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# EXAMINING THE NATURE AND DEVELOPMENT OF GROUP COHESION IN RESIDENCE HALL STAFFS

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EXAMINING THE NATURE AND DEVELOPMENT OF GROUP COHESION IN  
RESIDENCE HALL STAFFS

By

Thaher James Aiyash

THESIS

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EXAMINING THE NATURE AND DEVELOPMENT OF GROUP COHESION IN  
RESIDENCE HALL STAFFS

This thesis by Thaher James Aiyash is recommended for approval by the student's Thesis Committee and Department Head in the Department of Education, Leadership, and Public Service and by the Assistant Provost of Graduate Education and Research.

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## ABSTRACT

### EXAMINING THE NATURE AND DEVELOPMENT OF GROUP COHESION IN RESIDENCE HALL STAFFS

By

Thaher James Aiyash

The study of group cohesion has brought forth meaningful insight into the interworking of groups in athletic sports teams, classrooms, adult couples, businesses, and military training groups. This study used a mixed quantitative and qualitative methods survey to examine the nature of group cohesion in relation to resident hall staffs located on the campus of Northern Michigan University. A quantitative assessment of group cohesion used in previous studies of group cohesion was modified and used in supplement to a series of nine extended response items. Through the research, seven themes which were consistent across the staffs were discovered. The discovered themes include (1) working toward a group identity, (2) interpersonal skills, (3) conflict resolution, (4) providing support, (5) modeling exemplary behavior, (6) the acceptance of differences and finding common ground, (7) and having meaningful goals. Relationships between the qualitative themes and quantitative levels of group cohesion reported are further discussed.

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This thesis follows the format prescribed by the *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association (Sixth Edition)* and the Department of Education, Leadership, and Public Service.

In the interest of transparency, let it be noted that the author had either lived or worked in three of the ten examined residence halls from August of 2010 to May of 2014. None of the author's immediate colleagues from those years were working in the residence halls when the survey took place, but the relationship is still worth noting.

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## INTRODUCTION

Group cohesion is a phrase used to refer to the strength of a relationship among members of a group. The study of this relationship and the mechanics of its growth has maintained interdisciplinary attention from researchers across the world. As will be discussed in greater detail in the next section, researchers have studied how group cohesion can impact performance behaviors in a variety of small groups including sports teams, exercise/labor groups, business colleagues, and students. General interdisciplinary agreement suggests that group cohesion shares a positive relationship with the performance of a group (Greer, 2012). The acceptance of this consistent theme has created a need for research to investigate the processes by which group cohesion is facilitated.

There has been a variety of work done with the intent to discover the characteristics and attributes that help predict or accelerate the development of cohesion within a group. The variety of settings that this work has been completed in makes it difficult to generalize the results across different types of groups. Pescosolido and Saavedra (2012) noted the limitations of generalizability of group cohesion research across disciplines. Researchers in different disciplines will need to investigate group cohesion using their own relevant subject pools to assure accurate results. Therefore, a goal of this project was to provide insight into the development of group cohesion as it relates to higher education student affairs. Due to a lack of literature reflecting research with groups in this field, it is important that research is done to assure that there is a reliable understanding of group cohesion as it relates to higher education student affairs.

The findings of research on the dynamics of group cohesion have the potential to greatly impact the field of higher education student affairs with specific regard to hiring practices, as well as group management and leadership. As more information about the facilitation of cohesion surfaces, practitioners, managers, and leaders in the field can shape their actions to best foster the growth of cohesive staffs inside institutions of higher education. This study was focused on investigating what factors contribute to the development of group cohesion in a higher education student affairs setting.

### **Research Questions**

In institutions of higher education, there are many instances where staffs of individuals need to be together for a particular task or job. Major implications on the hiring/selection practices used in this field could result if significant findings arose in research on the dynamics of group cohesion. For the purposes of this study, a focus was maintained on undergraduate, paraprofessional staffs from residence halls. The members of these staffs are replaced regularly, making it a recurring task to rebuild cohesion among the staff in each hall.

To shed light on this process, the present study was aimed at uncovering information about the development of cohesion among the residence hall staff. This study was directed at discovering the factors that contribute to the development of group cohesion in residence hall staffs. The research sought to answer the following research questions:

- What is the perceived nature of group cohesion in the paraprofessional residence hall staffs at Northern Michigan University?

- What perceived themes are reported by members of each residence hall staff when asked open-ended questions related to group cohesion?

## LITERATURE REVIEW

Group cohesion research can be largely divided into two specific areas of study: (1) those that examine the relationship between cohesion and performance, and (2) those that examine the development of group cohesion. The body of literature examining the relationship between group cohesion and performance has paved the way for other research in group cohesion. By determining the effects group cohesion can have on a group's performance, researchers have a reason to continue researching the dynamics of group cohesion.

### **Cohesion and Performance**

There is a large body of literature that consistently acknowledges a general, positive relationship between group cohesion and performance. This relationship indicates that a group that develops a high level of cohesion performs better than a group with a low level of cohesion. This consistent relationship has been observed in varying dimensions of athletics (Gould, Greenleaf, Chung, & Guinan, 2002; Willams & Hacker, 1982), student groups (Chang & Bordia, 2001; Tekleab, Quigley, & Tesluk, 2009; Wolfe & Box, 1988), adult couples (Owen, Antle, & Barbee, 2013), business colleagues (Kirkman, Rosen, Tesluk, & Gibson, 2004), and military training groups (Lim & Klein, 2006). The variety of fields in which the measure of group cohesion was found to have a positive influence on performance may indicate, to an extent, the generalizability of the general notion of the pattern. Researchers performing meta-analyses on studies in this area caution against the generalization of individual results or findings from these types

of studies because they believe that the nature of this relationship is much more complex (Evans & Dion, 2012; Gully, Devine, & Whitney, 2012).

The complexity of this relationship between group cohesion and performance can be seen in several instances throughout the literature. Some researchers have come under criticism, and therefore had to defend their conceptual definitions and measurement methods of group cohesion (Carron & Brawley, 2012). Researchers have also had to distinguish group cohesion from other phenomena that occur in small group research (Paskevich, Brawley, Dorsch, & Widmeyer, 1999). As a final example, Beal, Cohen, Burke, and McLendon (2003) raised valuable points when discussing how *performance* measures were being defined in the literature. This is no small matter, the implications of maintaining a reasonable definition of performance are rather large. It was determined that performance ought to be defined as a behavior and not as a result (Beal, Cohen, Burke, & McLendon, 2003).

This definition's use will make results more generalizable because it is more realistic to believe that cohesion will have an impact on performance behaviors which may (or may not) result in increased success. If a student workgroup working on an assigned project exhibits high levels of group cohesion, the effect of their cohesion may not be that they earn a higher grade or score than other groups. Rather, it is suggested by the logic of Beal, Cohen, Burke, and McLendon (2003) that this group's high levels of cohesion may translate to an increase in behaviors that will help them successfully complete the project. Speculatively, these behaviors may include distribution of work, effective communication, appropriate investment of time into the project, or adherence to directions for completing the assignment. The observations noted in the literature above

serve as a reminder to readers and researchers that there are limitations to the extent which cohesion can positively influence performance. For example, a study of several sports teams found that if the level of agreement between members of the team is factored into their data analysis, the effects of group cohesion on performance are amplified for those teams that are in consensus on having a high level of group cohesion (Carron et al., 2004). If a study measured the self-reported data of individual members of teams, it is possible that they will still find that reported group cohesion will have a positive influence on group performance, but controlling for the level of agreement makes more conceptual sense. Just having a few members of a group believing that the group is highly cohesive should not be the goal of group managers and leaders. They should be trying to have everyone in consensus on the status of the group's level of cohesion to maximize the performance of the whole.

Other studies have found that the accuracy of member knowledge of group plans and the nature of conflict management skills can both have effects on the performance of the group regardless of the existence of cohesion (Lim & Klein, 2006; Jehn & Mannix, 2001). Examining the first limitation of the two, a team can exhibit high levels of cohesion, but not have enough recollection of an action plan to perform a task successfully. This would be a limitation to a case where performance was measured by the successful completion of a task and not an increase in positive behaviors throughout the attempt. As for conflict management, it is reasonable to assume that even highly cohesive teams experience different kinds of conflict. But how the conflict manifests itself and how it is dealt with will impact the overall performance of the group (Jehn & Mannix, 2001).

The final limitation of group cohesion's influence on performance found in the literature is discussed by two cases in which it is claimed that high group cohesion actually was a negative influence on a group's performance. Both studies were examining athletes. In the first, it was found that athletes believed too high of cohesion levels in social contexts could offset or distract from the task-specific cohesion level and compromise competition success (Hardy, Eys, & Carron, 2005). The second piece examined an ice-hockey team whose members depicted how their high level of cohesion in social contexts actually led to the collapse of their competition performance (Rovio, Eskola, Kozub, Duda, & Lintunen, 2009). These two studies draw attention to the intense complexities that lie within the dynamics of group cohesion. While the majority of studies have found group cohesion to have a generally positive relationship with performance behavior, it may be the case that this relationship is not perfectly linear.

The literature covering group cohesion and performance certainly indicates a generally positive relationship between group cohesion and group performance with very realistic and prevalent limitations. The importance of the findings that support this claim to the study at hand is that they have opened the door to research investigating the characteristics and attributes that contribute to the development of group cohesion.

### **Contributing Factors to Group Cohesion**

Some researchers in the field have carried the torch forward since the early work on group cohesion and explored some of the attributes and characteristics that influence the development of group cohesion. The results of these studies are invaluable to anyone

invested in small group research because they help piece together the nature of group cohesion's development and growth.

Much has been learned by examining the ability of various factors to predict group cohesion. It has been found that leaders who exemplify specific attributes like willingness to make personal sacrifices, helping others, praising the ideas of others, and inquiring about personal matters that are unrelated to work have shown to have a positive influence on group cohesion (Rozell & Gundersen, 2003). Observing these actions coming from a leader of a group could have had an influence on the rest of the members of the group and set the standard for how the group was going to operate. In a study of athletes, it was found that members of the team who believed that they and their teammates were personally sacrificing for the benefit of the team also showed higher levels of group cohesion (Prapavessis & Carron, 1997). These results along with the results from Rozell and Gundersen (2003) indicate that the element of personal sacrifice, whether it be exhibited by a leader or another member of a group, merits further investigation with regard to its relationship to group cohesion. In another study of athletes, it was found that task-related communication among team members had a positive relationship with group cohesion (Widmeyer & Williams, 1991). This study also complements the results of Rozell and Gundersen's (2003) study by way of indicating that communication with colleagues about matters both related and unrelated to work tasks may be beneficial. A thought would hopefully be commonplace, but is certainly worthy of empirical backing.

Resilience of the members of a community has also shown to share a strong positive relationship with group cohesion; this has been found to be especially evident in



communities where disaster has stricken (Townshend, Awosoga, Kulig, & Fan, 2015). A valuable lesson from this finding is the importance of how a group reacts in these crisis situations. In a crisis situation, it is easy for conflict between group members to occur, but if the group is resilient through a crisis, this finding indicates that they will be better for it. If, however, conflict arises and it is managed effectively, there is literature that shows group cohesion be positively influenced by the effective management of that conflict (Tekleab, Quigley, & Tesluk, 2009). This shows that resilience in a group and conflict management can have a positive influence on cohesion.

### **Group Similarity and Group Cohesion**

Research investigating how the similarity of a group's composition can influence group cohesion has potential implications for the study at hand. In this more specific body of research, the results have been mixed, but for logical reasons. Campion, Medsker, and Higgs (1993) initially found group composition similarity had little influence on employee satisfaction. However, they had not taken into consideration that their subject pool consisted of little diversity (Campion et al., 1993). In a replication and extension done years later, the researchers found that diversity of group composition (with regard to employee status, position, and experiences) had a significant positive influence on the group members' perception of team functionality (Campion, Papper, & Medsker, 1996). Widmeyer and Williams (1991) also found that athletes reported higher levels of team cohesion when they had experiences similar to their teammates. The discrepancy in findings here indicates that if a study is going to be conducted on testing the effects of having a diverse group, they should use a diverse sample so that the composition of small groups will differ and they can be compared.

Research studying the effects of similarity on group cohesion has distinguished between two different levels of similarities: *deep* and *surface*. Researchers have found that when leaders and members of a group exhibit deeper-level similarities like sharing common perspectives and being receptive to one another in the workplace, cohesion in their group shows a positive increase (Kacmar, Harris, Carlson, & Zivnuska, 2009). Other work in this area has shown that deeper-level similarities like attitudes, beliefs, and values are able to predict task-related cohesion in exercise groups. Whereas surface-level similarities like age, physical condition, and physical appearance are able to predict the cohesion of exercise group members in social settings (Dunlop & Beauchamp, 2011).

### **The Group Environment Questionnaire**

As has been stated before, the literature on group cohesion indicates a strong positive relationship with positive performance behaviors (Evans & Dion, 2012; Greer, 2012). A popular test of group cohesion in many disciplines has been the Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ) developed by Carron, Widmeyer, and Brawley (1985). The GEQ items ask questions related to two components of group cohesion from two different perspectives, leaving the researcher to analyze four components in total. The first components are called the Attraction to Group (ATG) and it is examined at the Social (ATG-S) and Task (ATG-T) levels. ATG items lead respondents to indicate whether they enjoy being a part of the group with regard to social activities or work-related (task) activities. The same Social and Task perspectives are examined for items regarding Group Integration (GI-S and GI-T respectively). GI items lead respondents to express how well they feel like they are made to be a part of the team in those Social and

Task activities that take place in a given organization. For the purposes of this study, the GEQ items were modified and made applicable to the subject pool.

### **Summary**

After reviewing the body of literature covering group cohesion a few conclusions can be drawn. First, there is a steady trend in the literature that group cohesion is positively related to performance. Second, the results of any individual study may not be generalizable to all types of groups. Third, since the generalizability of results is not reliable, there is a need for research in varying fields where small group research is valuable. This is especially true of higher education. None of the above studies used subjects that practiced in the field of higher education, and while the general findings of group cohesion research show moderate consistency, there is a rather large lacuna for budding higher education professionals to fill with research that specifically relates to this field and the dynamics of its small groups. A need for inquiry currently exists in the area of group cohesion in higher education. This study was done with the intent of beginning to set a foundation for obtaining a reliable understanding of group cohesion as it relates to higher education student affairs.

## METHODS

When existing research in an area is lacking, a qualitative approach is suggested for research (Patten, 2009). Qualitative studies yield results that allow for researchers to observe patterns and develop theories that can be used in further research. Patten (2009) purports that researchers using quantitative methods may find difficulty with putting forth a hypothesis. However, since the assessment of group cohesion is not, in itself, a new task, there was support for a mixed methodological approach in this study. The Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ) is a tool that has been used in a variety of settings to quantitatively measure perceived group cohesion. This tool was used in addition to supplemental items that yielded qualitative results. The responses from these items can give more insight to the specific perceptions of individuals in higher education student affairs on their staff's dynamics. For the listed reasons, this study used a 29-item electronic survey that prompts respondents to provide quantitative and qualitative responses. There was one demographic question, nine extended response items, and the remaining items were the modified GEQ.

The extended response items were constructed using a conceptual model established by Carron and Brawley (2012). The items were intended to lead respondents to indicate their perception of staff closeness and bonding in social and professional situations as well as the respondent's desire to remain a part of the group in social or professional contexts.

This methodological approach allowed for respondents to provide detailed accounts of their experiences while assuring maximum anonymity. The respondents were

not expected to spend more than 45 minutes completing the survey. The survey was distributed and results were collected via Northern Michigan University's Qualtrics system, assuring consistency and security of results. Distribution of the survey took place in the month of March.

The pool of respondents for this study consisted of Northern Michigan University's Housing and Residence Life paraprofessional residence hall staffs. Participation was voluntary and exclusive to the ten residence halls on campus. This limited participation to those paraprofessionals residing in Spooner, Meyland, Gant, Spalding, Payne, Halverson, Magers, Van Antwerp, Hunt, and West halls. Consent was gathered at the beginning of the survey, and respondents could quit at any time without penalty.

Respondents were assigned an alphanumeric code when the survey began. Upon collection, the researcher randomly assigned a three-digit numeric code to further assure anonymity of the respondents. The respondents identified the building where they work and each residence hall was randomly assigned a letter (A-H) so that no response could be traced to a building except in cases where respondents named a hall in their response. In such cases, the hall names were redacted and replaced with the assigned letter. No one other than the principle researcher will know the three-digit code and the residence hall letter assignments. Responses have been recorded and stored in accord with institutional policy. The survey items are attached (see Appendix A).

The GEQ responses were scored and subjects were separated by residence hall so that a group level analysis could be completed. The scoring of the GEQ was done as the literature suggested. As a part of the scoring directions, select item scores were directed

to be reversed in order to accommodate for the phrasing of those prompts. To assure accurate scoring, each respondent's survey was hand scored and checked over on three separate occasions by the author. Means and standard deviations for each residence hall were calculated and will be presented in the next section. These descriptive statistics were the extent of the quantitative analysis because of the low number of subjects in each residence hall.

When all extended answer survey responses were collected and coded, an analysis of each residence hall staff's responses was conducted. Examining the responses from members of the same residence hall staff assisted in identifying emerging themes and patterns among the individual staffs. The researcher looked for statements that described the relationship between the staff members and the underlying characteristics that have built that relationship. As themes emerged, each was given a concise label and added to a running list of themes to assure consistency. However, before a new theme was considered for addition to the cumulative list, the theme had to be determined to be (1) internally convergent and (2) externally divergent, as suggested by Marshall and Rossman (2006). This means that the theme needed to be consistent across residence hall staff members and must have been distinctive from other emerging themes.

After examining each individual staff and the identification of themes was complete, the researcher looked for largely consistent themes (themes that were consistent across several residence halls) to determine the role of individual differences in staff dynamics. The steps in this analysis were consistent with steps of analysis suggested by Creswell (2003). Creswell's (2003) generic six-steps were (1) organizing and preparing the data for analysis, (2) performing a first-pass through the results, (3)

performing a second pass through the results and chunking related bits of information, (4) giving definitions/meaning to the coded chunks, (5) developing a strategy for including the defined chunks into the narrative, and finally (6) creating an interpretation of the results that ties everything back together and explains what was learned in the study (pp. 191-195).

Due to the lack of existing research examining these relationships, the analysis of qualitative results in this study followed what Marshall and Rossman (2006) called an immersion strategy. This strategy of analysis called upon the researcher to determine themes, without a template, as they emerged from the responses.

Let it also be noted that the author had either lived or worked in three of the ten examined residence halls from August of 2010 to May of 2014. None of the author's immediate colleagues from those years were working in the residence halls when the survey took place, but the relationship is still worth noting.

## RESULTS

Respondents to this survey represented ten different residence halls at Northern Michigan University. The Residence Halls are referred to by a randomly assigned letter. There were 39 respondents to the Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ) items and there were between 28 and 29 respondents to each of the remaining nine extended response items. Respondents to the GEQ represented all ten residence halls, and each residence hall had at least two respondents. The extended response items had responses from nine of the ten residence halls, and at least two respondents from each of those nine residence halls. The results from the GEQ items will be displayed before the extended response items.

### **Group Environment Questionnaire**

Table 1 shows the mean scores and standard deviations for each residence hall. The results are separated into Carron, Widmeyer, and Brawley's (1985) four components of group cohesion labeled Attraction to Group-Social (ATG-S), Attraction to Group-Task (ATG-T), Group Integration-Social (GI-S), and Group Integration-Task (GI-T). They are also ranked from the highest mean score to the lowest mean score in each of the respective categories. The four columns for each category include (from left to right) Hall Identification (HID), Number of Respondents (N), the mean score ( $\bar{x}$ ), and the standard deviation ( $\sigma$ ).



Table 1

*Individual Residence Hall GEQ Scores in high to low rank*

ATG-S				ATG-T			
<u>HID</u>	<u>N</u>	<u><math>\bar{X}_{ATG-S}</math></u>	<u><math>\sigma_{ATG-S}</math></u>	<u>HID</u>	<u>N</u>	<u><math>\bar{X}_{ATG-T}</math></u>	<u><math>\sigma_{ATG-T}</math></u>
I	5	8.36	1.11	D	4	8.38	0.89
J	4	7.85	1.27	J	4	8.31	0.87
D	4	7.60	2.16	C	5	8.10	1.33
F	6	7.53	1.94	F	6	8.08	1.38
C	5	7.16	2.58	I	5	8.05	1.10
H	3	7.13	2.39	H	3	8.00	1.21
G	3	6.67	2.94	A	4	7.31	2.06
B	2	6.00	2.45	G	3	7.25	2.30
A	4	5.75	2.40	B	2	7.00	2.27
E	3	4.93	1.62	E	3	4.50	2.58

  

GI-S				GI-T			
<u>HID</u>	<u>N</u>	<u><math>\bar{X}_{GI-S}</math></u>	<u><math>\sigma_{GI-S}</math></u>	<u>HID</u>	<u>N</u>	<u><math>\bar{X}_{GI-T}</math></u>	<u><math>\sigma_{GI-T}</math></u>
F	6	8.13	1.08	D	4	8.11	1.15
G	3	7.82	0.98	C	5	8.08	1.58
J	4	7.19	1.22	J	4	7.75	1.41
D	4	7.06	1.61	F	6	7.60	1.57
I	5	6.50	1.99	I	5	7.52	1.73
C	5	6.40	2.76	H	3	7.47	2.03
H	3	5.75	1.91	G	3	7.20	1.82
B	2	5.63	1.60	A	4	6.50	2.12
A	4	5.00	2.42	B	2	6.20	1.62
E	3	3.42	2.15	E	3	4.60	2.56

Upon looking at Table 1, it is noticeable that there is a wide variety of patterns for the hall scores in the four different categories. Some residence hall staff scores led to low means across the board, and some scores led to high means across the board. Some varied quite a bit in mean scores from category to category. For example, Halls J, D, and F reported scores that led to means in the top four ranks of each category. On the opposite end, Halls E, B, and A reported scores that led to means in the bottom four rank positions of each category. Then, there were halls that fluctuated in each category like Halls C and I.

Table 2 shows the departmental mean scores and standard deviation for the same four categories. These scores will include all 39 respondents to the GEQ items in this study.

Table 2

*Departmental GEQ Mean Score and Standard Deviation*

ATG-S				ATG-T			
<u>HID</u>	<u>N</u>	<u><math>\bar{X}_{ATG-S}</math></u>	<u><math>\sigma_{ATG-S}</math></u>	<u>HID</u>	<u>N</u>	<u><math>\bar{X}_{ATG-T}</math></u>	<u><math>\sigma_{ATG-T}</math></u>
All	39	7.07	2.27	All	39	7.65	1.84
GI-S				GI-T			
<u>HID</u>	<u>N</u>	<u><math>\bar{X}_{GI-S}</math></u>	<u><math>\sigma_{GI-S}</math></u>	<u>HID</u>	<u>N</u>	<u><math>\bar{X}_{GI-T}</math></u>	<u><math>\sigma_{GI-T}</math></u>
All	39	6.47	2.24	All	39	7.26	1.96

As was mentioned in the earlier methods section, these descriptive statistics are as deep as the analysis of GEQ scores is going to go in this study. Since the number of respondents for each hall is six respondents, at most, inferential statistics are not going to be used.

### **Extended Response Items**

For the extended response items, a total of seven major themes emerged. These themes all answer the research question mentioned earlier in the Research Questions section; that question being, what perceived themes are reported by members of each residence hall staff when asked open-ended questions related to group cohesion? The themes discovered were (1) working toward a group identity, (2) interpersonal skills, (3) conflict resolution, (4) providing support, (5) modeling exemplary behavior, (6) the acceptance of differences and finding common ground, (7) and having meaningful goals.

Statements regarding the first theme of working toward a larger group identity were noted most commonly in the items that prompted respondents to discuss staff goals, how the staff has worked towards those goals, (dis)agreement with the goals, and what

has made the staff (un)successful. In the prompts regarding staff goals, many of the 29 respondents disclosed that part of their staff goals were dedicated to the development of an identity that was larger than an individual. One subject stated that one of their staff's goals were to, "Create a welcoming atmosphere for the house and hall," (Item 21, Subject 120). This respondent is indicating that they and their staff are working together to impact the entire hall and not simply their assigned area. A subject responded to the following prompt by saying that one way their staff works toward their community identity goal is to, "...hang out with residents other than our own...so they can see that our building is strong with good relationships," (Item 22, Subject 117). This statement is also showing a sentiment by this respondent that they want to connect with individuals outside of their primary living space. One more subject in response to a different item expressed that they agreed with their staff's goals because, "...we need to create a tight-knit community among ourselves," (Item 23, Subject 102). This last comment is further support for the notion that the perceived goals of the studied residence hall staffs extend beyond the boundaries of any resident adviser's individual community. Other comments that relate to this theme discuss topics like sacrifice and investment in the community which will be discussed in the following section.

The second theme discovered from the responses was interpersonal skills. This includes developing social skills, building relationships, maintain relationships, appropriate communication, and a few comments on the understanding of different roles within the staff. When asked to discuss the goals of their staff, many respondents indicated that part of their staff goal was to not only have relationships with residents in the community but to have appropriate and well-maintained relationships with one

another. In response to a prompt asking how the staff worked toward their goals, one respondent expressed that, “We make sure to spend time with each other throughout the week and do staff bonding activities,” (Item 22, Subject 138). This subject, and others with similar comments, feels that intentionally spending personal time with other staff members is important to the goals of their staff. When it came to the item asking respondents what has made their staff successful or unsuccessful, the most prevalent theme was interpersonal skills. For example, one subject said that, “I feel like because we don’t spend as much time socially as a staff outside of our required duties, our houses don’t have much of a reason to be connected to the other houses,” (Item 24, Subject 128). This respondent feels that there is a direct link between their staff’s social habits and the social habits of their residents.

The third theme found in the extended answer items was conflict resolution. Conflict resolution was present in response to two of the prompts. First, it was discussed by a few respondents who claimed that one of their staff goals was to resolve conflicts within the community. Then, in response to a prompt about what made the staff successful or unsuccessful, some respondents made strong statements about the importance of resolving conflicts among the staff. One respondent mentioned that, “Being so close and willing to discuss issues,” (Item 24, Subject 118) as a reason for their group’s success. Another said that, “It’s never an issue when someone comes to one of us with an issue because we can relate to it. We don’t want to ever distance ourselves from another staff member because a disconnected staff is ineffective,” (Item 24, Subject 112). The shift in perspective of the statements about conflict resolution is one that will be discussed in the next section.

Providing feedback and support to colleagues was a largely present theme in response to three of the prompts. First, respondents indicated that being united and supportive of one another was one of their staff's goals from the beginning of the semester. Then, several respondents indicated that supporting each other and providing feedback was one of the ways in which their staff worked towards their goals. For example, one respondent shared that, "We have supported each other in programming and been critical of ourselves in conduct," (Item 22, Subject 110). This subject was open about the staff not being perfect and being able to be critical in the name of supporting a colleague. The third set of responses in this theme came from respondents indicating that support and feedback played a role in their staff's success.

Next came the fifth theme of modeling exemplary behavior. The respondents really only mentioned this theme in response to two of the prompts. The first prompt where modeling exemplary behavior came up was when respondents discussed how their staff approached set goals. Statements were made about consistently enforcing policies and about individual staff members modeling desired behaviors like going to campus events and participating in hall activities. For example, one respondent said that, "If a set of RA's are doing something together, it is easier to get their houses to also co-habitate [sic] and cooperate," (Item 22, Subject 128). This statement from the respondent indicates the impact they believe that resident adviser behavior has on the residents in the community. The second batch of statements in this theme come from responses to the prompt that asked what made each staff successful or unsuccessful. A few respondents made statements here that indicated that resident adviser activity was impacting resident behaviors in both positive and negative ways.

The sixth theme of these responses was that similarities, differences, and the acceptance of diversity was reported to have an impact on staff relationships and success. In response to the prompt that asked about contributing factors to staff success, respondents indicated that having alignment in values, vision for the community, and passion for the role all influenced staff success for these respondents. In the following prompt that asked respondents to indicate whether they felt accepted in the staff, there were responses that indicated that accepting diverse characteristics about one another helped the staff come together. One subject wrote, “They accept me as a person but also as a coworker. My opinion is valued. They are also willing to disagree with me and bring up another point of view which I think is very valuable in a colleague,” (Item 25, Subject 122). Similarly, other subjects indicated that they are not accepted into the group because of differences they have with the staff. It should also be noted that responses also indicated that a large majority of respondents indicated that both their individual social and work related relationships with each of their colleagues was different.

The last theme to be introduced from the results is that of believing in the goals of the staff. In the responses to the prompt asking about agreement with staff goals, most respondents indicated agreement with their staff goals and gave some rationale behind their agreement. One subject hinted at another seemingly important aspect of this theme, being involved in the goal creation process. They stated, “I do agree with these goals. We created these goals together which helped,” (Item 23, Subject 122). Being able to invest in the group’s goals seems to be important to these respondents. The subject that did not agree with their staff goals did explain why, and more about these comments will be discussed in the next section.

The GEQ score means and standard deviations, as well as the qualitative response themes laid out above tell a piece of the story about the nature of perceived group cohesion in these residence hall staffs. While this section was simply displaying information, the following section will dig deeper into some of the potential implications of these findings.

## DISCUSSION

For organizational clarity in this section, the results mentioned above will be discussed as follows. First, the seven themes will be discussed in further detail and connections will be made to the quantitative Group Environment Questionnaire (GEQ) data throughout. After these themes have been discussed, the topic of limitations will be addressed. This section will conclude with suggested implications of the results of this study and possible future studies.

. The themes will be discussed at a level of detail that is equitable to the level of detail provided in the corresponding comments. If the comments of a particular theme disclosed high levels of detail, the author was able to discuss them in greater detail. Some themes followed this trend, however, some were largely made up of vague comments, allowing for minimal speculation.

### **Theme 1: Working Toward a Group Identity**

As a part of one of these residence hall staffs, it seems that most of the responding resident advisers are in agreement about the importance of community building. While agreement on the importance of this is consistent, the concept of community building is largely vague in these comments. From what can be gathered in the responses to the prompt about staff goals, the respondents in this study believe that community building consists of some combination of the following traits: open social interaction, safety, respect, academic achievement, hospitality, pride, and engagement through programming or other activities. The traits listed here are representative of a community where students can enjoy living and have the opportunity to succeed in academic and social growth.



In response to the prompt asking how staffs worked toward their goals, several respondents made comments indicating some level of sacrifice as part of their response. For example, one respondent said that they, "...continue to push each other outside the comfort zone in order to grow as a person," (Item 22, Subject 116). Trying to expand one another's comfort zone in different aspects of the position is going to potentially make people uncomfortable and seems like the type of practice that would be considered to be above the call of duty. The next respondent to this same item was from another member of Subject 116's staff. This respondent made a comment that was quoted in the results section paragraph about this theme. They expressed that they intentionally took time to get to know residents from communities other than their own so that their residents would hopefully mimic that action and become close with individuals throughout the building. This is another comment that indicates action beyond the call of duty. After reading these two comments, it was no surprise to find their staff (Hall I) with high  $\bar{x}_{ATG-S}$  and  $\bar{x}_{ATG-T}$  scores (8.36 and 8.05) with low standard deviations (1.11 and 1.10). The mean scores indicate members of the staff are attracted to their residence hall staff for social and task related reasons, and the standard deviations indicate relative agreement from all five responding members of the staff.

When discussing what made their staffs successful or unsuccessful, one respondent made a comment that was particularly interesting when tied to their respective staffs' GEQ scores. This respondent commented that some members of their staff, "...have been largely absent in their houses and they themselves do not go to hall events, so the incentive for their residents to go to hall events is not there," (Item 24, Subject 130). This is an interesting observation for this theme because it provides a case in which

it is possible that not being willing to commit time may impact the staff in a negative way. The commenting staff member does not feel like their colleague is sacrificing enough time to their community and certain activities, and they feel like the community is worse off for it. Whether the allegedly absent staff member is not spending adequate time with their residents is almost unimportant, because it is the perception of lack of commitment that is affecting the respondent here. When this comment is tied to the respondent's staff GEQ scores, a rationale for this perception can possibly be made. The respondent's staff (Hall A) reported scores with comparatively low means in all categories ( $\bar{x}_{ATG-S} = 5.75$ ;  $\bar{x}_{ATG-T} = 7.31$ ;  $\bar{x}_{GI-S} = 5.00$ ; and  $\bar{x}_{GI-T} = 6.50$ ). It is logical that this comment is coming from a member of a staff that has low Group Integration (GI) scores for social and task related items. This staff member may not feel like their colleague would be receptive to their feedback, or they may simply not care enough to provide. All that can be gathered from this is that this respondent sees an issue with time commitments from their colleague and they do not appear to have a group dynamic where sharing feedback on performance like this is commonplace.

The responses that relate to this theme of creating a group identity largely seem to be indicating that perceived group cohesion of these residence hall staffs has benefitted when resident advisers work towards ends that are bigger than themselves. They consistently reported having the goals of building a community and acknowledge that achieving that goal is going to take sacrifice, an investment of time and energy, and perhaps stretching beyond the call of duty in some respects of the position. The responses that led to the formation of this theme align neatly with Rozell and Gundersen's (2003) piece mentioned in the literature review. Rozell and Gundersen (2003) similarly found

that willingness to sacrifice and assisting others for the benefit of the group had a positive relationship with group cohesion.

## **Theme 2: Interpersonal Skills**

Respondents strongly and frequently indicated that building relationships with members of their staff and communicating efficiently with one another was part of their staff goals, part of how they achieved other staff goals, and ultimately part of what led to the outcomes they experienced. Upon reading the comments that pointed to this theme more closely, there were indications that interpersonal skills were identified as contributing factors to success and failure by respondents. Some of the comments regarding these topics will be examined more closely here.

To start, there is the topic of building strong relationships as a goal of respondents. Goals of this nature were not expressed at the frequency the community building goals mentioned previously, but there was still a consistent pattern among respondents. The majority of comments were vague and simply stated that building relationships with staff and the residents was important to them. Having a strong interpersonal relationship with members of the community and staff would seem like a goal that most members of residence hall staffs would have set for themselves in any given semester. The presence of comments of this nature here was anticipated, but the role of interpersonal communication in two of the other prompts yielded more in depth comments.

When asked how their staffs worked towards the goals they set, respondents indicated consistently that interpersonal skills played a key role. One respondent noted that their staff tried to maintain their relationships by planning staff bonding activities

and trying to, "...keep everyone caught up on what's going on in our lives," (Item 22, Subject 122). This subject believes that being invested in the personal lives of one another was beneficial to her staff's relationship. That being said, her staff (Hall J) did report means in the top three ranks of each GEQ measure ( $\bar{x}_{ATG-S} = 7.85$ ;  $\bar{x}_{ATG-T} = 8.31$ ;  $\bar{x}_{GI-S} = 7.19$ ; and  $\bar{x}_{GI-T} = 7.75$ ). Additionally, two other members of her staff reported similar sentiments. One stated that, "We do social rounds and stop to talk to each other every time we are on duty...and we work to do staff bonding outings," (Item 22, Subject 134). The other made a point to note that the group has, "...a blast at staff-bonding times," (Item 22, Subject 135). The consistency of comments from members of this staff paired with the mean scores they received may indicate that staff bonding activities or caring about the personal lives of colleagues may be a part of the group cohesion development process for some residence hall staffs.

In the Results section, there was a comment about one respondent's perceived lack of social interaction with colleagues was linked to the lack of social interaction they believed their residents were exhibiting. This respondent believed their residents were mimicking her staff's lack of interpersonal communication. Coincidentally, this respondent's staff (Hall E) reported the lowest means in each of the four GEQ measures ( $\bar{x}_{ATG-S} = 4.93$ ;  $\bar{x}_{ATG-T} = 4.50$ ;  $\bar{x}_{GI-S} = 3.42$ ; and  $\bar{x}_{GI-T} = 4.60$ ). The only other respondent to this item from this staff said that, "I think we are good at making the area safe. However, some staff members lack ability to help make connections with their residents and promote connections between their residents," (Item 24, Subject 107). This comment adds a little more consistency to the trending impact that interpersonal skills seem to have had on the staff from Hall E in the semester in which this study was completed. It appears

that good interpersonal skills may have a positive relationship with group cohesion measures and that poor interpersonal skills or experiences may have a hindering effect on group cohesion measures in these residence hall staffs.

### **Theme 3: Conflict Resolution**

The concept of conflict resolution came across in two different types of comments. The first series were related to the goal of resolving conflicts effectively as a staff. This could mean enforcing policies, handling interpersonal issues, or correcting inappropriate behavior and it could be directed at either residents or staff. The second series of comments related specifically to the role that conflict resolution played in the perceived success of staffs. Both of these series of comments show the potential role that conflict resolution may play in the development and maintenance of group cohesion within residence hall staffs.

When it came to different conflict resolution goals, some of the comments seemed to be implying that there were inevitably going to be issues in the hall or that there had been issues in the hall's immediate history. For example, three comments of this nature came from the same staff. The first respondent said that, "We want to continue to change the perception that has previously come [sic] with the hall," (Item 21, Subject 109). The second respondent said that their goal was to, "Change the legacy of [Hall F] to be of positivity," (Item 21, Subject 110). The third respondent said later that, "We want to keep our hall out of the negative limelight," (Item 21, Subject 112). While other respondents did discuss this theme, no other hall had such a consistent pattern in the commentary. These comments about Hall F seem to indicate that there have been issues in the past that

seem to have had these resident advisers committed to sticking together from the beginning of their time together.

The GEQ mean scores for this group were recorded as higher than most staffs ( $\bar{x}_{ATG-S} = 7.53$ ;  $\bar{x}_{ATG-T} = 8.08$ ;  $\bar{x}_{GL-S} = 8.13$ ; and  $\bar{x}_{GL-T} = 7.60$ ). The scores from this staff add an interesting element to the discussion of the role of conflict resolution in the development of group cohesion. Even though there appears to be recent conflicts that occurred within the hall that this staff either witnessed or were made aware of, there is still a comparatively high attraction to the group and feeling of integration in to the group for both social and task related issues. Hall F was also the only residence hall to have the maximum number of six participants respond to the GEQ items, which means that the reported scores are as accurate of an assessment as possible because all members of the staff participated. What these findings indicate is that conflict resolution may have had a positive relationship with the maintenance of group cohesion in this particular staff.

The second series of comments about conflict resolution came from an item asking staffs to identify what contributed to their success or shortcomings. Here respondents indicated that their staff's ability to openly discuss issues contributed to their success. For example, in a comment quoted in the results section, Subject 112 stated that resolving issues among their colleagues was important because they did not want to, "...distance ourselves from one another staff member because a disconnected staff is ineffective," (Item 24). Another respondent said that their staff is, "...able to laugh with each other as well as take criticism from each other. I think we really understand each other genuinely enjoy being together," (Item 24, Subject 111). The first subject was already discussed to be from a staff with comparatively high group cohesion scores (Hall

F) but the other subject was from Hall G. This hall's mean GEQ scores were generally in the lower ranks with the exception of the GI-S factor ( $\bar{x}_{GI-S} = 7.82$ ;  $\sigma_{GI-S} = 0.98$ ) which was the second highest ranking score and the smallest standard deviation of the department. This particular mean score being high with a low standard deviation matches up with the respondent's noting that the staff enjoys spending time together. Surely if they were effective at resolving personal conflicts with one another it is understandable that this score is as high as it is compared to the others. On the other hand, the other scores indicate that there are some mixed feelings about the cohesion of the group when it comes to work related tasks, and unfortunately nothing of that nature is addressed in the comments. These findings show that a staff's strength in one aspect of an individual theme does not imply that all measures of cohesion will be high. Rather, it reinforces the notion that these themes are merely different potential pieces of a large puzzle. These particular results will be discussed again in the section on limitations.

What the above findings indicate is that the theme of conflict resolution was reported to have an influence on the performance of different residence hall staffs in this study. There were a variety of intriguing results that came with these comments. This theme also aligns with two pieces of literature mentioned in the literature review chapter. Lim and Klein (2006) found that conflict management had an influence on the overall performance outcomes of military training groups. In their study of student groups, Tekleab, Quigley, and Tesluk (2009) found that group cohesion was positively influenced when conflicts were reported to be managed effectively. The comments discussed above from the study at hand similarly indicate that there may be a relationship between conflict resolution and the development or maintenance of group cohesion in residence hall staffs,

but that future studies will have to dig deeper to discover more about the particular role of conflict resolution in the process.

#### **Theme 4: Providing Support**

Providing feedback and support to one another seem important to the residence hall staffs in this study because of the way that these resident advisers rely on one another. In the comments that led to the development of this theme, it was observed that providing feedback and support emerged as part of the reported staff goals, as well as part of the process of working toward staff goals and ultimately a component of what led to the success or shortcomings of staffs.

When discussing the reported goals of their staffs, many respondents stated that supporting one another as a priority. One subject stated that, “As a residence staff, we share goals in sticking up for one another. We always try to be unified,” (Item 21, Subject 135). Two of this respondent’s colleagues mentioned similar goals, showing a general consistency of this goal. In response to a later prompt, the fourth (and last) respondent from this staff said that, “Just having each other to rely on for advice on how to go about these goals and others is a really big thing,” (Item 24, Subject 140). The mean GEQ scores for this staff (Hall J) were discussed earlier under the second theme in this section, and they were high compared to the rest of the department. The respondents from this staff are a good model for the role that supporting one another in a residence hall staff can positively impact the overall levels of cohesion in the group and can ultimately result in helping the staff meet its goals as it did for Hall J.

Another interesting component of this theme is that of referral. When discussing what made their staff successful, one respondent said that, “We are able to relate to



everyone, or send a student to an RA who is able to give more knowledge on a subject,” (Item 24, Subject 103). This topic was not brought up frequently enough to gain its own theme, but it fits nicely into the theme of supporting colleagues on the staff. In a cohesive staff, it can be expected that a colleague would not be terribly bothered if a member of the group referred a student to them under appropriate circumstances. What this shows is a developed sense of abilities and limits by this respondent. They can identify, at least to some extent, the limits of their abilities to help a student and rather than ignoring the student or making something up, they decided to make a referral that will hopefully result in the resident getting the help they need. This skillset may be particularly important in crisis situations (self-harm, drug overdose, reported criminal sexual conduct, etc.) and other difficult situations (homesickness, academic struggles, health and wellness concerns, etc.) that resident advisers find themselves in. When symptoms of these situations present themselves, the resident advisers need to recognize these situations and be able to follow procedures to alert the proper parties or make the proper referrals. Seeing this comment appear may indicate that there is something further to investigate.

#### **Theme 5: Modeling Exemplary Behavior**

The theme of modeling exemplary behavior did not make its way into the discussion about staff goals, but it did become consistently mentioned in the discussion about how staffs worked toward their goals and lightly in the discussion of what made staffs successful. There were some comments about consistently enforcing policy and procedure in the hall. It was also reported that resident adviser social behaviors were believed to be directly influencing the behaviors of residents in their communities.

When it comes to enforcing policy in the halls, it seems like there is a consistent level of agreement that the staff needs to be unified in their approach. One respondent said, “We always consult another RA before addressing a situation... When possible and appropriate, we go into a situation with another staff member to make sure that we are being thorough,” (Item 22, Subject 112). This respondent makes it seem as though they put a great deal of thought into their enforcement of the policy. Another subject from the same staff (Hall F) indicated that, “We know as a staff that enforcing strict code that is rooted in our care for our students will them [sic] succeed,” (Item 22, Subject 110). The intentionality of the staff’s enforcement of policy is impressive and while residents may not see or be able to comprehend it, the extra thought may help the staff feel better about the difficult situations they find themselves in. The resident adviser position is one of the unlucky student employment opportunities where staff members see their fellow students in vulnerable situations like when they are intoxicated, when they are dealing with mental health issues, when they are homesick, and many others. Therefore, being consistently intentional about the process may conceivably help alleviate some of the stress that comes from these situations.

The other way that modeling exemplary behavior was discussed in this study was when it came to the reported mimicking of unfavorable social behaviors by the residents. A quote was given earlier from Subject 128 where they indicated that because the resident advisers did not spend much time together socially they believed that the residents had a lowered inclination to spend time with other residents in the building as well. Subject 107, who is also from this staff (Hall E) indicated that some members of the staff were not able to build relationships with their residents very well. With these

comments being the only representation of the staff, it appears that the members of this staff do not feel very good about the behavior that some members of their staff exhibited throughout their time together. This may help explain the low mean GEQ scores in all of the measured categories. With regard to the Attraction to Group (ATG) measures, it is imaginable that a group with colleagues who do not exhibit positive behavior in task related or social settings is not going to be a widely attractive group. Similarly, if the members of the staff are not carrying themselves in an acceptable way, it is not a surprise that the respondents from this staff indicated low sentiments of feeling integrated into to the group socially or professionally as they did in the Group Integration (GI) measures.

#### **Theme 6: Accepting Differences and Finding Common Ground**

This theme is unique in the sense that there were several items in the survey that yielded results almost exclusively on this topic. This was not intentional but it was noticed in the analysis and the results are consistent in a few different ways. First, the vast majority of respondents indicated that they felt accepted as a colleague to their staff. Second, a similar majority indicated that their social relationships and working relationships varied between different members of their staff. Lastly, there was a moderately consistent expression of the role that having commonalities with staff members influenced their staff performance.

There were four respondents that made comments indicating that their staff hesitated or outright did not accept them as colleagues. Two of these respondents were from Hall E, one was from Hall A, and the last was from Hall C. The responses from Halls A and E align with their mean GEQ scores, but the respondent from Hall C sticks out because the mean scores for that group were high in both task-related categories. This

respondent stated that, “They were harsh at first and did not seem to understand that I also had my own life I wanted to live. They are still critical of what I did and do not do,” (Item 25, Subject 103). This statement comes off as if the respondent is defending their maintenance of social relationships outside of the staff, even though that was not the intended topic of the prompt. This explanation would make sense if it were true due to the difference in reported mean Group Integration scores and standard deviations for social items compared to task-related items ( $\bar{x}_{GI-S} = 6.40$  with  $\sigma_{GI-S} = 2.76$ ; and  $\bar{x}_{GI-T} = 8.08$  with  $\sigma_{GI-T} = 1.58$ ).

The next point to be made regards the responses made when respondents were asked if their social and working relationships differed among different members of their staff. Respondents provided numerous reasons why their relationships differ including time spent together, everyone is unique, enduring difficult situations with someone, romantic relationships, previous friendship with individuals, different senses of humor, proximity of living spaces, interests, and personalities. One respondent expressed that they talk more with those who they fulfill weekly on-call duties with more frequently. The respondent went on to state, “That being said, I am satisfied with how I get along with all of them,” (Item 27, Subject 111). Even though this subject has differing relationships with different members of their staff it is important to notice that they still are able to enjoy the various members of their staff. This point is important because it shows that one can have similarly enjoyable experiences that differ in their nature and still have a positive experience.

There were also a few respondents who noted that their relationships do not differ much across the different members of their staff. This notion is conceivable in a small

setting like this where the largest a set of peer staff members can get is six. But after looking at some of the statements, it seems like their responses are more complex. One respondent indicated that, "...each one is a piece of the whole," (Item 27, Subject 113). Another stated that, "We make sure to all reach compromises on situations or expectation that affect the group. I think all of us understand our job expectations and the role that we play in the community," (Item 29, Subject 134). There were a few more comments along these lines from different respondents. What these responses acknowledge is the part of this theme where accepting differences intersects with the discovery of common ground. This series of statements were pointing out the common ground that respondents noticed among their colleagues rather than pointing out the differences they may have accepted in the process. This trend appears to be a confounding variable of optimism. The researcher certainly did not anticipate this variable when writing these particular items, and while the majority of responses ended up fitting into the same theme, they did so in different ways. A very fitting outcome for this particular theme.

### **Theme 7: Meaningful Goals**

This final theme also had the benefit of having a survey item that yielded many results that fit within it. Additionally, the respondents indicated an almost unanimous consensus in response to the item. The respondents were asked if they agreed with the goals set forth by the staff. While only one individual voiced opposition to one of their staff goals, there were still many individuals who did not participate in the survey and did not answer this question at length. This leaves open the possibility of more existing dissent among the resident advisers.

The lone dissenting subject stated that, “I am not sure if there is any point in getting students to the hall events if the student does not want to go to the hall event,” (Item 23, Subject 130). This portion of the comment points out that the respondent is not rather interested in the hall events that Hall A is putting on, or at least believes that their residents will not be interested. The subject then goes on to say, “If they are only going because I asked them to, then what is the point of them going?” (Item 23, Subject 130). In response to this, the optimistic administrator would say that the residents are still being exposed to the desired material regardless of why they go, but it is unlikely that this resident adviser would be satisfied with that response.

This subject’s sentiment in the next item tied in closely to this topic. They stated that some of the members of their staff are not present enough in their communities and that there is not an incentive for the respective residents to participate in hall activities if their colleague is not participating in them. This particular response from Subject 130 fits more neatly into the theme about modeling exemplary behavior, but it helps illustrate the point that this staff does not appear to be a cohesive unit. Looking back at Hall A’s mean GEQ scores, it seems accurate to say that they are relatively lacking in the group cohesion measures. Simply by noticing that their standard deviation scores are all greater than  $\sigma = 2.00$  indicates some level of disagreement among the staff on their own. While this particular staff is only one example, it illustrates the potential role that having a consistent investment in the goals and actions of a residence hall staff can have.

### **Limitations**

The first limitation to be discussed here is that of the size of residence hall staffs. The findings in this study may prove to be consistent with residence hall staffs of similar

sizes if future studies are conducted. However, the size of residence hall staff can potentially distort the existence of group cohesion. In a residence hall where there are upwards of 20 resident advisers in a single building, it is going to be conceivably difficult to have the same type of group dynamics that have been observed in these smaller staffs of three to six resident advisers.

Second, it is important to note that the mention of these above themes does not imply that actions in any single theme area will impact group cohesion alone. Rather, it is intended to imply that these theme topics were mentioned by the respondents at the highest frequencies in this study and that they may play a contributing role to the development of group cohesion in a residence hall staff. This study has hopefully illustrated the complexities that exist in group dynamics and group cohesion in particular. It would be too simple of a response to only work on one of these potentially contributing theme areas and believe that an improvement in group cohesion is assured.

The third limitation that needs to be expressed was mentioned previously in the literature review, but it is worth acknowledgment here as well. While group cohesion has generally shown to have a positive relationship with group performance, there are ways in which high, or highly imbalanced, levels of cohesion can prove to be harmful to a group. For example, consider a residence hall staff that is very highly cohesive in all aspects of group cohesion mentioned in this study. Then consider the consequences of members of the staff lying or covering for one another when one of them violates a policy like a curfew or substance use policy. That type of dishonesty is similarly toxic to the goals of the department as the issues that come across in a confrontational staff with low levels of group cohesion.

Lastly, remember that high levels of group cohesion do not assure success. Rather, high levels of group cohesion simply have been found to have a positive relationship with increases in positive performance behaviors. What these behaviors are in the terms of residence hall staffs is for individual campus housing departments and future studies to examine more closely, but they could potentially include high levels of meaningful relationships with residents across the community, proper reporting and handling of different conduct situations, or even higher attendance at programming activities. Performance behaviors are difficult to define and very difficult to record in this context, and there is the inhibiting variable that there is almost no foreseeable way to anticipate which ones will manifest at any given time. Similarly, while the hope is that all definable measures of performance behavior will eventually be present, it is likely the case that many of them will go unnoticed by administrators or researchers because they occur naturally between the resident advisers and the students.



## CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE PROSPECTS

The findings of this study have led to the discovery of some contributing themes to the development of group cohesion. To be better assured in the soundness of the discovered themes, replication of this project should be completed before making any suggestions about any of the discovered themes larger than saying that they were discovered among these staffs. Replications of this study could also begin to look more deeply into some of the discovered themes with adding new or modifying existing extended response items. For example, the role of conflict resolution and sacrificing external commitments were not very clearly addressed from the responses in this study. Future studies could extend the survey and examine these potential themes more intentionally.

In any future replications, extensions, or other studies in the area of group cohesion in higher education student affairs settings should attempt to make use of the GEQ or a consensus should be sought after on a similar assessment to begin to establish validity and reliability of the instrument. Having consistency in the group cohesion instrument will also be important for the establishment of a coherent field of literature on group cohesion in this specific field. As the field of literature grows, more complex studies can be done and the field can be advanced from the discovery of new findings.

To conclude, this study was done to examine the perceived nature of group cohesion in residence hall staffs and to attempt to uncover any underlying themes that may have contributed to the development of group cohesion within these staffs. A mixed methodology approach was used so that a historically reliable quantitative group

cohesion assessment (the Group Environment Questionnaire; GEQ) could be used in supplement to items that yielded qualitative results that would be used to gather the discovered themes. The respondents provided responses to the GEQ that led to a diverse array of mean values as well as many detailed responses to the extended response prompts that were able to be tied together with the mean GEQ scores.

The results of this study indicated that (1) working toward a group identity, (2) interpersonal skills, (3) conflict resolution, (4) providing support and feedback, (5) modeling exemplary behavior, (6) the acceptance of differences and finding common ground, (7) and having meaningful goals were believed to have played some role in the dynamics of these residence hall staffs. When paired with the mean GEQ scores, many of the comments that fell into these themes helped provide context to some of the staff's mean reported scores. It has been concluded that these seven themes have been reported to have influenced the development or maintenance of group cohesion among the observed residence hall staffs. However, it has also been concluded that more research needs to be done in order to make further claims about these themes, as this is the first time they have been examined in this setting. Future studies will be able to replicate and extend the findings in this study and the puzzle of group cohesion in higher education student affairs settings.

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## APPENDIX A

### Survey Items

Which Residence Hall building do you currently work in as a Resident Adviser at Northern Michigan University?

- Spooner
- West
- Magers
- Meyland
- Hunt
- Van Antwerp
- Payne
- Halverson
- Gant
- Spalding

GEQ1 I do not enjoy being a part of the social activities of this residence hall staff.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9 Strongly Agree

GEQ2 I'm not happy with the distribution of work-related opportunities I receive.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9 Strongly Agree



GEQ3 I am not going to miss the members of this team when we are done working together.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9 Strongly Agree

GEQ4 I'm unhappy with my residence hall staff's level of desire to perform our duties well.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9 Strongly Agree

GEQ5 Some of my best friends are on this residence hall staff.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9 Strongly Agree

GEQ6 This residence hall staff does not give me enough opportunities to improve my personal performance.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9 Strongly Agree

GEQ7 I enjoy other social gatherings rather than social gatherings with my residence hall staff.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9 Strongly Agree

GEQ8 I do not like the way this residence hall staff performs its duties.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9 Strongly Agree

GEQ9 For me, this residence hall staff is one of the most important social groups to which I belong.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9 Strongly Agree

GEQ10 Our residence hall staff is united in trying to reach its goals for performance.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9 Strongly Agree

GEQ11 Members of our residence hall staff would rather go out on their own than together as a staff.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9 Strongly Agree

GEQ12 We all take responsibility for any poor performance by our residence hall staff.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9 Strongly Agree

GEQ13 Our residence hall staff members rarely spend time together socially.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9 Strongly Agree

GEQ14 Our residence hall staff members have conflicting aspirations for the staff's performance.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9 Strongly Agree

GEQ15 Our residence hall staff would like to spend time together over the summer (regardless of feasibility).

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9 Strongly Agree

GEQ16 If members of our residence hall staff have problems with training, everyone wants to help them so we can get back together again.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9 Strongly Agree

GEQ17 Members of our residence hall staff do not stick together outside of practice and games.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9 Strongly Agree

GEQ18 Our residence hall staff members do not communicate freely about each individual's responsibilities during training or job-related situations.

- 1 Strongly Disagree
- 2
- 3
- 4
- 5
- 6
- 7
- 8
- 9 Strongly Agree

Q1 What are the goals you and your colleagues share as a residence hall staff?

Q2 How has your staff worked toward these goals?

Q3 Please explain how you do (or do not) agree with these goals?

Q4 What do you believe has made your staff successful (or unsuccessful) in making progress towards your goals?

Q5 How do you feel about the way your staff has accepted you as a colleague?

Q6 What type of interaction do you have with members of your staff outside of your defined work responsibilities?

Q7 Do you find that you have different social relationships with different members of your staff? How so?

Q8 How would you describe the quality of your social interactions with the different members of your staff?

Q9 How do your experiences differ when working with different members of your staff on work-related tasks?