

THE IMPACTS OF THE RESIDENT ASSISTANT POSITION ON POST-GRADUATE WORK

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INTRODUCTION

The transition from student to alumni with full-time work is a significant part of student development and the college experience (NAEP, 2015). With the majority of students entering the job market after graduation, schools have long recognized the importance of career development and most campuses have centers dedicated to providing services around **career readiness and employability skills**. Student affairs practitioners across departments should be invested in the career development of all their students, but especially their student employees. Student affairs practitioners have a heightened obligation to develop their student employees given the profession's foundational mission of developing students.

However, there is currently a lack of literature at the intersection of student employment on campus and its impact on career readiness and employability (Cholodnuik, 2003; Peck, 2017). One area with significant opportunity for developing student employee career readiness and employability lies in residence life. Residence life programs tend to employ large numbers of resident assistants (RAs) and spend significant amounts of time training and supervising these student leaders over the course of the academic year. RAs are uniquely positioned to develop career readiness and employability skills in their hybrid educational/work setting within a well-woven safety net of full time professional staff invested in their success.

I argue that **residence life programs, learning from career services colleagues, should more systematically explore how the RA role impacts graduates' career readiness and employability** and use that information to enhance the long term learning and benefits for RAs.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Given the inter-professional nature of the topic, the theoretical framework of this study pulls from the fields of student development and career development. This multiple-perspective approach is seen in Academic Advising, where professionals utilize theories and strategies from academic advising and career development realms to better serve their student advisees (Hughey, Burton Nelson, Damminger, & McCalla-Wriggins, 2009; Luzzo, 2000). Further, the burgeoning studies aimed more directly at exploring student engagement or employment and career development are also pulling from multiple theories to better understand and ground their research (Battjes, 2016; Brandfon, 2018).

This research is situated in the work experiences of Resident Assistants, an activity that demands a significant amount of time actively involved with their given institution and under the guidance of trained student affairs professionals. Astin's (1984) student development theory and Kuh's (2001; 2003) student engagement theory

DEFINITION OF TERMS

NACE (2015) defines career readiness as "the attainment and demonstration of requisite competencies that broadly prepare college graduates for a successful transition into the workplace" (para. 3). Griffin, Peck, & LaCount (2017) breakdown those requisite competencies into 11 employability skills: teamwork, decision making, problem solving, workflow planning, verbal communication, information processing, quantitative analysis, career-specific knowledge, computer software skills, writing and editing reports, and selling and influencing.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK (cont' d)

both seek to describe the impact of involvement and engagement on learning and positive college outcomes. **Astin's (1984) student involvement theory explains that when students are involved they learn and their learning is impacted by the quantity and quality of their involvement.** Thus, involvement can be measured qualitatively or quantitatively. Involvement has been shown to increase positive outcomes for students (Abrahamowicz, 1988; Astin, 1993; Chickering & Gamson, 1987; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 2012).

Similar to Astin is George Kuh's (2001; 2003) student engagement theory. In it, he defines student engagement as "the time and effort students devote to activities that are empirically linked to desired outcomes of college and what institutions do to induce students to participate in these activities" (p.10). In his theory he describes actions students and institutions can take to increase engagement including living on campus and participating in extracurricular activities. **Kuh (2009) wrote "employment may provide opportunities for students to practice and become more competent in collaboration and teamwork, skills that are needed to function effectively in the twenty-first century work environment"** (p. 693-694). Since RAs are employed by an institution and hold a leadership position, it can be said that they are involved and engaged with the institution while practicing leadership and therefore could be learning beyond that of their peers who are not RAs but are otherwise similar in terms of other involvement.

This research is concerned with the impact of the RA experience on their career development in terms of career readiness and employability. From the field of career development, **Super's (1990) life span-life space career theory seeks to describe the developmental process of an individual's career in terms of stages and roles that engage different tasks and that change over time in a variety of contexts.** Understanding of self, engaging in various growth experiences, and assessing one's values, skills, and interests are important components of Super's theory. These are also important components of the RA experience. Super, Savickas, & Super (1996) also describe

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK (cont' d)

the importance of various life roles, such as that of student, worker, and family member, and when these roles conflict with one another. Balancing these roles is a skill most RAs must practice regularly because of the blended life/student/work nature of their reality in college. This theory is particularly useful for RA career development because of the theory's developmental approach and recognition of the interplay of various life roles.

KEY LITERATURE FRAMING THE PROJECT

The importance of higher education's role in preparing students to successfully join the workforce is longstanding and clear. Students enroll in colleges with the explicit expectation that their degree will net them a better job (Cai, 2013; Grubb & Lazerson, 2005). **Grubb and Lazerson (2005) state that "the dominant force that propels students to college is the belief that they can exchange a degree for professional status"** (p. 9). In addition, employers expect colleges to graduate students who are career ready and need little to no training (Teichler, 2009). Student affairs and universities as a whole have started realizing the great potential that a strong career services department offers in terms of recruitment and revenue (NAEP, 2015; Dey & Cruzvergara, 2014).

Several studies find that some part-time work is associated with improved outcomes (Cheng & Alcántara, 2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Cheng and Alcántara (2007) also found that students who worked experienced career benefits including more opportunity to network and become familiar with the field. Excessive hours worked, over-involvement, and off-campus work did not have the same benefits and sometimes had detrimental outcomes (Astin 1984; Coressel, 2014; Kuh, 2009).

Athas, Oaks, and Kennedy-Phillips (2013) state that employment within student affairs can be particularly helpful in developing transferable skills and Martinez (2013) found that student affairs professionals have a positive influence on the career growth capacity of their students. Utilizing NACE's (2015) employability skills, researchers have shown that involvement at the leadership or positional level has been shown to be positive (Brandfon, 2018; Griffin, 2016). **No studies have looked at the perceptions of students after they graduate and no studies have looked at the RA experience.**

TENTATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN

Mixed methods offer a way of triangulating data sources and integrating qualitative and quantitative data, which are especially important when literature is lacking in an area (Creswell, 2014). **Because research is lacking on this topic, a three-part exploratory-sequential mixed methods design is proposed.** A qualitative first research phase will be

TENTATIVE RESEARCH DESIGN (cont'd)

conducted first to explore participant views. The data will be analyzed and subsequently used to inform and build a second, quantitative phase. The second phase could be comprised of an instrument built from knowledge from the first phase, or be used to select an existing instrument that best fits the sample. Data from the second phase are then analyzed and used to build a final third phase. The third phase may consist of either another qualitative or quantitative approach, depending on the findings. The data may reveal variables to delve deeper into or further clarify.

TENTATIVE FIRST PHASE

The first phase will be qualitative and phenomenological in nature, since there is little research into the question of how alumni RAs perceive the impacts of their RA experiences on their post-graduation full-time work. The researcher will conduct in-depth, interviews of former RAs who are no more than five years post-graduation, who are currently working, and were not supervised directly or indirectly by the researcher. The researcher will complete a general intake survey and then ask open-ended questions starting with **"How has the RA role impacted your post-graduate job search or work life?"** The researcher will then explore the most salient topics brought up by each individual and then gather the information into themes for follow up interviews.

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