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Characteristics of High-Performing Women Resident Assistants at Private Liberal Arts Institutions

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Characteristics of High-Performing Women Resident
Assistants at Private Liberal Arts Institutions

A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Doctor of Education in Higher Education

by

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Abstract

Resident Assistants (RA) are unique positions within a university. Undergraduate students are selected to enforce policy, complete administrative paperwork, and develop community in on-campus housing. Despite the critical role these students play in the advancement of university programs and retention, there is a gap in research regarding what contributes to the success of individuals in the position. Within the limited literature on RA performance and success, there is no current research relating to factors that are shared among the highest-performing women in the role.

The current study identified nine high-performing women RAs at three small liberal arts universities in the Midwest. RAs were interviewed to determine common themes among their experiences and work that could be used to predict what contributes to their success. A semi-structured interview protocol was utilized to gain insight into the lives of each RA selected to participate in the study. At the conclusion of all interviews, audio recordings were transcribed to allow for member-checking and coding. A process of open coding identified themes that were categorized into axial codes, and then further consolidated into selective codes for analysis.

Axial codes of adaptability, external factors, ability to mitigate negative consequences, recognition of positive outcomes, ability to enforce policy, appreciation for administrative role, and a capacity to develop community and socialize were created to categorize the participant's responses. These axial codes were further collapsed into the selective codes of personal characteristics, influencing factors, and understanding the role.

The highest-performing RAs demonstrated adaptability in the face of adversity, a set of common experiences and passions, and position knowledge that exemplified the goals of their job. College administrators should pay particular attention to the types of characteristics that

women RAs share, with the intent to develop more undergraduate women into campus leaders.

Future research should be directed toward diverse groups of students to compare what characteristics of high-performing women RA are shared among all undergraduate student leaders at all types of institutions.

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Acknowledgments

Believe- Mumford and Sons (Wilder Mind)

It Was A Sin- Revivalists (Men Amongst Mountains)

Loveless- X Ambassadors (VHS)

Got It- Marian Hill (Sway)

Water- Judah & the Lion (Kids These Days)

Whatever It Takes- Imagine Dragons (Evolve)

Burn the House Down- AJR (Single)

You & Me- The Hunna (100)

Cringe- Matt Maeson (Who Killed Matt Maeson)

First- Cold War Kids (Hold My Home)

Moments- Tove Lo (Queen Of The Clouds)

Skin Tight- Hunter and The Bear (Single)

Kansas City- The Mowgli's (Single)

Resurrect Me- Skrizzly Adams (Single)

Break in the Ether- Jared & The Mill (Single)

Chrysalides- The Ghost of Paul Revere (Monarch)

Hold Each Other- A Great Big World (When the Morning Comes)

Let's Start Again- MAGIC GIANT (In The Wind)

Say Something- Justin Timberlake/Chris Stapleton (Man of the Woods)

Magic- Rudy Mancuso/Maia Mitchell (Single)

Life Itself- Glass Animals (How To Be A Human Being)

Irresistible- Fall Out Boy (American Beauty/American Psycho)

Dedication

7/20/18 1:00pm

VDub- I'm sorry for everything I couldn't be. I know you're stronger than me, but I hope this endeavor serves as inspiration in your life. You're my reason. I love you with all of my heart,

my Angel. Love

Dad

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Chapter 1

Introduction

A. Organization of the Chapter

The following chapter will seek to introduce the position of Resident Assistants (RA) in university and college residence halls, as well as leadership roles of women. The statement of the problem and a description of the gap in research that exists follows an introduction and background of the topic at hand. The research question will give the reader insight into the current study and the way it will expand the current knowledge base with regards to the topic, followed by the significance of the current study to the field.

The design of the current study will outline the way in which data will be collected and analyzed. The theoretical sensitivity will examine the researcher's bias and how they are positioned to add insight to the current topic. Next, the parameters of the current study and the way it will be conducted will be described. The definition of terms pertinent to the study at hand will be provided, followed by the limitations of the current study. Finally, a summary will conclude the first chapter.

B. Introduction

Women comprise approximately 50% of the world's population, but occupy significantly fewer leadership roles than men (Eagly & Carli, 2007). It is crucial to understand the disparity between men and women with regard to their ascension to the highest levels of leadership. Although women still face oppression throughout the world, this alone cannot explain the underrepresentation of women as leaders. When faced with the dual pressures of society that push women toward family or career, but rarely both, women must choose how to navigate leadership advancement. At what point do women leaders begin to differentiate themselves from

their peers? The gap in research regarding this process and factors that contribute creates an avenue for expanded study.

The current study will focus on the area of leadership emergence among high-performing women leaders in the collegiate environment. It is important to understand the factors that contribute to women self-identifying as leaders, and what characteristics propel them to continue as leaders later in life. The current study will serve as an exploratory study into the nature of experiences and characteristics that serve as the foundation for high-performing women leaders.

The position of resident assistant provides a leadership pathway for women in colleges and universities. RAs are asked to perform a variety of tasks that require them to serve as role models, counselors, peer mentors, policy enforcers, and friend (Jaeger & Caison, 2006). Women who engage in this work must demonstrate a capacity for peer leadership through a, sometimes grueling, selection process (Wu & Stemler, 2008). The women who are selected to serve as RAs learn and hone leadership skills that can propel them to future leadership roles in all areas of society. This formidable time in a woman's life is precisely the period of interest when looking at leadership emergence for women leaders. The current study will add to the existing literature by identifying common traits and characteristics among high-performing women RAs. By ascertaining the mechanisms by which high-performing women leaders progress, this research will inform those looking to maximize opportunities to inject more women leaders into the pipeline moving forward.

C. Background

RAs have a complex position that requires a wide range of interpersonal skills that must be applied in ambiguous situations (Jaeger & Caison, 2006). Despite the important role RAs play in student success, research into selection practices is virtually non-existent. The literature

regarding the selection of RAs is lacking cohesive themes or solid evidence of best practices (Wu & Stemler, 2008). Much of the available information is decades old, raising concern that today's college students could perform differently under similar conditions. In keeping with the outdated theme, the overwhelming majority of colleges and universities have not updated their selection practices in the same timeframe. Considering the critical role RAs play on university campuses through their first-level response to student issues, having a solid foundation on the hiring process for these student leaders needs to be further explored from a variety of methods.

If the selection practice for RAs is a critical piece of a university's success (Ostroth, 1981), the training process is potentially equally important. Getting the right person for the position is valuable, but the transmission of information, values, and the departmental mission will dictate success or failure of a person once they have obtained the position (Jaeger & Caison, 2006). Much like the literature regarding RA selection, there is a dearth of information regarding best practices for RA training (Schaller & Wagner, 2007). It is entirely possible that there is much research that is taking place in this regard, but it is categorized as "assessment," and therefore is never submitted to journals. The proliferation of assessment in higher education (Maki, 2010) demonstrates an increased commitment to learning outcomes, yet this information often only serves the host institution.

Although RA training practices vary from institution to institution, there are consistent educational tools implemented. Despite the fact that RAs serve a critical role in working with undergraduate students, there is very little existing literature on how to train them effectively to perform their essential functions (Martin & Blechschmidt, 2014). Current training experiences demonstrate that RAs learn in a variety of situations, but best practices should be developed to consider how to determine RA success (Hardy & Dodd, 1998). Best practices for RA selection

and RA training are not well understood and poorly researched, leading to a lack of informed practice (Longwell-Grice & Kerr, 2013). Considering the acknowledgement that RAs play a significant role in college student success, the call to better understand this population of student leaders leads to attempts to gain information about how to increase performance and retention of highly effective individuals. The demands of the RA position leave many students with high levels of stress, leading to early “burnout.” Supervisors should put extra care into the ways they develop teams and structure responsibilities to allow for RAs to get the most out of their experience with the least impact on their personal and academic lives (Morris, 2009). Although balance will always be a challenge for RAs, the benefits of the position for the institution and those holding the job far outweigh the effort required to sustain the workforce.

There is a small body of literature aimed at the best practices for RAs and their supervisors (Frazer, 1983; Posner & Brodsky, 1993). RA performance should be a priority of higher education administrators, yet the majority of research has been devoted to the selection, training, and experienced stress for RAs. The effective leadership characteristics of high-performing RAs, and the characteristics that can contribute to poor performance hold the key to better supervision and mentoring for students (Benjamin, 2005; Longwell-Grice & Kerr, 2013). The potential of increasing job satisfaction through increased self-efficacy has promise for creating an impact with not only staff members, but also the students they work with (Denzine & Anderson, 1999). Further research in this area should carefully evaluate what great RAs do best.

Not only is there a dearth of literature on RA success, women as leaders both inside and outside of higher education is poorly understood. Once taken for granted as a domain dominated by men, women in 2017 have access to roles that were once completely out of reach (Wenniger & Conroy, 2001; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Current findings of gross inequalities with regard to

leadership attainment by women (White House Project, 2009) lead the way for further analysis of what concerns women face on their path to top ranking positions in their field. At a time in history when more women are graduating from institutions of higher education than men (Eagly, 2007), yet occupy far fewer leadership positions in virtually every field (White House Project, 2009), it is now more important than ever to understand the factors that constrain and conversely facilitate the success of women.

Eagly and Carli (2003; 2007) first point to the primary concern facing all women leaders: how to lead. Because women are expected to conform to certain stereotypical behaviors in society, such as being warm and empathetic, it can often be considered undesirable for women to be assertive in the professional realm. At the same time, promotions and professional recognition are often based on an employees' ability to display traditionally masculine traits (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Eagly and Carli (2007) refer to this as the "double-bind" (p. 102). In this scenario, a woman can be placed into limbo, not being able to fully take a leadership role for fear of acting out of feminine character. This challenge can prove to be most insidious for any woman manager because they reach a point of being criticized no matter the decisions they make. Although there is evidence that subordinates respond better to the more stereotypical feminine leadership style (Eagly & Carli, 2007), there persists a preference for men as managers in many arenas (Eagly, 2007).

Eagly and Karau (1991) conducted a meta-analysis to determine trends in emergence of women as leaders in both laboratory and field research. Their findings suggest that men are more likely to emerge as leaders in a variety of settings, specifically in situations where the task required is more masculine in nature (i.e. repairing a machine), versus a task that is more

feminine, such as a sewing task (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ho, Shih, & Walters, 2012). Women are more likely to emerge as leaders when the task requires complex social interactions.

Nationally, women now make up the majority of students attending colleges and universities (White House Project, 2009), a decades-long trend (Arum & Roksa, 2011). Be this as it may, women only occupy 23% of universities presidencies (White House Project, 2009). Recent selections of women to the highest post at prestigious institutions (Lafreniere & Longman, 2008) aside, there are still a disproportionately high numbers of men in academic leadership roles. Historically, women leaders have occupied positions such as deans of women, which relegated them to less opportunity for advancement (Schwartz, 1996). Although more women are now selected to program director roles and other administrative leadership positions, it is possible that such jobs could turn into dead-ends, preventing further advancement (Wenninger & Conroy, 2001).

The majority of Americans are not only comfortable with women leaders, but report a preference for traditionally feminine leadership characteristics (Eagly, 2007), yet virtually every professional field sees a dearth of women in the highest ranks (White House Project, 2009). How can we continue with the status quo, experiencing flat growth in women's access to leadership positions over the last decade (Madsen, 2011)? Colleges and universities are experiencing a call to create more inclusive work environments, places that individuals of all backgrounds can succeed and diversity is rewarded. Old rhetoric regarding the fit of women in management roles no longer makes sense, and we now know that many of the characteristics that we appropriate to women naturally are our most prized examples of strong leadership (Zenger & Folkman, 2009).

D. Statement of the Problem

There is a gap in knowledge regarding the characteristics of high-performing women RAs in colleges and universities.

E. Purpose of the Study

The current research will utilize a qualitative approach to determine common characteristics of high-performing women in the RA position. High-performing women RAs will be interviewed at three small liberal arts institutions to determine the traits they share and how they ascended to their status on their campus. This study will serve as a foundational document for further research into leadership emergence among women at the undergraduate level. A better understanding of how women RAs are able to distinguish themselves will benefit the field of higher education research by helping to identify and support women who will become the next generation of professional leaders.

F. Research Question

What are common characteristics among high-performing women RAs?

G. Significance of the Study

The current study seeks to expand on our knowledge of the characteristics of high-performing women RAs and how they come to set themselves apart from their peers. As our society becomes more globalized, diversity and inclusion will become greater factors for everyone. With a better understanding of women leaders, there will be more opportunities to develop and support women in all aspects of our communities. By filling the gap in knowledge regarding the characteristics that contribute to the highest-performing women RAs, it will be possible to help girls and women develop and traverse organizational landscape in other settings of society.

H. Parameters of the Study

The current qualitative study will include three high-performing women RAs at three small liberal arts universities located in the Midwestern United States, for a total of nine participants. Interviews will begin in the spring of 2018, and will continue until the conclusion of the study. Liberal arts colleges were chosen due to the fact that RAs in those institutions have been found to display higher levels of intercultural effectiveness (Martin & Blechschmidt, 2014), suggesting they may demonstrate higher levels of desirable characteristics of women RAs. It is also believed that RAs at small institutions will be better positioned to distinguish themselves and practice high-level position skills with a smaller student population.

I. Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this study, a woman is defined as any person who self identifies herself as a woman. High-performing RAs are defined as an RA who is identified by their host institution as a person who distinguishes themselves according to performance standards, peer feedback, and anecdotal evidence.

J. Limitations

The current research will focus on a small sample of participants, and will not be generalizable beyond the group being studied. The subjective measure of high-performing women RAs will be dictated by the host institution, thus the researcher cannot completely control the study population because performance standards are not universal between universities.

K. Conclusion

The preceding chapter identified the need to better understand the RA position as it relates to women leaders. As a preeminent origin of leadership for college and university

students, the RA position serves as a jumping off point for women to begin to see themselves as leaders. The current study will employ a qualitative design to identify those characteristics that high-performing women RAs share. The gap in knowledge regarding how women navigate the RA position dictates an exploratory study to cluster traits and experiences of women RAs. Six women RAs at three small liberal arts institutions in the Midwest will be interviewed to gain a greater insight into shared attributes.

L. Organization of the Dissertation

Chapter 1 of this document serves as the introduction to the topic and the current study. Chapter 2 will acquaint the reader with an exhaustive literature review on the RA position and research dedicated to women leaders. Chapter 3 will explain the methods of data collection and the process of assuring fidelity to the source participant's experience. Chapter 4 will present the information collected from the population sample, followed by analysis and directions for further study in Chapter 5.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

A. Organization of the Chapter

Chapter 2 will present a review of the literature regarding the resident assistant (RA) position in colleges and universities, as well as women leaders. The literature related to RAs will be grouped into four main categories: selection practices, effective training methods, job performance, and best practices. Because the RA position in colleges and universities has not been explored in relation to women's leadership, this chapter also explores women leaders in higher education and business. Women's leadership will be explored in relationship to five themes: challenges, leadership style, leadership emergence for women leaders, leadership in education, and barriers to leadership roles. Although later in life, leadership roles of women in the professional setting draws from early leadership experiences in college.

RAs are typically undergraduate students who assume peer leadership roles in residential environments on college campuses. An RA is typically 18-22 years old, although most institutions offer open application systems that allow enrolled students of any age to apply. Because such student leaders have the capacity to lead and shape the experience of other students, potentially impacting retention and student success, it is important to understand their role within the college (Wu & Stemler, 2008).

RAs most often serve four major functions in their position: 1) maintaining campus residence halls, 2) enforcing university and residence hall policies, 3) developing community for other students, and 4) assisting students in a variety of capacities (Healea, 2005). Because universities ask so much of RA position, not only to serve other students, but in the form of demands on the individuals who assume the role, it is critical to select the very best students (Wu

& Stemler, 2008). Interestingly, the policy enforcement role of the RA was found to be very important to residence life leadership by Schuh, Kuh, Gable, Friedman, Stipanovich, and Wegryn (1982), but of little importance or inappropriate to parents, students, and faculty. There are serious questions regarding the direction, value, and outcomes of higher education in the current environment, and role responsibility expectations highlight a lack of congruence among those invested in the enterprise. Although authors such as Arum and Roksa (2011) found that out of classroom activities can detract from the educational experience, no college or university appears to be backing away from their commitment to student leadership positions in residence halls. Considering this fact, understanding the RA position and who is likely to succeed in it remains a worthy question for researchers to explore. The following sections will outline the literature regarding the RA position and provide suggestions for future research in this area.

B. Search Strategy

In order to capture articles related to the RA position, the University of Arkansas library website was utilized for search practices. The following search engines were used for the literature regarding RAs: ERIC (Department of Education), ERIC (Ebsco), ERIC (ProQuest), Ebsco Academic Search Complete, Google Scholar, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. The following search terms were used to locate articles related to the RA position: resident, assistant, undergraduate, leadership, female, and women. The search dates began with a range of 1990 to the present, but when there was a need for more information, the search was expanded to included dates from 1970 to the present day.

The search related to women leaders utilized the University of Arkansas library website. The following search engines were used to locate articles: ERIC (Department of Education), ERIC (Ebsco), ERIC (ProQuest), Ebsco Academic Search Complete, Google Scholar,

ABI/INFORM Complete, Ebsco Business Source Complete, and ProQuest Dissertations and Theses Global. The following search terms were used to identify relevant articles: women, female, leadership, executive, education, and administrator. The date range for the search process was 1970 to the present day.

Once articles were located, they were either directly downloaded or requested through the interlibrary loan system at the University of Arkansas. Articles were examined for content and relevance to the current project, and categorized according to their contribution to the literature on the topic.

C. Literature Related to the Resident Assistant Position

Resident Assistant Selection Practices. RAs have a complex position that requires a wide range of interpersonal skills that must be applied in ambiguous situations (Jaeger & Caison, 2006). Despite the important role RAs play in student success, research into selection practices is virtually non-existent. The following section will review the literature related to RA selection and provide directions for future research.

Ostroth (1981) identified the most common RA selection practices as applications, interviews, group interactions, and references. Despite the passage of nearly four decades since his work, little has changed concerning RA interview practices (Wu & Stemler, 2008). Ostroth (1981) described the need to introduce practices that mitigate the tendency to allow the RA selection practice to become a popularity contest. The fact that many of the candidates are well known to institutional selection authorities creates a confounding variable by tainting objectivity, allowing information not included in the selection process to be used to make decisions. Ostroth (1981) reviewed the literature regarding novel approaches to selection practices and determined that the RA position differs so greatly from institution to institution that generalization of how to

selection staff members can be challenging. He also found that there are numerous endorsements for peer ratings, role-playing scenarios, and group discussions, yet no research at the time validated any of the techniques. Ostroth (1981) advocated for more research to suggest standardized practices in the RA selection process.

Through a process of pre- and post-test questionnaires, Hayes and Burke (1981) identified personality factors that contribute to RA success. Traits such as approachability and level of concern for others marked the ideal characteristics for an RA. Although just correlational in nature, the study provided a starting point for understanding RA success. Such qualities have been validated through other correlational research (German, 1979; Hall & Creed, 1979; Eichenfield, Graves, Slief, & Haslund, 1988; Wu & Stemler, 2008), suggesting that further exploration in this area could yield promising results in the pursuit of bettering RA selection practices.

Depending on the institutional needs and RA evaluation process, it is possible for a staff member to be considered successful in other ways than just the most common personality characteristics. For example, Shelton and Mathis (1976) found that the most desirable characteristics for an RA were positively correlated to assertiveness. Because of the date of the research, it is possible that some of the tasks the RAs were evaluated on are no longer valid measures of position success, such as policy enforcement and the ability to not avoid conflict. RAs are routinely asked to perform such tasks (Wu & Stemler, 2008), but that does not mean those are as prized in the current higher education system. Further research into RA assertiveness might shed light onto another dimension to evaluate in the selection process and an update on previous findings.

In the same vein as assertiveness, temperament was examined by Dickson and Thayer (1983) to determine if there is an “ideal” RA fit for the position. They found that although there was a large emphasis placed in hiring diverse staffs to meet the needs of as many students as possible, in practice there was evidence that hiring authorities selected a fairly homogenous group of students for the RA position. Melancholy temperament candidates were not developed at the same rate as the other temperament styles. Dickson and Thayer (1983) suggested closely aligning the RA position responsibilities with those individuals who show a propensity toward the traits that lend themselves to a specific task. Such planning can alleviate stress and create an environment for universal success.

Miller and Conyne (1980) and Forsyth (1983) found that RAs reported higher levels of anxiety and stress in comparison to their non-RA peers. Fedorovich, Boyle, and Hare (1994) performed a between groups analysis to determine if there were significant differences in the levels of wellness between those students who were selected as RAs and those who were not. The researchers found a positive significant difference in physical exercise, nutrition, and self-care with those who were selected. Fedorovich et al. (1994) concluded that it was possible the RA candidates who took better care of themselves could have been more physically attractive, and that the selection authorities could have been more prone to selecting these candidates. It is also entirely possible that those students selected to leadership positions have a higher propensity to engage in self-care behaviors, leading to greater wellness. The time discrepancy between Miller and Conyne (1980) and Fedorovich, Boyle, and Hare (1994) could suggest that over time self-care has become a greater emphasis on college campuses. Anecdotally, this seems to be true, as wellness is being given more importance on college campuses across the nation (Rath &

Harter, 2014). Further research at more institutions could provide greater insight into the factors that lead to a selection-wellness relationship.

Ketchum (1988) surveyed groups of Black and White students to determine why they would seek out the RA position. Their findings suggest that both Black and White students' perceptions of the RA position were consistent. Findings to note were that the Black respondents were significantly more likely to feel that RAs of their race are uniquely hassled by fellow residents, and that race might be a motivating factor in the hiring process when selecting RAs. These responses suggest that Black students may uniquely feel targeted in the RA role on college campuses. To effectively recruit and retain individuals of color to the RA position, concerns about targeting would need to be specifically addressed to those populations.

An RA's openness to diversity and inclusive communities presents itself as a highly desirable characteristic in the current college climate. It is critically important for a residential staff member to not create an environment of hostility for students who live on campus. Evans and Broido (2001) examined perceptions of students who identify as members of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, and queer (LGBTQ) community. By conducting interviews with lesbian, gay, and bisexual students, Evans and Broido (2001) determined suggestions for best practices in selection and training of RAs. Chief among the suggestions was recruitment and selection of staff from groups and organizations dedicated to social justice. Although many colleges target student organizations for publicizing position announcements, there is typically little information provided to groups that identify as a particularly desirable candidate based on their affiliation with an organization. Because RAs are often asked to support all students, regardless of their background, it is logical to recruit specific students to participate in the selection process.

Although the limited available research focuses primarily on the individuals who are selected and what selection practices produce the best results for an institution, Chernow (2000) conducted interviews with those individuals who were not selected to be RAs, despite completing the interview process. She found that those not selected displayed three primary behaviors: self-reflection and an enhanced sense of self-awareness, recognition of the learning experience through process and how it can be applied to future job applications, and withdrawal and disengagement from campus leadership opportunities. In many instances, an RA applicant may be interviewing for a job for the first time through the selection process. Universities and colleges have a responsibility to create educational moments throughout the collegiate experience, and the RA selection process should be no different. Considering the high stakes with student disengagement, Chernow (2000) demonstrates a potential attrition point for some students once they are rejected from the RA position.

Wu and Stemler (2008) identified the lack of knowledge in the academic community with regards to best practices in RA selection. As others have indicated the importance of the RA role, the lack of research suggests that there are challenges in identifying how to effectively evaluate the selection practices. Wu and Stemler (2008) built on the research from Jaeger and Caison (2006) by examining how intelligence, personality traits, and emotional intelligence predict success. By using standardized questionnaires for both RAs and residents, Wu and Stemler (2008) identified the relationship between self-reported RA traits and the experiences of the residents the RAs serve. Findings from their study provide support for the notion that RAs strong in certain personality characteristics were positively correlated with performance (emotional stability, conscientiousness, and confidence), while the personality characteristic of neuroticism was negatively correlated with performance. Wu and Stemler (2008) suggested that

personality trait measurements could be included in the more traditional RA selection practices, similar to some business settings.

Summary. The literature regarding the selection of RAs is lacking cohesive themes or solid evidence of best practices (Wu & Stemler, 2008). Much of the available information is decades old, raising concern that today's college students could potentially perform differently under similar conditions. In keeping with the outdated theme, there is a lack of evidence that colleges and universities have updated their selection practices in the same timeframe.

Considering the critical role RAs play on university campuses, having a solid foundation on the hiring process for these student leaders needs to be further explored from a variety of methods.

Resident Assistant Training Practices. If the selection practice for RAs is a critical piece of a university's success (Ostroth, 1981), the training process is potentially equally important as the selection process. Getting the right person for the position is valuable, but the transmission of information, values, and the departmental mission will dictate success or failure of a person once they have obtained the position (Jaeger & Caison, 2006). Much like the literature regarding RA selection, there is a dearth of information regarding best practices for RA training (Schaller & Wagner, 2007). Trends toward university assessment endeavors (Maki, 2010) have tampered the publication of research in this area. Host institutions benefit from internal assessment practices, but these projects are rarely shared outside. The following section will review the available literature regarding RA training processes.

Training for RAs typically takes one of three formats: training sessions, staff retreats, and academic courses (Upcraft, 1982; Ender, 1983), and are most commonly facilitated by new professionals or graduate students (Roussel & Elleven, 2009). It is common for training before each semester to take the form of intensive week(s) long schedules that include position specific

responsibilities and university services education. Retreats tend to include team building activities and extended educational sessions on more difficult topics. For long-term training practices, some institutions employ semester-long courses that engage staff members in position knowledge, as well as the theoretical approach to student affairs work.

Kuh, Stage, and Westfall (1991) found that asking RA staffs to identify theoretical concepts in programming efforts and student behavior was effective in helping staff apply theory to their work. As a potential extension of Murray et al. (2001), it may be possible to better educate students on the theoretical underpinnings of their work through real life application. Kuh et al. (1991) acknowledged the ability to recognize and apply theory would increase with age, and as students progress in college there will be less of an emphasis on practical components of being an RA.

Bowman and Bowman (1995) collected data from a cross section of 369 schools regarding their RA training programs. Specifically, they analyzed data regarding semester-long training classes for RAs. There was significant variability across training programs with regard to content. Of respondents, 90% required RAs to be enrolled in the course, which was taught by student affairs professionals in the majority of programs. Bowman and Bowman (1995) expressed concerns with the syllabi and policies outlined for students at the onset of the courses survey. Contradictory policies and grading practices project an image of the position and professionalism of the department RAs serve in. Sloppy implementation and content can undermine the goals of the course. Students have come to expect similar materials to the academic setting with in a course environment. Further evaluation of such programs should include this component.

Murray, Snider, and Midkiff (1999) conducted a pre- and post-test evaluation of training practices on information retention and performance. Students who underwent a training session on conflict resolution were tested before the training period, and then again four weeks later, with resident assessment also being conducted. Participants showed significant gains in knowledge in the post-test evaluation, as well as practical performance gains. The authors deduced that training practices for RAs are effective means of transmitting information in the short term, and that there is a reasonable expectation that long-term, semester-long training practices could show even greater gains.

Because RAs are expected to learn not only how to perform the major tasks of their position as if it were a “job,” their understanding of the theoretical position in the university experience can at times be overlooked. Murray, Kagan, and Snider (2001) performed a between-groups analysis to evaluate the effectiveness of task and theoretical training for new and returning RAs. They found that RAs benefited more from the training related to specific position tasks as opposed to theoretical content. This finding was true for both new and returning RAs. The new RAs particularly reported higher satisfaction with the practical material taught during training periods. The authors were concerned that exposure to theoretical knowledge reduced the RAs confidence, especially in the experienced group. The authors suggested that training of new staff members should initially focus on practical knowledge, gradually shifting toward a more theoretical emphasis as RAs gain experience. Utilization of student development theory in the training and supervision of student staff members could potentially mitigate the impact of confidence reduction by addressing the student’s current needs (Ricci, Porterfield, & Piper, 1987).

Healea (2006) proposed the implementation of the Character Education with Resident Assistants (CERA) program over the course of an academic year. RAs would be evaluated twice during the year through a questionnaire instrument to determine the effectiveness of monthly trainings. The desired outcome would allow for the proliferation of high character behavior throughout the student body. Noted professionals such as Carol Dweck (2008) in her book *Mindset* advocate for such training and education. Healea (2006) acknowledged the difficulty in implementing character training to address performance because there is an inherent bias toward a specific value system. Nevertheless, because RAs are often asked to make independent decisions, it is prudent to ask them to reflect on their value system and to develop their character while in their position because values play out in real life whether intended or not.

RA training is required to cover a wide expanse of topics (Murray, Kagan, & Snider, 2001; Jaeger & Caison, 2006; King, 2012). Taub and Servaty-Seib (2011) explored the specific training of RAs to refer cases in which students need assistance for mental health related issues. The growing trend on college campuses for increased care of students struggling from mental health concerns necessitates that RAs be adequately trained in this area. Following the best practices of Reynolds (2009), Taub and Servaty-Seib (2011) found that RAs best learned material when knowledge, attitudes, and skills were addressed in training sessions. The special needs of mental health training may provide a template for other unique training topics. The fact that RAs are expected to operate at a high level in a number of areas requires evaluation of extended training regiments.

Utilizing a pre- and post-test measure, King (2012) found similar results to Murry et al. (1999) in knowledge and performance gains among staff undergoing a single training period. Primary concerns expressed were not participant learning, but staff buy-in to training programs.

For sustained learning from training to occur, it must be reinforced from other staff members who actively participate in programmatic efforts. King (2012) acknowledged that college housing staff members refused to participate in training programs and that lack of support created a barrier to overall program success. Highlighting programmatic purpose and outcome goals can play a significant role in RA success (St. Onge, 2003).

Summary. Although RA training practices vary from institution to institution, there are consistent educational tools implemented. Despite the fact that RAs serve a critical role in working with undergraduate students, there is very little existing literature on how to effectively train them to perform their essential functions. Current training experience demonstrates that RAs learn in a variety of situations, but best practices should be developed to fully flush out how to determine RA success.

Resident Assistant Performance. Best practices for RA selection and RA training are not well understood and poorly researched, leading to a lack of informed practice. Considering the acknowledgement that RAs play a significant role in college student success, the call to better understand this population of student leaders leads to attempts to gain information about how to increase performance and retention of highly effective individuals. The demands of the RA position leave many students with high levels of stress, leading to early “burnout.” The following section will review the literature related to RA performance and how stress impacts their experience.

In an attempt to demonstrate a relationship between stress and burnout, Nowack and Hanson (1983) administered a questionnaire to RAs at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) to assess their level of stress and factors related to position burnout. They found that RAs who rated themselves at Type A personalities were more likely to be rated poorly by their

residents and experience higher levels of illness. Type A RAs found it more difficult to engage in the relationship-building components of the position, potentially creating more stress and making it more challenging to complete the basic expectations of the job. Suggestions for supervisors of Type A RAs include identifying RAs struggling with stress, careful screening of staff members through the selection process, and incorporation of stress management programs into training.

Nowack, Gibbons, and Hanson (1985) conducted research involving a 190-item questionnaire aimed at identifying the factors that contributed to RA burnout. They measured three variables related to burnout: emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and personal accomplishment. RAs included in the sample size of 43 RAs demonstrated a significant negative relationship between burnout and performance, meaning the higher the RA scored in measures of burnout, the poorer their performance responses. The authors were surprised to find there was not a significant relationship between psychological distress and performance. One would assume the higher psychological stress a staff member's experience, the more likely their performance in their job would suffer, but in this case, that relationship did not exist. Nowack et al. (1985) concluded that social support networks and personal health habits mitigated the role of burnout in RA performance.

Although RAs experience a great deal of stressors in their positions, Durden and Neimeyer (1986) found that the parts of the job they liked the least were aimed at helping to reduce the pressure they experience. Leadership classes, staff development, training programs, and meetings were among the items RAs enjoyed the least about their positions. Durden and Neimeyer (1986) reported this as a counterintuitive finding because theoretically these activities should help RAs be more proficient at their job. Although that may be true, as busy college

students themselves, any encroachment on their time, regardless of its goal, will be met with resistance. This feeling has likely intensified with time demands since Durden and Neimeyer (1986) conducted their questionnaire. Not surprisingly, the highest rated RA activities were interactions with residents, counseling peers, high visibility from their position, and staff interactions. Although those items require time, they are less structured than a staff meeting. RAs enjoy the status and helping behavior of the position, but not the demands of holding a job.

As the RA team can be a source of stress reduction (Durden & Neimeyer, 1986), Rapaport (1988) suggested the use of team building to help mitigate the impact of position responsibility pressure by creating a support network for an RA to rely upon. In such a scenario, RAs would be led through a series of meetings to find goals, both as a group and as individuals, and facilitate structured conversation with the team. The supervisor (most likely a hall director-type role) plays a critical part in creating an atmosphere where staff members feel they can count on each other for support (Rapaport, 1988). Although team building activities showed promise in fostering social support (Schuele, 1982), requiring more meetings and more time on task for RAs could prove to be a source of stress in-and-of-itself (Durdent & Neimeyer, 1986).

Ballou and Brown (1987) evaluated RA burnout through the lens of Kiersey and Bate's (1984) four Myer-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI) temperaments (Myers & McCaulley, 1985). After administering the MBTI, RAs were asked to complete the Maslach Burnout Inventory (MBI) (Maslach & Jackson, 1981). Results were correlated to determine if certain temperaments were more closely associated with burnout. None of the four temperaments differed from the others in burnout as measured by the BMI. The authors hypothesized that each of the four temperaments identified by Maslach and Jackson (1981) were able to meet their needs in terms of helping behavior. As such, the RAs experienced a higher threshold before they reached

burnout condition. Ballou and Brown (1987) conclude that the MBTI temperaments are inappropriate categorization to assess burnout threat for RAs.

In examining the individual and situational factors associated with RA burnout, Fuehrer and McGonagle (1988) used questionnaires to ascertain what factors could predict RAs that would struggle. They determined that women RAs were more likely to exhibit signs of burnout, scoring higher on items related to emotional exhaustion and feeling a lack of accomplishment. Fuehrer and McGonagle (1988) also found that the situational variables of working in an all-freshman residence hall, or feeling as though one's values could not be expressed, were correlated to burnout. They posited that role ambiguity could be the culprit in RAs feeling as though their personal values are not reflected in their work. As Deluga and Winters (1990) later reiterated, role ambiguity creates strain on staff members. Fuehrer and McGonagle (1988) suggested that this feeling could be more intense for women RAs; creating the artifact that women RAs express higher levels of responses related to burnout.

Hetherington, Oliver, and Phelps (1989) used the MBI to determine factors related to RA burnout. They found that women RAs display higher levels of emotional exhaustion and higher levels of burnout. In their sample of women RAs, participants scored in the upper third of helping professions for burnout. They found that scoring higher on the factor of personal accomplishment mitigated the burnout result. Implications from this study suggest that women RAs may feel a greater sense of accomplishment from their helping behavior expressed through the RA position, reducing burnout for some students.

Contrary to what one might assume, Benedict and Mondloch (1989) found that year in school and time in the position was unrelated to RA burnout. Similar to Fuehrer and McGonagle (1988), Benedict and Mondloch (1989) found that the most significant predictors of RA burnout

were their personal health habits and personal upkeep, as well as the type of residence hall they worked in. RAs working in all-freshman residence halls were more likely to experience burnout. Environment and coping strategies play an important role in reducing burnout for RAs (Benedict & Mondloch, 1989). Because many RAs begin their work in predominantly freshman halls, it is possible high levels of early attrition could be explained by this phenomenon. The alternative would be to have RAs that are younger than their residents in some cases are, but even distribution of RAs throughout a housing system could reduce staff wide burnout.

Supporting the findings of Hetherington, Oliver, and Phelps (1989), and Benedict and Mondloch (1989), Hardy and Dodd (1998) found that RAs assigned to primarily first-year communities were more likely to present higher levels of burnout as measured by the MBI. Unlike other studies, women did not respond with higher levels of burnout in this case. The authors believe that over time the increased pressure for women RAs may have dissipated, reducing the likelihood of replicating the findings of earlier research. Hardy and Dodd (1998) also suggest that residence hall team composition could also impact the propensity of women RAs to display higher levels of burnout. Highly functioning teams may have a dampening effect on burnout for RAs, women in particular.

Deluga and Winters (1990) administered a series of questionnaires to RAs at the conclusion of the academic year to determine their understanding of their role as staff members. The authors found support for the fact that RA-role ambiguity had an inverse relationship with job performance and satisfaction, as well as overall satisfaction as a student. There was a positive relationship with role ambiguity and stress. Because RAs are asked to perform tasks that pit them against other students, or potentially infringe on their experience as a student, stress is a natural outcome. Suggestions for mitigating the impact of role ambiguity involved

separating the different responsibilities cognitively by structured dialog and training for staff members.

Dodge (1990) reported that institutions of higher education have considered the prospect of removing undergraduate students from the position of RA. Through a series of anecdotal stories, she painted the picture of the difficult situations most RAs find themselves in, caught between institutional expectations, commitment to helping others, and their personal goals and work. How can an RA be expected to aid their peers during the most stressful points in a semester, when they themselves are also under intense personal pressure? This push and pull pit RAs against time and focus to meet the multitude of calls for their attention. Dodge (1990) also asserted that the types of issues presented to RAs have changed over time. As the public consciousness around alcohol consumption, drug use, sexually transmitted diseases, and other concerns college students are at high risk for has increased, so too did the demand for RAs to further expand their responsibilities. The greatest potential weapons RAs have in the battle for their time will be their knowledge and ability to refer students to professional staff members. If they avoid providing direct services, and act more as a conduit to helping students find the resources they need, Dodge (1990) proposed they would have a greater chance of success avoiding burnout.

In an attempt to understand why RAs choose to engage in the position, Deluga and Winders (1991) developed a questionnaire instrument to assess the components of the position that are most desirable to a college student. They found that RAs motivated by a desire for power, financial obligations, career development, or personal growth exhibited higher levels of stress related to the RA position. Students primarily focused on helping others and team cohesiveness reported higher levels of job satisfaction. It seems unsurprising that the RAs least

interested in personal gain were able to get the most out of the position. If a person feels a strong sense that they need the position due to financial reasons, they may be less likely to take full advantage of their time as an RA by being focused on keeping the job rather than helping others. If the intrinsic rewards of the position are removed, and only external motivation exists, it stands to reason satisfaction will be decreased.

Komives (1991a) examined hall director (HD) transformational and transactional leadership and their outcomes for RAs. HDs were found to practice high levels of transformational leadership, with both self-reports and reports from RAs that they demonstrate individual consideration at a higher rate than other characteristics. Komives (1991a) asserted that the RA experience, and stress reduction for the position, could be significantly enhanced by HD transformational leadership style (Komives, 1991b). Rajakumar (2005) believed that the supervisor of undergraduate RAs plays a very important role in stress reduction through the overall performance management process. In an attempt to further understand the relationship between HD leadership and RA satisfaction, Morris (2009) found a positive relationship between HDs who displayed transformational leadership characteristics and RA satisfaction, similar to Komives (1991a). HDs should focus on their leadership style and practice to assist RAs as much as possible.

Paladino, Murray, Newgent, and Gohn (2005) identified the three areas that most contribute to the burnout of RAs in their position: personal factors, training, and work environment. Personal factors, a wide umbrella for many discrete concerns, encapsulated stress, financial problems, wellness, and gender. Training concerns that do not set up students for success in the role through clear expectations, and a work environment encompasses the conditions related to depersonalization and emotional exhaustion. They found that

depersonalization specifically was positively correlated to burnout of RAs. This finding suggests that burnout can be mitigated in part if leaders recognize this pitfall and build in mechanisms that allow RAs healthy levels of autonomy. Because non-Caucasians were more susceptible to the phenomenon of depersonalization, this study has great implications for the recruitment and retention of diverse populations into the RA role.

RAs have a particularly daunting job of not only building community in residence halls, but also enforcing policies among their peers (Jaeger & Caison, 2006). Because they are expected to perform these tasks within a residence hall and also be campus leaders outside of their respective communities (Blimling, 2003), they face unique stress from always having to assume the expectations of their position. Everett and Loftus (2011) utilized both qualitative and quantitative measures to examine the role ambiguity RAs face when performing position-related tasks. They found that RAs routinely connect with fellow students they supervise on a fairly regular basis, creating stress when they are forced to address policy violations with these same students. Participants acknowledged that friendships with residents challenged them to address policy violations or behavioral concerns (Everett & Loftus, 2011). RAs are expected to act as campus level law enforcement without the ability to exercise discretion in the dispensation of their duties.

In nearly all residence life programs across the country, RAs must have lived in a residence hall at least a semester before being selected to the position. As such, the typical RA starts their journey as a sophomore. Schaller and Wagner (2007) examined the experience of sophomore RAs through structured interviews. They found that sophomore RAs had difficulty acclimating to the position potentially based on their expectations coming into the position, as well as inadequate support from supervisors. Suggestions included better marketing and clear

information regarding the responsibilities of the position. Schaller and Wager (2007) also suggested that supervisors concentrate on developing a healthy blend of work and life outside of the RA position to help alleviate stress. Treating all RAs the same at every level, and assuming that sophomore RAs do not face unique challenges, can both stunt their growth as leaders and produce poor performance. Schaller and Wager (2007) concluded that utilizing concepts from Baxter Magolda's (1998) work on self-authorship could be a key in assisting sophomore RAs on their journey.

Summary. Holding the position of RA can be incredibly stressful for undergraduate students. Putting a 19- or 20-year-old in an authority position over their peers, with high institutional expectations is a recipe for burnout, forcing RAs to make difficult choices to manage their limited time. Supervisors should put extra care into the ways they develop teams and structure responsibilities to allow RAs to get the most out of their experience with the least impact on their personal and academic lives. Although balance will always be a challenge for RAs, the benefits of the position for the institution and those holding the job far outweigh the effort required to sustain the workforce.

Best Practices for Resident Assistants. Little research has sought to understand the RA position and how it contributes to university goals. Even less understood than the selection and training of student leaders are the qualities that make RAs stand out among their peers. There is a small body of literature aimed at the best practices for RAs and their supervisors. The following section will summarize the research toward RA leadership and supervision.

A potential motivating factor for RAs in their position is the long-term benefits of their experience. Lillis and Schuh (1982) surveyed former RAs to determine how their experience as an RA had contributed to their ability to address major life events after their service. They found

that the length of time a student served as an RA, the greater impact the position had on life skills. They found that interpersonal and group skills, such as communication and teamwork, were more influenced than life skills such as planning and budgeting. As professionals work with current RAs, it is important to understand how the experience of serving an institution in a leadership capacity can impact the rest of a person's life. By appropriately promoting the benefits of the RA job to candidates and current employees, it is possible to encourage increased motivation and performance.

Frazer (1983) found that effective RAs shared certain personality traits, namely men RAs were found to experience higher levels of effectiveness when correlated with assertiveness and community mindedness. Effective women RAs were correlated with affiliation and nurturing traits. Where both sets of traits are highly sought after characteristics of high-performing RAs, these findings support stereotypical views of men and women in leadership roles, thus it is possible there is selection bias at play in Frazer's (1983) study with which students are selected into the RA position.

Hetherington and Kerr (1988) focused their research on a pitfall of the RA position that can lead to behaviors that veer from best practices to the area of co-dependence. Many RAs are drawn to their position with the goal of helping people, but few researchers have examined when helping behavior crosses the line in to an unhealthy pattern that can work against an RA. Because so many students struggle with issues that lend themselves to leaning on others, it is possible for RAs to become over extended, decreasing their performance. Hetherington and Kerr (1988) pressured supervisors to recognize the symptoms of co-dependence, intervening when necessary to protect the RA, as well as enhancing their performance. Distance from residents is not a bad thing, especially when commitment to an individual can harm the person helping them.

In a comprehensive evaluation of RA behavior, Posner and Brodsky (1993) examined the leadership practices of students at six institutions. They used a modified version of the Leadership Practice Inventory (LPI) created by Kouzes and Posner (1988). The full LPI inventory seeks to evaluate the effectiveness of leaders by administration of a 360-degree feedback system. Beyond self-evaluations from leaders, followers are evaluated for commitment, engagement, and satisfaction. Posner and Brodsky (1993) asked participants to complete a questionnaire evaluating five leadership behaviors in their position: challenging the process, inspiring a shared vision, enabling others to act, modeling the way, and encouraging the heart (p. 301). The effectiveness of RAs was measured by creating questions through conversations with professionals in the field. Participating RAs' supervisors also provided feedback to assess performance. Overall, RAs' effectiveness was positively correlated to the leadership practices measured by the LPI. Further, the greater frequency an RA engaged in leadership practices as measured by the LPI, the more effective they were seen by their supervisor, although this relationship was not as consistent or as strong. The most effective RAs were those who reported themselves as engaging in the leadership practices of enabling others to act, modeling the way others should behave, and encouraging the hearts of others. Posner and Brodsky (1993) posit that the use of these behaviors was most in-line with the goals for the RA position, and thus viewed most favorably.

In an attempt to examine what motivates RAs, Bierman and Carpenter (1994) surveyed 327 RAs from 15 institutions. New RAs and female RAs were more likely to be motivated by the surroundings of their position and the training they received, versus veteran male RAs who reported motivation through the challenges they encountered. The motivation for work performance cannot be overstated in the experiences RAs have in their time working for a

university or college. Bierman and Carpenter (1994) suggested that unmet needs directly contribute to dissatisfaction with the position, leading to poor performance and disengagement. By better understanding the motivating factors RAs experience at different types of institutions and working environments, it will be possible to create strategies to address the needs of student leaders.

Denzine and Anderson (1999) created an RA self-efficacy instrument to reliably validate RAs beliefs about their ability to positively develop students. Working from Bandura's (1986, 1993, 1997) definition of self-efficacy, Denzine and Anderson (1999) administered the *Resident Assistant Self-Efficacy Scale* (RASES) (Denzine & Anderson, 1998) in hopes of attaining a better understanding of one aspect of RA performance. Denzine and Anderson (1999) found that the majority of RAs who responded felt they could positively develop students through their RA role. Different than previous research on the topic (Benedict & Mondloch, 1989), there were no differences found for gender or community type in these results. The higher the self-efficacy score for an RA, the greater job satisfaction reported. As job satisfaction can be a predictor of performance and continued employment (Bierman & Carpenter, 1994), it is important to understand the relationship between self-efficacy and job satisfaction. Denzine and Anderson (1999) suggested increasing self-efficacy through creating supervision and support systems that help train RAs, as well as support through mentorship programs. The nature of the university system is conducive to providing feedback that encourages concepts of self-efficacy, thus institutions should take advantage of the built in mechanisms to accomplish this goal.

Longwell-Grice and Kerr (2013) found that the metaphors RAs used to describe their role in a residence hall and how it changed over time could help predict success. If an RA had the correct perception of their role upon starting, they could potentially experience a higher level of

satisfaction in their time in the position. Metaphors were used to explain the type of work they expected they would be engaged with, and ultimately how they felt their role looked like after one year. RAs who did not change their role metaphor after one year self-defined their success at a higher level than those RAs that did modify their metaphors. This study supports previous findings that setting the correct perceptions prior to the RA job beginning are critical to success and satisfaction. Indeed, the expectations student leaders bring into their role can be a significant determinant of success, as Benjamin (2005) found with the peer mentor role in residence halls. Because the role of a leader can begin even before they assume their position, expectations play a huge role in how a student leader performs and progresses.

RAs at liberal arts colleges have been found to have significantly higher intercultural effectiveness than their peers at research and regional institutions (Martin & Blechschmidt, 2014). This finding would seem to indicate that RAs who attend liberal arts colleges experience a significant advantage in their development of intercultural competence. This is a phenomenon other types of institutions should attempt to duplicate because, as commentary from Martin and Blechschmidt (2014) noted from the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) (2007) resource, modern college students will experience disruption rather than certainty in their lives. Having a strong grasp of how to interact and work with individuals of different backgrounds is a critical skill for leaders. If the RA position can speed the adoption of skills related to this end, colleges and universities should seek to maximize their influence in this area.

Cousineau and Chambers (2015) further examined the gendered nature of the RA experience by surveying women RAs. They sought to determine how lived experience varied from expectations when entering the role. They found that women RAs felt they were treated as

surrogate mothers, suggesting existing literature might not fully account for the experiences of women in the role. Better training could potentially bridge the gap between expectations and experience, thus reducing the bias that may exist for women RAs. Although Mulder and Clark (2002) suggested that RAs should play the parental role, Cousineau and Chambers (2015) asserted that this perpetuates the gender binary that is learned, not innate. To allow women leaders access to the same opportunities, it is important to reduce the gendered differences in the same role.

Summary. RA performance should be a priority of higher education administrators, yet the majority of research has been devoted to the selection, training, and experienced stress for RAs. The leadership characteristics of high-performing RAs, and the characteristics that can contribute to poor performance hold the key to better supervision and mentoring for students. The potential of increasing job satisfaction through increased self-efficacy has promise for creating an impact with not only staff members, but also the students they work with. Further research in this area should carefully evaluate what great RAs do best.

D. Literature Related to Women Leaders

Leadership has long been a concern for scholars. Although often intangible and elusive, strong leadership can propel organizations and groups to success when lackluster talent and ability would otherwise limit success. Once taken for granted as a domain dominated by men, women in 2017 have access to roles that were once completely out of reach (Wenniger & Conroy, 2001; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Current findings of gross inequalities with regard to leadership attainment by women (White House Project, 2009) lead the way for further analysis of what concerns women face on their path to top ranking positions in their field. It is not enough to simply identify the phenomenon and trends, but researchers must make sense of

seemingly disparate concepts in order to provide new opportunities to women and girls seeking success as leaders this century. At a time in history when more women are graduating from institutions of higher education than men (Eagly, 2007), yet occupy far fewer leadership positions in virtually every field (White House Project, 2009), it is now more important than ever to understand the factors that constrain and conversely facilitate the success of women.

The labyrinth metaphor proposed by Eagly and Carli (2007) will be identified and explained to further the understanding of differential success women experience when ascending an organization. Research on leadership style will be discussed to determine what messages women are sent on the method of leadership that is best to adopt. Female leadership emergence will be considered to better understand how women rise to prominence in a male dominated society. The field of education will be highlighted based on its unique position to not only train women leaders, but also as a profession that offers a great many women leaders opportunities to excel. Finally, barriers to leadership success for women will be considered.

The Labyrinth for Women Leaders. For many years, the metaphor of a “glass ceiling” was used to describe the challenges women faced when attempting to ascend to leadership roles (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Eagly & Carli (2007) proposed a new way to conceptualize the path women must take to obtain leadership recognition in any discipline, the labyrinth. They contended that once women faced an impenetrable wall that completely halted access to leadership positions. As the metaphorical wall broke down, the analogy of a glass ceiling emerged, implying women could see leadership roles within their grasp, yet were unable to obtain them. Eagly and Carli (2007) suggested that contemporary women face a maze on their way to the highest levels of leadership, producing unclear pathways and frustration for women who attempt to forge ahead. This metaphor creates a sharp contrast to those who might point to

progress in recent decades (White House Report, 2009). Despite increased opportunity on many fronts, sharing of information about what works for facilitating leadership roles for women is still rare (Madsen, 2011). The following section will examine the challenges women face when taking on leadership roles in organizations.

Eagly and Carli (2003; 2007) first pointed to the primary concern facing all women leaders: how to lead. Because women are expected to conform to certain stereotypical behaviors in society, such as being warm and empathetic, it can often be considered undesirable for women to be assertive in the professional realm. At the same time, promotions and professional recognition are often based on an employees' ability to display traditionally masculine traits (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Eagly and Carli (2007) referred to this as the "double-bind" (p. 102). In this scenario, a woman can be placed into limbo, not being able to fully take a leadership role for fear of acting out of feminine character. This challenge can prove to be most insidious for any woman manager because they reach a point of being criticized no matter the path they take. Although there is evidence that subordinates respond better to the more stereotypical feminine leadership style (Eagly & Carli, 2007), there persists a preference for men as managers in many arenas (Eagly, 2007).

Potentially acting in tandem with biases against leadership characteristics of women is the notion that a woman's responsibilities outside of the workplace will have a greater impact on her job performance than a man's. Hoobler, Wayne, and Lemmon (2009) found that decision makers manifested a bias against women when considering organizational fit based on an increased expectation of familial responsibilities. Not only do such expectations prevent promotion and career advancement, but also society at large can limit a woman's scope of aspiration by creating a false sense of an either/or dichotomy (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Women

leaders are routinely told that they will have to make sacrifices in their family life to obtain leadership roles, sacrifices men are not confronted with in the same manner (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Women who choose to promote family over career are considered to be “settling,” while women who prioritize career are thought to be incomplete and missing a part of their identity.

It is clear that women can achieve high-ranking positions in education, business, and politics, as evidenced by women such as Madeline Albright, Marissa Mayer, and Hillary Clinton. The greater problem presents itself when considering that less than 20% of the United States Congress, six of 50 governors and less than 20% of Fortune 500 CEOs (Arfken, Bellar, & Helms, 2004) identify as women. Although it is possible for women to reach these positions, what distinguishes the women who make it to the top? Arfken, Bellar, and Helms (2004) found that approximately 5% of corporate boards compositions were women, creating a foundational argument that men have been unwilling to relinquish current power structures to women (Eagly & Carli, 2007). It only stands to reason that executive boards are less willing to select a woman as a CEO if few of the voices in the decision-making roles are women to begin with. Even more troubling is the fact that a large number of corporate boards are composed of business leaders from other businesses (Easterbrook, 2004), suggesting they have a stake in maintaining the status quo.

Beyond the challenges women face in reaching the highest levels of organizations, Ryan and Haslam (2005) identified another phenomenon that may impact the success of women leaders. In their research, Ryan and Haslam (2005) found that women could be more likely to experience negative consequences than their counterparts for poor company performance could. Men were less likely to be held directly responsible for external factors that hindered company growth. Ryan and Haslam (2005) referred to this as the “glass cliff,” implying that when women

finally reach a president role, their grasp of the job may be more tenuous than a man in a similar position. Eagly and Carli (2007) often refer to the success of Carly Fiorina as an example of a top woman manager at Hewlett-Packard, one that has since been fired and held personally responsible for that company's performance when CEOs who identify as men might not have been. This example provides support for the glass cliff metaphor proposed by Ryan and Haslam (2005).

Although America has progressed significantly from the days of not allowing women to even enter the workforce, there is still a great deal of change that needs to occur. There is no doubt that women are still differentially affected by biases that permeate society. With wide access to empirical data on the number of women leaders, managers, and board members, decision makers can no longer turn a blind eye to the glaring problem women face when confronted with the conflicting messages from the leadership labyrinth.

Women Leaders and Leadership Style. Leadership style is a well-researched and significant indicator of success as a leader (Zenger & Folkman, 2009). Zenger and Folkman (2009) identify three primary types of leaders, laissez-faire transactional, and transformational. The laissez-faire leader is reluctant to approach problems and conflict directly. They are more likely to withdraw and allow followers to work independently, although that comes at the cost of support and direction. The transactional leader puts forward a structure that promotes results, rewarding behavior and actions that fit within the goals of the group. The transactional leader is often direct and assertive in nature. The final leadership style, transformational, exhibits high levels of interaction and support. The transformational leader is heavily engaged with followers and facilitates change and conflict. In the current climate, transformational leaders are exalted as a pinnacle of leadership achievement (Zenger & Folkman, 2009).

It is assumed that women engage in a more democratic, participatory style of leadership that is most closely associated with transformational leadership, and men in a more directive autocratic style more closely resembling transactional leadership (Eagly & Johnson, 1990). Much like the transformational leader, a democratic leader directs energy and attention on participation and satisfaction of the group. Because women are assumed more community oriented, the transformational/democratic style is the closest representation of this mindset. On the opposite end of the spectrum, men are assumed to be direct, engaging in the transactional leadership style, which is closely linked to an autocratic model outlined by Eagly and Johnson (1990). The transactional/autocratic leader feels more comfortable directing others rather than collecting input (Eagly & Johnson, 1990; Zenger & Folkman, 2009). Although situational leadership strategies should always be taken into account (Young, 2004), transformational leadership is stereotypically identified more as a feminine approach (Eagly & Johnson, 1990).

In Eagly and Johnson's (1990) meta-analysis of literature on gender and leadership style, they found that women were more likely than men to assume a role of democratic leader were. Despite their reasoning that organizational role would have greater predictive value than sex of leaders on style, they found that the phenomenon of women acting more as transformational leaders held in laboratory experiments, assessment studies, and organizational studies. This broad-spectrum finding suggests support for women as transformational leaders, on average, different from men. Eagly and Johnson (1990) acknowledge that their findings could be related to selection bias in some instances of real world leadership studies. Because women leaders are still relatively rare, it could be that the characteristics chosen for advancement could lend themselves toward a more desirable form of leadership, where the large number of men in leadership roles offers more variety of style (Eagly & Johnson, 1990).

In contrast to the early work of Eagly and Johnson (1990), Young (2004) found that women adopted more masculine leadership traits and men more feminine in the higher education setting. Young (2004) speculated that men in higher education gravitate toward the most desirable form of leadership, where women must display determination and resolve to be selected to leadership positions. This conclusion is consistent with the work of Eagly and Carli (2007), who suggest that men have the luxury of expanded opportunities and do not necessarily have to conform to any standard to be accepted. Women bear the burden of having to prove themselves on a regular basis to be seen as fit to lead. Such justification can lead a person to adopt a more directive leadership style to prove they are worthy (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Adding even more confusion to leadership style and gender literature, Barbuto, Fritz, Matkin, and Marx (2007) found that men and women did not vary significantly in leadership style until education level was considered. Women with a high school education were least likely to display transformation leadership characteristics, where men and women who had completed a bachelor's degree or graduate degree were equally likely to lead with a transformational style. Barbuto et al. (2007) concluded that life experience might have more to do with leadership style than gender, and call for re-analysis of previous work that does not consider such variables.

The question of whether men and women lead with different styles is not clear. There is evidence that supports a wide range of interpretations on the matter. Although there is a clear answer to how the majority of individuals prefer to be led (Zenger & Folkman, 2009), it is unclear what factors most influence how a person chooses to lead. It is quite possible that Eagly and Carli's (2007) hypothesis that women face extreme pressures in attaining leadership positions is at play in much of the literature on this topic. It is also possible, like much of the

research in this domain, that women have changed over time (Eagly & Karau, 2004), producing a confounding variable that must be considered to fully understand leadership style between sexes.

Leadership Emergence for Women Leaders. A large amount of attention has been paid to the emergence of leaders in literature. It is typical for such research to engage a group (student or professionals) in a task, observe in various ways the individuals who demonstrate leadership characteristics, and then attempt to tease out what themes arise common to leaders. Gender roles have played a large part in determining leadership characteristics in such work. The following section will examine the findings of leadership emergence research relative to gender of participants.

Eagly and Karau (1991) conducted a meta-analysis to determine trends in emergence of women as leaders in both laboratory and field research. Their findings suggested that men are more likely to emerge as leaders in a variety of settings, specifically in situations where the task required is more masculine in nature (i.e. repairing a machine), versus a task that is more feminine, such as a sewing task (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Ho, Shih, & Walters, 2012). Women were more likely to emerge as leaders when the task requires complex social interactions. The strength of these findings declined the longer the task was required and with publication date of the research (Eagly & Karau, 1991). Eagly and Karau (1991) suggested that the more information a group has about its members, the more likely each person will be judged based on ability rather than superficial characteristics. It should be noted that this phenomenon may be observable at the undergraduate level in controlled experiments (Eagly & Karau, 1991), but evidence suggests that gender still plays a large role in promotability and leadership roles in the real world (Eagly & Karau, 2002; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Although there is a tendency to select male leaders, there are situations in which women leaders have a higher likelihood of acceptance,

especially when a task is framed in a way that leads to more interaction among members (Eagly & Karau, 2002).

Androgyny seems to also play a role in perceptions of leaders. Kark, Waismel-Manor, and Shamir (2012) found that androgynous men and women were preferred as leaders, meaning leaders that did not have a leadership style that was feminine or masculine dominant. Feminine qualities of a leader are not necessarily problematic in leadership emergence, but they must be mixed with more traditionally masculine characteristics for them to work in a person's favor. Kark et al. (2012) also found that men preferred masculine traits in a leader, and women who were not perceived as androgynous were the least likely to be selected as leaders. Consistent with this finding, Kent and Moss (1994) also found that androgyny was not a limiting factor, providing mixed results to the notion that men are more likely to be selected as leaders. Task appears to play a large part in how leaders are selected, potentially more so than actual gender identification of the individual. Gender identification of the followers is also an important factor in the selection of leaders (Kent & Moss, 1994; Eagly & Karau, 2002; Kark et al., 2012).

It is important to understand that not all cultures view women leaders the same way. Toh and Leonardelli (2012) found that cultures that have tighter control on attitudes and behaviors of citizens were less likely to select women as leaders. When considered in context, it is logical to believe that women are less likely to emerge as leaders in a variety of settings in tighter controlled countries, such as Middle Eastern nations. Although tighter cultures are less likely to select women leaders, one must ask why the United States lags behind other advanced nations in our selection of women to top positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007). It is possible that the historical distribution of power in the United States exacerbates the reluctance to elevate women, with more conservative areas mirroring tighter controlled nations (Toh & Leonardelli, 2012). As

an example, many states that are more liberal have long been represented by women at the statewide level, yet the state of Iowa elected its very first woman, Senator Joni Ernst, to a statewide office in 2014. One can see similar trends toward leadership in more conservative and tighter regions within the U.S., although it is a problem nationwide regardless of political affiliation (White House Project, 2009).

Understanding the factors that contribute to the emergence of women as leaders is critical in predicting how to duplicate situations to facilitate a balanced approach to selecting leaders. Task appears to be a very important determinant when selecting a leader (Eagly & Karau, 2002), yet Toh and Leonardelli (2012) suggested that it may not be as important to focus on conditions as much as culture. The complexities of leadership emergence among women cannot be understated, and depend heavily on the perception of followers. When considered in relationship to the perceptions of individuals selecting leaders from an elevated position, it is clear that women leaders face a daunting journey to the top.

Women Leaders in Education. Colleges and universities in the United States serve as the gateway to formal leadership positions in all areas of our society. It is not that all leaders require a college education, but the value of a degree from a higher education institution is a valuable resource in most career fields. Now more than ever, a college education has dire consequences for lifetime earnings and advancement opportunities (Oreopoulos & Petronijevic, 2013). As the value of an advanced education increases, the desire for successful completion rates and results does as well (Arum & Roksa, 2011). More and more focus has been paid to success rates of individual populations, women included. Although programs aimed at helping women achieve leadership roles in higher education have existed for decades, it is only now that research and evidence is beginning to emerge demonstrating best practices (Madsen, 2012). The

following section will detail what is known regarding women leaders in the higher education setting.

Nationally, women now make up the majority of students attending colleges and universities (White House Project, 2009), a decades long trend (Arum & Roksa, 2011). Be this as it may, women only occupy 23% of universities presidencies (White House Project, 2009). Recent selections of women to the highest post at prestigious institutions (Lafreniere & Longman, 2008) aside, there are still a disproportionately high numbers of men in academic leadership roles. Potentially more disturbing than the lack of women presidents is the fact that the percentage has not changed in the past decade (White House Project, 2009). Because women occupy a smaller number of board positions within colleges and universities (White House Project, 2009), there is a potential for unconscious biases to be impacting the selection of women leaders (Eagly & Carli, 2007). As Eagly and Carli (2007) point out, unless intentional efforts are made by the established leaders to allow underrepresented groups into the upper echelon of positions within an organization, there is little evidence that the trend of selecting men, predominantly white, to the top posts of higher education will change. As dubious a proposition as it is to expect men to relinquish the power they have enjoyed for centuries, there is evidence that such a turn will produce positive results for all members of our society (Madsen, 2011; Madsen, 2012).

Historically, women leaders have occupied positions such as deans of women, which relegated them to less opportunity for advancement (Schwartz, 1997; Hevel, 2016). Although more women are now selected to program director roles and other administrative leadership positions, it is possible that such jobs could turn into dead-ends, preventing further advancement (Wenninger & Conroy, 2001). Wenninger and Conroy (2001) pointed out that positions such as

Assistant or Associate Dean allow women to test the waters of leadership before taking a large step forward into the highest positions. Mid-level positions draw on specific traits such as advocacy, nurturing, and facilitation (Wenninger & Conroy, 2001), traits that may come more naturally to women (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Zenger & Folkman, 2009) allowing them to excel at such roles. One must ask if such stereotypes act as a barrier to advancement for women (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Among tenure track faculty, women occupy roughly half of all assistant professor appointments, yet only roughly 26% of full professor positions (Madsen, 2011). There are many potential reasons why women are not advancing to the ranks of full professor, not the least of which are expectations regarding home and family life (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Many more college and universities presidents who are men are married than their women peers (Wenninger & Conroy, 2001). There are still significant societal pressures for women to follow a certain path, one that is not always conducive to the long hours and work habits of the highest positions academia (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

Beyond just advancement in higher education, among all women in academic positions, there still exists a pay gap, with women making 75-85% of their counterparts (Wenninger & Conroy, 2001; Madsen, 2011). At a time in American history that all workers face falling economic strength (Che, 2015), it is even more critical for women leaders to be compensated at the same level as men. Although it has been proposed that women are less likely to engage in tough salary negotiations to achieve higher pay (Eagly & Carli, 2007), it is incumbent upon higher education institutions to overcome this inherent bias. Of any profession in the United States, one should expect the science and data driven field of higher education to take an ethical stand against gendered discrimination in pay. Because so many state institutions openly publish

salary information for public consumption, it seems the Internet may be a strong tool against such practices in the future.

Although the proliferation of women into lesser administrative roles and fewer full professor appointments could be looked at as a negative trend, there is the potential for great gains. Lafreniere and Longman (2008) concluded that mentorship is one of the greatest tools in empowering women leaders. In their research, participants in a female leadership program cited their experience shadowing or being mentored by a professional on a different campus as their greatest benefit from participating in the program. Mentoring can play a large role in the development of any individual, especially in a higher education setting (Lafreniere & Longman, 2008). It only stands to reason that the more women are seen in positions of authority, the more women will set their expectations on leadership success themselves.

Despite recent gains in leadership positions within the field of higher education, much ground still needs to be covered for women to achieve a greater sense of equality. With decades of growth, there is the potential for gains to remain at a standstill without intentional efforts (White House Project, 2009). Higher education can, and should be, a driving force in propelling women into leadership roles across all disciplines. Such work should start with in-house initiatives aimed at creating greater access to all underrepresented groups.

Barriers for Women Leaders. There is no doubt that women leaders face a number of obstacles as demonstrated by the literature reviewed here. Stereotypes regarding men versus women leaders have a significant impact on how a person is perceived (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Schaubroeck & Shao, 2012). There is less tolerance for a woman to express anger in a leadership role (Schaubroeck & Shao, 2012) and women are less likely to be chosen as a leader if a task is stereotypically male (Eagly & Karau, 1991; Eagly & Karau, 2002). As previously discussed, a

majority of women face a labyrinth when ascending any leadership structure (Eagly & Carli, 2007). The following section will examine the most prominent barriers women face on their path to leadership roles.

Ho et al. (2012) suggested that task framing plays a large role in determining if a leader is perceived as competent, in a given area, to lead. When taken in conjunction with the work of Eagly and Carli (2007), the picture of obstacles women face in the leadership arena becomes more visible. Eagly and Carli (2007) suggested that women are initially considered less competent than their counterparts are, thus must perform at a higher level to achieve the same success. A task itself must be framed in such a way for a woman to be considered suited to lead (Ho et al., 2012), and then she must also perform at a level that is substantially greater than her peers who are men (Eagly & Carli, 2007). It is precisely in this environment that the double bind (Eagly & Carli, 2007) becomes a limiting force for women leaders. She will risk being seen as too harsh and autocratic in exchange for the leadership role itself. In a sense, what will get her there will not keep her there (Zenger & Folkman, 2009).

Eagly and Karau (2002) found that leaders were most effective in situations that their role was congruent with their stereotypical expectations of their gender. That is, women were most effective in middle management roles that require a great deal of interpersonal communication and negotiation with subordinates, traits that may be more endemic to women (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Women were less effective in line management positions that required more directive behavior (Eagly & Karau, 2002). This suggests that the followers in any given situation can dictate the success of women leaders based solely on the expectations of the role of gender. Eagly and Karau (2002) asserted that this type of prejudice could have extreme limiting effects of leadership advancement for women.

Kark et al. (2012) found that women paid a much higher price than men did for not displaying androgynous characteristics in their leadership role. When coupled with the findings of Eagly and Karau (2002), women are most effective in roles ascribed to women, but once there they must perform their task in a more androgynous manner, lest they risk not being accepted by their group. This dynamic sets up confounding information for a woman to navigate in order to be successful. The result of such a double standard is that women may seek out leadership roles that do not require them to challenge traditional gender stereotypes in order to avoid role incongruence (Eagly & Carli, 2003; Eagly & Carli, 2007). It is entirely possible that women self-select into certain leadership roles, roles that may not allow for advancement (White House Project, 2009).

It is important to point out one of the more significant barriers women face in the workplace, that of bearing and rearing children (Eagly & Carli, 2007). Although the last 30 years have seen significant gains in gender equality with regards to caring for children (Eagly, 2007; Eagly & Carli, 2007), there is still significant pressure for women to assume primary responsibility for children (Eagly & Carli, 2007). There is little doubt that prejudice exists with regard to a woman's fit for leadership roles based on her family and potential to have children (Hoobler, Wayne, & Lemmon, 2009). Although making personnel decisions based on such information is inherently illegal, women face the specter of discrimination based on family status every day in the United States, real or perceived. Men are rarely confronted with this challenge, if at all.

Women in all areas of the working world face significant barriers to leadership success. Mixed messages regarding the characteristics necessary for success form the walls in the labyrinth they must navigate on their way to the most coveted positions (Eagly & Carli, 2007).

The science of leadership struggles to provide clear answers for how a woman can best lead. Although it is not possible to eliminate all confounding information, one only need point to the pathways men take to leadership positions. Women face a unique set of challenges that men typically do not consider for their own success.

Summary. The majority of Americans are not only comfortable with women leaders, but report a preference for traditionally feminine leadership characteristics (Eagly, 2007), yet virtually every professional field sees a dearth of women in the highest ranks (White House Project, 2009). How can we continue with the status quo, experiencing flat growth in women's access to leadership positions over the last decade (Madsen, 2011)? We are all experiencing a call to create more inclusive work environments, places that everyone can succeed and diversity is rewarded. Old rhetoric regarding the fit of women in management roles no longer makes sense, and we now know that many of the characteristics that we appropriate to women naturally are our most prized examples of strong leadership (Zenger & Folkman, 2009).

It seems the education sector is uniquely positioned to lead the way for women. There are currently many leadership programs specifically aimed at women on college campuses across the country (Madsen, 2012). Research for best practices is beginning to emerge that can help women gain confidence and approach their professions with the knowledge to perform and negotiate the challenges they face. We still need a better understanding of how women distinguish themselves as leaders, what characteristics allow women to emerge in the early stages of their careers as leaders, and how growth can be sustained in our communities and workplaces. Examples of successful women such as Hillary Clinton and Elizabeth Warren in the media help provide girls and women of all ages role models to which they can aspire. It is incumbent on

leaders in all fields to continue the work necessary to inspire the next generation of women leaders.

E. Conclusion

Although the RA position has existed on college and university campuses for a significant amount of time, little is known regarding the best practices when selecting, training, and developing leaders within the group. RAs find themselves under great university demands to perform essential functions within the institution, yet the outcome of these practices on staff members is not very well understood. RAs must serve fellow students to resolve conflicts, enforce policies, plan activities, and develop relationships with other students. Simultaneously, RAs must also be students themselves, managing the day-to-day stresses any other college student would face. Because there are unique pressures facing women RAs, it is critical to examine this population of students.

In much the same way, women leaders in general find themselves in a precarious environment. Being asked to lead as a man would leave to achieve the highest roles, but at the same time being criticized for the very traits women are asked to adopt. A woman leader who is seen as too masculine will be chastised in a way a man in the same position would not. It is as if American society both loves and hates the role of women leaders. A better understanding of the roots of women leaders allows a greater sense of how women leaders evolve and pursue positions of authority.

Because the RA role serves as a prominent leadership position on virtually all college and university campuses, examining the common traits of high-performing women leaders in the RA role can serve as a foundational understanding of women leaders. At a point in life when women begin to decide how they will lead in their own communities, the RA role offers an opportunity

for them to excel in a field with many women leaders. The following research project will examine the common traits among high-performing women RAs.

Chapter 3

Methodology

A. Organization of the Chapter

The following chapter begins with an introduction to the topic of study, and will be followed by an explanation of the focus of the current research. Next, the research question will be addressed. Issues of theoretical sensitivity will precede the description of the research design and the timeline for the project. A description of the site location and the population sample will be discussed. A discussion of depth and breadth of the study will demonstrate the data collection method of interviews. The researcher's observation practice and the role of the researcher will be covered, followed by the managing and recording of the data collected. Finally, the trustworthiness of the data collected will precede the final chapter summary.

B. Introduction

Women comprise approximately 50% of the world's population, but occupy significantly less leadership roles than men (Eagly & Carli, 2007). It is important to understand the disparity between men and women with regard to their ascension to the highest levels of leadership. Although women still face oppression throughout the world, this alone cannot explain the entire picture when examining the difference in leadership roles between men and women. When faced with the dual pressures of society that push women toward family or career, but rarely both, women must choose how to navigate leadership advancement. At what point do women leaders begin to differentiate themselves from their peers? The gap in research regarding this process and factors that contribute creates an avenue for expanded study.

The current study will focus on the area of leadership emergence among high-performing women leaders in the collegiate environment. It is important to understand the factors that

contribute to the success of women RAs, and what characteristics propel them to be recognized as the best RAs on their respective campuses. The current study adds to the existing literature as an exploratory inquisition into the nature of experience and characteristics that serve as the foundation for high-performing women RAs.

The position of resident assistant (RA) provides a unique leadership pathway for women in colleges and universities. RAs are asked to perform a variety of tasks that require them to serve as role models, counselors, peer mentors, policy enforcers, and friends (Jaeger & Caison, 2006). Women who engage in this work must demonstrate a capacity for peer leadership through a sometimes-grueling selection process (Wu & Stemler, 2008). Despite the important role RAs play in student success, research into selection practices is virtually non-existent. The literature regarding the selection of RAs is lacking cohesive themes or solid evidence of best practices (Wu & Stemler, 2008). If the selection practice for RAs is a critical piece of a university's success (Ostroth, 1981), the training process is potentially equally important. Getting the right person for the position is valuable, but the transmission of information, values, and the departmental mission will dictate success or failure of a person once they have obtained the position (Jaeger & Caison, 2006). Much like the literature regarding RA selection, there is a dearth of information regarding best practices for RA training (Schaller & Wagner, 2007).

Not only is there a dearth of literature on RA success, women as leaders both inside and out of higher education is poorly understood. Once taken for granted as a domain dominated by men, women in 2017 have access to roles that were once completely out of reach (Wenniger & Conroy, 2001; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Current findings of gross inequalities with regard to leadership attainment by women (White House Project, 2009) lead the way for further analysis of what concerns women face on their path to top ranking positions in their field. At a time in

history when more women are graduating from institutions of higher education than men (Eagly, 2007), yet occupy far fewer leadership positions in virtually every field (White House Project, 2009), it is now more important than ever to understand the factors that constrain and conversely facilitate the success of women.

The women who are selected to serve as RAs learn and fine tune leadership skills that can propel them to future leadership roles in all areas of society. This formidable time in a woman's life is precisely the period of interest when looking at leadership emergence for women leaders. The current study will add to the existing literature by identifying common traits and characteristics among high-performing women RAs. By ascertaining the mechanisms by which high-performing women leaders progress, this research will inform those looking to maximize opportunities to inject more women leaders into the pipeline moving forward.

C. Focus of the Study

There is a gap in knowledge regarding the characteristics of the highest-performing women in the RA position. The current research utilized a qualitative approach to determine common characteristics of high-performing women RAs. High-performing women RAs were interviewed at three small liberal arts institutions to determine the factors that contribute to their success in the position. This study serves as a foundational document for further research into leadership emergence among undergraduate women. A better understanding of common factors among the best women RAs, the field of higher education is benefited by identifying ways to select, train, and support women on campus leadership roles.

D. Research Question

What are common characteristics among high-performing women RAs?

E. Theoretical Sensitivity

Theoretical sensitivity was addressed in four ways: personal experience of the researcher, professional experience of the researcher, the researcher's knowledge of the literature regarding the topic, and analytic rigor of the study. This study was conducted by a student affairs professional with 15 years of experience working with college student housing and student leadership. He supervised approximately 100 women in the RA position and observed the performance of over 1,000 student leaders at multiple universities throughout the Great Plains region. Through the lens of professional and personal experience, coupled with the literature review detailed in chapter 2, data was collected through personal interviews with high-performing women RAs. Piantanida and Garman (1999) assert that the researcher, much the same as the inquiry process and the study's intent, is a critical part of the study. The researcher gives voice to the data collected. Given this fact, qualitative research relies on the researcher themselves as the primary instrument (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Marshall & Rossman, 2006).

F. Design

The current study was conducted as a phenomenological study. Phenomenology, according to Moustakas (1994), is "knowledge as it appears to consciousness, the science of describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one's immediate awareness and experiences" (p. 26). By placing an emphasis on a holistic experience of the researcher, phenomenology seeks meaning in information that cannot be captured quantitatively, rather they born of qualitative methodologies. The phenomenological approach is based on the emphasis of the researcher engaging in a dialog with the participant, such that in-depth descriptions can be gleaned to derive universal meaning (Moustakas, 1994). The goal of a phenomenologist is to

focus on the description of what all research participants have in common with a shared phenomenon (Creswell, 2007).

Qualitative research has been questioned as a viable form of scientific research. Phenomenological science has challenged this controversial viewpoint, asserting that the positivist mindset is not suitable for capturing psychological and social phenomena (Marquez, 2014; Brewerton & Millward, 2006; Dressman, 2008; Gall et al. 1996). Marriam (1998) stated, “researchers who conduct these [phenomenological qualitative research] studies, which are probably the most common form of qualitative research in education, simply seek to discover and understand a phenomenon, a process, or the perspectives and worldviews of the people involved” (p. 11). Phenomenology, according to Moustakas (1994), is “knowledge as it appears to consciousness, the science of describing what one perceives, senses, and knows in one’s immediate awareness and experiences” (p. 26). By placing an emphasis on a holistic experience of the researcher, phenomenology seeks meaning in information that cannot be captured quantitatively, rather they born of qualitative methodologies. The phenomenological approach is based on the emphasis of the researcher engaging in a dialog with the participant, such that in-depth descriptions can be gleaned to derive universal meaning (Moustakas, 1994). The goal of a phenomenologist is to focus on the description of what all research participants have in common with a shared phenomenon (Creswell, 2007). As such, it was determined the best way to explore the lived experiences of women RAs in the college setting is by employing a qualitative approach.

Qualitative research explores not only physical events and the associated behaviors, but also provide greater insight into how the participants make sense of these events and how their understanding influences behavior (Maxwell, 2005). The freedom that is borne from a model not

bound by strict statistical testing allows the researcher to adjust their research design when new information is presented by participants (Cassell & Symon, 1994; Maxwell, 2005). Because the current research is focused on a previously under-researched group of participants, qualitative research is precisely the correct method to study the phenomenon of shared characteristics with this population of women. Phenomenology allows the researcher to create the understanding of this population through the research process.

In order to preserve the individuality of each participant, while at the same time exploring his or her unique experiences and characteristics, qualitative research focuses on a small sample size (Maxwell, 2005). This qualitative research took place in the spring of 2018. The researcher conducted in person visits to three small liberal arts universities in the Midwest region of the United States. At each institution, administrators were asked to identify their three top performing women RAs. Evaluation criteria for inclusion in the study was based on performance evaluations, anecdotal peer feedback, and anecdotal administrative feedback internal to each institution.

Initial selection criteria was based on each RAs' individual performance and meeting departmental standards. All RAs in the study were asked to perform similar tasks in their position according to documents collected by the researcher, including programming, policy enforcement, administrative tasks, and overall community leadership. RA programming requires the individual to plan, organize, and implement activities for the students they supervise. Activities can include educational endeavors, but often are seen as community building initiatives to help students get to know one another, a critical part of each RAs' responsibility.

Each institution included in the current study placed a heavy emphasis on university policy enforcement. Each RA is expected to serve on-call for emergency response, and

conducting building “rounds” to verify students are complying with policy throughout the night. If an RA encounters a potential policy violation, they are expected to confront the students involved and document any interactions they have. Such confrontations can result in the offending student(s) facing university action depending on the seriousness of the infraction. Each university used in the current study requires RAs to regularly confront policy violations and provides extensive training on the topic. An RA’s ability to confidently confront policy violations is a great predictor of success in their position.

Administrative tasks were other criteria for success an RA at each institution. Although each institution considers the RA position a leadership role that is compensated through a scholarship covering the student’s room and meal plan, the administrators who supervise the RAs consider the position a job. The job focus of the role requires the RA to perform university administrative tasks such as check-in and checkout paperwork for each student, documenting confrontations, documenting conversations with students to verify they have interacted with students they supervise, and documenting building maintenance concerns. Although these administrative tasks are not the focal point of the RA role, each institution used this as performance evaluation criteria and verified a person cannot be successful in the role if administrative responsibilities are not completed.

Each institution formally evaluates RAs based on the above-mentioned tasks, but also considers intangible leadership qualities of the student. In many instances, administrators struggled to exactly define how an RA could distinguish themselves as a leader on their staff, but acknowledged that a person can recognize it when they see it. Leadership was considered a willingness to coach other student peers, take initiative with projects, and the desire to learn and get better at their position. Leadership was the student’s prioritization of the RA role above

other activities, allowing administrators to be able to count on them to get their work done on time. It is difficult to measure dedication to position, but each of the RAs included in the current study displayed an intention to go above and beyond in their job.

Each of the nine RAs included in the current study was interviewed in person for approximately one hour. An in-depth, semi-structured interview was utilized to gain a rich and developed narrative regarding each RA's life, experiences leading up to their current position, and understanding of the RA responsibilities and role. Berg and Lune (2012) define a semi-structured interview as one that the researcher asks a predetermined set of questions for each participant in a consistent order, but probes far beyond the answers to the standardized questions. The researcher prepared 15 predetermined questions for the interview that were asked of each participant (See Appendix A).

In a process called member-checking, each participant was sent transcriptions of their interview to strengthen the validity of the study. Berg and Lune (2012) described the process of member-checking as allowing each participant access to the transcripts of their interviews so that they may clarify and edit their statements in order to obtain the most accurate account of their experiences. Each participant had the opportunity to clarify and alter or provide feedback on the accuracy of the transcription of her interview. Glesne (2010) stated that the optimal method of interviewing participants is in-person. The current study sought for the most authentic feedback, thus the researcher spent a day at each campus to gain a sense of culture and meet the participants in their own environment.

Once all data was collected and member-checked, responses were coded for analysis. Participants responses were coded according to the methodology of Strauss and Corbin (1990), identifying three levels of codes, open, axial, and selective. All transcripts were first read and

key words and phrases from each participant were highlighted, creating the open codes from responses. These open codes provided the core of what each participant was expressing, allowing the researcher to identify the prominent themes from the interviews.

Once all responses were manually analyzed for open codes, the data was collected and consolidated into axial codes. Axial codes capture the essence of what the data in more abstract terms than the identified open codes (Bowen, 2009). Axial codes serve as relevant conceptual categories that are derived from frequent use of words, phrases, and concepts from the interviewees. This coding moves beyond the responses and allows the researcher to make sense of the collected data (Bowen, 2009).

Once open codes were identified, a final layer of consolidation was applied to the data to create selective codes. Selective codes capture the core meaning of the data by connecting the meaning of responses to other categories (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). The researcher must interpret the data collected to find themes that cut across all responses to develop selective codes (Bowen, 2009). When analyzing qualitative data, codes are applied to the data, themes emerge from the data (Bowen, 2009).

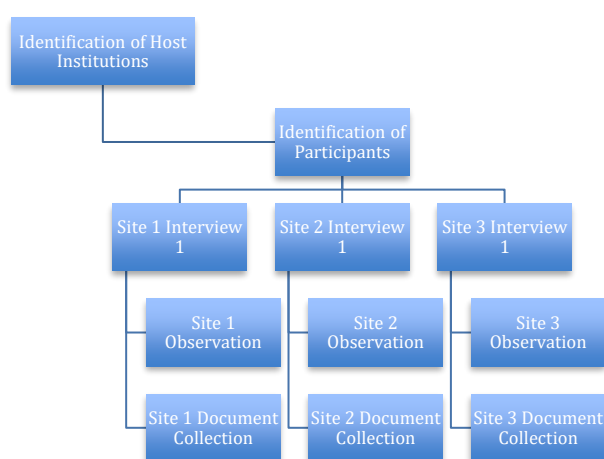


Figure 3.1.

Site Visit Process

G. Site Selection

Small liberal arts universities were selected for the host sites for two primary reasons. Liberal arts colleges were chosen due to the fact that RAs in those institutions have been found to display higher levels of intercultural effectiveness (Martin & Blechschmidt, 2014), suggesting they may demonstrate higher levels of desirable traits for high-performing RAs for the current time period. Second, in the experience of the researcher, small colleges and universities allow for higher visibility and increased leadership opportunities due the smaller student population. Proportionally, there are more leadership positions going to a smaller student population of less than 2000 students as opposed to a university with 25,000 plus students. As such, small institutions were selected to maximize the leadership experiences of the study population. The more exposure participants have to leadership opportunities, the greater chance they will have insight into the pieces of their lives that have contributed to the emergence of their talents and abilities. The profile of each institution follows:

University A (UA): Private, Urban, Jesuit, Liberal Arts based

- Undergraduate population: approx. 2100
- Campus population: approx. 1000
- 2 year requirement to live on campus
- 61% identify as female
- 71% white
- tuition cost: approx. \$36,000 per year

University B (UB): Private, Urban, Liberal Arts based, 1400 undergraduates

- Undergraduate population: approx. 3300
- Campus population: approx. 1000

- 1 year requirement to live on campus
- 58% identify as female
- 83% white
- tuition cost: approx. \$27,000 per year

University C (UC): Private, Rural, Liberal Arts based, 1000 undergraduates

- Undergraduate population: approx. 1800
- Campus population: approx. 1200
- 4 year requirement to live on campus
- 55% identify as female
- 74% white
- tuition cost: approx. \$29,000 per year

All universities were located in the states of Missouri and Kansas, primarily serving traditional aged students 18-22 years of age. All universities have programs that house the majority of the student population on campus owned property as of 2017-2018.

H. Participants

Women in the age range of 18-22 in the college setting display a wide range of diversity and characteristics depending on background and life experience. For the purposes of this study, the researcher sought to identify women RAs whom their host institution determined were their highest-performing women on staff. Generally speaking, characteristics that lead to success in the RA role are confidence, assertiveness, and a general willingness to assume leadership roles in their everyday life (Wu & Stemler, 2008). Understanding the nature of experience that leads to how a woman comes to see herself in this light, and pushes her to transcend her peers is of critical importance. The RA position demands a great deal from a person. Confronting peers

with policy violations, leading activities regularly, and mentoring peers are all highly desirable characteristics of an RA leader (Jaeger & Caison, 2006).

I. Research Ethics

The rules and regulations of the University of Arkansas Institutional Review Board (IRB) were followed at all times throughout the course of this study, as well as each institution participating. Appendix B displays the IRB approval from the University of Arkansas. In order to gain and maintain the trust and respect of all participants engaged in the study, it is of critical importance that the researcher manages the highest degree of ethical conduct.

From the onset of communication with each participant, they were fully informed of the nature, purpose, and scope of the study. The informed consent document that was given to each participant can be found in Appendix C. Each participant was asked to sign a form to verify informed consent and a willingness to participate in the study. They were each made aware they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time without consequence. All forms, recordings, and data were kept in a private and secure location at all times.

J. Depth vs. Breadth

Because the focus of the current research was to dig deeply into the life experiences of the individuals selected for participation, in-depth interviews were selected to gain the greatest amount of information possible. The intent was to create the richest description of how participants ascended to their status as a high-performing woman RA. Stake (2005) asserted that readers are able to learn vicariously from the researcher's narrative of an encounter when the description is filled with sufficient detail to transport the reader to the setting being described. The current research aimed to further the field of study by presenting information in a way that it may be transferred and used in similar situations (Erickson, 1986).

It was determined that depth of information with a relatively small sample of participants versus breadth across a large sample was preferable to suit the goal of the current research in the interest of time and resources. The reader will be presented with breadth of experiences for each participant as a means of creating generalizability for future research. In this case, depth serves as the primary catalyst to gaining knowledge on the topic. Although all women RAs are considered high-performing by virtue of being selected to the position, the current study was most interested in only the best women RAs from each institution. In order to not dilute the study population, only three women RAs were selected from each site. This sample assured the researcher was focused on the highest performing women RAs and not all women RAs regardless of performance.

K. Data Collection

Maxwell (2005) stated that by utilizing a triangulation strategy, the researcher is able to reduce the risk that their conclusions will only reflect the singular limitations of a method or source. Triangulation is a process that ensures the researcher has a broader understanding and can be more secure that they are gaining access to the specific issues that are being investigated. The current research employed several means of collecting data to avoid the biases of a single method. Triangulation was achieved by conducting two interviews per participant, utilization of observations, and conducting document analysis of the research participants' resumes.

Interviews. The researcher conducted nine interviews by meeting with identified women RA leaders for one hour each for the first-round interview. These interviews served as the primary method of data collection. Participants were asked a series of fifteen predetermined questions (Appendix A). Each interview was digitally transcribed after each site visit for coding. All first-round interviews were transcribed, reviewed, and field notes reviewed. Once interviews

were completed, participants were asked to confirm the accuracy of the transcribed interviews to look for mistakes, missed information, and verification that their experiences were accurately conveyed. Coding was concluded on all interviews to ascertain codes used to answer the research question.

Privacy of each participant was achieved by utilizing a pseudonym for each person. No unique identifier was used for any participant at any point in the transcription or coding process. Participants are identified here only using their pseudonym, and all documents relating to interviews were kept on a private computer throughout the duration of the study.

Observations. Each participant was identified by their housing professional staff members as one of the highest-performing women RAs on their campus. Although each campus differs in their evaluation techniques for RA performance, leadership in their environment according to campus performance criteria provided the context for which they were able to distinguish themselves. Each interview was conducted on the participants' home campus, followed by a campus and office tour given to the researcher. The researcher spent a business day on each campus to conduct the interviews and meet with campus officials. The researcher sought to observe the context within which each participant worked and lived to give a richer description of their experiences. A descriptive approach was used to place each participant in context of her host institution.

Document Analysis. Each host institution was asked to provide detailed evaluation criteria for the RA position. The evaluation criteria was used to determine the consistency of each RA who was included in the study by examining how their performance was measured. Information regarding each institutions' programming requirements and training procedures were also obtained to verify each RA was adequately trained on the criteria used for evaluation.

L. Researcher's Role

The researcher was able to gain access to the eventual participants by contacting the person at each university responsible for the student housing program. By calling each Director, the researcher was able to request participation in the study. A letter of approval from each host institution was obtained giving access to RAs for participation in the study. Once approval was granted, the researcher began the process of contacting each participant from the group of women RAs on each campus.

M. Trustworthiness

Prolonged-Engagement. In order to demonstrate the researcher has spent a sufficient amount of time in the field to observe the phenomenon being studied, documentation of patterns in the data must be shown over time. It is not possible to build trust with participants and learn the true culture of the study population without spending enough time in the environment to detect distortions that could potentially creep into the data collected (Patton, 2014). In the current study, the researcher spent a business day on each campus touring each college and interviewing participants. Trustworthiness was built with each participant through engagement with campus professionals, demonstrating a dedication to the field by the researcher. By re-engaging with participants on numerous occasions to share and clarify data collected, the researcher was able to build trust with the participant population.

Persistent-Engagement. As stated, participants were each contacted twice formally for interviews, and numerous other times for the purposes of sharing and corroborating data collected. Data analysis did not begin until each participant had sufficient time to review all interview transcripts to avoid premature closure of observations (Patton, 2014).

Triangulation. Triangulation is the process of collecting data from multiple sources to assure the phenomenon being observed is accurately documented (Patton, 2014). The current study used the methods of interviewing, observations, and document analysis to gain a variety of insights into the RA participants. As previously stated in the current chapter, each method was compared to the others to verify data collected was consistent.

Peer Debriefing. Patton (2014) described peer debriefing as the process of reviewing thoughts and research experiences to a disinterested peer in order to explore interpretations from a different perspective. By discussing the inferences with a third party outside of the research process, it is possible to determine if the researcher's assumptions and processing makes sense. In this study, the researcher peer debriefed with a student from the doctoral cohort from the degree granting institution that had a personal history as a distinguished women RA. The process of peer debriefing served to challenge assumptions about the data collected.

Member-Checking. Member-checking took place after each interview was transcribed. Participants were sent a copy of their transcribed interview via email. Each person was asked to review their documents within two weeks and return any edits or changes to the researcher. The process of member-checking is intended to strengthen the credibility of the findings by the researcher. Schwandt (2001) claims member-checking is important to corroborate and verify findings in order to ensure they are valid and meet the criterion of confirmability. Without this crucial step, it is possible the researcher could misconstrue or come to invalid conclusions based on misunderstandings from simple mistakes.

Audit Trail. It is critical to any research project to be able to verify results if called into question. A sufficient audit trail would point a reviewer back to raw data, allowing that person to come to the same or similar conclusions (Patton, 2014). All field notes, interview recordings

and transcripts, participant edits, and collected documents were saved and organized in a manner that would allow any audit to determine exactly where data presented in this study was sourced.

N. Conclusion

The current study seeks to identify the common attributes of high-performing women RAs on three university campuses. Through communication with campus officials, a series of semi-structured interviews, member-checking, and document review, common experiences and work history will be used to determine how the participants ascended to the recognition as one of their campus' highest-performing RAs. By coding the data and examining patterns as they emerge, it was possible to identify the common traits and experiences that lead to the acknowledgement that each woman has distinguished herself as one of the best RAs on campus.

Chapter 4

Findings

A. Organization of the Chapter

The following chapter begins with an introduction to the topic of study will be covered. The audience of the current study will be identified, followed by a description of the data collected and how individuals will be notated in this work. The axial codes will be detailed with an extensive analysis of each item. Finally, a summary of the chapter will conclude the data presentation.

B. Introduction

The current study focuses on the characteristics of high-performing women RAs at small private universities. It is important to understand the factors that contribute to women RAs distinguishing themselves, and what characteristics may propel them to continue as leaders later in life. The current study adds to the existing literature by identifying the characteristics of high-performing women RAs.

Women who serve as RAs learn and fine tune leadership skills that can propel them to future leadership roles in all areas of society. This formative time in a woman's life is precisely the period of interest when looking at leadership emergence for women leaders. The current study will add to the existing literature by identifying characteristics of high-performing women RAs. By ascertaining the characteristics of high-performing women RAs, this research will inform those looking to maximize opportunities to inject more women leaders into the pipeline moving forward.

The position of resident assistant (RA) provides a unique leadership pathway for women in colleges and universities. RAs are asked to perform a variety of tasks that require them to

serve as role models, counselors, peer mentors, policy enforcers, and friends (Jaeger & Caison, 2006). Despite the important role RAs play in student success, there is little evidence-based literature regarding the characteristics of high-performing RAs (Schaller & Wagner, 2007; Wu & Stemler, 2008). RAs conduct a variety of critical university functions, yet the body of evidence based research remains lacking in almost all facets.

Once taken for granted as a domain dominated by men, contemporary women have access to leadership roles that were once completely out of reach (Wenniger & Conroy, 2001; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Current findings of gross inequalities with regard to leadership attainment by women (White House Project, 2009) lead the way for further analysis of what concerns women face on their path to top-ranking positions in their field. At a time in history when more women are graduating from institutions of higher education than men (Eagly, 2007), yet occupy far fewer leadership positions in virtually every field (White House Project, 2009), it is now more important than ever to understand the characteristics of women who successfully hold a leadership position early in life.

This study seeks to shed light on the qualities and characteristics that lead to success in the RA position. By understanding the highest performing women RAs, future selection, training, and development practices may be improved. This exploratory addition to the literature on the topic provides insight into the elements that make a woman RAs serve the institution at the highest level.

C. Audience

This study is directed toward university housing professionals, higher education administrators, and any person who seeks to further the advancement of women in leadership roles throughout society. Specifically, university housing staff members can benefit from the

current research by having a better understanding of the characteristics of high-performing women RAs and what characteristics are likely to lead to success in the position. Higher education administrators can benefit from a deep understanding of the fundamental building blocks of women's leadership in colleges and universities. RAs serve as frontline paraprofessionals who are tasked with identifying and referring students for a litany of concerns. Administrators who hold a strong understanding of the people who serve in these roles may distinguish themselves as indispensable in the pursuit of retention and graduation efforts.

Finally, this study illuminates a portion of the central dilemma regarding women's leadership, namely, what are the characteristics of women who stand out from their peers? By examining high-performing women RAs, the reader can identify those personal elements that can be cultivated for future work in the field. In this respect, any person who would further efforts to allow women expanded opportunities and leadership roles will benefit from this work.

D. Transcribed Interviews

In the spring of 2018, nine women RAs were interviewed at three small private institutions in the Midwest. Each interview was recorded in its entirety, and then transcribed by a third party to insure accuracy of information. At the conclusion of the transcription process, each interview was emailed to the participant for them to read and suggest edits based on the information presented in a process called member checking. After each interview was checked, the participant was assigned a pseudonym to protect their identity. Note that years as an RA is measured as the current year they are serving included. Thus, 1 year as an RA means they are serving their first year currently. Table 4.1 presents the demographic information for each participant.

Table 4.1

Demographic Information for Participants

Name	Age	Year in School	Years as an RA
Gwynn	21	Junior	1
Penny	19	Sophomore	1
Faith	20	Junior	2
Iris	20	Junior	2
Talla	20	Sophomore	1
Sienna	20	Sophomore	1
Veronica	20	Junior	2
Serena	20	Junior	2
Regina	21	Junior	2

E. Audit Trail Notations

Information that comes from an interview with a participant will be cited by notating their name, the fact that it comes from an interview source (I), and the page in the relevant transcript it can be found. An example of a participant interview citation would be (Talla, I, p. 3). Information that attributed to document collection from the host institution will be notated by indicating it is a document collection (DC) source, followed by the page within each institution's documents it can be found. An example of a source originating from a document collection would be (DC, p. 3). The final audit trail source cited in this work is a field note source. Field notes from the researcher will be notated by indicating it is from a field note (FN), followed by the page within the notes it can be found. An example of a field note source would be (FN, p. 3).

F. Presentation of Axial Codes

The axial coding process for characteristics of high-performing women RAs at small private universities included the identifying open codes that extended across multiple interviews.

Open codes were identified from each of the transcribed interviews, and then themes were created based on common interview responses (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Table 4.2 presents a sample of open codes and the seven axial codes that were generated from the interview process.

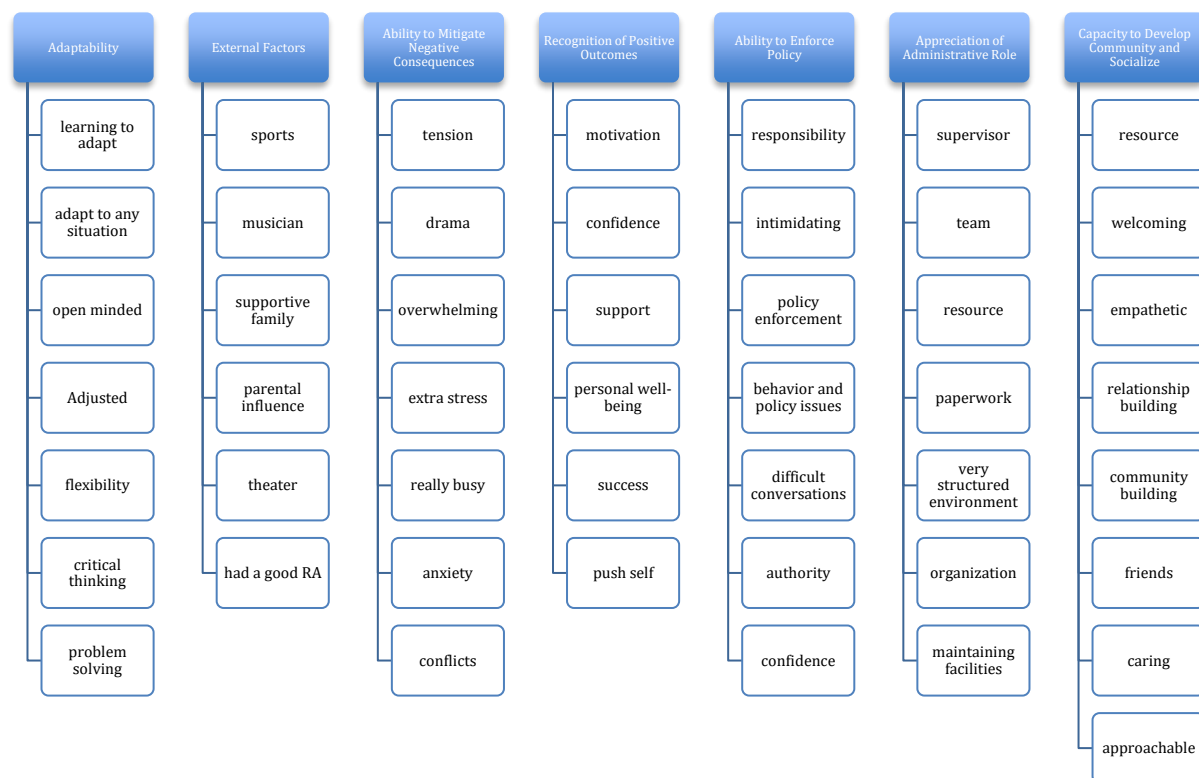


Figure 4.1.

Theme Codes for Characteristics of High-Performing women RAs

G. Axial Code Analysis

Adaptability. Adaptability is a cornerstone characteristic an RA needs to possess.

Because an RA's primary role is working with people, there is no way to predict how a situation will play out. It is crucial to be able to adapt and change with the department and student needs to perform at a high level in the RA role. In many instances, appropriate critical thinking skills must be employed by an RA to make independent judgments on how to proceed in the field.

Each host university identified a student's ability to adapt to change and work in an ever-evolving environment as a desirable characteristic for RAs (DC, p. 3; DC, p. 10; DC, p. 15). Indeed, administrators expressed a strong desire to find students who could mold themselves in a number of ways to meet the needs of the department and students (FN, p. 1). RAs were evaluated on their ability to perform a variety of tasks, but they were also asked to make adjustments as their job and students presented challenges.

The RAs involved in this study universally recognized that their ability to adapt in their role was critical to their success. Faith described her ability to be adaptable in terms of her personal balance of activities:

“I am pretty adaptable in that way, but also adaptable in the way that I find time management with classes, extra-curriculars, homework, like the things I do outside of [school], I am pretty good at like finding a way to shift those things around when they need to be shifted, and still like balance it all. Which I think the RA role really forced me to learn how to do.” (Faith, I, p. 11)

Veronica reiterated the necessity of adaptability in the RA role:

“I think a lot of it is just having to be flexible, which is not something I was before this job at all, and so that's something I have had to learn through the position because you just have to like, understand the crazy things that are going to happen and it is your job to deal with them no matter what they may be. And also, like not everything is going to go how you picture it.” (Veronica, I, p. 6)

She went on to describe what she had done to develop in this area:

“I think I have gotten really good at doing things in advance enough that I could drop anything at the second of a hat if I needed to, and frequently have to do that now. It is so

necessary, it makes me comfortable to do it. I am still someone who really likes structure and calendars and planning and I always will be, but I think it's definitely improved my ability to be flexible without panicking which I think is overly a good thing. It is good to not just panic when things do not go your way (laugh)." (Veronica, I, p. 6)

Serena was more direct in her approach to adaptability. Not only did she recognize the need to be adaptable in the position, but she also identified many of the challenges she had encountered in her time as an RA:

"I think a successful RA has to be pretty adaptable because there are different... there are things that you don't really expect that happen every day. Like I got hired for my sophomore year and then 2 days later I was asked to be hired as a freshman, and so like, that was something that I know I had to be adaptable in order to be successful and something with like, in the middle of the year when we have to get, you know, a new RA or we get a new Director, it's something where you just have to be able to adapt to those new people and the new dynamic of the staff." (Serena, I, p. 6)

The participants spoke of a need to be open-minded in their approach to their work, demonstrating problem-solving skills that can be applied in a variety of situations. Because an RA can be asked to triage situations that could turn out to be life and death in extreme scenarios, the ability to adapt on the fly was crucial to their success.

Where others described the need to be adaptable in their role as something they were required to learn to be a successful RA, Regina indicated that she had learned this skill early in her life. As a child, she "moved around with my dad's job. So, I was... I learned to adapt very quickly to any kind of situation" (Regina, I, p. 1). She went on to describe how this skill manifested itself in the RA position:

“I think I had developed this from my childhood in a sense that I can... I know how to adapt to any situation.... I know how to get myself in with any group of people. I don't have to have a whole lot in common with you. I just need to know what my in is. So, is it... is it that you play tennis or is it you play Fortnite and so does my boyfriend, so I can say, you know “Oh gosh, I have seen that game before”, it's... it's something finding ways that I know I can interject myself into their life...” (Regina, I, p. 11)

In a similar way, Sienna was able to articulate the need to be adaptable with different kinds of people:

“I mean, people come to me a variety of different issues you know, so you just have to be able to roll with the punches and you have to be flexible, which isn't something that you necessarily have to do as just a resident. You have to... you have to be able to help people no matter how much you, like disagree with their political views, what they are doing, I mean I think at the end of the day you have to look out for policy, but you also have to look out for the person and so that's a big thing too.” (Sienna, I, p. 7)

Students come to colleges and universities from all over the world with a wide array of backgrounds. The RA role is not to judge or change anyone; it is to work with each individual person. Being able to adapt to every unique person helped distinguish high-performing individuals.

The RA role presents a very challenging set of circumstances for a student in the position. They are required to not only maintain a high level of personal accountability, but also manage the lives of other students. There is no set way of proceeding in any situation. Despite the universities having extensive policies and procedures for RAs, every day has the potential to throw a person into unfamiliar territory. The necessity of being adaptable at all times was best

summed up by Iris when she said, “I feel like I am again just very open minded and you kind of never know what life is going to throw at you and what is going to happen” (Iris, I, p. 12). The participants clearly felt a need to make adjustments in their life and work to be the best RA possible.

Summary. The participants realized that in order to be successful in their role, they must make the necessary adjustments to their lives. RAs were asked to complete a wide variety of tasks in an ever-changing landscape of work. The goals of their work could be ambiguous, requiring them to have a deep understanding of their mission, despite not always knowing exactly how a task would meet that end. These RAs knew every individual they worked with presented a complicated tapestry of life experiences, and they were able to act as a chameleon to interact with a very diverse group of people. Being open-minded and willing to learn about a wide array of people was central to the success of the participants.

External Factors. An important part of understanding the commonalities between high-performing women RAs was examining the common external factors among the participants. Despite the fact that the participants represented individuals from many different backgrounds, a set of common themes emerged from their interviews. A desire to select a diverse group of students was expressed by campus administrators at each site visit (FN, p. 1; FN, p. 13; FN, p. 25). University officials expressed a mindset that the more diverse an RA staff, the more likely they would be to meet a wider range of student needs and overcome community challenges throughout the course of an academic year. As indicated in Table 4.1, the current study population ranges in age and experience in the position.

The most pronounced common experience of the RAs was the fact that, with the exception of Sienna, every RA grew up playing some type of sport. They described their

participation in athletics as central to their identity development. Sienna participated in wide array of activities, but she indicated that health problems early in life inhibited her from playing sports; otherwise, she would have been involved in them as well. Table 4.3 displays the diversity of sports the women participated in and the timeframe they stopped playing in an organized capacity.

Table 4.2.

Sport Participation by each RA

Name	Sport	Organized participation end date
Gwynn	Basketball	College
Penny	Dance	High School
Faith	Gymnastics, Karate, Tennis	High School
Iris	Basketball, Volleyball, Softball	High School
Talla	Cheerleading, Swimming, Bowling	College
Sienna	----	----
Veronica	Volleyball	Middle School
Serena	Basketball, Softball, Soccer, Dance, Volleyball	High School
Regina	Softball	High School

It appeared that the RAs not only involved themselves in sports, but they engaged in artistic endeavors as well. Gwynn, despite playing basketball on a national team, took the time to direct a high school play:

“So, we had like a drama section in our high school and I was like a student director. I didn’t like...do the whole play by myself, but like I worked with our teacher like one-on-one and everything. Then like, I did a lot of the set design, like help with acting, projection, articulation. So, yeah, I would say, like, I played a big role in the play.”

(Gwynn, I, p. 2)

Similarly, Penny choreographed and directed peers in dance after she stopped participating herself due to health concerns. She described wanting a creative outlet:

“I just find opportunities to do choreography for other groups, I never competed or anything myself, just small creative things like that, we would have a school talent show and I would choreograph something with my friends, like just little things like that for fun.” (Penny, I, p. 3)

Penny also engaged in yearbook editing, enjoying the layout process and creative aspects of the work. RAs are frequently asked to be creative in their work, generating their own ideas for floor decorations, student activities, and unique approaches to their tasks. Those individuals who seek creative outlets in their life were likely to thrive when asked to do it as part of their work. Those who enjoyed their work could be more likely to excel at it.

Musical expression was also an important component in many of the RAs' lives. Faith described being musically inclined as early as the age of six, beginning violin lessons at that time (Faith, I, p. 1). Veronica engaged in piano and choir from an early age:

“I played piano up until junior high and then in junior high, I joined choir and then my parents made the deal with me that I could drop piano and exchange for choirs, then we had some music aspect in there. They mostly like stand for my grandmother who I paid for my piano lessons, because she thought music was an important thing and wanted us to be involved in it so. I was like I think one thing that they kind of like required of us, for the most part, they wanted us to do something.” (Veronica, I, p. 2)

Because Sienna was not able to play organized sports due to health concerns, she described herself as a music kid:

“So,, I was not a sports kid, I was a music kid. I had weird medical problems which stopped me from playing sports, but I played piano for 12 years, I took lessons for 12 years. I did pit band in the school, I was like, played the piano, I played in Jazz band, that required musical and stuff like that, and went to state one year.” (Sienna, I, p. 1)

Growing up, Iris sang for fun at church, but turned that into a collegiate activity that provided a scholarship for her academic work:

“I sing in choir there, like in church and I got to sing special music occasionally on Sundays, so that was kind of like, my singing other than like, I do not know, it was like, I didn’t even realize like how much, like advanced I guess I could get with my singing. Yeah, I guess I found that here and I am singing along and I am actually going this Friday to England; our choir is going out on a tour yeah, so I am like just crazy to go places that I would have never expected...” (Iris, I, p. 3-4)

In this instance, musical inclination could be substituted for other forms of artistry. It seems the act of creating music allowed an outlet to translate talents into an external product. This could be the reason many of the RAs gravitated to music production.

One factor the participants frequently cited as contributing to their own success in the position was the quality of their RA when a resident. Often they described their RA as a good example, so they wanted to be like them. This motivation played a major role in the participants’ desire to be an RA. Talla described her relationship with her RA as “really good” (Talla, I, p. 4), and described interacting with RAs throughout the building, which influenced her work:

“I loved all of them, and now I have really used that to help produce my programs and make sure I reach out to like my residents to make sure because that is what they did for us and they mentioned that we liked the program and make sure that it fits to us and I

would make sure I do that with my residents, like what do you guys want to do and try to fit in with the programs that really has helped me a lot like more residents coming into the programs. I made sure I asked them what they did and we would like how they wanted me to come, because I did go. I went to every single one of them last year. I was like, this is fun and then I got my residents come this year and I liked this, it's ok. I loved it." (Talla, I, p. 4)

Iris described her RA aiding her as a supportive force for her, and wanting to be that same person for other students:

"My RA always made, like an effort, to like invite me to her programs and again just like that word of mouth exchange was so important to me because it just like made me feel like "oh like you know [Iris] get out of your head, like just get involved," you know it doesn't hurt to try something new, and then anytime like I didn't feel good, she was always there like, "oh like you need a cough drop." She would pass little hand sanitizers whenever I was having the flu and so I just felt like all those interactions assured me that she cared about her residents and there was somebody that I wanted to be too, like for future students." (Iris, I, p. 7)

In the author's experience, many RAs do not realize the impact they have on their residents. The small, day-to-day positive interactions they have with students can change the course of a person's life. Because the decision to become an RA often hinges on the experience a person has with their own RA, it is critical for high-performing RAs to acknowledge the circular nature of these experiences.

Veronica described her RA overall as being good, but she wanted to improve on her experience:

“I think I remember thinking she did a good job, but I remember thinking that she was not around the whole lot because we would like, walk by her room and it was not necessarily open all the time. But I remember thinking like, "oh its fine like she is a person, she has got other things to do," but I remember thinking she was a good RA and now like I think from this side of things and she still was a good RA but I could definitely see things like maybe were missing to some extent, you know?” (Veronica, I, p. 5)

Faith’s experience with her RA transitioned from being her resident to a peer, both positive experiences:

“My RA actually was really great, somebody who from the beginning opened herself up as somebody you could go to, to talk to for anything for advice on school or relationships. She always had her door open, which I found as an RA is really important, so just being able to swing by and say “Hi” after classes or something. Yeah, so it was really good, and she was an RA, my first year on staff, which you could consider weird you know...going from one kind of relationship to completely different one, but I saw how she just kind of transitioned from being my RA to being like a really good mentor on the staff, so I always had really positive views of what an RA was because of her.” (Faith, I, p. 5)

Penny also experienced the same transition to being a peer with her RA:

“So my RA was always just like leaving us little things at our door, planning events, she wasn't really invasive which I respected because I am more an introverted person, but like I always felt comfortable going to her, her door was always open, and would always say hi when we walk by and then we were involved with some other clubs on campus, both of us were so I would kinda see her there and even though we weren't friends, I was just like comfortable because I was like, ok we have this common interest, I can come to you

for these things. Um. And she was just very approachable, and I immediately felt comfortable and build that relationship with her and she in turn encouraged me to become an RA and now we're RA's together, it's so cool.” (Penny, I, p. 6)

Despite having multiple RAs, Gwynn articulated having positive experiences with her RAs prior to joining the staff:

“My first RA was really genuine, and I can... I can tell that he was being genuine that he actually cared and he is like, if you need anything, just come to me and I felt that he meant that. And my other RA, my sophomore year, she liked harmony a lot and she was like... very inclusive, like even if she was kind of awkward, she would like still put an effort to... to like make us laugh or like make a group activity. So... and she really liked harmony... like she would say things like in the most respectful way as she can like... try not to offend anyone or pick sides. So, I like that.” (Gwynn, I, p. 5)

The best RAs had the ability to translate experience into action. It was not simply the fact that they themselves had good RAs that promoted them to stand out in the role; it was their recognition that they could do something with their experience. Characteristics such as demeanor, approachability, kindness, and respect were hallmarks of a person high-performing RAs sought to emulate.

Finally, the support of family appeared to be a significant factor in the development of the women in this study. Although parents had varying degrees of college attainment, each person indicated their families were supportive of their college endeavors. Talla discussed that, although her parents were divorced, she spoke with her mother daily and her father as much as his farming schedule allowed (Talla, I, p. 1). Gwynn described herself as being born late in her parents' life, but that they promoted independence and empowerment by sending her to an all

girl's school in the country of Jordan, something that was not common practice (Gwynn, I, p. 2). Although calling her family "average" (Faith, I, p. 1), she also indicated the values they instilled in her:

"I feel like I grew up in a very supportive household and a very encouraging household, so my parents were always just pushing me to do and be my best, but always knew that because they instilled those things within me and I was always doing my best they were seeing that. I think they liked the way they raised me instilled a lot of confidence in who I am, what I can do and just kind of raised me to know that like whatever I put my mind to, I would be able to accomplish so yeah." (Faith, I, p. 1)

Serena's educational endeavors were supported by her family through observing her father go back to school at a non-traditional age for pharmacy school:

"My dad went for business and then my mom went to school for education, then went back and got her master's was a guidance counselor and then my dad went back to school about 10 or so years ago and now he is a pharmacist." (Serena, I, p. 1)

Coming from a large family, Iris described herself as the appointed individual helping her siblings with their academic work, even into college:

"I have three younger siblings who were always like "[Iris], can you edit my essay? Can you like I need advice." So, I feel like within my own family like I have already kind of been like chosen I guess this kind of like, keep everyone together, help everybody out kind of role I guess." (Iris, I, p. 1)

Because the RA role can be challenging, it was important to have a network of supportive individuals in one's life to be successful. The participants indicated family serving in that supportive role.

Summary. A host of external factors contributes to success in any particular role in life. For the high-performing women RAs in the current study, several focus areas were indicated as contributing factors to their success. Having grown up playing organized sports seemed to be a central piece of identity development for these women. Identifying a creative outlet, whether music, art, or other artistic expression, was a core component of life as well. Beyond the activities that contributed to their wellbeing, having a supportive family that encouraged higher education endeavors enabled these women to excel in their position.

Ability to Mitigate Negative Consequences. These high-performing RAs were not immune to negative impacts of their position, but they possessed the ability to mitigate these challenges. Through an understanding of their own experiences and recognition of the negative consequences, the participants were able to minimize the less pleasant outcomes the RA job can have on their lives. They expected tension between their academic work, personal life, and RA role, and they compensated for the trials they experienced.

As documented in chapter 2 of this work, stress and position related anxieties are significant outcomes from serving in the RA position. The participants in this study were no exception to these negative outcomes. They all indicated that time management and balance were critical factors affecting them on a regular basis. Iris summed up her experience with the position:

“I think one thing for me is I get stressed out when a lot of things are happening at once and I think this goes from like school load, like all the extracurriculars that I am in, so time management for sure. I feel like it is just my biggest thing because time management and just kind of coping with stress, I feel like. I know I have all these resources available. I am telling my residents all the time. Sometimes I need to take my

own advice and utilize them like I do go to our school counselor once a month if I am feeling really overwhelmed and I cannot do but those are my two biggest things and I am still working on them to this day.” (Iris, I, p. 9)

Sienna experienced a number of challenges in her personal life that affected her work, creating issues with balance:

“Last semester was a lot of change for me, a lot of things happened in my personal life and so being able to kind of balance a lot of different things also comes with being an RA. So... I think that’s always a challenge, but I think you can just got to power through with the end of it.” (Sienna, I, p. 7)

As with all jobs, an individual’s personal life will influence the quality of work they produce.

The highest-performing RAs in this study appeared to be able to put these challenges aside and, as Sienna stated, power through.

It is not that the highest-performing women RAs did not experience the stress of the position; it is that they recognized it and reduced its impact. Conversely, it is also possible that high-performing RAs experienced higher levels of stress precisely because they were focused on details of the position that other RAs dismissed. Regina described her reaction to her first year as an RA including a great deal of “anxiety” (Regina, I, p. 10). Her words reflected challenges in being able to relax and let go of work:

“I faced a lot of challenges that semester and just like my own personal wellbeing of, I can’t... I can’t really relax when I am at home because I am so worried about what I am going to hear, who is going to need me, or xy and z.” (Regina, I, p. 10)

Similarly, Faith acknowledged the growing challenge of having more to do every semester:

“The difference between my freshmen year and now is that I just have so much more in my plate and I know like every semester going into the semester I had a little bit of anxiety about how I might do with having so much more on my plate...” (Faith, I, p. 11)

Demonstrating growth in the position over time, Serena described the theme of finding a healthy balance with students:

“I have been working on is just kind of making sure that I am balancing the amount of time I am spending doing RA stuff and doing school stuff with like the amount of time I am doing things just solely for me, so like baking cookies for my residents while baking is very therapeutic for me is not necessarily a wholeheartedly like self-care type of thing and so I think that’s something that I have gotten worse at is making sure I am doing things for myself...” (Serena, I, p. 9)

Veronica spoke about the overwhelming nature of the position when multiplied by the number of students she was responsible to oversee:

“I think people really underestimate the job of being an RA. I think they see some of it and they get the whole like you have to follow the rules and they get you decorate and that you come to them with problems and I have used this analogy before with a lot of my friends whom I am trying to explain to them like I think how many times you probably contacted your RA like let’s say you at max talked to your RA once a month about something that you had to do but I have 35 people on my floor who they all come to me once a month and that at least every day that I have something happening and some people definitely need their RA more than once a month, so I think like you can see how much you use them and you are like they definitely do a job but you don’t get to like the full extent of what they have to do every day.” (Veronica, I, p. 9)

Regardless of the origin of the stress, it is clear that mitigating negative outcomes was a central characteristic of these high-performing women RAs. Whether self-imposed, or inherent to the position, the ability to work through life's challenges was shared by the participants.

The ability to temper their negative emotional responses and perform under pressure was an indicator of a common characteristic among high-performing RAs. Beyond the personal challenges of time management, stress also manifested itself in the need of the RA to confront other students. Those individuals who were less confident in their confrontation skills indicated a negative experience in those situations. Talla noted that events between her and residents made it more challenging to do the job:

“Constant conflicts within residents are sometimes hard especially because when residents say something and then I am not even in a situation and they think I said something that gets very hard because it is like I had never even said that and it was always like when you are trying settle something you didn't do and now they don't like me and it is like very hard to see that more than little conflict had enough nothing to do and it is just like drama that happens and that is very hard for me. I would just rather settle it and move on but sometimes residents don't want to just move on from it.”

(Talla, I, p. 7)

Faith talked about having challenges confronting individuals she did not know as well:

“I do have anxiety sometimes, it's interesting. If I have a good relationship with the resident, I am not super anxious about it because I know that the foundation is there to where they'll probably be able to get over it in a couple of weeks but if I don't have a really solid foundation it is really difficult for me...” (Faith, I, p. 7)

In much the same way, Penny acknowledged her misgivings with addressing policy violations:

“Now that we've had some kinda serious situations I've never been the person in charge, I've always helped another RA deal with it, um, and I think and it's just like, I don't want to deal with it, that's the problem and like even it's like tiny little things, like we have emergency exit doors that we're not supposed to use, for example, like I'll see someone use it and I'll be like they're not supposed to use that, ha-ha then they'll come back through it and I'll be like I should really say something right now but I don't want to. And I think it's the awkwardness, like I don't want to create awkwardness and I think obviously like a fire exit door is different than a serious situation and like I know that I would do what was right but I think it's me not wanting to get out of my comfort zone...”

(Penny, I, p. 8)

Veronica discussed the drama working with college students can produce in her role by stating:

“I mean policy violations even if like I am good at them, they are hard to do like people become obsessed. You are dealing with people with high emotions all the time, roommate conflicts, meetings and people have extremely high emotions. You are just dealing with things that to certain people like they think it's like the end of the world for them and you are just counseling and have to deal with those high emotions.” (Veronica, I, p. 9)

Being asked to confront peers with limited authority would likely be stressful for anyone, and the participants in this study were no exception. Conflict management was a common theme that required extended training for RAs. Participants recognized the tension between their anxiety in this area and the expectations of the university.

Summary. The participants displayed the characteristic of being able to overcome the negative consequences of their job. The RA position inherently puts a student in a role that their

peers do not face. Having a job that does not function on traditional hours, while requiring a person to confront peers, had a strong potential to create internal stress for these individuals. The highest-performing RAs included in this study were not immune to these challenges. The participants acknowledged the overwhelming nature of the position, but were able to put these feelings aside to complete the expectations of their job.

Recognizing Positive Outcomes. Participants demonstrated their ability to reflect on how they had grown and what they had learned from their position as an RA. While the negative outcomes of the position existed, the highest-performing women RAs were able to see how the position expanded their abilities and helped them develop in ways that were not always evident. Participants' ability to recognize the positive outcomes of being an RA helped propel them to perform their best in the role. Personal growth was critical in the evaluation of RAs at each institution (DC, p. 1; DC, p. 10; DC, p. 15). Administrators at the host institutions also described positive development of RAs as a primary objective of their role on campus (FN, p. 1; FN, p. 13).

Although not linear, the RAs described a journey of self-discovery that benefited their growth as individuals. Penny talked about how support from others helped her see her self-worth in a different light:

“All the support I’ve received and good comments I’ve received from my from my supervisors has kinda helped me see myself differently. Um that I am good at things I didn't really think about, or more so that the qualities I have are valuable, like a lot of things I knew I was that way but I didn't realize that was important or that could like benefit me for a job or benefit somebody else. Um so I think it’s just, it boosted my

confidence, um and the skills that I have and also challenged me to develop more skills.”

(Penny, I, p. 14)

Talla, although feeling pressure from it, described her growth by learning how to push herself:

“I think I worked very hard and I pressured myself too much from that, so I have grown more confident even, so, but definitely I have pushed myself way harder than sometimes I need to be when there’s other people that can do the job, but that is how I have always been.” (Talla, I, p. 8)

Veronica was more explicit in what she had learned from the RA position. She painted a wide picture of the extent of growth she had experience:

“I think I have also learnt how much I am capable of. I think I have learned that I can handle a lot of things that are difficult. I had to deal with a lot of extremely difficult situations through the job and I have been able to do all of them and so I think it is a big thing I learnt to accept that. I am capable, and I can probably do anything if I want to and I think that’s a good thing. ...like you can do anything, because you can do this.”

(Veronica, I, p. 10)

Because the unique challenges the RA position presents are typically novel for a student, it stands to reason that RAs walked away from the position believing they could do things previously outside of their comfort zone. It is possible that these challenges not only helped them perform better in the RA job, but also bolstered their attitude in difficult times.

Participants were empowered by the support they received in their position. In fact, institutional training practices were designed to challenge a student in ways that prepared them for the unique nature of the role (DC, p. 5; DC, p. 23). Serena found support from supervisors’ efforts to empower and build her confidence:

“It [the RA position] has also just helped me a lot in my confidence I think having supervisors who are administrators of the school and people who have a lot experience with RAs and telling you, you are doing a good job, you know, they are not just like fluffing you, they are telling you, you are doing a great job and they have all of this experience to draw on and so I think finding something that I have been good at without you know having my brothers be good at it first or having some sort of predisposition to being good at it has been good for me because no one in my family has ever done a leadership role on campus level and something like RA, so that’s helped that I have a lot of value by myself as opposed to like the value of being in my family kind of a thing and I think that’s been the biggest thing, it’s kind of learning that I can do something by myself that nobody around me has done before and that’s something that I can be good at.” (Serena, I, p13)

Sienna echoed the theme of empowerment identified by Serena. She spoke directly about learning skills of independence and self-reliance from the position:

“I think that I started out in a lot of positions being a little shy and quite. I am... only if you first meet me, I am kind of shy. Being... I have just learned that I can overcome that and still do what I need to do. This is my job, this is what I need to do, this is how I am going to do it and I think that I just uncovered a lot of strength that didn’t know ... it forced me to be a lot more independent. I mean I was independent last year, but I am significantly more independent now.” (Sienna, I, p. 9)

The RA position should serve to cultivate feelings of empowerment among individuals who take on the role. RAs are asked to work independently, performing tasks they likely have never encountered. Because RAs are challenged to approach problems creatively in a variety of

settings, it is not surprising the participants recognized their growth in this area as a positive outcome of the position.

Iris, as an individual who moved far from home for college and was far from her family found support from the RA position:

“I feel like just kind of recognition even if it is just a little bit; a little thank you goes a long way and so that is something that I have really valued relationships, that family aspect again and I think that came like even more present and prevalent when like being here in Kansas. I do not have family out here and so kind of finding that family and holding on to them has been super important for me and it has been my support when I feel like I need help to at times and I find that I can lean on my staff or lean on my residents who have also been able to give me that exchange.” (Iris, I, p. 11-12)

She went on to describe personal characteristics that had grown in the position, “learning even more about different cultures and different kinds of people and working and interacting with them, that I have just become so much more open-minded and emphatic” (Iris, I, p. 12). Finding a place with like-minded individuals can go a long way toward promoting well-being among RAs. Associating on a regular basis with other RAs appeared to promote a sense of family, potentially more so for those individuals who were far from their biological relatives.

Participants were self-reflective, showing an ability to recognize their shortcomings. Regina spoke directly to the things she felt she had identified as personal weaknesses in her role as an RA:

“I have learned a lot about the things I’m good at, but I have learned even more about the things that I struggle with and the things that I know, I will need to improve upon in my career later on. This is much as working in a team... We are going to it how the whole

group wants to do it and that's a struggle for me I think it's... as a first born child, I was very used to... this is what I want to do and this is what we are doing, this is how it's going to get it done. I was... that was just... I was in charge, you know whereas this team has really forced me to... to look at how I approach being in a team, how I value other people's skill sets? How I can learn how to best utilize my own in a team, that's been one of the things that's really developed for me out of this." (Regina, I, p. 12)

It was critical for RAs to make these types of connections to get the most out of their time in the position. Because they each articulated a strong sense of growth and strength gained through the position, it was clear that the highest-performing RAs not only brought their talents and skills to the position, but they also walked away with more. Such positive outcomes of the position propelled the participants to seek the role and dedicate themselves to their work.

Summary. College administrators often talk about the RA position offering students a great deal of growth opportunities when discussing it's advantages. The participants articulated personal growth in a number of areas. The highest-performing staff members in the position clearly articulated that they have grown in varied ways in their time as an RA. The interaction between their experiences and how they were able to add to their skillset was evident in their discussion of the topic.

Ability to Enforce Policy. RAs performed a range of services to the university, but one primary function that each host institution identified was that of policy enforcer (FN, p. 1; FN, p. 14; FN, p. 26). At each university, RAs were evaluated on their ability to confront and enforce policy violations perpetrated other students (DC, p. 1; DC, p. 10; DC, p. 15). They were expected to identify policy violations and directly speak to students about their behavior, then document the interaction for a full time staff member to address later. Because RAs typically

range in age from 18-22, they have often never been in a position to confront peers; the participants were no different in that regard. Even high-performing RAs who were comfortable with the rules in place articulated consternation with the direct confrontation required from the role.

Participants showed a willingness to enforce policy even if it did not come naturally to them. Regina explained her growth in the area of policy enforcement, and the challenges she faced early in her time in the position:

“The confrontation skills I... I didn’t have yet, I wasn’t... I wasn’t able to be direct yet... I mean I could in a sense, but the kind of direction as to being a resident requires as opposed to the resident assistant requires to be, I did not have that yet. So, my first week in [on the job] was like a crash course in... I mean I had learned the stuff from training and I knew how to have the conversations and “I” language and everything, but my first week was hellish and I mean... it was, I learned everything I ever needed to deal with that in that first week and so that was with a lot of, you know, cultivation from my supervisor of... you know, asking me well first making sure I was okay, but... but then asking me how can you improve these conversations, how can you make it easier on yourself? how can you... maybe have headed off some of these... you know, incidents and then became much larger issues like, you know... roommate pairs, behavior violations and things like that? So, yeah, I... I have learned a lot in that first week and then my confidence grew exponentially after that first semester that was... yeah, I... I became an RA, but like that... that fall was you know?” (Regina, I, p. 6)

The experiences Regina described are common in the RA role. Training practices can only go so far before students must learn confrontation skills from practice. Iris described her own challenges with policy confrontations:

“I really actually do not like that part, if I could just like be there for them and help them it is great but the disciplinary stuff is tough and we have training for it, but I feel like you can just never be prepared enough and it is just uncomfortable. I think people will say confrontation especially in our generation it is just uncomfortable, something I am definitely trying to work on more though which is being a little more confident in that.”

(Iris, I, p. 11)

Despite not enjoying the confrontational nature of the policy enforcement role, RAs must learn to appreciate the need to maintain a civil environment in a residence hall. All participants recognized the huge responsibility they have to police their peers. Without their presence, it would be extremely difficult to manage a building housing hundreds of 18-20 year olds. The difficult conversations they were asked to have with peers benefited both the resident and the RA.

Veronica described policy enforcement as being “a large chunk” (Veronica, I, p. 6) of the position. She went on to say that she could perform well in those situations, but did not seek them out:

“I think I am also pretty good at incidence and policy enforcement like I definitely do not seek them out because I don’t...like I don’t want to do it constantly, but I definitely like, will notice things and will act on that and I think I stay calm during them and I keep the residents calm which I think is difficult sometimes but I think I am pretty good at that because I had some crazy ones.” (Veronica, I, p. 7)

While self-identifying areas where growth is needed, Faith discussed the policy enforcement component of the position required her to be stricter when addressing situations with peers:

“I had that intention that I am going to be better, being more forceful this year or not forceful that’s not the word I like to use, but just maybe more or like I don’t know like strict. I don’t even like talking about it because I don’t like doing it, but being more conscious and cognizant of like following all the rules exactly. I think I can be a little lenient as an RA when it comes to that. So that was an intention I had going into this year and its definitely going to be an intention going into next year is just be a little bit more I am afraid, a little bit more willing to make sure those things would be followed the way they should be followed...” (Faith, I, p. 6-7)

In the interview, Faith physically recoiled when discussing the policy enforcement role of being an RA (FN, p. 7), clearly indicating the discomfort she described in carrying out that specific function in her role. Because information can come from both eyewitness accounts, or as Gwynn pointed out, second hand sources (Gwynn, I, p. 8), RAs often have to confront situations with limited information, increasing anxiety.

One of the most striking descriptions of policy enforcement came from Serena, who explained her role in this area being clouded by the fact that she was a woman. She indicated that she believed a man in the same role would not be viewed as being as strict as she was. She felt as though residents believed her to be intimidating and they would be less intimidated by a man in the same job. Others did not directly express this unique take regarding their experience as an RA. Serena evaluated this as evidence that she was doing her job well, but nonetheless, her experience was novel among the group:

“It is actually kind of nice to hear somebody say that I was intimidating, so I am used to people being like “I thought you are really nice RA” like I thought you just let everything go because you are just don’t want to hurt me ones feelings, but that’s something where I kind of felt nice to be called intimidating because then it felt like I was doing my job well and so people are kind of fearful of doing bad things because they think I am going to catch them, like feel like that’s kind of a good thing... like I am doing my job and people are scared of getting in trouble, so they just don’t do things that would get them in trouble. I see it as a good thing. I am sure they don’t, but that’s something where like... like if I had made somebody to believe that I am not going to let them get away with things that I am doing my job well and if it has to do with the fact that they think I am an intimidating woman... cool, doesn’t really bother me.” (Serena, I, p. 11)

Participants were mixed in how they believed their gender identification affected their work, but all acknowledged that the influence primarily surfaced when confronting policy issues. As identified in chapter 2, women as authority figures are perceived differently. Logically, when confronting policy issues, peers could be more likely to see the RA as an authority figure and react according to their own bias. Because there is an amount of street level bureaucracy inherent with policy enforcement conducted by RAs, when students see some RAs not addressing violations, it could have made the high-performing RAs seem more intimidating.

Summary. RAs are tasked with policy enforcement as a core job responsibility. High-performing women RAs identified the role as a challenging piece of the job that many did not relish. It was viewed as a necessary evil of the job that the university required, but not something they would go out of their way to perform. There appeared to be a disconnect

between the RA perception of the policy enforcement role and administrator's goals for the position.

Appreciation of Administrative Role. A great deal of the RA role evaluation centered around their ability to complete administrative tasks for their university department and institution (DC, 1; DC, 10; DC, 15). The high-performing RAs in this study completed these tasks at a high level (FN, 2; FN, 14), and self-identified these activities as being crucial to their success in the position. Supervisors required the RAs to turn in various reports regarding students and building condition on a regular basis. Regardless of their personal perception of the value of administrative tasks, because they are expected to complete these responsibilities, they must appreciate their role in the university to excel.

As one would expect, the highest-performing RAs were able to appreciate what parts of their role were rewarded and find ways to produce results in that area. Regina felt she excelled at the administrative role in the RA position, stating that it is the area she felt the most confident:

“I think I do the administrative side of this job very well. I might not be... you know, peachy all the time. I am... I am not overly emotional with my residents. It's... you know, they know they can come to me and I will... you know, be confidential and then I am trustworthy and then I will get the job done, probably not get and come cry on my shoulder may be that might not be who... who you... you go to [other RA] for that, but I think as far as enforcing policy and maintaining facilities, paperwork, things like that. that's where I find my stride in being a resident assistant is the mechanics of it. Can I get the job done? Can I get it done on time? Can I do it well?” (Regina, I, p. 7)

She went on to say at least 50% of the RA position was administrative in nature, signifying that her work directly corresponds to the elements she is being rewarded for. Regina also

acknowledged that the team-oriented nature of her work could accomplish more when drawing on the strengths of other staff members.

Veronica expressed disillusionment with the fact that she felt her work at times did more to serve the university than the students she worked with:

“I think that’s interesting because I think a lot of times the way I feel is that our expectations are not always like for the residents and more for the university side of things in a way. Sometimes I think a lot of our job is like checking boxes for the university rather than caring for the residents sometimes...” (Veronica, I, p. 6)

Administrative tasks were not always the most glamorous part of the RA position, but a necessary part of the university’s functions. Talla discussed the administrative tasks as something that can be assistive to other RAs as well as students:

“Going through our room check situation, putting toilet paper, any type of work like type of work, paperwork, any of it and like sometimes we have to put up like reminders on the their doors; any of that kind of stuff that they know that they all get it out to the people.” (Talla, I, p. 6)

Because administrative tasks are more black and white than many of the RA responsibilities, they could allow a person to be strong in the position by meeting the expectations of senior leadership. Penny talked about meeting the goals of her Resident Director (RD) and being a valuable member of the team:

“I’m always going to go back to structure, I just really value organization um and just being responsible and so I’m the team member who remembers things, I remember dates, I remember the little rules that we are and aren’t supposed to do and when they are due, and some RDs leadership style is like very strict on that, like you have to have this turned

in by this day and this bulletin board up and some are kinda lax and you're on your own and do what you do or don't do, um, and I really value like being on the same page.”

(Penny, I, p. 7)

The RAs recognized that many times they were fulfilling requirements of their supervisor, or boss, and that they needed to be proficient to be successful. This area of their work, more than any other, was evaluated very functionally. The RAs spoke about their position as a job in this regard, similarly to how a checker at Wal-Mart may describe their responsibilities. There was less art in how their administrative responsibilities were carried out; it was more task oriented.

Summary. Although not a favorite part of their position, participants expressed appreciation for administrative job requirements. High-performing women RAs had mixed emotions about the administrative component of their position. On the one hand, they expressed frustration that it could potentially take time away from residents and community building, but, at the same time, many felt confident in their ability to perform this part of the job. Their efforts were recognized by university officials, because this work is often prescriptive in nature, and easily measured on performance evaluations. All RAs spoke of administrative tasks in a way that illustrated their understanding of why these elements of their job were important, if not always enjoyed.

Capacity to Develop Community and Socialize. Every RA interviewed for this study was able to articulate a belief that their role in making residents feel comfortable in their community was critical. Their desire to be a significant contributor to the well-being of other students was a core piece of the work they were expected to perform. If the RA roles of policy enforcement and administrative tasks are considered necessary evils of the position, community building and the social aspects of the job were the most desirable portions of the experience for

most RAs. The highest-performing RAs must be able to excel in this area. Every administrator from the host institutions identified the RA role in building community in residence halls as the primary responsibility for staff members (FN, p. 1; FN, p. 13; FN, p. 25). Beyond the fact that administrators identified the community-building facet of the job as the most important, the same factor held the most weight in staff evaluations (DC, p. 1; DC, p. 10; DC, p. 15).

Participants knew that the success in their position depended on their ability to build community and be a positive social force for their residents. In describing what a successful RA does, Iris highlighted community-building aspects of the position:

“A successful RA... I'll just say what's on top of my head, I think one for sure is for me, this is what I think that relationship building aspect is like number one because if you don't have that your residents don't respect you, they don't know you. I have seen this in our own staff where issues like this happen and again I think it just goes back to that whole like relationships like they don't have that and it is not like I am not saying that you have to be best friends with everyone but I think there is something, you know, that little something to show that you care goes a long way. I think, just again, going back to that building relationships, I try to do this with residents on all floors.” (Iris, I, p. 8)

Likewise, Talla acknowledged that her success was tied to the experience her residents were having:

“I think it [RA success] is by making sure your residents are happy that is the biggest thing and if your residents are unhappy then I don't think you are as successful and making sure your work is getting done at the same time and as long as you are happy as well. Because if you are not happy then that is also a problem. Because if you are not

happy then your resident's life is not going to be where you expected to be.” (Talla, I, p. 5)

Gwynn described as successful RA as follows:

“Just be genuine, you know, I feel like... like it has to come naturally, you have to be genuine, you have to genuinely have an interest in people and being a mediator and welcoming people and like have this drive to make people feel at home...” (Gwynn, I, p. 5)

When explaining her strengths as a community builder, Faith said:

“I think that I am really good at making connections and making people feel comfortable. I have noticed that it’s a strength of mine. But within like the first month I think usually of meeting somebody, I am really able to like facilitate the relationship and become very close to them, and make them feel comfortable, and just like, I think they kind of like, I help them transition. So I can be that person you need to go to until you find a group that you really connect with, which as an RA is important because your residents aren’t going to be your best friends for the entire year, but for that first month that is really good for them to know that they have somebody. I think I am really good at doing that and just consistently, even throughout the semester, keeping up with them.” (Faith, I, p. 6)

Faith acknowledged that the position was complex in implementation; but that the pieces she felt were most important, were also those she felt most comfortable performing. It is challenging for a supervisor to look at a residence hall floor and say, “this is a good community.” More than something observable, it is just something you know. Often, the small things the RA does will dictate a good community.

Participants were able to define how they viewed success in their position, even if it was challenging to measure. Penny spoke about success in the RA position as a function of the intent of a person's work:

“I think the main thing is just empathy, just caring about people, ya know. And respect, that is something that we really have been trying to `push this past year, it's just that there are so many different kinds of people so many different of residents that you can't have prejudgments as an RA. You just have to care about them as people and want the best for them, whether their an amazing person or a jerk, whether they are excited about college or they hate college, like it doesn't matter you have to give all of them the same resources to succeed and I think that's the main thing, you just have to care.” (Penny, I, p. 6-7)

Sienna expanded on the ideas raised by Penny by more clearly delineating the intricacies of an RA's work with residents:

“I think a lot of it comes from being by curiosity, passion and you have to kind of know your residents, you have to be able to know your residents, but you also have to have a line of like this is where I am an RA and this is where I am your friend and so I think that building that line is interesting. I don't have relationships with all my residents, I will be honest. I mean, some of them are really quiet and they just start, they wanted to do what they want to do, and there a few who I like and know on a personal level and I know what is going on in their lives and so having that bond with residents is really important I think and just being able to also just drop a line...” (Sienna, I, p. 4)

Despite living in community that promotes more independent living, Serena still took care to invest in the lives of her designated students:

“Just being there and just kind of being available in that where I am a RA now, they don’t really seem to need me as much because it’s more of an independent living situation where they have the laundry in their house, they have kitchens, they have everything they would ever need and they would have almost no reason to run into me for things, but I think even still I have made myself known as a resource and I still checking with everyone enough to where they know if they need something.” (Serena, I, p. 8)

Finally, Regina lamented that she was not able to dedicate the time she wanted to community building, saying that she believed it only comprised 30% of the work she was asked to do. She suggested a different route to helping her students:

“I think the perception from may be a supervisory standpoint would put more emphasis on the personal relationships of this job, whereas I see the administrative side as being the most vital. I think you could maybe flip that forward coming from a supervisor they might tell you 50% of your time should be spent on... you know, cultivating relationships, 30% administrative, and 20% policy enforcement stuff. So, it... it kind of... it could vary based on who you were asking, but from my perspective that’s... kind of hashes out.” (Regina, I, p. 8)

Considering the emphasis placed on this particular job responsibility by administrators and participants alike, it would seem obvious that a majority of time should be spent on community building. The fact that it is not seemed to challenge the goals of being an RA. The student experience in a residence hall is potentially linked to retention and persistence, and the RA’s ability to cultivate a positive community would be linked to such factors as well.

Summary. University administrators do not only prize the community building and social aspect of being an RA, it is also sought out by high-performing women RAs. They saw

their role building community as central to the work they were asked to complete. Many of the high-performing women RAs believed this was an area of primary strength, but even those who did not described working to make this part of their work better. As a means to helping students be successful in college, building community and being social with students was an important part of the RA responsibilities.

H. Conclusion

The RA position presents a complex set of requirements for those students who engage in the work. University administrators had high expectations for the quality and quantity of work that each staff member would produce, while at the same time requiring them to perform at a high level in the classroom. Those RAs who distinguished themselves as the highest-performing staff members at their institution share a common view on the elements of the position that are both required and necessary for success.

Through the structured interview protocol utilized in this study, the highest-performing women RAs at each host site identified experiences and characteristics that could be consolidated into seven axial codes for analysis: Adaptability, External Factors, Ability to Mitigate Negative Consequences, Recognition of Positive Outcomes, Ability to Enforce Policy, Appreciation of the Administrative Role, and the Capacity to Develop Community and Socialize. Each identified axial code was analyzed for information provided by each RA for supporting documentation.

Adaptability was described by the RAs as the ability to adjust to changing dynamics with students and on their staff. Because RAs were asked to change course on projects on very short notice and meet students where they are, they had to be able to adapt in an ever-evolving

environment. External factors that contributed to high-performing RAs included playing sports as an adolescent, having a creative outlet, and support from family for their life's endeavors.

All of the participants described the positive outcomes of the position and their strategies to mitigate the negative consequences of being an RA. Stress and a general feeling of being overwhelmed dominated the negative experiences they had in their time as an RA. Their positive outcomes included personal growth and an ability to translate their experiences into an opportunity to better them in the future. The grueling nature of the RA position required self-reflection and perspective on their experiences.

The final three axial codes identified stemmed from the highest-performing women RA's understanding of the major components of their responsibilities in their position. They recognized a strong emphasis on enforcing university policies among their peers, an appreciation for administrative tasks, and a capacity for building relationships and social interactions with the students who lived in their community. Although varying levels of success in each of these areas, the RAs acknowledged that they are not only evaluated on these criteria, but it is the core of the RA position as a whole.

Chapter 5

Discussion

A. Organization of the Chapter

The following chapter will begin with an introduction to the topic of study, followed by the identification of selective codes. Selective codes were identified to inform the characteristics common among high-performing women RAs. Discussion of the selective codes developed from this study will be followed by a summary of findings from the research. Next, the data will be interpreted and the research question will be evaluated in light of the research findings. The chapter will be concluded with recommendations to the field of higher education and for further research on the topic.

B. Introduction

RAs have a complex position that creates a tremendous amount of stress and requires a student to demonstrate a wide range of skills to be successful in their work (Jaeger & Caison, 2006). Despite the importance most universities put on the position of RA, research regarding the selection, training, and support for the role is severely lacking (Ostroth, 1981; Jaeger & Caison, 2006; Schaller & Wagner, 2007; Wu & Stemler, 2008; Martin & Blechschmidt, 2014). Much of the available information is decades old, raising concern that today's college students could perform differently under similar conditions. Considering the critical role RAs play on university campuses through their first-level response to student issues, having a solid foundation of best practices would benefit the field of higher education to propagate student success throughout an institution.

Not only is there a dearth of literature on what makes an RA successful in their role, women as leaders both inside and outside of higher education are poorly understood. Once taken

for granted as a domain dominated by men, today women have access to roles that were once completely out of reach (Wenniger & Conroy, 2001; Eagly & Carli, 2007). Current findings of gross inequalities with regard to leadership attainment by women (White House Project, 2009) help illuminate the challenges women face. At a time in history when more women are graduating from institutions of higher education than men (Eagly, 2007), yet occupy far fewer leadership positions in virtually every field (White House Project, 2009), it is now more important than ever to understand the factors that constrain and conversely facilitate the success of women.

This study sought to understand the factors that contribute to the success of high-performing women in the RA position at three small liberal arts universities in the Midwest. The following chapter will discuss the results from this research and recommendations for how to proceed to maximize the RA role and university experience to support women.

C. Selective Codes

Selective codes serve as a reduction of axial codes in order to summarize the data collected for the purpose of generating theories to answer the research question at hand (Bowen, 2008; Brod, Tesler, & Christensen, 2009). The process of identifying selective codes required matching themes within the axial codes for characteristics of high-performing women RAs. The following three selective codes were identified: Personal Characteristics, Influencing Factors, and Understanding of the RA Role. The following sections will explore each of the three selective codes.

D. Selective Code Discussion

Personal Characteristics. The first selective code of personal characteristics was identified through the combination of the axial codes of adaptability and external factors to the

RA position. The axial code of adaptability was comprised of open codes related to the ability to be flexible, open-minded, critical, and adaptable in any situation. The RAs in the current study were able to find ways to fit into a number of situations and change their personal style to meet the needs of the moment. Because RAs are often asked to walk into situations they have only ever faced in training, if that, it is of the utmost importance they can stay calm and act in an appropriate manner in the most difficult circumstances (Longwell-Grice & Kerr, 2013). The high-performing women RAs in this study explained a willingness and ability to adapt when necessary.

Jaeger and Caison (2006) and Wu and Stemler (2008) identified the personality traits they found most associated with success in the RA position, including emotional stability, conscientiousness, and confidence. In describing the personal characteristics necessary for the RA position, the participants in this study expressed ideas congruent to the prior literature. To ascend to the level of the highest-performing staff members, one must demonstrate a level of confidence and stability to critically evaluate situations and how they should proceed. The RAs in this study described having to adjust to staff changes, leadership changes, meeting new people, and having challenging conversations as situations they must adapt to on a regular basis. It is through their ability to approach these scenarios with confidence head-on that has allowed them to distinguish themselves on their respective campuses.

Potentially because it is taken for granted that a diverse group of individuals can be successful in the RA position, there is no significant examination of the external factors to the individuals that contribute to success. Individual personality traits have been superficially studied (Jaeger & Caison, 2006; Wu & Stemler, 2008), but little attention has been paid to the external experiences that a person could have encountered that could predict an ability to excel

as an RA. The women in this study illustrated a diverse group from all different types of backgrounds could be successful, but even within those boundaries trends emerged.

When considering that fact that administrators at each host institution were asked to identify their three top-performing women RAs for this study, it is striking that all nine women included were in either their sophomore or junior year of college. Seniors were allowed to be included, but all individuals identified were in either their first or second year in the position. Although not explicitly examined in this study, it is a potentially significant artifact that the presupposed senior most RAs were not identified as the highest-performing staff members at any of the three host institutions in this study. As a trait external to individual personality characteristics, all of the women in the current study were able to demonstrate the highest levels of performance on their campus despite the fact that they were not the most experienced RAs in their institutions.

The single most pronounced experience each of the women in the current study shared was the fact that they were all significantly involved in sports growing up (Sienna would be the exception to this based on congenital health constraints, although she stated that she would have played sports had she been able). There is a well-documented link between involvement in sports and women's leadership development (Eagly & Carli, 2007; Megheirkouni & Roomi, 2017), and appears this particular group of women benefited from their involvement in sports at an early age. When asked what activities they participated in growing up, their sports experience was near the top of the list. Because the RA position requires a person to demonstrate confidence and self-assurance, sports may act as an early experience that allows women to practice these characteristics. Because the majority of sports experiences, and almost entirely in these women's experiences, are segregated by gender, they potentially give women the ability to

learn about their leadership style and preferences without having to navigate men in the same role.

Another external experience that was identified by the women included in this study was a creative outlet. The RA position requires a person to have some level of artistic ability to create floor decorations and advertisements. That the highest-performing women RAs had previous experiences that allowed themselves an artistic outlet was not surprising. By definition, to be recognized as a high-performer, they would have to display some level of competency in the elements required of the position. It would stand to reason that they would enjoy some level of artistic expression. In the experience of the author, those RAs who do not excel at creating floor decorations are typically those who do not enjoy that particular personal expression.

The fact that the RAs in this study had both good RAs themselves and supportive families is logically intuitive. Although the author has spoken to individuals throughout his career who became an RA with the intent of being a better RA than they themselves had, it appears a far greater motivator to have a desire to live up to the standard of those who one looks up to. In this study, the RAs expressed praise for the individuals who shaped them during the impressionable time they transitioned to college. Likewise, having a support structure in place in the form of family appeared to help women excel in the RA position. Because the RAs expressed experiencing position related stress, discussed in the next section, having family to call upon for support appears crucial to perform at the highest level.

Summary. For the RAs included in this study, it is clear that characteristics that display adaptability, previous experience with sports, creative outlets, and supportive figures in their life were critical in their development. By proactively engaging in these elements with girls and young women, it could be possible to cultivate similar characteristics in others. It would not

only be important to identify those who already have these elements in place, but it is incumbent on professionals to not sit idly by if they can affect change in society to promote success of women.

Influencing Factors. The RAs in the current study expressed significant numbers of factors related to recognizing positive outcomes and mitigating negative consequences of serving in the position. It appears being able to maximize the positive outcomes of the role and minimize the impact of the negative consequences was critical in performing at the highest level as an RA. Although all jobs present an amount of stress, the RA position seems to present a unique level of personal stress on a person (Morris, 2009). Because women RAs not only have to balance their own life, but are also expected to take on an oversight role for their residents, the position appears to create a unique stress level that other jobs do not seem to have.

Participants repeatedly expressed a high level of stress in the position. The overwhelming nature of the position required them to not only deal with their day-to-day lives but also necessitated them to help manage a number of other students' conflicts and issues. This manufactured a high level of anxiety that had to be mitigated for them to be successful. The women participants discussed a wide range of factors that helped them deal with the stress of the job. Some were able to learn new skills and adapt to the challenges, while others acknowledged that they came into the position with a level of proficiency in reducing stress from a busy schedule. It also appears critical for supervisors to recognize and reduce stress for women RAs (Morris, 2009). Regardless of the approach, there is no doubt women RAs experienced negative consequences from the position. Those who were able to navigate these stressors successfully appeared to excel.

The author has experienced a career in which administrators at every level in higher education extol the benefits and growth opportunities of the RA position. It is often discussed that RAs are potentially the most sought after candidates in job searches because they are able to display leadership and management skills their peers do not. The participants in this study articulated high levels of growth in their time in the position, which appeared to confirm the desired outcome of the role. It seemed that learning about one's self and how to conduct the essential functions of the RA position had a transformative effect on those who took on the responsibilities of the job. That these RAs were able to speak about their experiences in such a way that demonstrated significant growth likely holds a key to maximizing individual potential. If supervisors are able to promote the growth opportunities of the RA role, it may be possible to push others to success (Morris, 2009).

By finding personal motivation to push themselves beyond the limits they thought they had and finding avenues for personal well-being, these high-performing women RAs were able to excel at the position in ways that not all of their peers were able. The support the participants received in their role also seems to contribute to their success. Bierman and Carpenter (1994) found that women RAs who received appropriate levels of support from staff and training were more satisfied with their role. It is unknown if every RA feels the same levels of support, but the participants in this study articulated a sense of being sustained by those around them, whether administrators or peers.

Summary. The participants expressed an ability to mitigate negative consequences of being an RA and extol the positive outcomes they experience from the position. It would make sense that those RAs who are able to maximize the positive outcomes of the position and minimize the negative outcomes would be the most successful. Those RAs who let the

overwhelming nature of the position overtake them would struggle to stay afloat on a daily basis. These women RAs were particularly adept at keeping a positive mindset while not letting the stress inherent in the job get to them.

Understanding the Role. Traditionally, the RA position is comprised of three main functions: policy enforcement, university service, and community building (Jaeger & Caison, 2006). The high-performing women RAs in this study were able to identify all of these roles in their work, leading one to believe that a common characteristic of successful women RAs is an understanding and appreciation of what their primary job is according to their university. Intuitively, performing the tasks required of one's job leads to success. At varying levels of personal satisfaction, each of the RAs in this study were able to perform the main responsibilities of an RA. Because Schaller and Wagner (2007) found that one of the greatest contributors to RA dissatisfaction was dissonance between their expectations of the job and the reality, it is critically important for administrators and supervisors to make sure these pieces are congruent.

Both administrators and RAs recognized an ability to enforce policy as being a critical characteristic in the current study. Supervisors expressed a need for RAs to address policy violations by peers as a primary responsibility of RAs on all campuses. It appears a great deal of resources and energy were devoted to RAs tackling issues among residents. It is common for RAs to have challenges confronting these types of issues with their peers (Everett & Loftus, 2011). The participants in this study described this as an area they felt proficient at, yet many had misgivings. It is possible that this portion of the job will typically be an expectation students do not relish, yet those who excel at the RA role will be able to perform when necessary.

Holding another person accountable for their behavior and actions is not natural for many individuals, but the RAs in this study expressed a respect for rules and their necessity in campus

communities. For a person tasked with maintaining order and a positive living environment, deviants can undermine community building efforts, rendering other parts of their job more difficult. When examining the policy enforcement role alongside their other responsibilities, it made sense for the RAs to promote a community that respected rules to maximize the parts of their job they enjoyed the most.

Another potential challenge of the role was an appreciation for administrative responsibilities required of RAs. The highest-performing RAs were able to recognize the importance of university work and were capable of setting their personal feelings aside to get work done on time at the expected quality. In this author's experience, very few individuals apply to be an RA desiring to complete paperwork and reports for the university. Some RAs expressed confidence in their ability to perform administrative tasks. The black and white nature of administrative tasks allowed RAs who excel at them to receive praise and positive feedback from conducting mundane tasks. Nevertheless, many RAs are not able to complete administrative tasks on time, at a high level. The fact that the participants were evaluated highly in this regard spoke to their ability to accomplish the less desirable components of the job. The highest-performing RAs were not overwhelmed by the monotony of these tasks.

The final component high-performing women RAs identified as being critical to their role was a capacity to develop community and socialize with their residents. Building community and interacting with residents in their building was the portion of RA work that attracted the majority of students to the role. Because the participants came into the position with a high expectation that they would function as a community builder and mediator, they believed they were able to do the small things that made their residents feel they cared. RAs that perform at the highest levels are seen as empathetic, caring, and engaged in individuals lives (Wu &

Stemler, 2008). If the RA position is intended to affect the lives of students living on campus, it stands to reason that those RAs who were most driven to be a part of other's lives would be the most successful. The highest-performing RAs were able to find joy and derive personal satisfaction from this area of their position.

Summary. The highest-performing women RAs clearly articulated the responsibilities of their position and are able to relate them to personal passions. In examining what characteristics high-performing women RAs shared, it is clear that an appreciation of their role and responsibilities was vital in establishing who would excel. Therefore, women who have an appreciation for the duties of an RA coming in would be more likely to ascend to the highest levels of success.

E. Summary of Findings

The highest-performing women RAs in the current study shared common characteristics that lead to their success in their position. They displayed personal characteristics that allowed them to be adaptable in a variety of situations and possessed experiences that led them to be as comfortable as possible assuming the leadership role of being an RA. Women RAs who performed at high levels were able to maximize the positive aspects of their position and mitigate the negative elements of being an RA, namely stress and a general sense of being overwhelmed on a regular basis. Finally, the women in this study had a strong understanding of their role as a policy enforcer, administrator, and community builder. It is essential to perform the three functions of the position to be considered a top performer, and the participants were able to clearly define their role and explain how their talents and skills were leveraged to complete the tasks required of them.

F. Interpretation of Data

As colleges and universities scramble to increase student retention and persistence, and as American society in general attempts to reconcile a long history of discrimination and repression of women, it seems doubly important to understand what distinguishes top performing women in a given role. If the RA position is a microcosm of women's leadership, gaining perspective on what the highest-performing women RAs share in common should be critical for university administrators.

The intersection of being able to bolster the success of undergraduate women while at the same time promoting the larger student population's success should be an attractive goal for colleges and universities across the country. The current study identified the characteristics of high-performing women RAs at private liberal arts universities in the Midwest with the intent of creating a template for which to study these factors on a larger scale. Giving rise to a body of research that illuminates a previously undocumented phenomenon has implications for a wide swath of social life both inside and outside of higher education. As more and more women ascend to higher level positions of leadership, it is critical to understand the underpinnings of such success.

G. Research Question

What are common characteristics among high-performing women RAs? High-performing women RAs share a set of personal characteristics, external influencing factors that contribute to success, and a clear understanding of their role as an RA. The convergence of these factors produces a template for the success of a woman RA.

H. Recommendations to the Field

The following section will outline three major recommendations for higher education administrators with the intent of maximizing the potential of women RAs. Although the recommendations primarily target administrators in the area of university housing, the resulting information could benefit the entire field of student affairs leadership development. The success of women and promoting high-performing women leaders is not exclusive to any single area of a university.

In the author's experience, university administrators implement a formulaic process of selecting RAs. It is incumbent on those overseeing the hiring process to implement a protocol that will select those who are best suited to success in the position. An argument can be made for using the RA position to develop individuals, which is not inherently problematic, but steps should be taken to understanding who is being selected and why so they can be set up for success. Although some departments employ elaborate processes to attempt quantification of interview performance, often these practices have little to no meaning. In practice, such scoring efforts only serve to justify personal biases, creating an argument to select those individuals who were pre-selected as staff member favorites.

The current research serves as notice to hiring authorities to seek a deeper understanding of their perspective staff members. Seeking individuals who possess the potential to be the most successful in the RA role should be of primary concern to those tasked with selecting women RAs. Application materials, interviews, and staff interactions should be geared toward finding those women who are most likely to demonstrate the qualities most associated with success.

Beyond the fact that RAs should be more intentionally selected to reflect the qualities most associated with success in the role, as the trend toward more women enrolled in and

graduating from college continues, the current study should be instructive as supporting women in leadership roles. Because the RA position can be considered an undergraduate leadership role as well as a job, there are lessons to be learned for all women leaders. As colleges and universities seek to support the increasing percentage of students who identify as women, it is critical to cultivate women into positions of influence. As this process becomes more important, understanding the characteristics of women who can provide the greatest level of support for others will be crucial for administrators.

The final, most obvious recommendation to the field of higher education is to provide the next generation of women with the tools they need to be successful. Too often colleges usurp their influence to all of the individuals who have contact with children and adolescents prior to their arrival to their institution, only to bemoan to resulting product. What is to say that we cannot get involved long before that point? What is the point of research and enlightenment if it is not used to benefit society at large? If we can come to definitive conclusions on the building blocks of women's leadership, it is the responsibility of higher education to intervene early to make these opportunities a reality for everyone. Engaging in community activities and reaching out to professionals in the community early and often ensures that girls and women have access to best practices from an early age.

Once in college, women can be educated as to the factors that are most associated with their own success. Not every single woman is interested in taking on leadership roles, especially the RA role. Promoting good habits and activities that are closely aligned with successful progression in college should be the cornerstone of all university administrators. The current research provides a blueprint for educating and cultivating the highest-performing women RAs, but also women leaders in general.

I. Recommendations for Further Research

The following section will outline five recommendations future research into the topic of high-performing women RAs. Not exhaustive, the following recommendations provide a sample of underrepresented topics of study.

- 1.) The current study focused on small liberal arts institutions in the Midwest. The limitations presented by focusing on any given population could be reduced by expanding to different types of institutions to see if the current results are transferable beyond these participants. Extensive inquiry with new and varied populations provides the opportunity to expand on this topic. Because small private schools may employ an RA staff of 10-15 women RAs, a large institution may employ 75 women or more. Do the same findings hold when there is a much larger pool of women to draw from?
- 2.) There is great value in qualitative research, providing rich data from a small sample of individuals. Once an extensive list of characteristics has been identified, a large scale, quantitative study focused on the central findings could seek to verify the results. Such a study could also conceivably identify between institution differences that may not be seen in a study that is small in scope.
- 3.) Because the current study is focused on women exclusively, it is not possible to say if any or all of the identified factors are unique to women. A separate study should be conducted with men RAs to determine if there are differences between the two populations. It could be that men present a unique set of success factors that could inform the field.
- 4.) Once research is conducted exclusively on men, a comparison study between men and women RAs could shed light on how these two populations develop successfully in their

positions. Large and small-scale studies could seek to delineate between the two populations for their unique challenges and successes.

- 5.) As college and universities, not to mention society, become more diverse, it is essential to expand all research to include and focus on minority populations. Student affairs in higher education has led the way for acceptance of the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transsexual, questioning (LGBTQ) community. As more individuals from this community become open about their identity, it gives researchers the opportunity to examine how their unique experiences can inform our field. The same principals apply to persons of color in this regard. Future research should seek to deeply examine these populations of RAs to determine how administrators can uniquely support their success in the position.

J. Conclusion

The preceding discussion identified the characteristics of high-performing women RAs at liberal arts institutions in the Midwest. High-performing women RAs displayed personal characteristics including an ability to adapt to a variety of situations, a history of sports and creative expression, and support from family. They were also able to manage the influencing factors of negative and positive consequences of their position. Lastly, high-performing women RAs understood the components of the RA role and were able to perform in all areas of policy enforcement, administrative tasks, and community building. The findings of this research provide a greater understanding of the characteristics of high-performing women RAs, but also give insight to benefit the field. University administrators who seek to better understand women RAs can extrapolate the findings of this study to gain insight aimed at all women in university leadership roles. As the influence of women only grows in American society, so too does the need of higher education to support and develop the women leaders of tomorrow.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions

Interview Guide University of Arkansas

Time of interview: _____

Date: _____

Institution: _____

Interviewer: _____

THANK YOU FOR AGREEING TO PARTICIPATE IN THIS STUDY REGARDING THE EXPERIENCES OF WOMEN RAS.

I AM PROVIDING YOU WITH AN INFORMED CONSENT FORM FOR YOU TO REVIEW AND SIGN, IF YOU AGREE. AS NOTED, YOUR RESPONSES WILL BE DI-IDENTIFIED SO YOUR IDENTITY WILL NOT BE LINKED DIRECTLY OR INDIRECTLY WITH THE STUDY FINDINGS. DATA WILL BE KEPT CONFIDENTIAL TO THE EXTENT ALLOWED BY LAW AND UNIVERSITY POLICY.

THIS INTERVIEW WILL BE RECORDED WITH YOUR PERMISSION. FIELD NOTES ON THIS INTERVIEW GUIDE WILL ALSO BE COLLECTED DURING THIS INTERVIEW.

YOUR PARTICIPATION IS ENTIRELY VOLUNTARY AND YOU MAINTAIN THE RIGHT TO WITHDRAW AT ANY TIME.

BEFORE WE BEGIN, DO YOU HAVE ANY QUESTIONS?

DO I HAVE YOUR PERMISSION TO BEGIN?

Should you have questions or concerns about this survey, please contact Grant Carlson, University of Arkansas, [REDACTED], gcarlo@uark.edu

- 1.) Can you tell me about your background, where you grew up, went to high school, and about your family?
- 2.) What types of activities did you participate in growing up? (sports, government, clubs, etc)
- 3.) Can you tell me about why you chose to attend NAME OF INSTITUTION?
- 4.) Can you tell me about how you first became aware of the RA position?
- 5.) How would you describe your experiences and relationships with your RAs?
- 6.) What motivated you to apply to be an RA?
- 7.) What makes someone a successful RA?
- 8.) What do you think you do really well as an RA?
- 9.) Are there aspects of being an RA that you don't think you do well, or that you'd like to improve at?
- 10.) Has being a woman influenced your experiences as an RA? Please explain.
- 11.) Do you consider the RA position a leadership position? Please explain.
- 12.) What challenges have you faced in your role as an RA?
- 13.) Has being an RA influenced your career plans?
- 14.) What have you learned about yourself from being an RA?
- 15.) What advice would you give to other women about being an RA and about leadership?

Appendix B

IRB Approval Letter



To: Grant C. Carlson
HOTZ 900

From: Douglas James Adams, Chair
IRB Committee

Date: 02/13/2018

Action: Expedited Approval

Action Date: 02/13/2018

Protocol #: 1801098447

Study Title: Characteristics of High-Performing Women Resident Assistants at Private Liberal Arts Institutions

Expiration Date: 02/01/2019

Last Approval Date:

The above-referenced protocol has been approved following expedited review by the IRB Committee that oversees research with human subjects.

If the research involves collaboration with another institution then the research cannot commence until the Committee receives written notification of approval from the collaborating institution's IRB.

It is the Principal Investigator's responsibility to obtain review and continued approval before the expiration date.

Protocols are approved for a maximum period of one year. You may not continue any research activity beyond the expiration date without Committee approval. Please submit continuation requests early enough to allow sufficient time for review. Failure to receive approval for continuation before the expiration date will result in the automatic suspension of the approval of this protocol. Information collected following suspension is unapproved research and cannot be reported or published as research data. If you do not wish continued approval, please notify the Committee of the study closure.

Adverse Events: Any serious or unexpected adverse event must be reported to the IRB Committee within 48 hours. All other adverse events should be reported within 10 working days.

Amendments: If you wish to change any aspect of this study, such as the procedures, the consent forms, study personnel, or number of participants, please submit an amendment to the IRB. All changes must be approved by the IRB Committee before they can be initiated.

You must maintain a research file for at least 3 years after completion of the study. This file should include all correspondence with the IRB Committee, original signed consent forms, and study data.

cc: Michael Stephen Hevel, Key Personnel

Appendix C

Informed Consent

Consent Form for Interviews

Title of Project: Characteristics of High-Performing Women Resident Assistants at Private Liberal Arts Institutions

Researcher Information: Grant Carlson, Doctoral Candidate, gcarlso@uark.edu
 Dr. Michael Hevel, Dissertation Advisor, mhevel@uark.edu
 Iroshi Windwalker, IRB Coordinator, irb@uark.edu
 University of Arkansas College of Education & Health Professions

Summary of Study:

The Resident Assistant (RA) position serves as a frontline student services position in colleges and universities. Often, students' time as an RA is an entry point into positions of leadership that can impact their career throughout their lifetime. This study seeks to better understand the characteristics of women who serve in the RA role; specifically the highest performing women RAs. By gaining a better understanding of the women who seek this role out, it is hoped that better mechanisms can be put in place to help identify and support women leaders at the collegiate phase of their life.

Purpose of Study:

The purpose of this study is to better understand leadership emergence among women. By studying the characteristics of high-performing women leaders at the collegiate level, a better understanding of the factors that can aid and support women leaders can be gained. Intended as an exploratory study, this research project will identify the characteristics of high-performing women RAs that propelled their success in the position.

Participants of the Study:

This study will seek out the highest performing women RAs identified by staff members at the host institutions. Personal observations and performance reviews will be utilized to provide evidence of individual selection to the study.

Description of Participation:

Your participation will require participating in a 45-60 minute recorded interview, with field notes made of your responses to several scripted questions, with additional prompts. There will be a follow-up phone call interview once all participants have been initially interviewed. There are no anticipated costs, risks, or discomforts expected from participating in this study. All electronic information collected will be stored on the researcher's computer and any hard copies of information collected will be kept in a secure space in the researcher's office. You will not receive any compensation for your participation in this study. If interested, you can obtain a copy of the results of this study by emailing Grant Carlson (gcarlso@uark.edu).

1. I confirm that I have read and understand the summary above and have had the opportunity to ask questions.
2. I understand that my participation in this study is voluntary and that I am free to withdraw at any time, without any given reason, and my choice to withdraw will not adversely affect any other relationship with the University of Arkansas or the researchers.
3. I understand that in participating in this study, because of the nature of social media, that while I will not be referred to by name in the study, the institution and my title will be referenced explicitly, therefore my anonymity is not guaranteed.
4. I understand that all interviews that I am participating in will be recorded and stored with all research documents of the study by the researcher.
5. I agree to take part in the above study.
6. I have been given a copy of the consent form.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Date	Signature
_____	_____	_____
Researcher	Date	Signature