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First Year Resident Assistant Retention at Grand Valley State University

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First Year Resident Assistant Retention at
Grand Valley State University

BY

Karl Rishe

THESIS

Submitted in fulfillment of the requirements for the Master of Science
Degree in Communication in the Graduate Studies Program
of the School of Communication
Grand Valley State University,
Allendale, Michigan

Fall Term 2006

**SCHOOL OF COMMUNICATIONS
GRAND VALLEY STATE UNIVERSITY
ALLENDALE, MICHIGAN**

WE HEREBY APPROVE THE THESIS SUBMITTED BY

Karl Rishe

ENTITLED First Year Resident Assistant Retention at Grand Valley State University

AS PARTIAL FULFILLMENT OF THE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE DEGREE OF

MASTER OF SCIENCE IN COMMUNICATION

ABSTRACT

The following study investigated the perceptions of resident assistants at Grand Valley State University in regards to retention rates of first year resident assistants. The study looked for links between cognitive dissonance about the resident assistant position and the intent to return to the position the following year. The study was qualitative by nature, asking a series of questions to first-year resident assistants concerning job responsibilities, perceptions of the position before applying and while in the position, and their relationship with their supervisor.

There were few studies found that addressed resident assistant retention or how the perception of the resident assistant position changed over time. The research pointed out that there was a clear link to miscommunication, cognitive dissonance, and job satisfaction in the work place. Other studies pointed out that retention of quality employees is becoming more and more challenging in today's world.

The findings indicated that most resident assistants interviewed stated they really did not have a good idea of what they were really getting into. Resident assistants interviewed also said their perception of the job changed three times: while applying, during training, and while actually doing the job. Recommendations include but not limited to having a mentoring program that would have a prospective resident assistant shadowing a current resident assistant to ease the dissonance of the job during and after resident assistant training.

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CHAPTER I

Introduction

Background

Festinger (1983), in his book *The Human Legacy* stated that speech and language as a communication system was and continues to be the essential building block to human civilization. This statement alone explains why communication is so important in our daily lives. “Every aspect of our daily lives is affected by our communication with others, as well as by messages from people we don’t even know – people both near and far, living and dead” (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005, p. 2). This would explain that communication in an open system is unavoidable, and is continuous. Thus these unavoidable messages would shape every aspect of our lives whether we want them to or not.

Communication is key in the work place too, “90% of employees who are updated frequently feel motivated to add value; just 14% of those who are not updated feel similarly motivated” (Hill, 2005, p. 9). Clear and frequent communication is linked to motivation and job performance. If “every communicative act is viewed as a transmission of information, consisting of discriminative stimuli, from a source to a recipient,” then every message in the work place contributes to a persons internal filters (Newcomb, 1953, p. 393). These internal filters have helped us code and decode messages. These messages in the work place create cognitive dissonances between what we hear and see, the expectations we have and our actual experiences.

“If it’s true that the companies that succeed get the best out of their staff, then it follows that good employment practices will be increasingly important to good

reputation” (Anonymous, 2005, p. 60). It is easy to see that a university’s reputation directly affects the admissions numbers for student, staff and faculty retention. These three factors are the lifeblood of financial income for any higher education institution, and failure in one area can mean great danger for the institution itself. “Some institutions are absolutely dependent on enrollment to cover the cost of operations for the fiscal year. The loss of even twenty students can mean the difference between institutional fiscal failure and success” (Barr, 2002, p. 10). Resident assistants are the first line of defense with retention rates. Resident assistants connect with students on their floor to create a welcoming community that students can call home.

Statement of the problem

Grand Valley State University’s Office of Housing and Residence Life employs 106 resident assistants to create a welcoming community to on-campus residents (S. Jensen, personal communication, February 24, 2006). In the 2005-2006 school year the Grand Valley State University resident assistant staff included 70 first time resident assistants and 36 returning staff members from the previous year (S. Jensen, personal communication, February 24, 2006). Grand Valley State University has only half of the first-year resident assistants returning for a second year that is 35 out of 70. The returning staff, referred to as the mentor staff, have 20 out of 36 returning, 14 of them graduating. That is 22 mentor staff members eligible to return as a resident assistant, with twenty of them returning with a retention rate of 90%. The 50 % retention rate of the first-year resident assistants seem to be a large problem (S. Jensen, personal communication, February 24, 2006).

Resident assistants (for the purpose of this study, also known as RA) at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) are supervised by living center directors and apartment directors. These directors all agreed at the yearly resident assistant selection meeting that a good staff has just as many first-year RAs as mentor RAs. The numbers at this meeting did not allow for a good matching of first-year RAs and mentor RAs, leaving some staffs with only two mentors and 11 first-year RAs. Directors commented that this would make it difficult to have duty schedules and effective programming models ready. It would ultimately affect the community in the residence hall due to the low numbers of mentor RAs (selection meeting observation, February 10, 2006).

Significance of the Problem

Fall training for resident assistants alone will cost the department of Housing and Residence Life a reported \$50,000 according to the resident assistant training chair, Vicky Wright (personal communication, 2006). The shortage of mentor RAs creates problems when coordinating different fall training activities that they need to run (V. Wright, personal communication, 2006). It is also clear that mentors could get burned out very quickly because of all the first-year RAs leaning on them for help during the year.

Other institutions have similar problems with the disparity between the returning mentor RA and first-year RA. An email was sent to every public higher education institution in the state of Michigan asking five questions (see Appendix A). The institutions that responded had a lower retention rate than Grand Valley State University for their RA staffs. Some schools expressed a problem with getting enough qualified applicants for their resident assistant positions, but had a great retention rate once the

student was on board. Grand Valley seemed to have the opposite problem, having many qualified applicants but not being able to retain those students after one year of employment. Central Michigan University (CMU) a school with a similar on and off campus population as GVSU, has a total 136 resident assistants. CMU has 57 out of 61 first time resident assistants returning for a second year, for a retention rate of 90%. When compared to GVSU's 50% retention rate, it is easy to see there is a problem.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to explore the perception a first-year resident assistant has before employment, during training, and during the last month of employment. The study will also explore the dissonance created by the different messages sent and received by the experiences a first-year resident assistant has. Finally the study will give more direction as to what the students would like to see the Office of Housing and Residence Life take. Gaining a better understanding of these perceptions could help to remedy the low retention rates at Grand Valley State University.

The research questions for the study are as follows:

- RQ1:** Do expectations of the resident assistant position that are communicated by Grand Valley State University to prospective resident assistants fit the actual job experiences they encounter?
- RQ2:** Is the dissonance experienced by a first-year resident assistant through pre employment, training, and employment too high?
- RQ3:** What other factors may be affecting the resident assistant retention rates?

Organization of Thesis

This chapter gave some background on the importance of communication in the work place as well as gave the statement and significance of the problem and purpose of the study. Chapter I also stated that Grand Valley State University only retained 50% of its first-year resident assistants in the 2005-2006 academic year creating a large problem for the Office of Housing and Residence Life. Chapter II will review the literature found to be pertinent to establish the history of the resident assistant position. It will also discuss effective communication in the work place, the cost of replacing an employee, and the core of Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory. Chapter III will explain the procedures used in the study and the methodology behind the study. Chapter IV will present the findings of the study, and Chapter V will discuss the finding, recommendations, and what should be explored next.

CHAPTER II

Review of the Literature

Gregory Blimling, in his book *The Resident Assistant* states, “The foundation of nearly every residence hall program across the country is the resident assistant position” (1995, page ix). “A resident assistant is a student who lives in a university residential facility and acts as a resource for the students on their floor or in their area of the building” (ResidentAssistant.com, 2006). On Grand Valley State University’s (GVSU) campus, the resident assistant (RA) serves on a staff with other resident assistants that all work in the same building or community. The resident assistant lives on the floor and uses programs, door decorations, bulletin boards, and mostly personal interaction with those that live on the floor to facilitate a positive community. The pay for this time-consuming position at GVSU is room and board in the Residence Halls on campus. The resident assistant also serves on call at least once a week where they make rounds through the buildings and address any problems that may arise. At GVSU the resident assistant reports to a living center director or an apartment director, which ultimately reports to the Office of Housing and Residence Life.

The resident assistant lives and works in a residence hall not a college dorm. “A residence hall is a place where you live, learn, grow and develop. A dorm is a building” (ResidentAssistant.com, 2006). The history of residence halls started shortly after Congress passed the Land Grant College Act in 1862 (Blimling 1995). In 1907 Princeton’s President Woodrow Wilson suggested moving unmarried faculty into the dorms in order to disband the powerful men’s social clubs (Blimling 1995). The idea of integrating learning inside and outside the classroom was looked at more thoroughly by

Richard C. Hughes in 1909 while he was the president of Ripon College (Blimling 1995, p. 26). Hughes said, “The purpose of a college education is not only to educate the student in formal disciplines, but to aid him in discovering his own powers and to train him in the best use of these powers for effective work in life” (Blimling 1995, p. 26). This is one of the first sightings in higher education where faculty understood and noted that learning happens outside of the classroom and that the university would need someone to aid and facilitate this learning. This would also be the start for the field of student affairs and the very root of the resident assistant position.

The duties of the resident assistant are described a little differently in each institution’s job description in order to serve the individual needs of that institution. Resident assistants at some institutions focus more on maintaining order in the hall by enforcing rules like underage alcohol consumption, candles in the building, restricted appliances, and facility needs (Busam, 2006). Other colleges and universities view the resident assistant as more of a mentor, a friend, a resource, and a community builder (Busam, 2006). It is also popular for an institution to ask a resident assistant to do both jobs as it is at GVSU (See Appendix B for resident assistant position description GVSU, 2006). Michigan State University has changed the name from resident assistant to resident Mentor in order to change the perception the students have of the resident assistants (See Appendix C for Michigan State University Department of Residence Life, Mentor Job Description, 2006). Student interaction is the only constant in all of the duties of a resident assistant at any institution.

A successful resident assistant is hard to point out because of the different evaluation systems used by each institution. A popular web site for resident assistants,

ResidentAssistant.com, talks about the relationships that a resident assistant has with three groups: residents, staff, and supervisor (ResidentAssistant.com, 2006). Denzine and Anderson(1999) in their study found that academic ability, personality profiles, previous leadership experience, level of motivation, evidence of group communication skill, potential for dealing with student conduct issues and agreement with the philosophy of the housing program only give a small indication of how successful a resident assistant can be. A successful resident assistant has high sense of self-efficacy, according to Denzine and Anderson.

Training for a resident assistant at every institution is a little different just as the role and the job description differs. Resident assistants usually arrive to campus several weeks before the residents of the hall for training. “The resident assistant position demands extensive training on such topics as: R.A. roles and responsibilities, campus resources, history and philosophy of residential education, student development theory, human diversity, counseling and communication skills, conflict resolution, leadership and group dynamics, stress management, and crisis management” (Murray, Snider, and Midkiff, 1999, p.1). Many training sessions are done to aid the development of each resident assistant through the year and it is safe to say that it takes a special person to do the resident assistant job even with training. A copy of the GVSU training schedule can be found in Appendix D.

Employee Retention

Beverly Kaye and Sharon Jordan-Evans in their article, *Retaining Key Employees*, stated that “retaining key employees is the number one problem” for employers today (2001, pg 6). Kaye and Jordan-Evans interviewed 50,000 employees in 300 companies to

compile a list of why talented employees leave their job. They found that pay was one of the least important factors in employee retention. It was found that productive and talented employees needed an exciting and challenging workplace, involvement in a team, and a good supervisor to remain at the workplace.

It is no secret that in any work place that the longer you have an employee, the more efficient they will become at their job. This is also true with the resident assistant position that the longer they are in their job, the better their work will become. There has not been much research done on the retention of resident assistants, but the research that has been done closely relates to any job. Lee Jackson in the article “Its Cheaper to Keep ‘em,” states that it can cost a company close to \$40,000 in lost productivity to replace a \$48,000 a year worker (2006). “Research reflects that around 22% of the American workers voluntarily leave their jobs within the first year” (Jackson, 2006, p. 73). Kaye and Jordan-Evans also state that losing a talented employee can cost 70% to 200% of that employee’s yearly salary (2001). Leigh Branham a consultant who specializes in employee retention in *It’s Cheaper to Keep ‘em*, says, “An overwhelming three-fourths of the workforce is disengaged” this would mean they are leaving because they are disinterested and not challenged (Jackson, 2006). Branham also says that money is hardly the reason that anyone ever leaves a job (Jackson 2006).

People today place a greater emphasis on the quality of their job experience rather than the longevity in their position (Jackson, 2006). Gregory P. Smith, author of *Here Today, Here Tomorrow: Transforming Your Work Force from High-Turnover to High-Retention* states that “the highest turnover rate is always with the youngest and newest people in the workforce.” This would correlate to first-year staff members in the resident

assistant position. They do not have loyalty to the RA position, the team they are a part of or the Residence Life department. They have loyalty to themselves; if they feel the Residence Life department is not taking care of them, they are going to leave the resident assistant position (Smith, 2001).

There is often a contrasting difference between what supervisors believe and the reality of why their employees leave. More than half of all employees indicate that better pay and benefits are their top reasons for leaving. However, “many times they’ve decided to leave because they don’t like the people, the boss, or the environment they are in” (Smith, 2001, p 152). Leigh Branham, career counselor and author of *The 7 Hidden Reasons Employees Leave*, has spent years listening to people talk about what they wanted at their next job and money was not at the top of the list. Typically the workers were disengaged or losing interest in their job.

Employees leave their positions for many reasons. One reason is the job does not meet their expectations. Retention truly begins during and throughout the interview process. Job benefits and responsibilities should be clearly outlined and defined. Miscommunication during the interview process can set a bad precedent for the integrity of the organization (Smith, 2001). Secondly, the employee and the job can be mismatched. This typically happens when the leadership is eager to fill the position. It is better to take your time even if it takes longer. Branham says, “think about it as ‘hire fast, suffer slow’” (p 74). Third, there is a lack of effective feedback. Before an employee decides to leave, they experience some sort of disengagement before they choose to leave, according to Branham (2005). Fourth, there is a lack of development and advancement opportunities. Individual talents of employees should be evaluated

like professional sports teams by looking at what each individual brings to the field, and the potential that employee has. The resident assistants experience needs to be managed from their first day to their last, much like a professional employee or a professional sports athlete to help them reach their maximum potential (Smith, 2001). You can not just hire them and forget about them (Jackson, 2006).

Resident assistants receive training on stress management and on how to balance their own lives. This training is to hopefully help staff so they will not become burned out. Burnout is the opposite of disengaged. "Burnout is a syndrome consisting of emotional exhaustion, depersonalization, and reduced personal accomplishment" (Hardy & Dodd, 1998, p.1). The resident assistant position is prone to burnout and stress because of its conflicting roles of friend and disciplinarian. Studies show that resident assistants who advise first-year students have a higher burnout rate and less job satisfaction than those that supervise upperclassmen (Hardy & Dodd, 1998).

Hardy and Dodd mention in their study that resident assistants seem to have a poor experience by having too many residents to care for, an unsupportive supervisor, or an unsupportive Residence Life Department (1998). The resident assistants at the University of Massachusetts voted in 2002 to become part of a union like the staff and faculty at the university. The University of Massachusetts employs 360 resident assistants that united with the help of the graduate assistant union to regulate their job and living environment (Williams, 2002). The history of student affairs has shown that once one school's students tried something new, other students at different institutions would follow.

Effective Retention

It has previously been discussed that retention of quality employees can be the difference in a company being successful or not. In Lonsway and Campbell's article, *Retaining Women Officers*, mentoring is discussed as an important variable in retaining women officers (2002). It is further stated that mentoring is a problem because there are not enough female officers identifying themselves as a mentors in the field (Lonsway & Campbell, 2002). This could also translate into the problems that Grand Valley State University has in retention. Retention rates show there are few mentors available for incoming resident assistants, making it difficult to have a one-to-one ratio of mentor to mentee that Lonsway and Campbell outline in their study (2002).

Communication and Student Development Link

Colette Hill, in her article "Strategic Communication Management," explores the link between effective communication with employees and their job satisfaction (2005). All of the statistics that Hill states support that poor communication between manager and employee will lead to poor job performance and low job satisfaction. The most compelling findings were that "68% of those with bosses who are poor communicators say they plan to leave within two years" (Hill, 2005, pg. 10). "Respondents firmly favor face-to-face communication, which offers the chance to debate issues and to build a sense of teamwork" (p10).

Gypsy M. Denzine and Cynthia M. Anderson in their study evaluated 111 resident assistants to assess the student's level of self-efficacy and how that related to job satisfaction for resident assistants (1999). "Perceived self-efficacy is defined as people's beliefs about their capabilities to produce designated levels of performance that exercise

influence over events that affect their lives” (Bandura, 1994, p. 249). Denzine and Anderson described a successful resident assistant having components of a counselor self-efficacy and a teacher self-efficacy; this could be very difficult if the student was receiving both messages at the same time and more so if these messages were different (1999). The findings did suggest a mentoring relationship for one-to-one communication to build confidence that would in turn build self-efficacy.

Self-efficacy is very closely related to a person’s sense of self-perception and self-esteem (Bandura, 1994). Self-esteem and self-perception can be seen as a person’s sense of self; self is constructed by “symbolic interactions” with people (West & Turner, 2000). Symbolic Interaction Theory comes from the works of George Herbert Mead; in these works Mead concludes that meaning is created and modified by interactions with other people (West & Turner, 2000). Mead further explains, “Meaning is negotiated through the use of language” (Griffin, 2003, p. 57). Language is one of the ways to solve ill-structured problems and uncertainty situations.

King and Kitchener in their Reflective Judgment Model explore how students know what they know and how they reason and come to these conclusions of “uncertainty” (Evans, Forney & Guido-DiBrito, 1998). This student development theory represents seven stages where “a logical coherent network of assumptions and corresponding concepts are used to justify beliefs” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991, p.32). King and Kitchener indicate that more than 1700 people representing varied student and non-student subgroups, had participated in Reflective Judgment interviews and writing exercises to prove their theory (Evans, et al., 1998). This research was important in

finding that a great deal of cognitive decision development happens during a students college years through the Reflective Judgment Model (Evans, et al., 1998).

Festinger takes the Reflective Judgment Model in a different direction by looking at what happens when experiences do not line up with perceptions. Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory is described by Littlejohn & Foss, "Dissonance itself is a result of two other variables- the importance of the cognitive elements and the number of elements involved in the dissonant relation" (2004, p.77). "Dissonance produces tension or stress that creates pressure to change. When dissonance is present, the individual will not only attempt to reduce it, but will also avoid situations in which additional dissonance might be produced" (p.77). The resident assistant job is filled with dissonance; the people they communicate with can create or destroys dissonance and that dissonance could be the link to resident assistant retention.

Messages are first received about the resident assistant position by a number of sources. These sources include current resident assistants, living center and apartment directors and many media sources used by the Office of Housing and Residence Life. The main source of information is through information sessions facilitated by the Office of Housing and Residence Life. An outline of the information sessions can be found in Appendix E. This can be where the basic assumptions about the position are formed thus creating the basis for intrapersonal communication leading to cognitive dissonance.

Cognitive Dissonance Theory operates under four assumptions: "human beings desire consistency in their cognitions, dissonance is created by psychological inconsistencies, dissonance is an aversive state that drives people to actions with measurable effects, and dissonance motivates efforts to achieve consonance and efforts

toward dissonance reduction” (West & Turner, 2000, p. 107). These four assumptions are closely related to King and Kitchener’s work. The first assumption of cognitive dissonance serves as a guiding rule of why there is a cognitive process for judgment and reasoning. The assumption that dissonance drives people to action was the focus of Festinger’s research (Griffin, 2003). This push to action is sometimes the reason why employees will leave an organization.

Keller and Block conducted a study that coordinated employees who had intentions and opinions opposite of the stimulus messages they were receiving at the work place (2003). The study found that two types of dissonance were created: “affect-based dissonance (dissonance accompanied with negative emotions) and cognition-based (dissonance accompanied with disagreements with the message)” (Keller & Block, 2003, p. 302). Two different strategies were discovered to assist with the dissonance that requested high one-on-one contact and communication. This would highlight one type of action that could be done when dissonance occurs.

Tewksbury and Higgins (2006) conducted a study that looked at the job satisfaction of correctional officers and their stress levels. Emotional Dissonance appeared to be a very important link between job satisfaction and stress levels of the correctional officers. “Structural equation modeling shows that emotional dissonance is an antecedent of work stress, which in turn affects satisfaction with supervisors” (2006, p 290). This study points to the link that dissonance is related to job satisfaction, stress, and supervisor relationships.

Dissonance has also been defined as psychological discomfort of tension which motivates efforts to achieve consonance (West & Turner, 2000). Dissonance can create a

great deal of anxiety until that dissonance is rationalized or leveled out. Other studies have examined the link between socialization to a new position and high turnover to that position. In the *Journal of Management*, David G. Allen reported that he interviewed 259 new employees about their socialization to a new job (Allen, 2006). The study found that decreasing anxiety and dissonance about the new job through socialization greatly improved employee turnover (Allen, 2006).

Most people want a positive, supportive work environment. When evaluating companies, employees put these attributes at the top of their lists. To help employees feel more comfortable and have less dissonance, “managers need to make employees feel valued and engaged and extend support when staff members face work and personal challenges” (Messmer, 2006, p 13). Employees who enjoy having interactions with their supervisor and colleagues produce better work, make the work environment more enjoyable, and are more reliable (Messmer, 2006). The resident assistant’s environment can change day to day with their interactions with their residents, fellow staff members and supervisor. This type of change can make it difficult for the resident assistant to receive the same message of feeling valued and having a positive work environment, thus creating some cognitive dissonance.

All communication has feedback and cognitive dissonance is based on feedback that does not line up with a received message. Resident assistants encounter high amounts of feedback from their residents. They also receive feedback from their supervisor and their fellow resident assistant staff about acceptable and unacceptable behaviors. If each group that provides feedback has a different idea of acceptable behavior, it can create a large amount of dissonance that is difficult to deal with. Studies

found that “environments supporting high levels of informal supervisor and coworker feedback are associated with lower employee perception of organizational politics” (Rosen, Levy, & Hall, 2006, p. 18). The feedback that resident assistants receive from residents, fellow staff members, and their supervisor are based on the messages from each subgroup creating politics in the organization. This would make the finding “that when employees have greater access to information regarding behaviors that are acceptable and desired at work, perceptions of politics are reduced and work outcomes are enhanced.” This occurs when communication messages from different sources are the same (Rosen, et al., 2006, p. 18).

Chapter Summary

There has been little formal research done on resident assistant retention. The resident assistant position is a stressful position that provides much needed guidance but requires a great deal of skill and professional training. It is clear that high retention for RAs will be better for the students they serve and for the university as a whole. The foundation of this study is the perceived messages the resident assistant receives before employment, during training, and during the school year. The other key component to the study is what is done by the university to combat the dissonance the resident assistant experiences.

Chapter III

Methodology

Study Design Overview

This study attempts to collect qualitative data that will help with further studies and to hopefully create solutions. The research was done at Grand Valley State University (GVSU) in Allendale, Michigan. GVSU is a mid-sized, liberal arts, public institution with an on campus resident population of 5,300 and a total of more than 23,000 students attending. More than half of the students living on campus are first-year students. There are many apartment complexes within walking distance to GVSU where many students choose to live after their first-year. As stated previously, the main points were spent investigating these three questions:

RQ1: Do expectations of the resident assistant position that are communicated by Grand Valley State University to prospective resident assistants fit the actual job experiences they encounter?

RQ2: Is the dissonance experienced with a first-year resident assistant through pre employment, training, and employment too high?

RQ3: What other factors may be affecting the resident assistant retention rates?

Data Collection/Procedures

The data were collected by interviewing first-year resident assistants who were not planning on returning for a second year. These interviews were all done during the resident assistant exit interview. Living center directors and apartment directors all spoke with their staff members about the exit interview and assured them that all information would be confidential. Each first-year resident assistant not returning to the position was

e-mailed to ask for their participation in this study. After a confirmation e-mail was received, they were contacted by phone to set up an interview day and time and to complete their exit interview. The criteria used to allow participants into the study were as follows:

- 1) Must be a first-year resident assistant for Grand Valley State University
- 2) The student must have worked a full academic year (no mid-year hires)
- 3) The resident assistant must be willing to be interviewed
- 4) The resident assistant must have completed fall and winter training

The interview is strictly qualitative based, so there is no number scale used with any of the interview questions. The resident assistants were able to answer questions in as many or as few words as they wanted. The interviewer did not correct or redirect the questions if the question was not answered. The student was also given time to ask any questions they wanted about what the information would be used for. Participants were all interviewed in the same office by the same person. All participants were met at the door when they arrived by the interviewer. The interviewer explained that the conversation would be recorded and that all data collected would be confidential. The interviewer started each interview by reading the current job description of the resident assistant position to the participant. A copy of the job description can be seen in Appendix B.

Interview Questions

The interviewer asked a series of eight questions to each participant in the same order. Each question was open ended for the participants to share as much information as they desired. The interviewer's questions attempted to address the perceptions that the

student had of the position during different stages of their employment. The questions also addressed what they liked and disliked about the position, their relationship with their supervisor and staff members, as well as the blunt question of why they are not coming back. The complete list of questions asked is located in Appendix F.

These questions were based on Festinger's Cognitive Dissonance Theory. "Dissonance occurs when one element would not be expected to follow from the other." (Littlejohn & Foss, 2005. p. 77) Questions were asked to see if there was a difference between what students thought the job was going to be and what their actual experience was. The questions also related to Newcomb's approach to communication acts. The interview attempted to explore whether or not the students that applied decoded the messages the way the university intended (Newcomb, 1953).

Participants

Participants were only first-year resident assistants at Grand Valley State University that had completed a full year of training and service and were leaving the position. These participants lived in a variety of 22 different buildings on campus. The participants had hometowns from large cities such as Chicago, as well as hometowns with very low populations. There were no international students present in the study and the majority of students indicated the state of Michigan as home. Participants represented all of the 12 different living areas on campus and all of the three different living arrangements: traditional, suite style, and apartment. The majority of students were white females, reflecting the resident assistant population as a whole. All of the resident assistants interviewed were between 19 and 22 years of age and a sophomore or junior in class standing.

There were 35 first-year resident assistants not returning to the position out of 70 that started in the beginning of the year; the total eligible for the study was 18. There were 11 students that came in to the position at mid-semester. These students were not present for fall training thus could not answer questions as to if their perceptions of the position had changed before or after training. There were two graduating seniors and four resident assistants that were terminated during the year, making the total eligible for the study eighteen. The total number of students that chose to take part in the study was 12, giving a total of 66% participation in the study.

Chapter Summary

Chapter III explains that participants were asked a series of questions on a voluntary basis. The same person conducted each interview and all interviews were recorded with a digital voice recorder. These were open-ended questions to discover whether or not there was dissonance within the resident assistant position. The population was representative of the current resident assistant employee population from year to year.

CHAPTER IV

Findings

Interview Specifics

As mentioned before, 12 first-year resident assistants that were not returning to the position volunteered to take part in the study. All interviews took place in the same office in February 2006. Each interview took approximately 20 minutes, with the same questions being asked in the same order. Participants were assured of privacy and confidentiality of their interview answers and their name would be protected. The participants were also assured that nothing they said was going to be taken back to their supervisor or put in their personnel file for their employment history.

*Interview Summaries**Student One*

Student One was a 20-year-old white female in her sophomore year, who worked in a suite style resident hall for co-ed freshmen. Student One shared with the interviewer that she became a resident assistant because she had become friends with several resident assistants the previous year through her involvement with community council. Student One thought she had basic idea of what the position was going to be like, but had no idea students were so needy with roommate conflicts. Student one also said that her perception of the position changed during training to greatly respect the position of a resident assistant.

Student One went off on a tangent commenting that most residents and supervisors do not realize everything that a good resident assistant does. She said that just listening to residents' concerns and all the paper-work that goes with doing a

program is very time consuming. Student One commented that meetings alone take up three to four hours a week of her time. Student One enjoyed the interactions with the residents of her floor the most. She did not enjoy the large amount of paper-work that came with each program, fire safety checks or whatever surprise came up that week.

Student One responded that the reasons that she would not be returning to staff started with her friends. She wanted to spend more time with her friends off campus and not have to report where she was at all times. She also wanted more time for her studies and for her family. She commented that she had a pretty good relationship with her supervisor and was able to talk freely with her. Student one said she did not like the selection process for the up-coming year. She had no questions about the study and said she had felt better after sharing all this information with someone.

Student Two

Student Two was a 22-year-old white female in her junior year who worked in an apartment setting with upper-class students at the down-town campus. Student Two commented both 'yes' and 'no' that she knew what she was getting in to with the resident assistant position. She understood it was being a resource person for the community but she had no idea the amount of paper-work that would go along with that responsibility. She also did not understand during pre-employment and training all of the extra little things that seemed to take up a lot of time such as meetings and crises that would occur. Her perception of the job changed when all of the extra little things started piling up. She said that she would always say that next week she would get a break and the break would never come.

She loved the interactions with the residents, especially helping them out. The first week was by far her favorite. Getting to know everyone on the floor and building community on the floor was great. Conversations with everyone on her floor and finding out what was going on in their lives were her favorite part of the position. She did not like all of the extra paper-work. The weekly reports, programming proposals and evaluations were hard to stay on top of. Programming was frustrating because there was no telling what was going to be successful from week to week in her community.

Student two had a good relationship with her supervisors and felt she saw them a lot. She was not returning to staff because of all the little things that kept adding up. She said it was a great experience and she learned a lot about herself but she was ready to be a college kid again. She did not have any questions for the interviewer.

Student Three

Student Three was a 21-year-old white female that worked in the first-year student area. Student Three oversaw one building on her own of about 50 students. She said the resident assistant job was a great growing experience for her personally. She did not think it would challenge her as much as it did. Student Three thought the position would be interacting with people but had no idea about the crisis management and the amount of meetings and paperwork that went along with the job. The paper-work was the part of the job that bogged her down and the programming was not as enjoyable as it could have been because of all the rules and guidelines linked with programming. Student Three said that the resident assistant job helped her with her time management, and that she felt she could tackle anything after being a resident assistant.

Student Three commented that it was difficult being the only resident assistant running the building. She loved interacting with her residents and said if she could just do that part of the job she would return. Student Three said she enjoyed her supervisor and thought of him as a person that challenged her to be a better person in every aspect of her life. She would come back to staff if it was certain that she could work for him again. Student three had good relationships with her fellow staff members and said she had made life-long friends through her resident assistant job. The main reason she was not returning was because she only wanted to work for her current supervisor and that she wanted to be the average college student again.

Student Four

Student Four was a 21-year-old white male in his junior year. Student four was working in a first-year hall set up traditionally styled with community bathrooms. Early in the interview student four made it quite apparent that he was a pre-med student and the resident assistant job took up too much of his time. He enjoyed the interactions with people and likes the new group of friends that he had acquired but really did not have time for what the resident assistant job entailed. He stated that his living center director understood him because he tried to help him balance his fraternity, girlfriend, and his resident assistant job.

He said he thought he knew what the job was going to be like because he knew his resident assistant when he was a freshman really well. He said the meetings, in-services and weekly reports just began to back up and he saw himself not giving his best effort. He enjoyed his experience but said one year is all his grades and his sanity could take.

Student Five

Student Five was a 19-year-old white female in her sophomore year working in a traditional hall with first-year students. She said that she understood the resident assistant position when applying for the job but her perception of it changed during training and then again when the students moved on to campus and classes started. She stressed that training was long and tiring, but fun and very important to build the team, because she was able to depend on her co-workers the rest of the year. The job also taught her to manage her time better but created problems with her and her boyfriend. Student five said her idea of what the job was changed several times and that expectations of the position also changed from being relationship based to being administrative based.

Student Five enjoyed interacting with the residents and planning programs for the residents to attend. She also enjoyed her staff as a new group of friends that she would have for the duration of her college career. She said that she had a good relationship with her supervisor and that she would work for him again if he was returning to staff. She said she had a negative opinion of the Office of Housing and Residence Life as a whole. She said it seemed that they cared about paper more than people a lot of the time. She also was not returning because she wanted to live off campus with a group of friends.

Student Six

Student Six was a 22-year-old female junior working in the upper-classmen area. When she applied for the job, she felt she had a very good understanding of what the job would be comprised of. She had several friends who were resident assistants and even had a few family members who were resident assistants. She had no idea that there would be so many roommate conflicts between upper-class students that picked to live

with each other. She said she felt a change in herself once the school year started. She was more assertive and got more respect as a result of being assertive. As a whole the job was what she thought it was going to be; interacting with students, programming and duty were the three big things.

Student Six did not like all of the extra things that needed to be done as a resident assistant. The fire safety checks, program proposals, in-services, and weekly reports always seemed to be due at the wrong time. She had a good relationship with her supervisor but could only talk with her about work stuff. She did not apply for next year because she did not like the process and she really wanted to live off campus with her friends.

Student Seven

Student Seven was a 20-year-old male in his sophomore year living in traditional halls with first-year students. He really had a problem realizing that the resident assistant job took a massive amount of time. He said that he thought he knew what he was getting in to, but really had no idea. He really had a hard time with gaining his residents' respect and balancing his time. The demands of the resident assistant job ran him in circles and his grades dropped immensely. He could not manage his time and he became upset with being a resident assistant. When he felt he had the resident assistant position figured out, the job would change and he would be behind yet again.

Student Seven liked the staff he was on and all the new friends that he gained with the resident assistant job. He hated the paperwork, the documentation of situations and the overall time drain that the resident assistant position had on his life. He had a good relationship with his supervisor but early on was told by his supervisor that he was in

over his head because of the difficult students on his floor. Student seven said he was not returning because of his grades and because the job was just not what he thought it was going to be.

Student Eight

Student Eight was a white female, age 20 and in her sophomore year. She was working in a first-year student area in the apartment setting. From the start of the interview she was very negative and it was clear she was not happy with her resident assistant experience. She stated she did not know all the things that would go into the resident assistant position until the job actually started. During training she found out how much work it was going to be and her stress level started to go up and never went down. She said during the year she found herself working around the clock some days trying to get things done. The programming was also a surprise to her. She had no idea that she would be doing two programs a month and that they would take so much time to do. Duty was also a surprise to her. She did not know that she would be on duty so many days a week and that when she was on duty she could not do anything else, such as homework.

Student eight enjoyed getting to know the residents on her floor, it was the best part of the job. She indicated that she felt like an outcast on her staff and did not have a connection with her supervisor. She felt alone most of the year and was looking forward to next year. She was not coming back to the resident assistant position because it was not what she thought it would be and she did not enjoy the job.

Student Nine

Student Nine was a 21-year-old white female in her junior year working with first-year students. She said she had a good understanding of some of the responsibilities of a resident assistant when applying for the position but had no understanding of some of the administrative demands of the job. She said that the job changed drastically from training to the school year because there were so many other things to do. She said it was difficult or even impossible to tell when she would get some down time and when she was going to be crunched for time. The job was very stressful but she said she learned a lot about herself and about how to manage her time and people.

She did enjoy interacting with all of the students in the building and all of the connections that she had to people on campus. She loved her staff and said they were a great support for her in tough times. She had a good relationship with her supervisor and said she cared about her as a person. She disliked the administrative side of the job and that bogged her down most weeks. She was going to be a senior and wanted to enjoy her last year of school and concentrate on her job search.

Student Ten

Student Ten was a 21-year-old African American male in his junior year working with first-year students in a traditional style residence hall. He stated that he did not know what he was getting in to. He really needed the money and this would allow him to save a good amount of money while living on campus (see chapter II). He said his understanding of the job changed from training to the school year because of all the other stuff going on. He said it would have been nice for there to be some kind of warning about how things were going to be different once the year had started. He said he

acquired a lot of skills that would help him obtain a teaching job when he graduated the following year.

Student Ten hated the administrative side of the job and loved the people part of the job. Doing the facilities stuff was also not the best part of the job and really took the most time away from doing other stuff. He had a good relationship with his staff and felt that he had made a real connection with his supervisor. He would not be returning because he did not feel he could do his student teaching and the resident assistant job at the same time.

Student Eleven

Student eleven was a 21-year-old white female in her junior year and worked in the apartment setting downtown. She felt that the resident assistant job was laid out and explained pretty well; and if you asked questions and read the paper-work, you should have known what you were getting in to. She said that there did seem to be a communication problem between housing and the residence halls not identified in the beginning, but became more apparent as the year went on. She said training was great and that she loved getting to know her new team members. The job was only difficult because of individual problems with residents or housing needs.

Student Eleven really enjoyed working with students and getting to know her staff. She indicated that she had many new friends and new networks of people because of the resident assistant job. She did not like living alone. She had always lived with someone and wanted to live with a group of people again. Student Eleven had a good relationship with her supervisor and with her staff. She said she was frustrated with the

communication that would come down from the housing office and that she really wanted to live with her friends off campus.

Student Twelve

Student twelve was a 20-year-old Indian male in his sophomore year working with first-year students in a traditional residence hall. He thought he had a good feel for the resident assistant job when he applied, but he found that he was challenged with the student interactions and with getting his residents to respect him. He enjoyed training because he got to know his co-workers and they helped him through some difficult times during the year. Training was the foundation of their relationship. The job was so much more than just what it said in the job description. It was hard to describe, he explained.

Student Twelve enjoyed interacting with the staff the most and the relationship he had with his supervisor. He did not enjoy duty or documenting residents for behavioral situations. He was not returning because he was pre-med and he did not think his grades could take another year of being a resident assistant.

Themes and Summary

The 12 resident assistants interviewed expressed a diverse explanation of what they thought the RA job was before having the job, during training, and during the regular school year. Most of the students interviewed really enjoyed interacting with their staffs and found new connections on campus. However, they did not enjoy the administrative demands of the resident assistant position. The perception of the resident assistant job was shaped by what time in the school year it was and what was going on in each person's life. Frustration with upper administration housing seemed to also be a theme when relating to communication.

The reasons were all very similar as to why students were not returning to the job. The resident assistants wanted the same type of freedom they had before becoming a resident assistant. They had gotten all they could handle from the resident assistant job in one way or another. It seemed that the shock of the change in the perception of the resident assistant job affected the adjustment to the school year of each staff member. The retention of each staff member, however, was individual. There was a clash of personal needs that was the deciding factor of why they were not returning to the resident assistant position.

CHAPTER V

Conclusions and Recommendations

General Conclusions and Outcomes

Each student brought their own perspective to life while talking about the resident assistant position. There were several themes repeated in each interview and similar responses to each question concerning communication and the perception of the resident assistant job. Although it is difficult to draw clear statements as to why retention for the resident assistant position is low, looking at each question separately may help. The following section will break down each question asked and the themes and trends in responses to that question. Following the analysis, there will be recommendations as to how to assist with this problem or how to capitalize on this strength.

Question 1: When you applied for the resident assistant position, did you feel you had a good understanding for what the job was?

The majority of the students interviewed thought they knew what they were getting themselves in to. Before the interview started, the resident assistants read the job description of their position. This reminded most resident assistants of what the job looked like on paper or what they had visualized before beginning training for the resident assistant position. As the year went on, the students said they did not have an accurate picture of all the time commitments and administrative needs of the job. The job was advertised as a social position geared towards extraverts. It seemed that the struggle for the resident assistants began with the administrative and facility needs of the resident assistant position.

Recommendations

A better description of the time commitments of the resident assistant position might ease the cognitive dissonance that is created with the administrative and facility needs of the position. This may impact the pool size of resident assistants and also may affect the overall quality of the candidate that is attracted to the position. It also may be beneficial to have actual documents present at resident assistant information sessions to showcase all the documents the resident assistant will be producing each week, month, and semester.

Question 2: During training, did your understanding of the job change or stay the same? Why or why not?

The resident assistants interviewed enjoyed the training period because of the connection they made with their staff and their supervisor. Their perception of the resident assistant job changed because of the breadth of training they received. Most of the students interviewed said this is where they realized all that would have to go in to the job. It was stated several times that it seemed not as time consuming during training as a result of not having classes and not having students in the buildings.

Recommendations

The training seemed to be a critical time for the resident assistant to build a bond with their staff team and their supervisor. The expectations and administrative needs are also laid out quite well for each student during this time. The only recommendation that would seem to help with the dissonance the resident assistant experiences is to continuously remind them that things will change once classes start and students arrive. It may also help to talk to them about time management skills and have a

training session on effective time management.

Question 3: While in the job, did your understanding of the resident assistant job change?

The theme in this question was the time management piece that the students were not prepared for. It was difficult to judge if the resident assistant had too many other commitments or if they just did not like doing the administrative needs, putting them off and occupying more of their time. The feeling of being overwhelmed administratively came out over and over again during this question. resident assistants stated it was difficult to judge when slow times would be and when to schedule time to just get away from campus.

Recommendations

The administrative needs of the resident assistant need to be re-evaluated to see what is turning students off. It may be beneficial to capitalize on student interactions and to decrease job responsibilities that have to do with facility needs. Being on duty was not a large theme but it may need to be looked at as far as the administrative piece of documentation. The baseline is to take out what students do not want and increase the interaction they want more of.

Question 4: What did you like most about the job?

It was easily observed that the resident assistants enjoyed interacting with their residents and their staffs the most. They liked the one-on-one time with each resident and they also enjoyed the interactions they got to facilitate within their floors. The resident assistants responded that the resident assistant position did help them grow as individuals and assisted with sharpening the skills they would need in their profession when they left

college. The resident assistants also liked the time they spent with their supervisor and felt they had a new role model in their life.

Recommendations

Staff and student interactions along with gaining skills that would help them in their future are great selling points for the resident assistant position. Further promotion of these activities can only increase the quality of candidates that apply for the resident assistant position. It would also make sense to increase the staff time and the needed relationship with residents and professional staff members. The more meaningful relationships the resident assistant establishes, the better experience they will have.

Question 5: What did you not like about the job?

The resounding response to this question was the time consuming administrative and facility needs that the resident assistant has to do. The resident assistants also stated that it was overwhelming trying to do the administrative part of the job with the relationship part of the job. Time management was also a theme highlighted by the resident assistants interviewed. They felt they had too much to do and not enough time to do it all. They also did not have a positive opinion of the Housing and Residence Life Department. They stated communication was a problem and they felt too far detached from those in power to solve the problem.

Recommendations

It may be okay to remove some, if not most, of the facility needs the resident assistant must do in their position. The administrative needs could also be stream-lined to see what information is needed and what could be done in a different way. The students did not like to change gears from relationship-focused to administrative-focused

activities, so a look at what type of student is being attracted to the position may also be beneficial. A very alarming statement is the lack of communication and respect for the department they worked for. There could be more emphasis put on personal relationships with those administrators in leadership roles in housing. It is also important for upper administrators to explain why something is needed to be done, not just tell them what to do.

Question 6: Why are you not coming back to staff?

This particular question had several different responses and it was difficult to see trends in the interviews. The one trend was that the resident assistant wanted to be able to “be a college student” again and to live off campus with friends. It was also stated that there were conflicts with majors and with overall time commitments. They wanted to reconnect with their friends and what they did before the resident assistant position. The person that applied for the resident assistant position had a change in their self perception from how they identified with themselves before taking the job. This created dissonance with intrapersonal communication and their identity.

Recommendations

Recommendations should be combined in order to get a clear picture of the retention of resident assistants. If the level of job satisfaction is high, the student is more likely to come back to staff, even with few problem areas. A clear message and description of what the position is going to be and time constraints linked to the responsibilities are needed. Also, during training, it is suggested to have philosophical discussions on the socialization of the resident assistant position and how a person’s identity can change with the new leadership position. Decreasing what the students do

not like and attracting a different kind of student to do the administrative needs of the job while still recruiting the social student to establish the relationship part of the job may result in higher retention rates and higher job satisfaction rate.

It may help to establish a mentoring program to deal with the dissonance experienced by first-year resident assistants. The mentoring program could begin the last two months of the academic year, before the resident assistant is hired, to shadow job responsibilities. This would give the prospective resident assistant a hands-on approach to not only the time commitments but also the socialization of becoming a resident assistant. This in turn would decrease the anxiety and the dissonance that seems to happen during training and the first few months of the resident assistant position. This may also help with resident assistants leaving the position after the first semester because they would have an accurate picture of what the job entails before doing it themselves.

Further Research to be Done

A quantitative study that would be given at different stages in the resident assistants job would provide a frame-work for the needs of the resident assistants at different stages during the year. The study would need to look at the building setup and the staff relationships with fellow staff members and with their supervisor. The study's data could be crossed with the exit interview to see if there is a correlation to the data collected and the personal responses by students. The study would have to take into account those students graduating and those just not fit for the position in the first place. There are ten qualitative questions that could be asked during and after training and after the first and second semester. Refer to Appendix G for these questions.

The Office of Housing and Residence Life at GVSU seems to be having some miscommunication that is echoing throughout the organization. It would be interesting to see if there are similar feelings with the Graduate Assistants and with the supervisors of the resident assistants, living center directors and apartment directors. The study would be qualitative in nature to get a good feel for the environment at each level in the organization.

The same study could also be done with those who are staying in the resident assistant position for a second year. The same questions could be used to see if there is any difference in the student's response or if there is something different in the retention of mentor resident assistants. The returning staff members could give the opposite perspective to see the correlation between those that stay and those that leave.

Conclusion

The resident assistant position is very complex to describe and to evaluate. The retention rate of resident assistants at Grand Valley State University is a sign that there is something going on in the organization as a whole and the student worker is being affected. It is not apparent why the retention rate is so low within the resident assistant position, but there are some clear links between the perceptions of the position before being hired, during training and during the school year and the dissonance the resident assistants experience due to their perceptions.

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APPENDIX A

Questions given to Michigan Higher Education Institutions

February 9, 2006

Dear Colleagues,

My name is Karl Rishe, I am a Living Center Director at Grand Valley State University, and a masters student in the School of Communications. I am currently requesting some information from Residence Life departments. I am trying to look at the retention rates of first-year Resident Assistants/Mentors in the State of Michigan. After gathering the data I will be able to see if we have a significant problem, and then begin to explore why retention is low. I will use these statistics in my thesis. I intend on investigating the messages received by Resident Assistants/Mentors prior to and during their first-year of employment. I have listed the data that I would need from your institution below. If you cannot answer these questions, it would be great if you could direct me to someone in your institution that could. I would greatly appreciate any help that you could give me.

(These questions do not include Multicultural Assistants)

1. How many Resident Assistants/Mentors do you employ on your camps during the 2005-2006 school year?
2. How many first-year resident assistants/mentors do you employ on your campus during the 2005-2006 school-year?
3. How many first-year resident assistants/mentors of the 2005-2006 school year are planning on returning for a second year during the 2006-2007 School year?
4. How many First-year Resident Assistants/Mentors are graduating before the start of the Fall 2006 School year?
5. Do Resident Assistant/Mentors get a choice, or a say on where they are to work their second year on staff?

Thanks for your help!

Karl Rishe M.Ed.
Living Center Director
Grand Valley State University
(616) 331-1110

APPENDIX B

Resident Assistant Job Description

*Resident Assistant Position Description***Grand Valley State University
Office of Housing and Residence Life****IMMEDIATE SUPERVISOR:**

Living Center Director in concert with Graduate Assistant.

REMUNERATION:

You will receive room and board. Please note that your employment has the potential to affect your financial aid status and you should discuss this with the financial aid office.

JOB REQUIREMENTS:

Academic Requirements: An essential role of the Resident Assistant is that of academic role model. It is your responsibility to maintain at least a 2.5 cumulative GPA while maintaining a minimum of 12 credits while holding the Resident Assistant position. Failure to do so may result in probation, suspension or termination from the Resident Assistant position. If your semester GPA falls below 2.5, minimally, you will be placed on probation. If your semester GPA falls below 2.5 for a second consecutive semester, your contract will be terminated. If your cumulative GPA falls below 2.5, then your contract will be terminated.

Assistant/Liaison: Resident Assistants implement the goals of the Department of Housing and Residence Life (HRL) within the Living Centers. Resident Assistants serve as a liaison between the HRL administration and the students in our Living Centers. Resident Assistants foster an atmosphere for academic, social, cultural and emotional growth. As a Resident Assistant, you are responsible for the well being of the students in your assigned area, as well as the general atmosphere, the programs and the physical facilities of the residential area.

Administrative Tasks and dates: To coordinate the administrative tasks associated with opening and closing the Living Centers, all Resident Assistants must plan their departure and arrival times in accordance with the following break periods:

- Fall Arrival: You are required to arrive 2-3 weeks prior to the start of the fall semester.
- Winter Break: You may leave no earlier than the Saturday following exams or upon the completion of your closing responsibilities. You must return for training no later than the Thursday before classes begin for the winter semester
- Closing: You may leave no earlier than the Sunday following final exams or upon the completion of your closing responsibilities.

In addition, staff will be expected to assist with on-going administrative tasks which could include fire safety checks, reports to your supervisor, etc.

Communication: All communication (written, oral, or electronic) should be courteous, inclusive and representative of your status as a role model. This would include job related as well as personal communication.

Community Building: A primary responsibility of the Resident Assistant is to help establish and maintain a positive living and learning environment for the residents within the Resident Assistant's assigned area. Additionally, you should take a supportive interest in the community-based government by attending community meetings in your assigned area to keep informed about current events within your building and throughout the campus. It will be necessary to attend Community Council and RHA meetings as assigned by your supervisor.

Conduct: You are responsible for understanding and abiding by the policies and procedures in the Student Code, the HRL Handbook, local, federal, and state law, and the specific procedures for your assigned area in fact, in rationale and in spirit.

Confidentiality: It is important to maintain confidentiality in relation to all conduct or student issues that the Resident Assistant may encounter within his/her role (i.e. the Resident Assistant must keep his/her supervisor apprised of all important events and must not discuss these events with other students/staff unless directed to do so by their supervisor).

Duty Responsibility: Each Resident Assistant is required to serve as an emergency on-call/student resource during pre-determined periods as established by their supervisor. Please consult with your Apartment Director for specific information regarding your duty responsibility. This includes covering Thanksgiving and Spring Breaks with no additional compensation (with the exception of per diem money to help cover the cost of food).

In-services/Meetings: In order to be able to offer on-going training opportunities, HRL requires all Resident Assistants to attend all in-service dates. In-services will be scheduled from 4-6pm on 5 to 6 Fridays throughout the academic year. It is a basic expectation that the Resident Assistant will attend all in-services, training sessions, and meetings on time and in full preparation. In addition, Resident Assistants will have weekly staff meetings with their assigned staff team. Please plan on two hours for this commitment. Finally, Resident Assistants will have one-on-one meetings with their supervisor as determined by that person. **Staff Meetings will take place from 4-6 on Mondays- Staff are not allowed to schedule any classes at this time.**

Keys/Access Cards: Resident Assistants are responsible for the cost of any lock/key/access card changes if they lose their HRL issued keys/access cards or contribute to the circumstances of them being stolen. Proper use of the key/access cards and/or master key/card is vital. Improper use of key/access cards and/or master key/card will result in termination of disciplinary action.

Programming: As a Resident Assistant, you are expected to promote the development of students by providing a diverse range of programs. Specific requirements will be detailed during fall training by your supervisor. However, Resident Assistants can generally expect to do one social and one educational program per month.

Pre-Employment Training Requirement: All new Resident Assistants are required to attend one pre-employment training session. Failure to attend one of these sessions could result in them not being hired.

Recruitment/Training/Selection: As a member of the HRL staff, Resident Assistants will be asked to assist in the recruitment, selection, and training of new staff. This could mean that you are part of interviews, information meetings, or our group process. In addition, we may utilize some staff photos as part of our recruitment materials. Please notify us if you do not wish to have your photo utilized in this manner when you turn in your contract.

Role Modeling & Ethics: RAs are expected to be good role models and ethical decision-makers at all times, both on and off campus.

Substance Use Expectations: Each Resident Assistant must sign and adhere to the expectations as set forth in the Housing and Residence Life Staff Substance Use Expectations and Procedures.

Supplemental Employment/Outside Obligations: Any outside job commitments or other student activity obligations outside the Resident Assistant job should be approved by your supervisor to ensure that you are able to maintain a healthy balance while in the job. We expect your academics to come first, but you must put your Resident Assistant job second over other outside obligations. In general, we ask you to keep all outside commitments below 15 hours total.

Visibility/Availability: It is a basic expectation that you will be in your assigned area and available to students. This includes staying the night in your assigned area Sunday through Thursday evening. This time may include primary responsibilities such as attendance to staff meetings, participating in meetings with student groups (eg. community meetings), dedicating time to perform administrative functions or may include secondary responsibilities such as availability for drop-in discussions with students, individual advising and referral, etc. With advance approval, each staff member is entitled to be absent two weekend days per month. Other nights away should be cleared with your supervisor prior to departure.

Other Duties as Assigned: Please understand that you may be asked to fulfill other duties and responsibilities that are not listed above.

SUSPENSION/TERMINATION

This appointment is subject to termination prior to its normal expiration for failure to complete or fulfill duties/requirements or for conduct inappropriate to this position, including violations of University and HRL regulations or local, federal, and state law. Each staff member is eligible for reappointment. Eligibility in itself does

not constitute a commitment of HRL to offer reappointment. If your employment contract is terminated, you will be responsible for the pro-rated amount of your meal plan. Further, termination does not release someone from the obligations of their Housing Contract.

REHIRE

Staff members must reapply to return for an additional/consecutive year.

APPENDIX C

Michigan State University Department of Residence Life, Mentor Job Description, 2006

I. BASIC FUNCTION

The Mentor is a live-in student staff member in the Department of Residence Life. The Mentor assists in supporting the academic community in an undergraduate residence hall and has specific responsibility for working with students on a particular floor. Mentors are expected to provide strategies for, and assist residents with, multicultural development, learning, character building, community development and personal wellbeing.

II. RESPONSIBILITIES

The Mentor is responsible for assisting students individually and in groups. The Mentor's primary role is to facilitate the creation of a positive environment on an assigned floor which supports students' academic and personal success. In order for these environments to develop, Mentors must make significant connections with their residents, help residents know each other, and connect residents to the resources and opportunities of the larger university. Strategies for success include maintaining individual and group contact, a thorough knowledge of campus resources, planning and implementing activities, and responding to community and individual concerns. See also Expectations for Residence Life Staff, the Mentor contract, and expectations established by individual supervisors.

III. CHARACTERISTIC DUTIES

A. Genuine Connections with Residents

1. Is visible and available
2. Is approachable
3. Treats floor residents fairly
4. Helps residents
5. Establishes mutual respect
6. Develops rapport with residents
7. Has communication and active listening skills
8. Demonstrates care and concern for residents
9. Residents feel comfortable going to the Mentor
10. Develops relationships with residents
11. Knows about student development

B. Developing Community

1. Recognizes and works to involve diverse/marginalized populations on the floor
2. Can identify the stages of community development
3. Encourages residents to take responsibility for one another

4. Works consistently to create a civil and respectful atmosphere on the floor
5. Encourages interaction between residents
6. Builds an open and inclusive environment on the floor
7. Creates opportunities for residents to discuss floor issues
8. Facilitates events that connect students to one another
9. Initiates programs residents participate in
10. Effectively mediates conflict
11. Implements the Community Standards Model

C. Safety/Climate/Crisis/Triage

1. Reports appropriately
2. Meets duty expectations
3. Demonstrates good judgment
4. Follows-up appropriately with individuals or the floor community following incidents
5. Masters the 3 R's (Recognize, respond and report)
6. Understands and maintains confidentiality
7. Can interpret and explain university and housing policies
8. Knows and uses appropriate crises protocols
9. Is professional in working with safety response personnel
10. Can identify potentially unsafe conditions and take appropriate action Knows resources, makes appropriate referrals and follows-up

D. Educator

1. Recognizes and takes advantage of opportunities to help students learn
2. Effectively assesses the learning needs of the floor
3. Encourages and facilitates discussion and dialogue among residents about in class and out of class learning, campus and national events and life experiences.
4. Implements activities that contribute to student learning as reflected in the core and student learning outcomes
5. Can articulate how as Mentors and residents on the floor, they have influenced students' growth
6. Capitalizes on opportunities for implementing programs based on students' interests and needs

E. Team Player

1. Supportive of institutional partners
2. Contributes positively to the morale and functions of the staff team
3. Has mutual respect with fellow staff members
4. Actively participates

5. Encourages and supports others
6. Upholds team standards
7. Maintains appropriate confidentiality
8. Demonstrates care and concern for other staff members success
9. Willingness to be solution-oriented

F. Leader

1. Demonstrates leadership skills
2. Acts with integrity
3. Is Inclusive of others
4. Maintains personal balance
5. Models appropriate behavior as a community member
6. Demonstrates a commitment to academics
7. Maintains appropriate boundaries as a staff member
8. Follows the law, and university, housing and department policies
9. Displays a commitment to their own growth and development in all core areas
10. Manages the boundaries between staff member/friend

G. Administrator

1. Is timely
2. Keeps supervisor informed
3. Follow directions
4. Submits projects and paperwork on time
5. Completes work thoroughly and accurately
6. Follows through on projects and assignments
7. Is prepared for meetings
8. Attends all required meetings and training sessions

IV. CONDITIONS OF EMPLOYMENT

1. The Mentor must be enrolled in a degree granting program at MSU.
2. The GPA requirement is a cumulative 2.75. Mentors are expected to meet that requirement and to maintain it during their period of employment.
3. Mentors must have completed at least 12 credit hours at the time of application, and have lived in a residence hall for one semester.
4. First semester Mentors may not student teach or hold internships. After the first semester, experiences which will take the Mentor away from his/her building for significant time blocks are discouraged, and must be approved by the Hall Director and Area Director before they are accepted.
5. It is understood that an undergraduate staff position in residence halls cannot easily be translated into hours worked per day or week because of the unique nature of the work. The Mentor job requires regularly scheduled responsibilities and times at which Mentors are available and accessible to floor residents. A reasonable work schedule

would include both types of time, e.g., 12 hours per week of regularly scheduled responsibilities (staff meetings, staff training, student groups, programming), and a minimum of 24 hours per week of availability time at varying intervals during the day and night. Availability time should be planned in consultation with the supervisor during high activity time (typically 4:00 p.m. - midnight). This is time during which the Mentor is accessible to residents for informal contact. Because of the nature of availability time, four hours of availability time equals one hour of regularly scheduled responsibility.

6. The Mentor position is for one academic year (fall and spring semesters). If you wish to return the following year, you must apply and be reappointment for the Mentor position.

VI. REMUNERATION

Remuneration is a single room with board while school is in session.

APPENDIX D

GVSU Training Schedule, 2005

Building Teams for a Strong Community



Office of Housing and Residence Life
Grand Valley State University



You must bring your nametag to all meals

THURSDAY 8/11/05

5:00 PM	Welcome TEAM BBQ (Rain location Pere Marquette)	Carillon Plaza
9:30 PM	First Meeting! <input type="checkbox"/> Waivers for Pretty Lake <input type="checkbox"/> Money for Pretty Lake <input type="checkbox"/> Nametags—to be worn at ALL Times! <input type="checkbox"/> Training Expectations—Amazing Race <input type="checkbox"/> Theme of Training <input type="checkbox"/> What tomorrow will look like <input type="checkbox"/> Key forms <input type="checkbox"/> Blue Basket forms <input type="checkbox"/> Room Inventory <input type="checkbox"/> McDonald's for Breakfast???? <input type="checkbox"/> Staff Role Call!!!! <input type="checkbox"/> Items to be sent to storage!!! Let's all help!	In Community
6-9 PM	Imagination Station Open	Devos

FRIDAY 8/12/05

7:30 AM	Living Centers-Pretty Lake- Life on the ropes All meals on the road	
APARTMENTS – FINDING YOUR FOOTING – COMMUNITY TIME		
7:30 AM	Breakfast	FFC
9:00 AM	Community Time	In Community
Noon	Lunch and Summer Common Reading Discussion	FFC
1:00 PM	Community Time	In Community
6:00 PM	Dinner	FFC

6-9 PM Imagination Station Open Devos

SATURDAY 8/13/05

7:30 AM Apartments -Pretty Lake- Life on the ropes
All meals on the road

LIVING CENTERS – FINDING YOUR FOOTING – COMMUNITY TIME

7:30 AM Breakfast FFC

9:00 AM Community Time In Community

- Welcome
- Teambuilder/Icebreaker--significance
- Go over Manual—review of schedule
 - Bring it to EVERYTHING!
 - Team Task List
 - Personal Task List
- HRL Staff Phone List
- Review Work Agreement/Job Description--accountability
 - Riot Act—you will get fired if....
 - Outside job (10 hours)
- Expectations for the year
- Goals for the year
- Community Standards
- Give signs to staff
- Create Large Welcome Signs for each building

Noon Lunch and Summer Common Reading Discussion FFC

1:00 PM Community Time In Zone

- Use of IS
- Planning a Program
- Creative Advertising
- Community Development

4:00 PM Community Time In
Community

- Expectations of LCD/GA
- Class Schedules
 - Duty Schedule
 - Staff meeting—pick day/time
 - 1:1's—pick days/times
- Duty Rounds—what it looks like in our area
- Duty Binder
- Review Key Usage (masters, office, etc.)

6:00 PM Dinner FFC

6-9 PM Imagination Station Open Devos

SUNDAY 8/14/05

7:30 AM	Breakfast	FFC
8:00 AM	I Time <input type="checkbox"/> Go to Church <input type="checkbox"/> Unpack and Setup Room <input type="checkbox"/> Bulletin Boards <input type="checkbox"/> Door Decorations <input type="checkbox"/> "All About me" Information outside Doors <input type="checkbox"/> Schedule (office hours posted) <input type="checkbox"/> Post Signs on Floors	
Noon	Lunch	FFC
1:00 PM	MA Training	215-216 KC
	Community Time for RA staff <input type="checkbox"/> Floor Meetings/Role with Transitions <input type="checkbox"/> Community Building <input type="checkbox"/> RA/MA Action Plan <input type="checkbox"/> The "Five Dysfunctions of a Team" <input type="checkbox"/> Group Dynamics <input type="checkbox"/> Ethics/principle	In Community
6:00 PM	Dinner	FFC
6-9 PM	Imagination Station Open	Devos

MONDAY 8/15/05**Facilities Day**

7:30 AM	Breakfast	FFC
8:00 AM	Community Time	In Community
9:00 AM	Facilities and Opening-All Staff	Pere Marquette
Noon	Lunch	FFC
1 PM	Community Time <input type="checkbox"/> Room Readiness <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Facilities walk through (fire extinguishers/alarms, breaker boxes, lights, etc.) ▪ What does it mean to have a complete room ▪ RI's and Fire Safety Checks ▪ Work Orders for rooms ▪ Work Orders for Buildings ▪ Public Area Inventories ▪ Key Audits 	In Community
5:00 PM	Craig's Cruisers	Depart from Lot F
6-9 PM	Imagination Station Open	Devos

TUESDAY 8/16/05
Creating a Foundation

7:30 AM	Breakfast	FFC
8:30 AM	Recognizing Crisis: Top 3 Issues Counseling Center Interns	Pere Marquette
Noon	Resource Fair/Lunch	Pere Marquette
2:00 PM	Time in "Zone" with Staff-Programming <input type="checkbox"/> Assessing your Community <input type="checkbox"/> Leadership Development and You (CC/MC/RHA/NRHH) <input type="checkbox"/> Creating an Inclusive Community—it's not just the MA's job <input type="checkbox"/> Use of Campus and Community Resources	In Zone
5:00 PM	In Area <input type="checkbox"/> Prepare for BCD <input type="checkbox"/> Handbook	In Area
6:00 PM	Dinner	FFC
6-9 PM	Imagination Station Open	Devos

WEDNESDAY 8/17/05

7:30 AM	Breakfast	FFC
9:00 AM	Handling Conflict and Crisis on the Job: New Staff BCD Prep: Mentors in Area	215/216 KC
11:00 AM	Emergencies in Area: New Staff	215/216 KC
Noon	Lunch	FFC
1:00 PM	BCD	In Area
6:00 PM	Dinner and Debrief with Staff Team	FFC
6-9 PM	Imagination Station Open	Devos

THURSDAY 8/18/05

Thursday for New Staff
 Friday for Mentor Staff

7:30 AM	Breakfast	FFC
9:00 AM	Dialogue with Jamie	Pere Marquette

Noon	Lunch	FFC
1:00 PM	Dialogue with Jamie: Part 2	Pere Marquette
6:00 PM	Dinner	FFC
6-9 PM	Imagination Station Open	Devos

FRIDAY 8/19/05

Thursday for Mentor Staff
Friday for New Staff

7:30 AM	Breakfast	FFC
9:00 AM	TIPS Training with Eric and Friends 3 rd and 4 th year staff with AP	215/216 KC
Noon	Lunch	FFC
1:00 PM	Mediation Training	215/216 KC
6:00 PM	Dinner	FFC
6-9 PM	Imagination Station Open	Devos

SATURDAY 8/20/05

7:30 AM	Breakfast	FFC
8:30 AM	Community Time <input type="checkbox"/> Debriefing of Jamie Washington <input type="checkbox"/> Debriefing of Mediation Training <input type="checkbox"/> Opening Information <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Stations <input type="checkbox"/> Opening Schedule <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Lunch Breaks ▪ Volunteering in other areas 	In Community
11 AM	Roundtable Q&A	Stafford GR
Noon	Lunch	FFC
4:00 PM	Pictures	GRR
5:00 PM	The Ultimate Teambuilder Closing Banquet	Pere Marquette

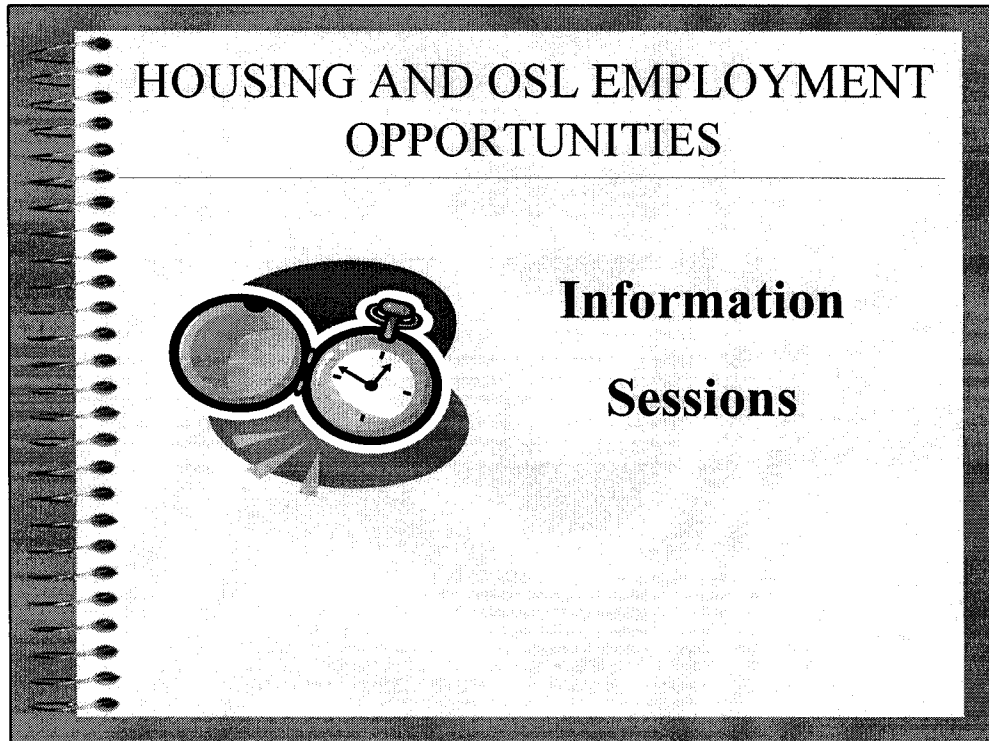
SUNDAY 8/21/05

Community Time Day

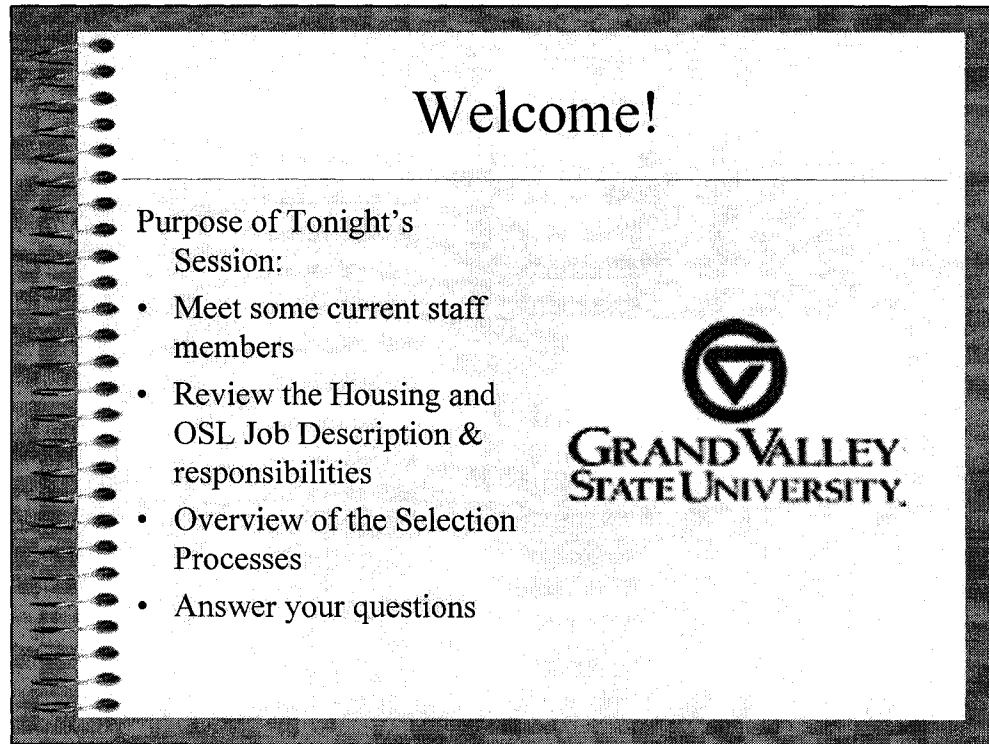
Noon	Lunch	FFC
1:00 PM	MA Training	104 KC
3:00 PM	Transitions Leader and RA/MA Training	GRR
6:00 PM	Dinner with Transitions Leaders	GRR

APPENDIX E

Resident Assistant Information Session



Opening Slide – Should be showing as candidates enter the room.

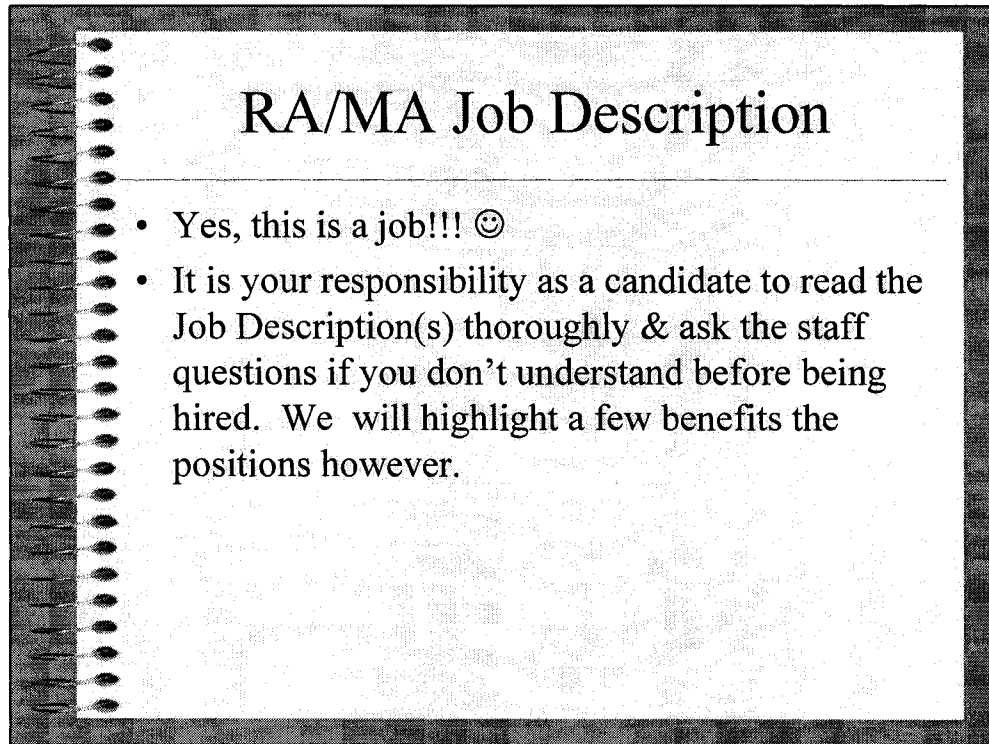


Thank audience members for coming to learn about the RA job & selection process.

Share the Goals & Objectives of the information session. (on slide).

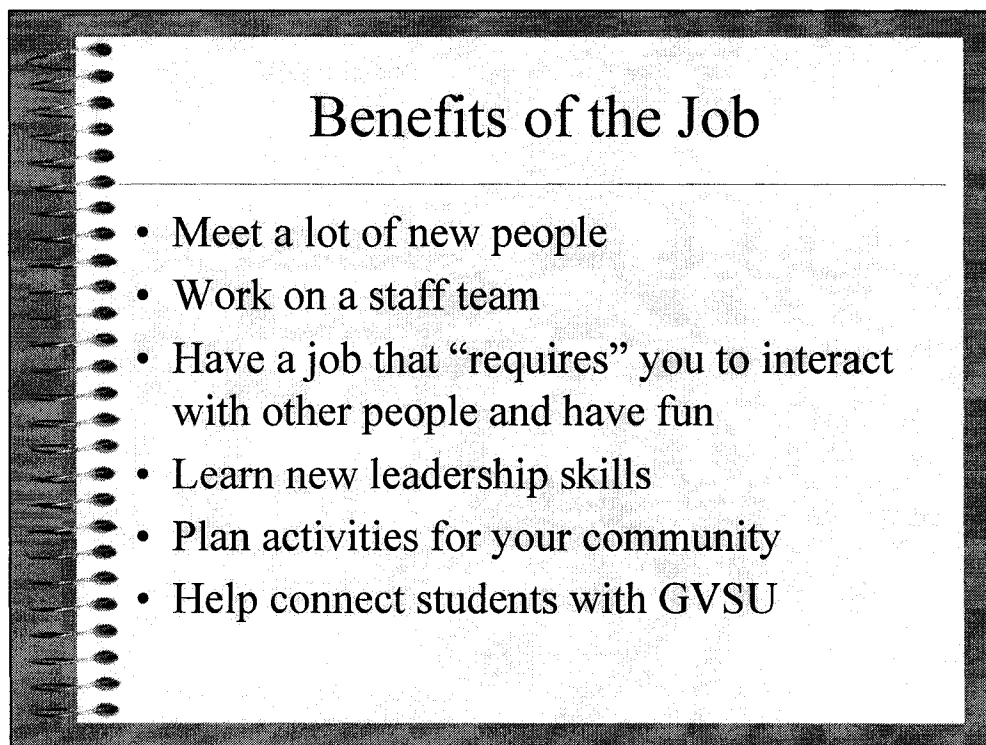
Instruct audience members that we are not providing handouts because all the information covered tonight is also on the website:

www.housing.uiuc.edu/reslife/rajobs/



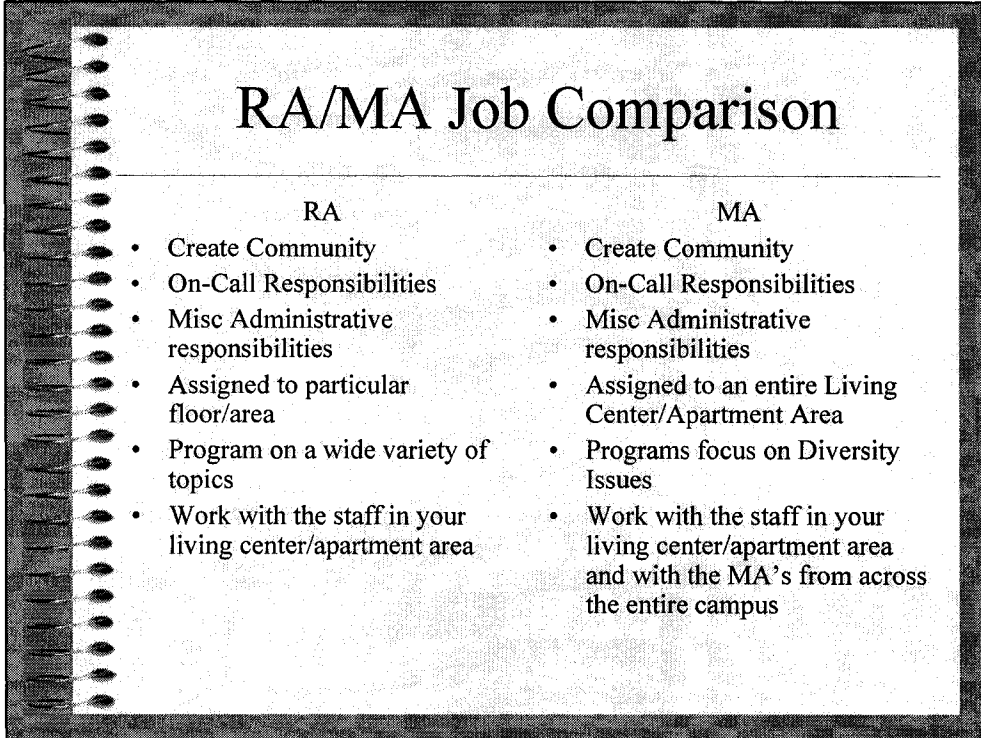
Let audience / prospective candidates know that there is a link from the RA Selection Website that has a job description. They should read this job description before turning in their application!

Common responsibilities for ALL RAs, regardless of hall placement: community building, duty, meetings, being available to residents, programming / event planning, administrative tasks (such as Opening & Closing the halls), and discipline.



Benefits of the Job

- Meet a lot of new people
- Work on a staff team
- Have a job that “requires” you to interact with other people and have fun
- Learn new leadership skills
- Plan activities for your community
- Help connect students with GVSU




RA/MA Job Comparison

RA	MA
<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create Community• On-Call Responsibilities• Misc Administrative responsibilities• Assigned to particular floor/area• Program on a wide variety of topics• Work with the staff in your living center/apartment area	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Create Community• On-Call Responsibilities• Misc Administrative responsibilities• Assigned to an entire Living Center/Apartment Area• Programs focus on Diversity Issues• Work with the staff in your living center/apartment area and with the MA's from across the entire campus

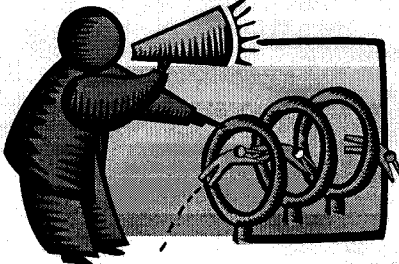
Additional Things to Consider...

- Come back to campus early & stay late for Living Center/Apartment Opening/Closing & Training programs
- Differences between Apartment and Living Center Jobs
- Duty
- Staff meetings
- Limited Weekends away
- Holiday/Break On-Call



Many candidates are not aware of these specific requirements when they are going through the application process (discuss slide). These requirements may conflict with your current activities or responsibilities – you will need to make a tough choice – these will not be negotiated by your RD.

Selection Process



The illustration shows a stylized figure on the left holding a megaphone to their mouth, as if announcing. To the right of the figure are several interlocking gears, symbolizing a process or mechanism. The entire scene is set against a background that looks like a spiral-bound notebook page.

- Three-phase process
- Written application & references
- Group Interview
- Formal Interview

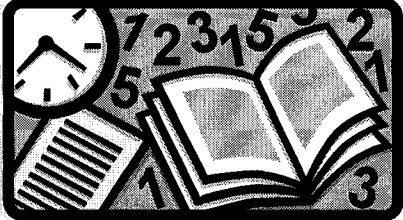
Phase 1 – Now through October 26 – 4pm.

Phase 2 – November 5 – December 7

Phase 3 – January 25 or 26

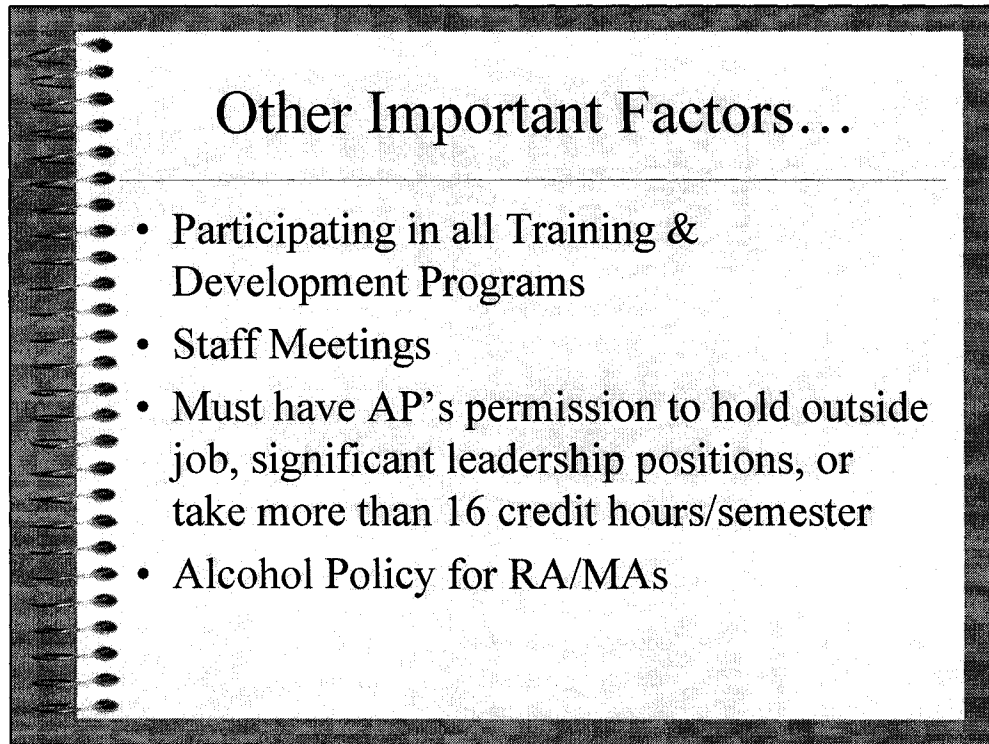
To Keep the Job...

- 2.5 overall GPA & every semester as an RA/MA
- Full time student (min. 12 credit hours)
- Good conduct & student standing
- Satisfactory performance appraisals



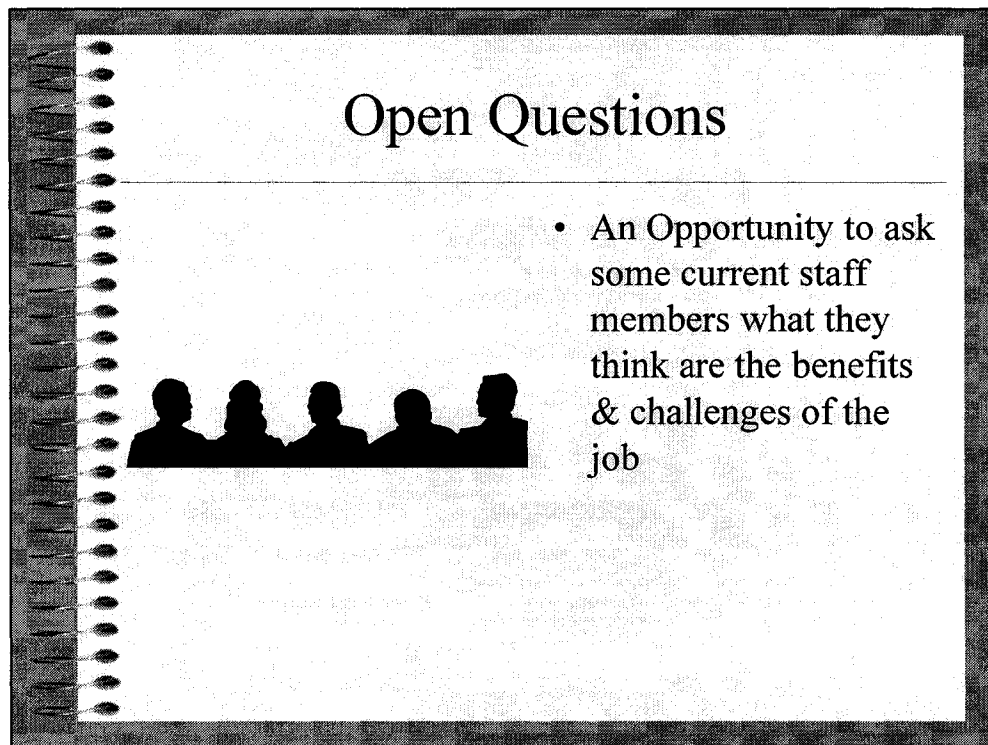
Again, no exceptions.

Returning RAs must reapply – it is not a given they can return.



As you apply for summer internships & other positions, keep in mind RA training dates & responsibilities – there is no negotiating start dates with new RAs.

Again, all these conditions are outlined in detail on the website.



Re-introduce panelists. Allow them to share how long & where they've been an RA, and perhaps to get started their favorite thing about the job & the biggest challenge. Then, open up to questions. Monitor time to conclude by 8:30pm....if folks are asking personal/individual questions, ask them to stay afterwards to talk to you or call Trish.

APPENDIX F

Interview Questions

1. Read job description of Resident Assistant position
2. When you applied, did you feel you had a good understanding for what the job was?
3. During training, did your understanding of the job change or stay the same?
4. While in the job, did your understanding of the job change, etc.?
5. What did you like most about the job?
6. What did you dislike about the job?
7. Why aren't you coming back?
8. Any comments?

APPENDIX G

Qualitative questions for further research presented on a 5-point Likert-type scale

Please answer the following questions to the best of your abilities. The answers to these questions will have no bearing on your evaluation as a resident assistant. All results will remain confidential and only used to make the job more satisfying as a resident assistant.

1 = Not at all

2

3 = Somewhat

4

5 = Yes, very much so

1. How satisfied are you with the resident assistant position?
1 2 3 4 5

2. Do you still feel connected with the friends you had before the RA job?
1 2 3 4 5

3. Do your expectations as a RA line-up with what you thought the position would be like?
1 2 3 4 5

4. Has your self-perception changed during training?
1 2 3 4 5

5. Has your self-perception changed during the first semester?
1 2 3 4 5

6. Has your self-perception changed during winter semester?
1 2 3 4 5

7. Do your friends frequently tell you that you have changed?
1 2 3 4 5
8. Do you feel you are given the support that you need to be successful as a RA?
1 2 3 4 5
9. Do you feel that you are compensated fairly for the job that you are required to do as a RA?
1 2 3 4 5
10. The job has caused you to have problems academically?
1 2 3 4 5