their halls and on campus. Due to this conservative environment, those resident assistants thought that it was unlikely that new social trends would impact their campuses. One of those resident assistants acknowledged his role in reinforcing the conservative climate.

Social trends that are much different from what is considered the status quo are looked down upon and I am guilty of doing this as well. This is such a conservative campus, that something that is very different is seen as not being right. That is just a continuing challenge that some of us as RAs face, but I think campus leaders in general are going to be especially confronted with this in the next 3 or 4 years.

**Opportunities and threats in the social aspect.** Many of the trends and issues that have been reported for this aspect of the external environment are considered threats since they have the potential to reduce the ability for the resident assistants to build community within their area. I was unable to determine whether parental involvement was a threat or opportunity. Based on the findings, it appears that the resident assistants are not affected by this trend of increased involvement of parents. Then the issue of conditions and configurations of residence halls was categorized as both an opportunity and a threat. Renovated or new halls can serve as an opportunity to recruit resident assistants. However, facilities that have not been renovated and have the traditional style double corridor with community bath may be seen as deterrent in recruitment of resident assistants. Renovated halls, particularly those that are now configured as suites or apartments, may threaten attempts to build a community.

**Document Analysis of Resident Assistant Training Schedules and Manuals**

After gaining a better perspective as to the opportunities and threats that exist in the three aspects of the external environment, I analyzed the training schedules and resident assistant training manuals to determine if the three aspects were addressed and how they were addressed, if they were addressed.

**Technology Aspect**

Only five housing programs included a session during their intensive training period that focused on technology. When asking for clarification regarding the content of the technology sessions, one professional staff member elaborated that their training session targeted “on-line communication and online journaling, specifically sharing personal information and resident information on-line, and the degree to which that is appropriate or ethical…” A resident assistant at another institution explained that during
their technology session they meet the staff responsible for maintaining and repairing problems related to computers. Two institutions had a thirty or forty-five minute session that allowed their information technology staff to share information regarding their services.

The training manuals did not have any sections devoted to technology. Two manuals provided a list of websites that could be used for programming and resources. In another manual, there were instructions for using the institutional event planning website that resident assistants are to use when planning a program. Otherwise technology was not addressed in the other sections of the manuals.

**Demographic Aspect**

Upon reviewing the training schedules, the majority of housing programs did address the issues of demographics through awareness and sensitivity training sessions. Although there was a noted difference in the amounts of time that were designated to this topic and also that some institutions targeted specific demographic groups such as students with disabilities or gay, lesbian, bisexual or transgendered students.

None of the manuals contained information as to the general demographics of the student population. Information was provided in most manuals regarding the name and contact information for departments or offices that dealt with specific types of populations. A few manuals did have sections devoted to specific issues related to diversity and certain demographic populations. One manual included tips on what to do when you meet a person with disabilities. Another manual contained a list of definitions pertaining to terms that are used when discussing various diversity issues and a guide to help staff that are unsure as how to interact with gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students.

**Social Aspect**

As I reviewed training schedules and manuals, I noted whether these four areas were addressed: mental health, parental involvement, conditions and configurations of residence halls, and drugs and alcohol.

**Mental health.** The issue of mental health was not presented as a general topic by any of the housing programs during their training. However, most institutions did have training on developing helping skills that would enable a resident assistant to understand when a resident’s problem needs to be referred to the counseling center. Also, most housing programs provided training on handling crisis situations which included attempted suicides. A few institutions trained resident assistants on recognizing eating disorders and abusive relationships. There were a few schools that invited their counseling centers to address the resident assistants, so that resident assistants became familiar with their services.

Again, in the manuals, there was not a section which focused on mental health with the exception of one manual. In this manual there was a section devoted to recognizing depression and other mental health illnesses. Most manuals included general tips or strategies addressing helping skills and suicidal threats. A few gave an outline of the steps resident assistants are to take when dealing with a psychological emergency.

**Parental involvement.** In both the training schedules and manuals there was nothing that directly addressed parental involvement. Indirectly, some of the manuals mentioned that student information cannot be shared with parents unless a student has waived her or his rights to privacy.
Conditions and configurations of residence halls. Most training schedules included sessions that pertained to maintenance related issues such as how to fill out a repair order, how to respond to a facility related crisis, and hall or area specific facility issues due to the conditions of the facilities. A few schools did separate their staff for training based on areas or facilities. For example, a school with apartments and traditional residence halls had all the resident assistants assigned to the apartments meet separately. It appears that in some cases this was done because the housing program wanted to address specific issues related to the facilities.

The manuals also contained information on how to handle facility related issues. There were a few housing programs that had separate procedures and policies in their manuals, for the different configurations that existed in their housing inventory.

Alcohol and drugs. The majority of the training schedules had a session or sessions devoted to alcohol issues primarily. Typically the sessions focused on alcohol policies, how to confront an intoxicated person, and how to respond to alcohol poisoning.

One housing program had devoted a day long retreat during training where they examined various aspects of alcohol and drug use by college students. A few schools did address the drug issue. A housing program had a session regarding club drugs. Two housing programs had the campus police burn pellets that produced marijuana-like smoke so resident assistants could detect marijuana use.

Only a few housing programs addressed alcohol and drug issues in their manuals. In some of those cases, the housing program was giving resource information on this topic but rather telling resident assistants about the expectations and consequences of alcohol and drug use.

Summary of the SWOT Analysis

Conducting the SWOT analysis helped determine what participants perceived as the strengths and weaknesses of the resident assistant role. Then the analysis focused on the opportunities and threats that existed in three aspects of the external environment and how they impact the role of the resident assistant. The document analysis clearly showed that the housing programs have not addressed the issues and trends that all three stakeholders spoke about when discussing the three aspects of the external environment.

Having established the strengths, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities, it was then important to see which of the three aspects might have the most impact in the future role of the resident assistant. The next section contains the thoughts of each group of stakeholders as to which of the three aspects of the external environment will have the most impact on the role of the resident assistant in the next 10 to 20 years and how that may change the role of the resident assistant.

Future Role

In order to determine what housing professionals and resident assistants perceive as how the role of the resident assistant will change, all stakeholders were asked which of the three aspects-- technology, demographics or social-- will have the greatest impact on the role of the resident assistant in the next 10 to 20 years.

Housing directors. A majority of the housing directors responded that the social aspect would have the greatest impact. Three directors expanded on their answer as to why this would be the case. One director responded:
I think they’re [resident assistants] going to run with technology, a lot of that is just part of their inherent self at this point. I think I know where we’re going demographically with the population over the next ten years and, maybe it’s more my anxiety than anybody else’s, but I think the social. I don’t know where we’re going to go socially, yet. I think that is going to probably impact more than anything else, to me anyway.

The second one noted:

I think it has been said that our role on residential campuses is going to be to socialize society. Because they’re coming here, often in little cocoons and then staying in those little cocoons, and we’ve got to figure out some way to break that down.

A third housing director declared:

The lack of social skills is going to be a major problem. I remember when my grandparents talked to me about, “This person was a great conversationalist…” I’m thinking, “Great conversationalist?” But they thought that was really important, to be able to carry on a good conversation with someone, to be social, to be better with all the things like that. No one even thinks about that now. I think if you don’t have good social skills, if people aren’t able to communicate well, all the other things are not as important.

**Professional staff members.** The majority of the professional staff members, unlike the directors, believed that technology will have the greatest impact. One professional staff member reflected on his own observations about technology and how it has changed the role of the resident assistant.

One of the things I go back to is remembering when I started out being an RA in the early 70s. Nobody had a TV in the room, no cable hookups or anything like that. I remember being able to go into my TV lounge and spend a couple three hours and see probably 70 to 80 percent of my guys because it was a true commons area. Everybody came through there; even if they didn’t come in to watch TV, they stuck their heads in to see who was there. Frankly, I remember a real sense of rose-colored glasses, many years later, of an RA being kind of easier because you had true commons areas, true central gathering areas that everybody shared. Then I remember, as we got TVs and cable, first there was a TV in every four or five rooms and particular rooms would become sort of mini-common areas for that cluster of rooms, and now of course we have at least one TV in every room. Anyway, I guess to me, that is an example of in a sense, how the RAs job has gotten harder when you talk about building community, building connections, building bonds within the group, as that sort of technology has changed. I guess my point on that is I think that technology gets into what we do in an awful lot of ways and, in many cases, very subtle kinds of ways, but very profound kinds of ways.
Another professional staff member who answered that technology will have the greatest impact asked a thought provoking question: “Will students [resident assistants] do rounds online? That is, where the residents are. If you want to get to know your residents, why don’t you get into a chat room with them and chat?” Other professional staff members saw technology as making the role of the resident assistant easier, particularly as it related to administrative tasks and communication with staff and students.

**Resident assistants.** Unlike the other two stakeholder groups, resident assistants were more divided as to which aspect would have the greatest impact. Ultimately, resident assistants believed it would be the social aspect. A resident assistant said: “Social and technology can kind of go hand-in-hand, but I really feel like social is by far the most important…you can incorporate technology, but I really feel that interaction with your residents is very important.” Other resident assistants clearly believed that technology and demographics would not have as great of an impact on the role of the resident assistant as the social aspect would have. Below are three responses from resident assistants who supported this view. The first resident assistant commented:

I think it is going to have to be the social. I think it has been, up until now, and I think it will continue to be. No matter how much technology you have, regardless of the demographics, if you don’t have the social aspect with your residents, if you don’t have an understanding of what their social values are, you can’t reach them, you can’t work with them as well as you could otherwise.

Another resident assistant noted her observations:

You are seeing more and more students who are coming with baggage, and it is making the RA position much harder….You have to reach more people, and you have to make your programs more appealing to different people. I think that is going to be changing over the years.

A third resident assistant discussed the following:

I think it all comes down to social. I really do. Technology is going to continue to advance and students are going to bring all sorts of new gadgets to the residence halls. But as far as impacting the RAs and their role, I don’t see that impacting them dramatically. Demographics, I think, will certainly influence, but I think it all comes down to the social aspect because that, it seems, is the primary emphasis of our role now. Maybe I am not looking in the future far enough that I just don’t see how that could change. It seems like just the nature of our job is a social based job, whether it be interacting with residents, whether it be challenging their ways of thinking, whether it just be providing ourselves as a resource, providing ourselves as a leader on campus. I think those are all aspects of the social aspect, and I guess I don’t see how that could change and continue to grow without changing the whole RA job completely. I really think when it all comes down to it, I think the social influence will remain as the primary influence, and I think that the way things are going right now, as far as the way
the world is going right now, I think it is going to continue to be the more challenging aspect.

One resident assistant thought that the social aspect would have a greater impact as her institution was moving away from community style living by building suites and apartments. Even though the scope of the question was limited to those three aspects, overall, the responses suggest that the resident assistant’s role will change in that there will be more of a need or expectation for resident assistants to promote socializing between the residents and help residents strengthen their social skills. Housing programs that recognize this trend will most likely place even more emphasis on developing relationships between the resident assistant and the resident and then between the residents themselves. As one resident assistant stated that the “nature of our job is social” and it will continue to be even more so focused in the future.
CHAPTER 5
CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This chapter presents a brief review of the purpose of this study along with the research design. It also contains a summary of findings for each research question, followed by the implications of the findings, and recommendations for housing professionals. To conclude this chapter, recommendations for further research are given.

Purpose

The purpose of this study was to explore potential changes in the role of the resident assistant in public college and university housing programs. This exploratory study was guided by the following research questions: What is the current role of student paraprofessionals, otherwise known as resident assistants, in public college and university housing programs? What do practicing professionals and resident assistants in public college and university housing offices perceive as the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the resident assistant position? How do housing professionals and resident assistants perceive that the role of the resident assistant will change?

Summary of Research Design

To provide findings that would be rich with description and applicable for housing programs, a qualitative approach that involved multiple sites, methods, and populations was utilized. The multiple sites consisted of seventeen public four-year institutions that housed a minimum of 2,000 students. Data was collected through questionnaires, focus groups, individual interviews, and reading of documents. Three different populations were interviewed: housing directors, professional staff members, and returning resident assistants.

Summary and Discussion of Findings

This section contains a summary of the findings for each research question along with relevant discussion pertaining to the findings.

Current Role of Resident Assistants

Since the last research articles pertaining to the role of the resident assistant were published in 1982, it was necessary to determine the current roles of resident assistants before looking for the anticipated roles. In the focus groups, housing directors were asked to identify three primary roles of the resident assistants at their institutions. They replied with the following roles: community builder, policy enforcer/disciplinarian,
referral agent, programmer, mediator, academic promoter, administrator, role model, agent of the state, interventionist, transitional agent, and friend.

Housing professional staff members reported that resident assistants carry out these various roles: first responder, receptionist, tour guide, advisor, health and safety inspector, programmer, academic interventionist, and administrator. When resident assistants discussed their roles at their respective institution, they gave the following roles: friend or sibling-like, resource referral agent, community builder, policy enforcer, mediator, role model, university representative, programmer, and liaison between residents and university departments.

For the most part, the responses echoed Buhrow’s (1999) statement found in a short editorial piece regarding the numerous roles housing programs expect resident assistants to handle. She stated, “we are asking the RA to be all things to all people--a peer helper, community developer, administrator, cheerleader, mentor, friend, sanitation engineer, and policy enforcer” (p. 12). However, as was evident in the findings of this study, not only have new roles been added to the resident assistant position but the long standing roles have become more complex.

New roles. The new roles of academic promoter, academic interventionist, agent of the state, advisor, mediator, tour guide, university representative, health and safety inspector, and liaison with university departments have been created to respond to different needs or expectations within the university. A number of housing programs in this study have recently implemented academic initiatives to help support the retention efforts of their institutions in addition to creating stronger connections between the classroom and out-of-the classroom experiences. The difference between the academic promoter and the interventionist is slight, however, noteworthy. In the academic promoter role, an environment is created on the floor by the resident assistant which enables residents to study, recognizes academic achievement, facilitates study groups, and provides programs that reflect the academic program that is housed in the hall.

Serving as an academic interventionist is different in that the resident assistant meets with each resident two or three times a year to discuss the resident’s grades and any academic difficulties she or he is experiencing. They also may be promoting academics, but in this role they are actually intervening in students’ academic lives.

Serving as an agent of the state and conducting health and safety inspections are roles that reflect the new and on-going laws pertaining to campus safety and security. The new reporting laws require institutions to provide statistics for various types of criminal activity that range from homicide to alcohol violations. Therefore, resident assistants who confront alcohol violations are required by law to report these violations to their supervisors. Health and safety inspections are done to insure that residents adhere to fire codes and health standards.

Being a tour guide for the housing department or university is not a surprising role since resident assistants have been so well trained and possess a great deal of knowledge regarding university resources. In addition, parents and prospective students appreciate the fact that the tour guide is actually a resident of the hall.

The fact that resident assistants saw themselves as university representatives and liaisons meant that they feel their role is integral to the institution’s mission. They are involved and recognize that other departments and offices look to them to provide observations and feedback as to what the students want or need or think. However, at
least three of the housing professional staff members discussed that there are times when
the other departments expect too much or rely to heavily on the resident assistants for this
information. Therefore, the professional staff member has to decide which departments
can have access to the resident assistants.

The role of mediator is most often used to help resolve roommate conflicts. When two or more people live together in the same unit, conflict will eventually arise due to different expectations and lack of communication. In the past, conflicts that were addressed between the residents themselves; now residents seem less willing or able to address the issues and the situation requires the resident assistant to mediate the conflict. Another reason this role has become important is due to the fact that over the past few years, housing programs in this study have opened their halls at full capacity. This meant that residents who experienced roommate problems could not move, therefore, mediation was necessary.

Serving as an advisor for hall government is a new role and is potentially time consuming. In some cases resident assistants were not actually advising the hall government but rather were advising their floor president or hall government representative. The main goal in advising was for the resident assistant to support the floor president in her or his programming efforts. Two resident assistants who were expected to advise their floor presidents ended up doing the work themselves. This was not surprising since the resident assistants understood the importance of providing programs to promote community building.

Long standing roles. Many of the long standing roles such as community builder, policy enforcer, programmer, administrator, transitional agent, role model, and friend require more involvement than in the past and carry higher expectations. As one housing director specifically stated, they are housing more first-year students than ever before to help support the university’s retention goal. The majority of the institutions in this study reported that their housing populations were predominantly first-year students. This shift has resulted in fewer upper-class students living in the residence halls, which results in a community where the maturity or leadership role modeling that once existed is lacking. Now the resident assistant has to fill this void. Additionally, the role of transitional agent becomes more important in the goal to retain students. There is more emphasis placed on the resident assistant to help with the transitioning process that first-year students experience. Therefore, they are expected to learn more about the resources available to students and to make appropriate referrals.

Due to the increases in enrollment, most of the institutions have developed retention plans that focus on getting the students connected and involved in the university. To help with that issue, housing programs are asking the resident assistants to build welcoming and involving communities on their floors and within the hall. Therefore, there are now greater expectations on the resident assistant in the role of community builder. Resident assistants are expected to have more one-on-one interactions that facilitate relationships between the resident assistant and residents. At one institution in this study, resident assistants were required to document the content of those interactions on a monthly basis.

Programming models that provided structure for the resident assistants when planning programs have also changed. In most cases the old programming models prescribed what the resident assistants needed to do. For example, housing programs that
used the wellness model required staff to plan programs that met the different components of the wellness model. Now many of the programming models require resident assistants to assess the needs of the residents and then provide programs that will address those needs. This requires more of the resident assistant’s time and energy. It is important to note that two housing programs did not have the expectation that resident assistants serve in this role; instead, that was the role of the floor president. However, the resident assistants from those housing programs reported that they do plan the programs because either their floor presidents do not assume the responsibility or the resident assistant found it easier to plan the programs than train the floor president to plan programs.

Changes in the way institutions address alcohol and drug usage along with the new reporting laws have impacted the role of policy enforcer. As the housing directors discussed, it is not so much that the drinking and drug use have changed but that universities are expected to take more responsibility for this problem. Therefore, today, university administrators develop and implement more policies that address this issue. Many of these policies require enforcement. This is where the role of the policy enforcer can become even more difficult, particularly if the consequences for the residents who violate the alcohol or drug policies are severe. Resident assistants may be more reluctant to confront an alcohol or drug violation in the case of severe consequences because they do not want to be seen as the person who was responsible for a resident’s sanction. Or, a resident assistant may face students who are more argumentative or violent towards the resident assistant because they fear the sanctions that are going to be given. These students will try to intimidate the resident assistant so the violation will not be reported. Most frequently, the resident assistant believes that her or his main role is to be a friend to the residents; consequently, she or he grapples with how to remain a friend after documenting a resident for a violation.

Overall, the role of administrator appears to have grown in regard to the number of tasks and expectations that are required of resident assistants. Every resident assistant in this study was required to attend a weekly staff meeting which typically ran more than one hour. Resident assistants were required to either meet with their supervisor weekly or biweekly as well. Several housing programs required their resident assistants to work as the receptionists beyond the hours that they were on-duty. The number of forms that resident assistants are required to fill out has grown. In some cases, housing programs did put the forms on-line; however, many of those resident assistants were frustrated because the on-line version was not always up and running.

**Analysis of resident assistant job descriptions.** Analysis of the resident assistant job descriptions from the seventeen institutions brought forth two interesting observations. First, though the resident assistants perceived their number one role was to be a friend, only one institution included that role in its job description. Second, not one of the job descriptions stated that resident assistants were recognized as agents of the state nor that they were responsible for reporting certain types of behaviors.

**SWOT Analysis**

Who would have anticipated that Lowell’s message given in his inaugural address at Harvard prior to 1900 would continue to be relevant in today’s world? He “urged that dormitories, especially for freshmen, be built and that everything within reason be done to develop undergraduates as people as well as students” (Coulter, 1934, p. 760). A
majority of schools included in this study were building or renovating residence halls. When those institutions opened their halls in Fall, 2002, they were unable to accommodate all the requests for housing. Housing directors and professional staff members were not only concerned with building facilities to meet increasing demand, but they were also brainstorming and implementing different strategies to address the goal of developing undergraduates into responsible individuals. A secondary goal was to retain them as students. These strategies led to implementation of living/learning programs and other academic interventions which have resulted in additional responsibilities for the resident assistants.

Since Lowell’s inaugural address, the level of influence from the different aspects of the external environment has changed. I will address three different environmental aspects of (1) technology, (2) demographics, and (3) social and will show how they have affected or will affect the residence hall living environment. All three sets of stakeholders acknowledge that not only are the resident assistants carrying out the long standing roles that Holt and Davidson (1967) and Buhrow (1999) defined, but that several new roles have been added to this position as a result of the influences from the external environment.

Realizing and understanding how different aspects of the external environment influence the role of the resident assistant will help the housing staff to plan and strategize appropriate organizational changes for resident assistants. Examining the different aspects of the external environment that influence the resident assistant position through the use of a SWOT analysis was insightful. Jonsen’s model (1986) provided guidance as to which aspects of the external environment were scanned.

Summary of the SWOT Analysis

During this analysis, the strengths and weaknesses of the current roles of the resident assistant were examined. This examination was followed up by looking at the opportunities and threats that exist in technology, demographics, and social aspects of the external environment that might impact the role of the resident assistant. This analysis helped to answer the second research question which was: What do practicing professionals and resident assistants in public college and university housing offices perceive as the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats of the resident assistant position?

Strengths. The greatest strength that emerged during the analysis was reported by resident assistants when asked how this experience had changed them. It still rings true that student involvement in everyday affairs of the institution is “invaluable in training students for democratic leadership, community participation, and in personal development” (Aceto, 1962, p. 23). Resident assistants reported that their experiences and the training they received helped them become more involved in campus life, find their niche, and strengthen interpersonal skills. Several participants noted that they had become more patient and developed more respect for others’ opinions and lifestyles.

Additionally, the majority of resident assistants related that they had matured and had become more responsible in their everyday lives. They attributed this change to the fact that they were responsible for helping other students. Their statements support Heath’s conclusions found in Ender and Carranza (1991) that “personal development of college students can be enhanced through programs that expect and encourage students to take responsibility for growth in others and provide opportunities for students to assume
alternative roles” (p. 535). As established in the last chapter, the resident assistant definitely assumes a variety of alternative roles depending on the situations.

Making friends and having strong relationships with peers and professional staff members were outcomes that echoed Hardin’s (1999) findings from her research pertaining to the outcomes of paraprofessional experiences. For many of the resident assistants in this study, those relationships were the reason they decided to return as a resident assistant for another year. A less obvious outcome that Ender (1984) wrote about was raised by a few resident assistants: this experience caused them to alter or choose a different career path or this experience opened their eyes to a career with similar roles.

Weaknesses. A weakness was defined as any aspect that would possibly limit a housing program’s ability to recruit and retain resident assistants. When developing the interview guide I expected to receive ample feedback from the resident assistants to the question “If given the opportunity to change your position, how would you change it?” However, this was not the case. The majority of the resident assistants stated that they liked the position as it was and could offer no changes.

The responses that were unexpected came from the question: “How is the resident assistant position perceived by other students, staff, and faculty?” The majority of the responses pertaining to student and faculty perceptions of the role of the resident assistant were negative or indifferent. Those responses provided data that were mainly categorized as weaknesses.

There were four themes that I categorized as weaknesses. The first theme focused on administrative responsibilities and duties. The first issue within this theme was the required meetings. Specifically, meetings seemed to be increasing in number, lacked substance, and were seen as timewasters by the resident assistants. The second issue focused on initiatives or programs that were time intensive and required excessive paperwork. At one institution, which had piloted the academic intervention program, the professional staff member and the resident assistants stated that the interventions took more time than expected. They stated the required reporting after each intervention was tedious. Another housing program had just required resident assistants to post availability hours which meant they had to be in their rooms and free to interact with residents. These hours were in addition to the hours they were on duty or working as a receptionist at the main desk in their hall. Since this initiative was implemented a short time prior to the interview, the professional staff member guessed that the resident assistants would be frustrated by this new requirement. She was right. Both resident assistants were frustrated and felt that the initiative was unrealistic.

The second theme categorized as a weakness was that the resident assistants perceived that their positions were not regarded as prestigious or as valued as other student paraprofessional positions on their campuses. This perception or belief can negatively impact the recruitment process because students may seek paraprofessional positions that are perceived as more prestigious. Also, if the resident assistants are not feeling valued, this leads to low morale among the staff.

Poor supervision, including lack of support from supervisors, had a negative impact on resident assistants’ experiences and, therefore, was categorized as a weakness. One professional staff member acknowledged that the supervisors for the resident assistants at his institution were not as experienced or as effective as they should have
been. This was a frustration to him because the resident assistants were not getting the best experience. Two resident assistants from different institutions spoke about how demoralizing it was to be yelled at constantly in staff meetings and to be threatened with termination.

The last theme was that students and faculty perceived a very limited role of the resident assistant: and this view was mainly negative or indifferent. Unless faculty are a part of a faculty associate program or teach in a residence hall, resident assistants believe that faculty do not know about the resident assistant position. Resident assistants believe the students would say that the resident assistant’s role is to be a hall monitor. On a different note, students may think that if you are a resident assistant the position will take up your whole life.

**Opportunities and Threats in External Environments**

**Technology aspect.** Not surprisingly, there were several trends and emerging issues in regard to technology. The trends and emerging issues that were considered opportunities centered around the facts that technology provided access to valuable resources for programming, a vehicle to communicate with residents and supervisors in a timely manner, and a tool to streamline administrative tasks.

The trend of residents isolating themselves from others in their community due to the amount of time they spent either on their cell phones or their computers was a threat to building a community. Illegal use of technology was an emerging issue that housing professionals and resident assistants have witnessed. Another trend which appeared to be related to technology was the erosion of interpersonal skills. Professional staff reported that students were quicker to use inflammatory words in e-mails than when speaking face-to-face, and residents were less willing to confront each other in person.

**Demographic aspect.** Several trends and emerging issues regarding demographics were reported by the three stakeholder groups. Housing directors discussed more trends and issues surrounding ethnicity and disabilities. An increase in the Latino and Hispanic population was a trend that the housing directors from the midwest schools had observed. Other directors noted the increasing number of students with disabilities along with the increasing number of roommate conflicts due to the issues surrounding the disabilities. Professional staff members and resident assistants spoke to those issues but also pointed out that gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered students were becoming more visible in the residence halls. At the same time that growth is seen in ethnicities, disabilities, and student with different sexual identities, professional staff members and resident assistants perceived that little would change in the conservative climate within the next twenty years.

Resident assistants who observed the increase in diversity saw this as an opportunity for themselves. They believed that exposure to different types of populations will help challenge their own beliefs and make them more open and tolerant of individuals or groups that are different than themselves.

**Social aspect.** There were five trends or emerging issues that were discussed when the social aspect was examined. The following four were identified by the housing directors: mental health, parental involvement, conditions and configurations of the facilities, and alcohol and drug use.

Mental health issues appeared to be on the rise as reported by housing directors and professional staff members. Professional staff members reported that a growing
number of residents are becoming more comfortable telling staff about their mental health illnesses. While the numbers of residents reporting illnesses is increasing, the majority of the affected students still do not share this information. The only way the staff learns of it is when a student is in a crisis situation. The majority of the resident assistants said they were not aware of any resident with a mental illness. However, several did say that they had residents who had either experienced emotional problems due to relationship issues and dysfunctional families or had difficulties socializing with other residents.

There are two potential threats that exist with this issue. The first threat occurs when a student decides to stop taking her or his medications. The student will, at some point, act out in a way that may disrupt the community around them. When this occurs, the type of response and care given by staff could be detrimental, particularly if the nature of the problem is unknown to the staff. The second threat is students who are engaging in self-destructive behaviors in an attempt to cope with a mental health illness. Those behaviors can severely impact the floor community.

Parental involvement was seen as an issue for the housing directors and professional staff members. Both of these stakeholder groups noted a major increase in the number of parent inquiries on behalf of their students. However, resident assistants reported that they rarely received phone calls. One resident assistant explained that when parents realize that the resident assistant is a student they will bypass the resident assistant and contact the professional staff member who has the authority to make decisions. The threat that exists in this aspect is that the parents allow their student to avoid handling conflict by taking on the problem themselves. In addition, the resident assistant may spend a good deal of time and energy mediating a roommate conflict only to find that the parent has called the housing office the next morning unhappy with the outcome and demanding a different outcome. Most resident assistants would probably feel defeated and frustrated if this happened, and they would most likely hesitate to help this resident again if there was another conflict.

All three stakeholder groups foresaw that renovating residence halls into suite or apartment configurations would create even more of a possibility for isolation to occur. The suites and apartments are less conducive for building and maintaining a close community. Another issue brought forth by professional staff members at the campuses that recently built apartment style housing was that they are now trying to decide what role the resident assistants play in these facilities compared to the role resident assistants play in traditional style halls. An opportunity that arose when discussing this issue was that professional staff members saw the renovations as a recruiting tool. They believed that one reason students were not applying to become resident assistants was because students did not want to live in the non-renovated halls.

Alcohol and drug usage appeared to be an on-going issue; however, there is more emphasis on reporting illegal usage. This emphasis was seen more as a threat due to the fact that it required resident assistants to act more as a policy enforcer as compared to the role of the friend.

The lack of socializing with others was the fifth trend. In this case, the professional staff member and resident assistant who brought this issue forward were not speaking about students lacking social skills, but rather students purposively choosing not
to socialize with others. This trend will hamper the resident assistant’s ability to develop a community.

**Future**

After examining the current opportunities and threats that exist in the three aspects of the external environment, all the stakeholders were asked which of the three aspects would have the greatest impact on the role of the resident assistant in the next ten to twenty years. The majority of the housing directors believed the social aspect will have the greatest impact. Technology was the answer that the professional staff members gave while the resident assistants believed, as the housing directors did, that the social aspect would be have the greatest impact.

It is interesting to note that when professional staff members spoke about technology they generally discussed the negative issues regarding technology compared to the other two sets of stakeholders. Their concerns echoed Jonsen’s (1986) thoughts regarding technology. Technology is evolving at such a rate that it is impossible to understand the future impact of the technology. Some staff members even questioned if there will be a need for residence halls in the next twenty years if campuses become virtual. There was a sense of futility coming from professional staff members in their efforts to keep abreast of the changes. They were quick to state that resident assistants were much more knowledgeable and experienced in this aspect of the external environment.

**Implications for Practice**

The purpose of this study was to not only establish the current roles of resident assistants but to also provide insight as to how certain aspects of the external environment have impacted and will impact the position. The findings will help guide those housing practitioners who want to review the role of the resident assistant position at their institutions.

Evidence from the findings would highly suggest that many housing programs in this study need to review and update their position descriptions and training manuals. In most cases, job descriptions did not reflect the majority of the roles that the housing practitioners and resident assistants discussed. It is important that the job description, which is the first standardized piece of information that resident assistant candidates receive, be as factual as possible so that candidates understand the realm of their roles. In some cases the description may help clear up perceptions of what the position entails. Job descriptions can also help convey the philosophy of the department and lay the foundation of what is the purpose of housing. For example, if retention is important and getting students involved is important, then the description might emphasize the role of community builder and in general how that role is carried out in the position such as making door tags, developing a relationship with each resident, and providing programs that will encourage interaction between residents. Also, a more detailed position description will not only provide more structure for the resident assistant but it will also guide their supervisor when developing further expectations of the resident assistant staff.

For the most part, the training manuals for resident assistants did not address the majority of the roles, particularly those that have developed or have been identified recently. For example, the role of academic promoter or interventionist was not
addressed in the manuals from the housing programs that required staff to do structured academic intervention. Training manuals supplement the formal training and staff development and also serve as a resource and refresher as to what is generally expected in the various roles. Additionally, the training manuals are an ideal place to discuss how different aspects of the external environment impact the roles and suggest practices that will help resident assistants address those situations where the impact is negatively affecting them and their residents. None of the manuals examined in this study contained information regarding technology. Thus, none provided information about how to use technology to the resident assistant’s advantage or about recognizing the signs of students who are addicted to the Internet. It is clear that technology is going to continue to evolve and provide challenges for resident assistants so housing professionals should address this in the manuals.

Training was another area that was weak with regard to addressing the roles and how the aspects of the external environment impacted the roles of the resident assistant. Understandably, formal training that is conducted at the beginning of the year and periodically throughout the year cannot address every role and issue as time is limited, and there are avenues for informal training to occur such as individual meetings with supervisors. However, the findings showed that in many cases the roles that were highlighted by all three stakeholders were not typically targeted in training of any kind. Based on the topics that were outlined in the training schedules provided by the housing programs, the role of community builder, which all three sets of stakeholders discussed, was not specifically targeted by most of the institutions. Obviously, when training is not provided then it is reasonable to expect that resident assistants may fail to carry out their role as expected. Housing practitioners realize that training is usually the first opportunity to make a great impression on the resident assistants as to their purpose and to their importance in helping to fulfill the mission of their housing programs.

The findings clearly showed that the long-standing roles have become even more complex due to the issues and trends in the external environment and to the new that roles have been added. When taking a step back and seriously taking an inventory of all the roles expected of a resident assistant, one realizes that resident assistants, who are predominately undergraduate students, are expected to handle more roles than any other professional staff member in housing. How many housing administrators actually have to respond to crisis situations twenty four hours a day, mediate conflicts on a regular basis, attend weekly staff meetings, turn in weekly reports, and enforce policies? Then be able to balance the role of administrator and friend? Even though the majority of resident assistants, when asked what would they change about their position, replied “nothing” I would suggest that housing practitioners not just settle for this answer and believe that changes are not necessary. Instead, I would suggest that housing programs determine whether there are other avenues to utilize in helping fulfill a role. For instance, a housing program that wants to focus more on academic issues or concerns may want to hire an upperclass or graduate student who is responsible for carrying out the role of academic promoter or interventionist for the hall or area. This staff person can be trained specifically on academics and be responsible for academic initiatives in the hall. Another avenue to fulfilling the role of academic promoter is to involve the academic advising department on campus. Explore the possibility of having an advisor placed in the hall periodically to help residents with academic issues.
One of the more disturbing findings was the incongruence between the outcomes that resident assistants reported and perceptions that they thought other students had about their roles. This finding may imply that housing programs could do a better job in promoting the outcomes that resident assistants experience along with the highlighting other roles such as university liaison or friend that would offset the role of enforcer. In the same light, when the professional staff members were asked the same question about the perception students had about the position, many of them recognized that they honestly did not know or had not sought out that information. I believe this type of information is critical for recruiting students for this position. If the majority of the students, as the resident assistants would lead you to believe, see the resident assistant as “a mean person who is out to get you,” then why would students want to apply for resident assistant positions? By conducting surveys or focus groups to find out more about the perceptions that students have about the resident assistant role, housing practitioners may be able to note if there are issues or trends in the internal campus environment that inhibit students from applying. For example, if students are required to have an internship off-campus for one semester and the housing program only allows juniors and seniors to apply for resident assistant positions, this internship requirement might affect the number of applicants. In most cases it is typical for students to do internships during their junior or senior year.

Throughout the interviews with the professional staff and resident assistants, it was interesting how the participants responded to questions about how the three aspects in the external environment impacted the role of the resident assistant. Many of the participants were quick to provide answers regarding the technology aspect. However, participants were mostly unsure as to how the social or demographic aspects may impact not just the resident assistant role but the campus population as a whole. In some cases, participants stated that since their campuses had such conservative climates, social trends and issues rarely impacted their campuses. Additionally, they didn’t foresee that demographics would be changing in the future, again due to the conservative nature of their campuses. These findings imply that housing practitioners may need to become more aware of the limited view they have as to how the different aspects of the external environment impact the role of the resident assistant. Other skills that professional staff members will need in order to help prepare resident assistants for their various roles is (a) assessing the external environment’s impact on the role of the resident assistant, and (b) developing strategies to address the resulting issues or trends.

Recommendations for Further Research

It is hoped that this study has provided helpful information that can be considered in strategizing and planning for the future role of the resident assistant. However, with most qualitative research, new questions emerged from this study that could warrant further research. The first question concerns current outcomes for students who serve as a resident assistant. Unlike Lillis and Schuh (1982) who researched the outcomes experienced by resident assistants by using a small select group of former resident assistants who were graduate students when they served as resident assistants, I would recommend conducting a longitudinal study involving undergraduate students who served as resident assistants. These resident assistants would be interviewed at three
different times. The first interview would take place during the student’s tenure as a resident assistant. The second interview would occur the year after they left the position. The last interview would take place one or two years after graduation. Possibly, these three time frames would give both the student and researcher the ability to reflect on the roles of the resident assistant and the impact the roles had on the rest of their collegiate and post-college experience. Data from this type of research could help not only in the recruitment of resident assistant candidates, but could also enlighten the faculty and student affairs staff as to the complexity of balancing the roles.

Another recommendation is to conduct further research on the role of technology in the residence halls. This is the one aspect that all three stakeholders agree will be constantly changing. Even though the change may not always be perceived as positive, there are real possibilities to make some changes to resident assistants’ roles. Qualitative information could be obtained about the residents’ time. In particular, questions could be posed to learn the rationale as to why residents are spending more time on-line than with other residents on the floor. This information would be helpful; along with gaining a better understanding as to what residents perceive are the benefits or costs to spending time on-line. This information may also be beneficial when trying to find ways to entice the residents to get know each other in the community. Another part of this research could look at the resident assistant’s own behavior regarding time spent on-line and how that impacts her or his ability to carry out job related and other responsibilities. As the reader may remember, one resident assistant commented on the fact that he had just wasted an afternoon playing a card game on-line rather than doing the homework he had planned on finishing. A housing director noted that the extensive use of e-mail and Instant Messenger had negatively affected students’ interpersonal skills, particularly when it came to dealing with conflict. He then raised the issue of how he believed the same issue was occurring with the resident assistants.

The last recommendation is to conduct research on the growing number of gay, lesbian, bi-sexual, and transgendered residents who have revealed their identity to their fellow residents while living in the residence halls and the impact that action has on floor communities. This recommendation is based on a forewarning from one of the housing directors who stated:

As people are more open about that [sexual identity], there are going to be more people talking about it openly. It is going to be something that staff is going to have to deal with. I see that as an issue that we’re going to have to deal with and it is with our floors, parents, everything like that. I think it is something that is really, really going to come out more in the future.

Even though some resident assistants felt that students were more accepting of different sexual identities, many professional staff members agreed with this director that the parents are not. Particularly, parents report concern if their student is rooming with a person of a different sexual identity. This study could prove helpful to all housing programs for developing strategies for preventing and handling conflicts involving this trend.
Summary

The resident assistant plays an important part in the college experience. Without this position, housing programs would find it difficult to carry out their mission to provide an environment that challenges and supports students in their academic and personal life. Over the years, new roles have been added to this position to help meet the needs of students and the housing programs. Despite the fact that resident assistants in this study stated that they would not change their role, the position may now appear unattractive to potential candidates because they have a perception that there are too many demands and responsibilities with this position. Many professional staff members agreed with the statement:

I really honestly believe that with all of our residence life positions, RAs being one, we need to do a real serious re-evaluation of them, and look at what the future holds and not just necessarily rest in what we have always done, because that may or may not be useful as we move into the future.

This study can serve as a catalyst for professional staff members and housing directors to review the resident assistants’ role with a new perspective that appreciates how external and internal environments can have an impact on this vital position.
APPENDIX A
Human Subjects Approval and Informed Consent Form

OFFICE OF THE VICE PRESIDENT
for Research
Tallahassee, Florida 32306-2763
(850) 644-8673 • FAX (850) 644-4392

APPROVAL MEMORANDUM
from the Human Subjects Committee

Date: June 28, 2002

From: David Quadagno, Chair

To: Paige Crandall
3269 Addison Lane
Tallahassee, FL 32317

Dept: Educational Leadership and Policy Studies

Re: Use of Human subjects in Research
Project entitled: The Future Role of Resident Assistants in College and University Housing

The forms that you submitted to this office in regard to the use of human subjects in the proposal referenced above have been reviewed by the Secretary, the Chair, and two members of the Human Subjects Committee. Your project is determined to be exempt per 45 CFR § 46.101(b)2 and has been approved by an accelerated review process.

The Human Subjects Committee has not evaluated your proposal for scientific merit, except to weigh the risk to the human participants and the aspects of the proposal related to potential risk and benefit. This approval does not replace any departmental or other approvals which may be required.

If the project has not been completed by June 27, 2003 you must request renewed approval for continuation of the project.

You are advised that any change in protocol in this project must be approved by resubmission of the project to the Committee for approval. Also, the principal investigator must promptly report, in writing, any unexpected problems causing risks to research subjects or others.

By copy of this memorandum, the chairman of your department and/or your major professor is reminded that he/she is responsible for being informed concerning research projects involving human subjects in the department, and should review protocols of such investigations as often as needed to insure that the project is being conducted in compliance with our institution and with DHHS regulations.

This institution has an Assurance on file with the Office for Protection from Research Risks. The Assurance Number is IRB00000446.

Cc: Dr. Barbara Mann
APPLICATION NO. 02.300
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

I, ____________________________ freely and voluntarily and without element of force or coercion, consent to be a participant in the dissertation study entitled “The Future Role of Resident Assistants in College and University Housing.” This study will examine the future role of student paraprofessionals otherwise referred to as Resident Assistants in the next 10-20 years. This study will be conducted during the period of July 2002 to January 2003 with Paige D. Crandall as the principal investigator. The data will be used as part of dissertation research in the field of higher education.

The procedures to be used have been explained to me and I understand them. Three tape recorded focus groups will be conducted with chief housing directors attending the 2002 ACUHO-I conference. Tape recorded individual interviews will be conducted with second year Resident Assistants and housing professional staff member responsible for the recruitment, selection and training of Resident Assistants. I understand I will be asked to fill out a questionnaire prior to the interview.

I understand that I will be tape recorded by the researcher. These tapes will be kept by the researcher in a locked filing cabinet. I understand that only the researcher will have access to these tapes and that they will be destroyed by December 1, 2004. Any notes, transcriptions and completed questionnaires will be kept in a locked storage area. I understand that my identity and the name of my college or university will only be known by the transcriber and Paige Crandall. Paige Crandall will not be using the real names of the subjects or the name of their college or university in her dissertation or any other publication or presentation.

I understand that there are no reasonably foreseeable risks associated with my participation in this study.

I understand that this consent may be withdrawn at any time without prejudice, penalty or loss of benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. I have been given the right to ask and have answered any inquiry concerning this study.

I understand that I may contact Paige Crandall at 850-942-2971 or her major professor, Dr. Barbara Mann at 850-562-8460 with any questions or concerns I may have about this research at any time.

I have read and understand this consent form.

(Participant) ____________________________ (Date) __________

(Witness) ____________________________

FLORIDA STATE UNIVERSITY
INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD

Approvied: 6/28/02
HS No. 02-300
Voted After 6/27/03
APPENDIX B

Interview Guide for Focus Groups

Opening Question

Please share with us your name and institution.

Introductory Question

If you were a resident assistant during your undergraduate experience, can you briefly recall the primary role of this position? If not, what was your perception or expectation for the role of your resident assistant?

Transition Question

List two or three roles that resident assistants play in your housing program.

Key Questions

Based on the questionnaire, there were five issues that several participants noted that were common on the campuses. They were the following: mental health issues, alcohol and drug use, diversity, parental involvement, and conditions and configurations of facilities. How do you think these factors impact the current role of the resident assistant?

Do you see technology affecting the resident role and, if so, how?

What, if any, impact does demographics have on the role of the resident assistant?

Does the social aspect, external to campus, affect the role of the resident assistant and, if so, how?

Which of these three aspects do you foresee having the greatest influence in the role of the resident assistant in the next 20 years—technology, demographics, or social?

Do you anticipate any other factors from the internal environment and other external environments that have not been discussed that will impact the future role of the resident assistant?
Closing Question

Are there any additional thoughts that you would like to share?
APPENDIX C

Introductory Script for Focus Groups

Thank you for your willingness to participate in this focus group. We know that student paraprofessionals, otherwise known as resident assistants, play a significant role in our housing programs. During the last several years the housing profession has discussed the role of the RA and the increasing difficulties in recruiting qualified candidates for this position. Paige’s dissertation study is an examination of the current role of resident assistants and what anticipated changes may occur with their role. As a chief housing officer, you will provide us with insights and thoughts about what internal and external environmental factors you believe will impact the role of the RA in the next twenty years.

This focus group will take an hour. It will be audio taped and the tapes will be transcribed. All the tapes and notes will be kept in a secure location and will be destroyed one-and-a-half years after the study has been finished. At this point I would like to remind you that you have the right to withdraw from this study at any point.

We hope that this discussion will be informal, so feel free to make any comments that are relevant to the questions. Are there any questions before we start?
APPENDIX D

Questionnaire for Housing Directors

Thank you for participating in my dissertation study. The purpose of this questionnaire is to gain some general information regarding your housing department and institution. Please take just a few minutes to fill this out and, when finished, please fax it to Paige Crandall at 850-645-4858. If you have any questions, please feel free to call me at 850-943-2971 or e-mail at pcrandall@admin.fsu.edu. Thank you.

Name ____________________________________________________

Name of Institution _________________________________________

Number of Resident Assistants/Advisors?______

Housing occupancy of areas that are staffed by Resident Assistants/Advisors?_______

What is the ratio of RAs to residents? ______

What are the top three trends, events and/or issues that exist in your campus environment that impact the role of the resident assistant?

What factors in the following three aspects of the external environment impact the resident assistant’s role?

Technological:

Demographic:

Social:

What, if any, staffing changes have you made in the Residence Life department within the past year?

Are you currently discussing and/or planning to make changes in the Resident Assistant position, i.e., roles, compensation, criteria for selection, etc? If so, could you please share very briefly what type of change(s) you are considering or implementing?
APPENDIX E

Questionnaire for Professional Housing Staff

Thank you for participating in my dissertation study. The purpose of this questionnaire is to gain some general information regarding the Resident Assistant position on your campus. Please take just a few minutes to fill this out and, when finished, please e-mail it back to paigecrandall@yahoo.com. If you have any questions, please feel free to call me at 850-942-2971 or e-mail. Thank you.

Name _________________________________________________

Name of Institution_______________________________________

What are the requirements for Resident Assistant candidates? Please mark all that apply.

___ Certain GPA which is ______
___ Lived on-campus in your halls for how many semesters_____
___ Certain classification which is ___ sophomore ____junior ___ senior ___graduate
___ Completed a certain leadership class pertaining to the position
___ Is in good judicial standing
___ Other, please list __________________________________________

Do current RAs go through a rehiring process? If so, please briefly explain that process.

What is the compensation package for the RA position? Are there any additional benefits for resident assistants who return to the position?

Please check off the following areas/duties that the RAs are responsible for in their role.

___ Enforce policies
___ Provide basic helping skills
___ Serve as a resource referral
___ Serve on judicial boards
___ Provide front desk coverage
___ Provide duty/on-call coverage for hall/area
___ Serve as tour guides for housing/university
___ Perform health and safety inspections of residents’ rooms
___ Respond to facility related crisis
___ Fill out maintenance work orders
___ Meet weekly/bi-weekly with supervisor
___ Attend weekly staff meetings
___ Serve on hall government boards
___ Serve on housing committees
___ Serve on university-wide committees as a housing representative
___ Provide official academic advising
___ Design bulletin boards
___ Make door/name tags for residents
___ Meet programming requirements which are ______________________________
___ Develop or maintain websites for their community
___ Other roles/responsibilities __________________________

What are the top three trends, events, and issues that exist in your campus environment that impact the role of the resident assistant?

What trends, events, or issues in the following aspects of the external environment impact the role of the resident assistant?

Technological:

Demographic:

Social:

What, if any, staffing changes have you made in the Residence Life department within the past year?

Are you currently discussing and planning to make changes in the Resident Assistant position, i.e., roles, compensation, criteria for selection, etc? If so, could you please share very briefly what type of change(s) you are considering or implementing?
Thank you for participating in my dissertation study. The purpose of this questionnaire is to gain some general information regarding the Resident Assistant position on your campus. Please take just a few minutes to fill this out and e-mail it back as an attachment to paigecrandall@admin.fsu.edu. If you have any questions, please feel free to call me at 850-942-2971 or e-mail. Again, thank you for your time and participation.

Name__________________________________  School________________________________

Classification ___ Sophomore ___ Junior ____ Senior ___ Graduate Student

Major ________________________________

Plans for after graduation
___ Graduate School – intended program? ____________________
___ Law or Medical School
___ Job in the area of _________________________________
___ Other

Number of years in the RA position, including this current year
___ 2     _____3   ______4  ____More than four

What type of housing accommodations are you currently responsible for?
___ Double rooms with a community bath
___ Suite style
___ Apartment style
___ Combination

How many residents live in the area you oversee?

Are the majority of your residents:
___ First-year students
___ Upperclassmen
___ Graduate students

Why were you initially interested in this position? (Please mark all that apply.)
___ Wanted a single room
___ Financial need
___ Opportunity to develop skills
Would look good on the resume
Friends decided to apply
Someone thought you would do a good job
Other, please state:

What are the following resources that you have utilized in the RA position?
___ Staff manual
___ Supervisor
___ Housing Administrators
___ Other RAs
___ Websites/Internet
___ Other offices on campus outside of housing
___ Student organizations
___ Other, please state:

In the last year, what campus events, trends, or emerging issues have impacted your role and responsibilities?

Do you believe that the following areas that exist outside of the campus have had an impact on your position?

Technology:  Yes or No
Demographics of the population that may attend college:  Yes or No
Social (trends, events, and issues):  Yes or No
APPENDIX G

Interview Guide for Individual Interviews with Professional Housing Staff Members

Opening Question

If you were a resident assistant during your undergraduate experience, can you recall the primary responsibilities for this position? If not, what was your perception or expectations of your resident assistant?

Introductory Questions

In your opinion, what is the current perception that students, faculty, and student affairs administrators outside of housing have regarding the resident assistant role on your campus?

What do you perceive would be one thing the resident assistants would like to change about their role?

What would the resident assistants say is a benefit of being an RA?

Have you seen a decline in the number of resident assistant applications? To what would you attribute this decrease?

Key Questions

From the questionnaire you filled out prior to this interview, you gave the following trends, events, and issues (list those) that exist in your campus environment that impact the role of the resident assistant. Can you elaborate on how these factors have impacted the RA role?

Moving from the internal environment of campus to the external environment, do you believe that the following aspects of the external environment impact the RA position? If so, in what ways do they impact the position? (Technological, Demographic, and Social)

Which of these aspects do you foresee having the greatest influence in the role of the resident assistant in the next 20 years?

Do you anticipate any other factors from the internal environment and other external environments that have not been discussed that will impact the future role of the resident assistant?
Closing Questions
Before we close is there anything else you would like to share?
APPENDIX H

Interview Guide for Individual Interviews with Returning Resident Assistants

Opening Questions

Why did you want to be a resident assistant?

Why did you decide to return to this position?

What ways do you think you have changed since you became a resident assistant?

What can you attribute to these changes?

Introductory Questions

If a parent or prospective student asked you what is your role as a RA, what would you say?

As a returner, have you been given additional responsibilities in your position? If so, what are they?

If given the opportunity to change your position how would you change it?

How is the resident assistant position perceived by other students? Faculty and student affairs staff?

Key Questions

What are the major events or issues that are occurring on your campus?

Have you seen an increase in parental involvement where the parents are calling you more or taking care of issues rather than letting the students resolve them on their own?

Have you seen an increase in the number of students who have mental health illnesses who are on medication and/or students who seem to be fragile?

Have you seen any new issues or increases in the alcohol or drug use? How has that impacted your role?

How has technology impacted your role?
What does the student population make-up look like and how has that changed since you have been there?

What social trends, events, or issues have impacted your campus and how have they impacted your role?

In the next 10 to 20 years, which of the three: technology, demographics, or social, do you think will have the greatest impact on the role of the resident assistant?

**Closing**

What do you remember about your resident assistant training? Was there a certain topic, concept, or message that you remember the most or that they spent more time on than others?

Is there anything that you wished they would have included to provide better preparation for your role as a resident assistant.

Before we close this interview, is there anything else you would like to share?
REFERENCES


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Coulter, E.M. (1928). *College life in the old south.* University of Georgia Press.


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<td>September 19, 1963</td>
<td>Born Fort Knox, Kentucky</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1985</td>
<td>B.A. Education, Westminster College, New Wilmington, Pennsylvania</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1987</td>
<td>M.A. Student Personnel Services, Indiana University of Pennsylvania, Indiana, Pennsylvania</td>
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<tr>
<td>1987 – 1990</td>
<td>Residence Coordinator, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, North Carolina</td>
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<td>August – December 1990</td>
<td>Hall Director, Semester at Sea, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania</td>
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<td>February 1991 - July 1991</td>
<td>Interim Assistant Director, Campus Programs and Student Activities, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, North Carolina</td>
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<td>December 1991 – July 1992</td>
<td>Interim Assistant Dean of Students for Greeks and Leadership, University of North Carolina at Charlotte, Charlotte, North Carolina</td>
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<td>August 1992 - 1999</td>
<td>Assistant Director, University Housing, Florida State University Tallahassee, Florida</td>
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<td>1999 - Present</td>
<td>Associate Director, University Housing, Florida State University Tallahassee, Florida</td>
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