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# Understanding the Development of Sophomore Resident Assistants

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*Eastern Illinois University*

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Understanding the Development of Sophomore Resident Assistants

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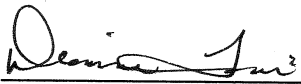FOR THE DEGREE OF

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Understanding the Development of Sophomore Resident Assistants

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# ABSTRACT

Sophomore resident assistants have to face many challenges in the position and outside of it. This study was designed in an effort to understand the development of sophomore RAs and what they might need in training to better handle the position. Through qualitative interviews with six sophomore RAs, the researcher was able to gather information that was coded to find trends that related to the research questions. The results of this study suggest that sophomore RAs are challenged to develop time management skills, they rely heavily on their staff members and supervisors for support, and they desire more hands-on training to better understand situations and how to fill out necessary paperwork.

## DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Kristen Webber. Your growth and development over your two years as an RA has been astounding. It is the opportunity to work with RAs like you that makes student affairs such a special field. You have impacted me more than I have impacted you, and for that I am grateful.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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**CHAPTER I**

**Introduction**

A college student's second year often determines the direction that student will

take throughout the rest of their college career (Schaller, 2005). It is a time where

students grow developmentally and solidify their academic trajectory by declaring their

majors and becoming more involved in their academic program (Gahagan & Hunter,

2006). However, some believe that the second year of college is even more challenging

than the first year due to the lack of organized programming and other support systems

specifically targeted at sophomore students (Tobolowsky, 2008). Without this support,

sophomores can feel forgotten on a college campus since the novelty of being in college

has faded, the expectations of these students have risen, and the support from the

institution is aimed at the new freshman class (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006).

In his original theory of involvement, Astin (1984) presented the idea that the

more a student gets involved on a college campus, whether that be through academics or

extra-curricular activities, the more that student will learn and develop personally. Such

extra-curricular activities include joining a student organization, getting involved with a

fraternity and sorority, or working on campus (Gansemer-Topf, Stern, & Benjamin,

2007). One opportunity first-year students may choose to apply for in anticipation of the

upcoming year is the resident assistant (RA) position, which provides experience in a

multitude of areas that could influence a student's development. An RA is a

paraprofessional within a university residence hall who acts as a resource for students in

the hall, upholds community standards, and responds to community disruptions (Blimling, 2003).

RAs play a pivotal role in the collegiate residence hall atmosphere. The RA position involves holding floor meetings, taking time to get to know residents individually, acting as a conflict mediator, responding to crisis situations, providing involvement opportunities to residents, and programming events to cultivate a positive and welcoming community (Blimling, 2003). According to the position description at the institution where this study takes place, an RA is expected to be a community facilitator, referral agent, team member, administrator, university representative, and academic role model. They are truly front-line paraprofessionals serving students in the residence halls. It is important that RAs are able to fulfill the responsibilities of the position and meet the needs of their residents while still achieving their academic and personal goals. Sophomore RAs also face challenges with time management, balancing academics and positional responsibilities, and maintaining social and professional relationships (Schaller & Wagner, 2007).

Understanding where these sophomores are developmentally as they step into the RA position will help university housing professionals better assist them with these challenges. This study aims to understand where sophomore students who are new to the RA position are in their development utilizing Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of identity development as well as Schlossberg's (1995) transition theory.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study was to understand the state of development of traditionally aged RAs in their second year of college. This study investigated the

development of these students rather than the developmental gains because research suggests that first-year students are better at assessing their current state of development than at describing progress they have made (Bowman, 2010). The findings of this study will help student affairs administrators affiliated with university housing better train and support sophomore students in the RA position as they do their job throughout the year. It will also help housing professionals identify which characteristics to look for when hiring prospective sophomore RAs and develop these characteristics once they are hired.

**Research Questions**

The questions used to guide this study are as follows:

1.  Where are sophomore students who are RAs at in their development upon entering the position?

2.  How do sophomore students describe their transition into the RA position?

3.  In what areas could additional training and support be beneficial to sophomore students in the RA position?

**Significance of the Study**

This study will also help administrators better understand where students may be as they start their second year of college, therefore allowing these administrators to challenge and support these students in a more targeted manner throughout the year. Schaller and Wagner (2007) assert that the development of sophomores has not been thoroughly studied, so this study will help bridge a gap in the literature. This study could assist institutions in determining what level of support sophomore RAs need from their supervisors and fellow staff members in order to thrive in the position. This study will also provide insight into the types of training sophomore students need to be successful.

**Limitations of the Study**

As with any research, there are limitations to this proposed study. This study took place at a midsize, Midwestern university through use of purposive sampling, which may affect the level of representativeness of the overall population of RAs in their second year of college.

In these interviews it was possible that the students tried to hide any developmental deficiencies they believe they have, especially since this study was conducted by me, a graduate assistant in the housing department at the university where the RAs work. It was important to ask multiple questions about each facet of this study using different approaches to get the most complete idea of each student's level of development in each area. Also, it was important to prompt the interviewees for further explanation if brief responses were provided to the initial questions.

My own personal background may be a limitation to this study because I was once an RA myself. I previously worked at an institution where incoming RAs were required to be entering their third year of college, so the practice of hiring students going into their second year to be RAs was new to me. As a former RA and a current supervisor to RAs, I understand the position these students are in, but I may have my own preconceived expectations that could cloud this study. I made every effort to remain unbiased in this regard as I completed this research. One benefit of my position is that I work in an upperclassmen residence hall where each resident, including RAs, must be of junior standing or 21 years of age. This means that I am not the direct supervisor of any of the RAs that were interviewed in this study.

**Definitions of Terms**

**Sophomore college student.** A student who is entering their third semester, not including summer terms, of college at the selected institution regardless of their number of completed credits. For the purpose of this study, only students of traditional college age were considered.

**Hall Directors**. At the selected institution, RAs report to both full-time staff and graduate assistants. Each full-time hall director has a master's degree in higher education or a related field, while each graduate assistant has completed their bachelor's degree and is working toward a master's in higher education.

**Residence Hall.** A university-owned building that houses and supports students attending the university. This support comes in the form of providing programs and opportunities for involvement on campus as well as personal attention from the full-time staff and student-staff members of the building.

**Resident Assistant (RA).** An undergraduate student working in a paraprofessional role among 25-50 undergraduate residents in a residence hall. Students in this role are responsible for tasks that include building a respectful floor community, confronting policy violations in the hall, and responding to crisis situations.

**Summary**

This chapter included an overview of the sophomore year and the RA position. To better understand where these students are at in their development, this study examined the experiences of sophomore RAs through qualitative research. The following chapter will discuss the current literature in more detail, including the theories this study used to guide the qualitative interviews.

## CHAPTER II

## Review of Literature

This chapter contains a review of the current literature on sophomore students, the RA position, and relevant student development theories. This information will provide a better picture of the experiences these students are going through and how those might affect a student during their second year. First, an overview of relevant student development theories will give background on the development of college students. Then a brief description of the challenges of the sophomore year will be presented along with a description of the RA position to further explain the student population that is examined in this study. Finally, a summary of the findings of a study previously conducted on sophomore RAs will be given to further guide this research.

**Sophomore Students**

The second year of college comes with challenges that are unique and significantly different than the challenges faced during other years of college (Boivin, Fountain, & Baylis, 2000). When it comes to student attrition, it is expected that the biggest loss of students comes between the first and second year, but more recently, colleges have been losing sophomore students at a disproportionate rate (Pattengale, 2000). Due to more challenging courses and higher academic demands placed on them in comparison to what was expected of them as freshmen, sophomores have a higher tendency to disengage from academic life in a phenomenon called the "*sophomore slump*" (Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000).

Tobolowsky (2008) suggests that one reason for this is that the programs and opportunities that were offered to these students as freshmen are now being directed to

the new freshman class, so the sophomore students do not perceive support systems as being readily available to them. The programs that are most often offered to sophomores are geared toward academic advising and selecting a career path (Tobolowsky & Cox, 2007). With this focus on selecting a major, sophomores tend to be more dissatisfied than their freshman, junior, and senior peers with the lack of academic support. In a survey of 118,706 students from both private and public colleges, Juillerat (2000) found that sophomores were significantly less satisfied with the approachability of advisors, the caring nature of faculty members, and the timeliness of faculty response when it came to registration conflicts and the focus on selecting a major.

When it comes to development, Schaller (2007) asserts that the main struggle for sophomores is the development of an identity because the sophomore year is a time where students are expected to make many decisions that will impact their future direction. This process of decision making includes more than just the selection of a major to study. It also involves sophomore students seriously reflecting on their past decisions and friendships, and how those relate to the type of person they are striving to be (Schaller, 2007). These identity crises can lead to a drop in self-esteem, but once the student is able to come to a resolution, their self-perception recovers along with a sense of self-authorship as described by Baxter Magolda (1992).

**Resident Assistants**

RAs are live-in undergraduate paraprofessional staff members who act as extra eyes and ears for university housing (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, &Witt, 2005). According to Blimling (2003), the RA is the foundation of nearly every residence hall program across the country and the college experience these students get is different than most other

students. This is because they directly guide and support their fellow undergraduates on a day-to-day basis.

According to Barefoot (2005), RAs are responsible for being community facilitators, referral agents, team members, administrators, university representatives, and educators/academic role models. The RA position is a lot of additional responsibility to place on any student, so it will be important to know that these sophomore students have the competence to complete these responsibilities while also maintaining their identity as a student and managing the intense workload.

When developing his theory of student involvement, Astin (1984) examined one of his previous longitudinal studies on college dropouts and found that a student's involvement outside of the classroom is correlated to their retention at a university. It is no surprise that part of the RA position is to encourage residents to get involved on the floor and in the hall community. One major way an RA can encourage residents to get involved in co-curricular activities is to engage in face-to-face conversations about involvement. Even residents who genuinely like their RA are less likely to get involved if they are not told of an event directly (Arboleda, Wang, Shelley, & Whalen 2003). This means that sophomore students in the RA position will have to be competent in the ability to relay relevant information that they get from training and from staff meetings to their residents and understand what might motivate their residents to attend an event.

With the wide array of students attending universities, RAs are charged with creating a welcoming atmosphere that is inclusive to all students regardless of race, religion, sexual preference, or physical ability (Schroeder & Mable, 1994). Along with building a floor community comes the responsibility to promote an understanding and

acceptance of diversity (Johnson, Kang, & Thompson, 2011). RAs are typically the first resource a student will reach out to when he or she feels uncomfortable in their college experience (Blimling, 2003). Blimling (2003) also stated that it is important for the RA to be competent in developing a healthy community, holding conversations about identity and diversity, and educating their residents on topics of difference. These conversations may be very challenging for sophomore students who may not be comfortable with these topics themselves. It is important to understand where these students are developmentally to best prepare them to make these conversations productive and positive experiences.

Another part of being a university representative is upholding and enforcing university policies (Barefoot, 2005). Since RAs are responsible for getting to know their residents on a personal level as well as upholding policies, they occasionally face ethical dilemmas when it comes to documenting policy violations committed by their own residents (Everett & Loftus, 2011). RAs spend a great deal of time building communities and getting to know their residents, and as a sophomore, it may be intimidating to confront these people that they have gotten to know so well. Blimling (2003) stated that RAs can have difficulties documenting residents in their own communities because they may later face social awkwardness or feel ostracized from those residents. It is important to keep in mind that, at a campus with a freshman live-on requirement, sophomores were a part of a floor community the previous year. Now, as an RA, these sophomore students are now expected to be the authority figure on the floor. Gauging the RAs' ability to adequately manage these interpersonal conflicts with residents is necessary to better help RAs in their postions.

As a referral agent, an RA is expected to be well versed on the resources provided by the campus and able to tactfully point residents toward these resources. At times this may include handling crisis situations involving students facing emotional or psychological crises, up to and including suicide threats and attempts (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2011). Exposure to intense mental health situations may be unavoidable because RAs are put in such situations by the close contact they have with their residents and they play a pivotal role in referring their residents to get appropriate help (Wallack, Servaty-Seib, & Taub, 2013). These crisis situations could be particularly challenging to sophomore students in their first year as a RA because these students likely have never been in a position where they are expected to be as involved in another person's well-being.

With all of these responsibilities, RAs are at risk of experiencing emotional exhaustion and burnout (Paladino, Murray, Newgent, & Gohn, 2005). In their quantitative study of 193 RAs across two universities, Paladino and his colleagues (2005) found that RAs working in traditional-style residence halls with first-year students are most at risk for experiencing burnout due to the consistent demand placed on the RAs by residents. They explained this by stating that the many responsibilities of the RAs are compounded by the higher activity levels of these halls, which cause the RAs to overextend themselves. This is significant because the only non-traditional residence hall at the university where this study takes place is restricted to upperclassmen students and the RAs chosen to work in that hall must be 21 years of age or have junior standing. Therefore, all of the RAs being interviewed in this study worked in traditional residence halls where there is a large population of first-year students.

**Theoretical Framework**

Two theories helped to guide this study: Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of identity development and Schlossberg's (1995) transition theory. These theories were selected for this study because they examine different aspects of the college experience and therefore provide a more comprehensive understanding of the students in this study. Chickering and Reisser's theory focuses on the growth of individuals as they progress through college and experience different situations while Schlossberg's theory focuses on how students experience and cope with transitions into new life situations.

Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of identity development is relevant to this study because it divides a person's growth areas into seven vectors, each of which plays an important role in the progression of a person's development. As will be explained, each of these seven vectors can pertain to the RA position and better help a supervisor understand where a sophomore RA may need assistance in their position. Schlossberg's (1995) transition theory is relevant to this study because the participants are first-time RAs, meaning they are transitioning into a new role at the university. Schlossberg's (1995) transition theory helps to better understand how a student might cope with such a change through the use of support systems and personal strategies. With these two theories as a foundation, this study will be able to provide a more targeted understanding of where sophomores in the RA position are in their development and how to best support them in that position.

**Theory of Identity Development.** As stated before, Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of identity development consists of seven vectors that students move through as they experience more situations that challenge and educate them. The seven

vectors are: *developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose,* and *developing integrity.* Chickering and Reisser's theory of identity development does not involve stages where one vector must be completed before moving into the next. Rather, a student can move along multiple vectors at once, with one vector impacting the student's progression along other vectors (Chickering and Reisser, 1993).

The first vector is called *developing competence.* This involves three distinct areas: intellectual competence, physical competence, and interpersonal competence (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). Intellectual competence involves gathering knowledge and acquiring analytical skills to synthesize that knowledge into an applicable resource (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). This means that RAs need to be able to absorb and implement information from their initial training at the beginning of the year and also relay information about important events and policies to their residents. This can be particularly challenging because the times when an RA needs to remember their training are often during stressful situations like confronting a policy violation or mediating a conflict (Twale & Burrell, 1994). While performing in their paraprofessional position, they must also have the intellectual competence to maintain the required GPA to remain in the position. Sophomore students could find this particularly challenging because they are expected to take higher-level courses with more intense curricula than their freshman counterparts, while also taking general education classes that they may have avoided during their freshman year (Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000). This increase in academic expectations could present a real problem, as many sophomores consider themselves to

be disengaged from their academics (Graunke & Woosley, 2005). In a qualitative study of nine sophomore RAs, Schaller and Wagner (2005) found that the participants either admitted to letting their academics slip in favor of the RA position or fall behind in their RA duties in an effort to prioritize classes.

Physical competence involves developing physical or artistic skills that will allow a person to adequately complete their responsibilities. Physical competence comes into play on a regular basis for an RA because they are expected to do duty rounds, which involve walking through residence halls, including up and down stairways (Blimling, 2003). In more extreme cases, RAs must be competent when responding to emergency situations, like a fire alarm, in a timely fashion. An RA's physical competence also makes an impact on the look and feel of their floor, as artistic ability plays a role in welcoming residents with door decorations and in the presentation of information through visually appealing bulletin boards.

Interpersonal competence involves communicating effectively, listening fully, and working well in individual and group settings (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). RAs should be able to demonstrate interpersonal competence by getting to know the residents in their floor communities and understanding the overall floor dynamic. The transition from being a resident on a floor as a freshman to being an RA the following year could be challenging for a sophomore because it is likely that the RA position is the first collegiate leadership experience the sophomore student has had (Pattengale & Schreiner, 2000). A sophomore RA may not completely understand how to navigate the balance of communicating with residents as an authority figure while also maintaining a friendly relationship. In their qualitative interviews with sophomore RAs, Schaller and Wagner

(2005) found that these students' relationships with their friends from the previous year had dwindled because of their new job responsibilities and because they began to see themselves as a role model who should not partake in the risky behaviors their friends were promoting. RAs also have to display interpersonal competence when working on a staff team, which is a unique challenge because these teams are made up of individuals who are all perceived as leaders. Some of the most common mistakes made by RAs involve improperly handling encounters with fellow staff members (Foubert, 2013).

The second vector is called *managing emotions*. This entails a student's ability to acknowledge the emotions that they feel and determine an appropriate outlet for these emotions (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). In the RA position, this could range from maintaining a calm demeanor when handling a crisis situation to venting stress in a healthy way. In a study of 249 full-time undergraduate students, Misra and McKean (2000) found that freshman and sophomore students had higher reactions to stress than their junior and senior counterparts, in part because of higher levels of anxiety and less experience in developing coping mechanisms to handle the stress. Managing emotions is critical to the RA position because an RA is expected to deal with a range of stressors that might greatly influence how he or she feels. Between balancing academics, maintaining a positive floor community, managing administrative deadlines, and enforcing policy, an RA has the potential to be greatly overstressed and burned out (Paladino et al., 2005). Wu and Stemler (2009) found that, of the 190 RAs they studied, the ones who were able to effectively balance these stressors and emotions were more likely to be rated as "highly effective" by their residents, so being able to manage emotions plays a role in the level of success an RA will demonstrate in the position.

The third vector is called *moving through autonomy toward interdependence*. This vector entails the process of a student realizing their independence from previous influences and becoming less reliant on the need for affirmation from others, while still understanding the role they play in a group setting (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). This vector can play out in many ways for a sophomore entering the RA position. For example, a sophomore student may be interested in breaking away from the influence of their parents, but could lack the means to be financially independent (Schaller, 2007). At the start of the year, it is likely that an RA will be unsure of their role in the position, which may lead to a heavy reliance on the supervisor for direction and feedback (Fitch & Winston, 1993). In this case, it is up to the RA's supervisor to assist the RA in building confidence and autonomy in the role through conversation, encouragement, and constructive feedback so the RA feels more comfortable in the position and is more able to accomplish tasks independently (Fitch & Winston, 1993). Essentially, a supervisor should provide an increased level of autonomy as the RA gains experience in the position.

The fourth vector is *developing mature interpersonal relationships*, which is based on two factors: appreciation of differences and capacity for intimacy (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The appreciation for difference is especially important for RAs because they play a pivotal role as the main facilitators for promoting cultural acceptance in a university setting (Johnson, Kang, & Thompson, 2011). Having an RA who can properly facilitate conversations of diversity and inclusion is especially important since living in a university residence hall is often the first time a student will experience living with people of different backgrounds (Schroeder and Mable, 1994).

The RA position is one that requires a sense of connection and camaraderie between residents and fellow staff members, so it is important to look at these relationships in a mature way. It is no surprise that *Lessons Learned,* a book detailing how to avoid common mistakes made by RAs, encourages RAs to avoid dating fellow RAs and residents (Foubert, 2013). Also this vector is important when it comes to maintaining a professional distance from residents so as not to inhibit the RA's ability to complete the responsibilities of the job (Everett & Loftus, 2011). This can be a significant struggle for sophomore RAs because there is a high probability that their social relationships outside of the RA position will be strained by the many responsibilities and the extensive time commitment of the job (Schaller & Wagner, 2005).

The fifth vector is *establishing identity* and contains many aspects that are relevant to personal growth. Students grow in this vector by developing comfort with their body image, sexuality, culture, role, self-esteem, and personal stability (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). These areas are developed through exploration and do not necessarily occur at the same time (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991). Many sophomores are at a point where they may struggle with this area. Residence hall settings promote the development of one's own identity due to the amount of immediate exposure residents have to a multitude of other students (Schroeder & Mable, 1994). Dugan and Komives (2010) found that having socio-cultural conversations with peers played a large role in the development of identity since it allowed students the opportunity to discuss relevant issues and discover where they stand on such topics. For most students, this happens slowly, but RAs may be thrown into these conversations on a regular basis. It is expected that RAs are able to facilitate these types of conversations, and in order for them to do so,

they must be able to adequately address these topics themselves (Fitch & Winston, 1993). Supervisors can play a key role and challenge the sophomore RA to engage in self-reflection and to take responsibility for their own identity development (Schaller, 2005).

The sixth vector is *developing purpose*. This can be through developing career, personal, and interpersonal goals. In addition to goals, students who have progressed fully in this vector have a clear plan on how to accomplish these goals and persist with these plans even in the face of obstacles (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The sophomore year is an especially important time in terms of developing purpose, as this is the year many students decide on their college major (Gahagan & Hunter, 2006). This can be particularly challenging for some sophomores because they must come to terms with the idea that the career their parents wanted for them may not line up with their own desires or talents (Boivin, Fountain, & Baylis, 2000). Some sophomores may not be at a point where they can decide on a purpose. It is reasonable to suggest that sophomores in the RA position will have a hard time assisting their residents in developing purpose since "RAs cannot effectively assist residents in dealing with developmental issues that they themselves have not satisfactorily resolved" (Fitch & Winston, 1993, p. 336).

The seventh vector is *developing integrity*. Developing integrity means more than just developing core values and beliefs. It also involves being open to others' beliefs and matching one's own beliefs to one's behavior (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Roussel and Elleven (2009) stated that being open to others' beliefs is especially important for RAs considering their status as a role model, however some RAs may be most challenged in this area. It may be asking too much of a sophomore to be fully adept at displaying

integrity since he or she is likely still trying to gain a proper perspective on their own

identity (Schaller, 2007).

**Transition Theory.** Another theory utilized in this study is Schlossberg's (1995)

transition theory. This theory revolves around the idea of transition, which is defined as

an anticipated or unanticipated event that results in changed relationships, routines,

assumptions, and roles (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2009). The process of

becoming an RA at this institution is considered to be an anticipated transition because

the student applied for the position, interviewed, was notified of their hiring, and

completed an RA workshop in preparation for the position. This anticipation provides

context for the transition and makes it likely that the student understands to some degree

that their life will be altered due to the acceptance of the position. According to

Schlossberg, how the student handles the position is predicated on four factors: situation,

self, social support, and strategies.

The situation itself plays a large role in the transition. There are many variables

that can have an effect on how the student handles a transition. These variables include

the cause of the transition, the timing of the situation, how much control the student

perceives he or she has, how long the change will last, the change of roles for the student,

the anticipated length of the change, previous experience with a similar transition, and

other concurrent stressors (Schlossberg, 1995). The cause of the transition into the RA

role undoubtedly included the applicant applying and interviewing for the position. Due

to the parameters of this study, timing of the situation for incoming sophomore RAs is at

the beginning of the fall semester of their second year of college. Other aspects are more

likely to vary between incoming sophomore RAs, such as their previous experiences with

similar transitions and the level of stress they are facing in other areas of their lives, but it is not clear whether this impacts the potential of an RA to be successful. More relevant are a person's potential to relate to others and solve problems in a constructive way (Fitch & Winston, 1993).

In addition to the situation, the personal makeup of the student will affect how he or she perceives and handles the transition to being an RA. The *self* that Schlossberg (1995) refers to includes the personal identity of the student as well as the level of development the student has achieved. This means that each person is likely to take on the transition to being an RA with a unique perspective due to differences in backgrounds and experiences up to that point. Each person is likely at a different level of their development, which is why this study also examined the development level of these students using Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of identity development.

In addition to the situation and the self, the level of social support felt by the person going through a transition plays a role in how he or she experiences it (Schlossberg, 1995). However, each individual can perceive these sources of support in different ways and utilize them to a different extent. When facing a period of turmoil, sophomore students are likely to reach out to their parents, friends from their freshman year, or a trusted faculty member (Schaller, 2005). In addition to these support systems, the RA position provides inherent support from professional staff supervisors and fellow RAs on the staff. Once again, each individual will feel a different level of support from these sources and may lean more heavily on one particular area than another, which could lead them to perceive the transition in a different way (Schlossberg, 1995).

The final aspect of transition that Schlossberg (1995) covers is the person's strategies, or coping mechanisms to deal with the transition. This can include how the student changes the situation to where he or she feels less stressed and how he or she manages that stress. Unfortunately, in a study of 249 students at a Midwestern university, 36% of which were sophomores, it was reported that freshman and sophomore students did not have a strong foundation of social support or proper coping strategies to deal with stressful situations (Misra & McKean, 2000). In their interviews with nine sophomore RAs, Schaller and Wagner (2005) found that sophomore RAs lost some of their social support throughout the position because they were not able to spend much time with their freshman-year friends due to the time constraints of the position. Also, Misra and McKean (2000) found that basic coping skills, such as problem solving and effective time management, were less developed in sophomores than in their older classmates.

**Resident Assistant Training**

It is important to note that RAs are not simply thrust into these responsibilities upon taking the job. Upon being hired, RAs go through a training process designed specifically by each university according to its own needs in terms of time, intensity, and the mission of the housing department (Bierman & Carpenter, 1994). At the university in this study, RA training involves two classroom sessions in the spring semester of their hire. In the Fall prior to the academic year they participate in a two week intensive training before residents move in to the halls. After this initial training, RAs are expected to attend one-hour in-service training sessions, called RA developments, approximately eight times per semester.

The purpose of pre-service training, defined as training that occurs before the residence halls open, is to prepare the RAs with skills they need to effectively run the hall, to provide practice dealing with difficult situations, and to foster relationships among staff members (Fitch & Winston, 1993). RA training typically consists of a multitude of topics including conflict resolution, crisis intervention, interpersonal skills, basic counseling, and problem solving (Twale & Burrell, 1994). These training sessions are delivered by residence life staff, student development staff, faculty members, and community officials such as police officers and firefighters (Twale & Muse, 1996).

In their quantitative study of 388 RAs, Twale and Muse (1996) found that 48% of their respondents considered their training "unhelpful." They speculate that this could be because the RAs are expected to learn such a vast amount of detailed information in a very short time frame, and once they enter the position, some of the information they learned will not be immediately applicable. In their study of sophomore RAs, Schaller and Wagner (2005) found that all nine of their participants shared the sentiment that training could never fully prepare an RA for the position due to the number of unexpected situations that could arise on the job.

**Summary**

The sophomore year is a time of growth and development in many areas. Much is expected of sophomore students in terms of academic achievement and decision making, even at a time when many sophomores are disillusioned with university life. More is expected of RAs, who are expected to be the guiding force in their residential communities in addition to the academic pressures they already face. RAs do go through training in order to learn the full requirements of the position and prepare for the role. It

is important to understand where these students are developmentally so their supervisors can help them fulfill the role to their full capacity while helping them grow as a student and as a person.

## CHAPTER III

## Methodology

The purpose of this study was to gain an understanding of the development levels of sophomores in the RA position and their viewpoints on RA training. A qualitative research method was used to collect data as it related to the RAs development levels and their perceptions of training. Qualitative research is designed to allow the researcher to observe a phenomenon in its natural progression from the perspective of the participant, and then interpret the data to form a better understanding of the topic at hand (Flick, 2008).

### Design of the Study

This research study was conducted using a qualitative approach because the study examined the quality of relationships, activities, situations, or materials. The qualitative method allows for further depth and richness in a study because researchers are afforded the opportunity to ask follow up questions to explain how things are done (Fraenkel, 2003). A qualitative method was the best approach to take for this research because qualitative research is used to better understand the effects of different experiences and when trying to better understand unknown phenomenon (Schensul, 2012). At the current time, there is not a wealth of research on sophomore RAs, so an in depth perspective will provide information to spur further research on the topic.

Individual interviews were used in this process to provide the most in-depth information about the sophomore RA experience from multiple sources. In this case, individual interviews were preferred over focus groups or narrative interviews because this study was conducted in order to understand specific facets of the development of

sophomore RAs on an individual basis. With a focus group, there is a possibility that some participants will speak more or less than others, therefore slanting the results toward the more vocal group members (Flick, 2008). Also, a narrative interview might be beneficial to understanding the participants' feelings about the position, but their stories may not include each of the developmental facets that are essential for this research study (Flick, 2008). Individual interviews allowed each RA to share their experiences in a thorough manner without being overshadowed or influenced by the other participants.

**Participants**

The participants of this study were selected using purposeful sampling, meaning the researcher selected a sample based on students who fit the criteria of the study and were representative of the overall population (Fraenkel, 2003). Because this study focused on sophomore RAs, the participants of this study were required to be traditional students in their second year at a mid-size, Midwestern, public university, and employed as an RA. The Associate Director of Housing and Dining Services provided a list of 19 candidates who fit these criteria and the researcher chose six students to e-mail requesting their voluntary participation. If a potential participant did not respond after two weeks or declined participation, another student from the list was contacted with an e-mail interview request. The interviews lasted between 35 and 90 minutes.

The participants were selected in an effort to provide accurate representation of sophomore RAs across this particular campus. Of the six participants, there were four females and two males. Four participants identified as Caucasian, one identified as Black, and one identified as Latino. The six participants of this study represented five residence halls across campus.

A brief description of each participant (whose names have been changed to protect their identities) is provided here:

Jason is a 19-year old male who identifies as Latino. He is an RA in an all-male residence hall that predominantly houses first year students and student athletes. Jason is also a member of ROTC.

Rachel is a 19-year old female who identifies as Black. She is an RA in an all-female hall that predominantly houses first year students and student athletes.

Andrea is a 19-year old female who identifies as Caucasian. She is an RA in a co-ed residence hall that predominantly houses first year students.

Albert is a 19-year old male who identifies as Caucasian. He is an RA in a co-ed residence hall that predominantly houses first year students. Albert and Andrea work on the same staff.

Jenn is a 19-year old female who identifies as Caucasian. She is an RA in an all-female residence hall that houses women of all class standings, freshman through senior.

Sophie is a 19-year old female who identifies as Caucasian. She is an RA in a co-ed residence hall. Her floor in the residence hall is the Honors floor, meaning they house students who are registered in the Honors College at the institution.

**Location**

This study took place at a mid-sized, Midwestern, public institution with an enrollment of approximately 8,500 undergraduate students. These interviews took place at a neutral location where the participants were not identified as a participant of this research study. The interviews were audio recorded and each lasted between 35 and 90 minutes.

**Instrument**

After a student had agreed to participate in the study, a time was determined for the student and researcher to engage in the interview process. Before the interview took place, each participant was asked to read and sign a form of consent (Appendix A) that explained the voluntary nature of the research and that the student was under no obligation to continue participation if he or she did not want to continue.

As the researcher, I was the one interviewing each participant in this study. I used a semi-structured interview format (Appendix B) where pre-scripted questions were asked, along with follow up questions that were intended to further flesh out ideas. The interview questions were structured in a way that addresses each of the seven vectors of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of identity development, the four components of Schlossberg's transition theory (1995), and the process of RA training.

**Data Collection and Analysis**

Data was collected by audio recording the six semi-structured interviews. Each interview was then transcribed. The audio recordings and transcriptions were stored on the researcher's personal, password-protected laptop.

The researcher manually coded each transcription to find themes among the interviews as they relate to the development of the RAs. Coding is the process of summarizing qualitative information into themes or categories that represent the core meaning of the information (Saldaña, 2012). The coding was done by reading through the transcriptions of the research interviews and categorizing words or phrases that were significant with respect to the research questions for this study. The researcher worked

with his thesis advisor throughout the coding process to verify the accuracy of the coding process and to ensure that the researcher does not miss themes or misinterpret information.

**Treatment of Data**

The data from this study was collected through audio recordings on the researcher's password-protected computer. This data was then transcribed and saved on that same computer to which only the researcher has access. The only other person who viewed the fully transcribed documents is the chair of the researcher's thesis committee. The audio files, transcripts, and coded files will be kept on the researcher's private computer for a period of three years, after which they will be promptly deleted in accordance with the IRB protocol at this institution.

**Summary**

This chapter contains a description of the methods used to conduct this qualitative research study. Six sophomore RAs at a mid-size, Midwestern, public university were interviewed using a semi-structured style. These interviews were audio recorded, transcribed, and coded by the researcher. This process allowed the researcher to assess the themes present in the interviews and have a better understanding of the level of development of sophomore RAs, as well as a better understanding of how they perceive their training.

## CHAPTER IV

### Results

This chapter describes the information gained from the six interviews conducted with sophomore RAs in regards to their development and their views on the RA training process. The interviews centered on the following research questions:

1. Where are sophomore students who are RAs at in their development upon entering the position?

2. How do sophomore students describe their transition into the RA position?

3. In what areas could additional training and support be beneficial to sophomore students in the RA position?

Themes were detected from the interviews through a process of transcribing, coding, and analyzing the responses. This chapter will provide an overview of those themes in an effort to answer the research questions.

**Identity Developmental Levels of Sophomore RAs**

To answer the first research question, the interviews were coded and analyzed with regard to Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of identity development. The RAs' responses to the interview questions (Appendix B) helped to understand their level of development along each of the seven vectors, which will be discussed in the following sections.

**Development of competence.** Competence in regard to the RA position was defined as the RAs' ability to complete their job responsibilities as well as the other responsibilities they have as students. The questions designed to examine the competence levels of the RAs were centered on the overall responsibilities of the position, the

particularly challenging aspects of the position, and the balance between the position and other facets of their life as students.

***Competence through training.*** Training is designed to prepare RAs to do their job. Training time allows them to develop their level of competence related to the expectations of the position. Each of the RAs spoke about RA training as a time that prepared them for the position and how it helped them understand their responsibilities more completely. The two male RAs stated that they were prepared for the RA position before training started. Albert, who was a Conference Assistant the summer before entering the RA role, said:

> I feel like I was decently prepared. I was a Conference Assistant over the
>
> summer, so a lot of what happened for training, we did for CA training. There
>
> were a couple [Behind Closed Doors scenarios] that were more extreme that I
>
> wasn't ready for. I think personally, I was decently ready for coming into the RA
>
> position.

The four female RAs said that they had felt prepared, but that training helped them realize that they had a lot to learn. When asked if she was prepared for the RA position before training, Andrea stated, "Probably not. In my head I was like, 'Alright, I got this.' If I wouldn't have gone through training, I wouldn't have been prepared."

***Competence through transition.*** Another sentiment that was shared was that the first few weeks after training were still a period of transition where the RAs solidify their understanding and their ability to do the job. They also identified that they were gaining competence to do their job during this time. When asked about the start of the academic year, a time when RAs have to put their training into practice, Albert said, "It's kind of

overwhelming all of a sudden. You have move-in and then everything is just go, go, go. I think information-wise, I was ready. I just didn't think I was ready to actually do it."

Rachel echoed this sentiment when she said:

I think the first couple weeks were difficult for me at first. Obviously I was a new RA and had no idea what to do. As time has gone on, I've been able to find different ways to do numerous things.

***Competence in balancing responsibilities.*** Each of the six RAs described their struggle with balancing time in the RA position. The four female RAs stated that the added responsibilities forced them to schedule their time better and become more organized. Jenn stated, "I think, because I have so much to do, and I have to make sure I plan everything out, I think that's helped." In contrast, the two male RAs spoke about how the position has placed an additional stress on them in terms of completing all of their responsibilities both in the position and outside of it. Jason, who is also a member of ROTC, explained:

I feel like sometimes the ROTC falls, then I need to get my ROTC priorities straight. Then I get my ROTC straight and I slack behind on readings or homework. Then I get that straight and the RA position will fall. It's hard.

Though the female RAs spoke of improving their time management, the RA position did still have an impact on them. Rachel hit on this point when she said:

I think the biggest thing is balance. Trying to find time to do this or that. The RA position, my schoolwork, I have to meet with my boss, I have to talk with this particular resident. So I think it was just balance and organization. It's just really stressful trying to keep up with everything.

**Development in managing emotions.** RAs must deal with a variety of people in situations ranging from mundane interactions to crisis situations, so managing emotions is paramount. This vector was analyzed by assessing each RAs' ability to contain their feelings during stressful situations and find a healthy outlet for those feelings at a proper time. Questions designed to examine this vector were focused on enjoyable and stressful moments in the position, dealing with emergency situations, and feelings about different aspects of the position, including training.

*Emotions through training.* Five of the six RAs spoke of feeling somewhat confident going into the RA training process, but then overwhelmed during training. Andrea experienced a variety of feelings during training:

> Like 'Oh my gosh! What did I get myself into?' There were so many times during
>
> training where I was like 'I'm not doing this again next year,' but then it was like,
>
> 'Just kidding, this is actually fun.' Mixed emotions.

Rachel described her perspective in a similar way:

> RA training was very stressful. I remember on the third day sitting in my room
>
> and thinking, 'Is this really for me?' I'll never forget that day. I think I was just
>
> overwhelmed because I had no idea what I was doing. I remember being very
>
> tired as well and having a lot to do. Training was a huge eye-opener for me. It was
>
> a lot to take in.

The same five RAs identified that they were more nervous for the position after training than they were before. This feeling was related to being more aware and overwhelmed by the responsibilities of the RA position and what they could possibly face on the job. Jenn explained, "I was kind of nervous about it after Behind Closed Doors.

Like, 'Oh my god. Oh crap. Now I really don't know what to expect, but at least I have

the experience now.'" Albert described a similar feeling on the subject:

> I realized, 'Oh, this is stuff I could walk into.' I expected it, but at the same time I
>
> didn't until it was all put together. You don't realize how many scenarios you
>
> could have to deal with as an RA. It's kind of overwhelming all of a sudden.

***Emotions in the position.*** As was stated in the previous sections on competence,

five of the six RAs admitted to feeling overly stressed by the day-to-day responsibilities

of the position in conjunction with their obligations as students. When asked what is

stressful about the position, Jenn stated, "Everything. Deadlines. It seems like every time

[reports on residents] are due, bulletin boards are due, tests are coming up, papers are

due. Everything is due at the same time every time. That's pretty stressful."

Andrea shared her perspective on the added pressure:

> I would consider it a high-stress job. I mean if I was just an RA I feel like it would
>
> be so much easier and more enjoyable. Then adding school into it and adding the
>
> fact that I'm still a teen, I'm learning, all that.

> Another area that elicited an emotional response from five of the six RAs was

approaching potential policy violations. They described feeling nervous about

confronting residents, mostly due to the unpredictable nature of these types of

interactions. Jenn explained this feeling:

> It's just making sure I get all the information and then before, it's like my hands
>
> get sweaty. You never know what's going on in that room, so it's running through
>
> everything. Like, if I see alcohol, this is what I do, or if I see weed. So just
>
> refreshing myself and thinking over everything. It's not every day that you have

to do that stuff. I think it's just refreshing. Then I just take a deep breath and do what you have to do.

One of the RAs had not yet experienced documenting a resident, but described a situation in which he observed other RAs on his staff dealing with a situation:

The RAs seem to be way calmer than I would be in that situation. [Two of my coworkers] had a really big one earlier in the year and I was like 'I don't know how you're dealing with this right now. I'd be freaking out probably.' They keep calm   with it though.

***Coping with the emotions of the position.*** Each of the RAs mentioned certain coping strategies they have for dealing with the stress of the RA position. Four of the six stated that they go to the Student Recreational Center to run, work out, or play a sport in order to relieve stress. Jason said, "Sometimes I just go to the gym. I just need to put everything away and clear my mind." Andrea had a similar statement when she was asked how she handles the stress of the position. She said, "Just exercise. Just go to the rec and come back and deal with it and go back to the rec."

Another way that five of the six RAs managed the stress of the position was to reach out to family members and friends. Jenn explained this by saying, "Just hanging out with my friends outside of the job. They tell me things that are going on in their lives and things that aren't dealing with residents. I think that helps a lot."

Sophie explained that she reaches out to family and friends in a different manner:

I have a tendency to freak out... But I have really awesome people in my life who are like, 'It's going to be okay, one thing at a time. What do you need help with?' That really helps me put it in focus and be like, 'Okay, I can do this.'

The RA who did not reach out to others during stressful times preferred a more internal approach. Andrea said:

I'm not much of a talker. I'm more of a listener. I just kind of deal with it and do my own thing. I just shut down a little bit, but you have stuff to do. You have to move on.

**Developing Autonomy and Interdependence.** RAs are expected to work together on a staff team in certain circumstances, but are also expected to complete responsibilities on their own. Some RAs rely on their supervisors and staff members for extra support and direction while others are more able to complete tasks on their own without much additional guidance. The interview questions that were developed to understand where a participant was in this vector looked at the assistance the RAs received or would seek from their supervisors and fellow staff members when completing their responsibilities.

*Autonomy.* It is not possible to constantly monitor the progress each RA makes toward fulfilling their responsibilities, so supervisors place a level of trust in their staff members to complete routine tasks. The additional responsibilities and trust that go along with the RA position were discussed by each of the RAs in terms of how they viewed themselves. Albert stated it best when he said:

Whenever you look at it you realize that they feel trust in me to carry a key to every floor, a key to the closet where the safe is at, so they're very trusting in you. They believe you have that maturity, so to prove that I have to be responsible whenever I'm dealing with things. If I lost this key, good lord, that's a lot of

money to be charged. There's so much responsibility given to you that you have to act responsible.

As stated previously when describing the competence of the RAs, the four female RAs conveyed a sense of autonomy when they spoke about taking the initiative to schedule their lives in a more efficient way. Sophie stated it best by saying:

The RA position really forced me to schedule myself. That really helped because I actually printed out a schedule of what I do every single day and put it outside my door so the residents know where I am. That honestly helped me personally getting in the groove with things. I go to class at this time, go to the rec at this time, eat dinner then, study then. So that helped me with getting into a pattern of what I'm doing.

Though he did not echo this change, Albert admitted that he knew he should make a change in his scheduling and procrastination habits:

I think trying to figure out the importance of stuff is how I've handled it so far. I need to start handling it by getting it done sooner, getting a head start on it. I think I've just realized the importance and what, if it needs to, can wait.

**_Interdependence._** Each of the six RAs mentioned relying on their supervisors and fellow staff members to a certain extent. Sophie, in speaking of her supervisor stated, "Anything I need help with, or support, or just to vent, they're there." Four of the six spoke about reaching out to their directors for support in an emergency situation. In dealing with a drug-related incident, Jason explained that his supervisor was there with him:

We called [my supervisor] who was on duty, which was good for us because he was right there. He gave us the run through. I used my training. Everything went smoothly because we remembered our training. We had [my supervisor] there who kind of helped us out.

In a situation that dealt with one student harassing another, Jenn explained her actions by saying, "I just talked to [my supervisor] and I was like, "I have no idea what to do. I feel like I've tried everything and it's just not working."

In less critical situations, each of the six RAs spoke about reaching out to their directors and also the rest of their RA staffs. Rachel talked about a minor situation she was facing on her floor: "Well, first I sent out a text to the other RAs in [my hall] to see what they would do. I kind of knew what to do, but I wanted to see what they would do." Jason explained his feelings on asking his staff for support by saying, "I usually go to them because I'm not afraid to ask for help. I just want to get things right."

**Development of Mature Interpersonal Relationships.** RAs are expected to interact with many different people in their positions, including their supervisors, fellow staff members, and residents. The development of mature interpersonal relationships involves knowing the differences between these relationships and maintaining a sense of professionalism and respect among the people they interact with. The interview questions that were developed to understand where a participant was in this vector looked at the relationships the RA had with previous peer groups, their current staff, and their residents in the hall.

***Relationships with friends from freshman year.*** When asked about their ability to maintain the friendships they had developed during their first year of college, three of the RAs said that they were able to continue those friendships. Jenn explained:

> It was kind of finding that happy medium, so I just started inviting them all together. I was like, "We're going to see the movie in [the theatre]. Do you want to go?" Then my friends would go and my residents would go. I put them all in one boat. That worked out. It was kind of nice because the freshmen residents knew another face on campus. I think I've done pretty well in doing that. My friends come over and it's cool.

When asked if she had been able to stay in contact with her friends from the previous year, Andrea stated, "All of them. They've been more supportive than anyone in my stress moments."

On the other hand, three of the RAs explained that they had lost contact with their friends from freshman year. Sophie said:

> That's one thing that has really been a downer. You do have to make sacrifices. You can't do everything completely. Hanging out with friends is something I haven't been able to do as much as I would like. I still try. I have weekly or bi-weekly lunches with some people. There are some people; we are just so busy we don't have time to keep up. We try to keep in contact, but it just hasn't ever happened, which is really sad.

Rachel spoke about a similar experience when she said:

> I will say that we are not as close as we used to be. I don't see them and they don't see me. I've made new friends this year. I still hang out with some of them.

There were like ten of us and I hang out with three or four as opposed to ten last

year.

*Relationships with staff members.* When asked about the relationships they have

with their fellow staff members, the RAs had mixed reactions. One of the RAs, Jason,

had built a very strong connection with his staff. Jason said, "We're good friends, but

especially with [my hall] and with [my staff members]. I consider them my best friends

because we tell each other everything. We spend almost every day together."

Two of the other RAs explained that they had good working relationships with

most of their staff members, but they really had strong connections with one or two

coworkers. When asked about being friends with her coworkers, Jenn said:

Me and [another RA] are. We've been to Buffalo Wild Wings when we just

needed to get out of the building. We've been there and I've invited her to things

that my friends do, like going to the movies. You can see that everyone has

formed, not cliques because we all do stuff together, but you have your person.

John, who felt that he got along better with certain staff members, but not all, said:

I knew [two other RAs on staff] already, and those two I became really close with

this whole year. [Another RA] is the one I didn't know and I got really close with

her too. The other ones, I don't really know too much about them and I thought I

would. I thought I'd be really tight with the staff.

The remaining three RAs explained that they get along fine with the rest of their

staff members, but they don't necessarily see them as friends. Rachel said, "If I see them

in the hallway or the lobby obviously we are going to talk, but we're not friends outside

of staff." Rachel followed this idea up later by saying, "We all work really well together, which is really nice." Sophie also spoke about the lack of closeness on her staff team:

Again, I think we're not as close as we could be. Not because we don't get along, but because everyone's schedules are super crazy. We're not super close friends. We don't hang out all the time, but again, I think that's scheduling because we get along fantastically and when we do hang out it's really nice.

***Relationships with residents.*** In speaking about their interactions with their residents, four of the RAs explained that they had at least one resident whom they considered a friend. The most obvious example of this was when Albert said:

I mean I've built some really strong friendships on my floor, which I did not expect to happen. They always say don't play favorites, which I've realized is really hard because there are some guys I hang out with all the time. They're in my room 24/7, from 10am to 1am.

The other three RAs who mentioned being friends with their residents talked about the friendships affecting situations where they had to confront policy violations. When explaining one situation, Rachel felt that her friendship with the resident had a positive effect. She said, "She was actually really cool about it. Me and her are friends, so it wasn't awkward."

On the other hand, Sophie's friendship with her residents gave her pause about confronting situations. She said:

It's definitely nerve wracking. I'm one of those people like, "Oh, what are they going to think? I don't want them to hate me. I'm not doing this because I hate you or because I'm trying to pick on you. I swear. I'm just trying to do my job."

The two RAs who did not speak of their residents as friends still explained that they appreciated their residents, but they emphasized the role of professionalism in those relationships. Andrea started off by saying, "The responsibility of getting to know your residents for me is so easy because I like to talk to people and I'm good at that." She later stated:

> You know people are looking up to you so you almost get, not an ego, but you're like "I have to be presentable. I have to keep it professional." No matter what I'm doing, even if my residents can't see me, still you've adapted that. It's part of you.

In the same way, Jenn had this viewpoint:

> At the first floor meeting they were like, "Are you going to be like the mom?" I was like, "No, I'm not your mom. Sorry." It's like I'm going to tell you if you're doing something wrong that you're stupid. I'm not going to say that, but if you are, ways to change it. I wouldn't be like, "You're so stupid." I would be like, "Oh, I understand." I wouldn't cry with you, but I'd be the shoulder to cry on. Then I'd be the one to say, "Come on. Snap to it."

**Developing a Personal Identity.** As stated in Chapter 2, sophomores may be at a time in their lives where they struggle with their personal identity since development comes through exploration of certain aspects of their identity (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). The interview questions that focused on identity development asked the RAs to reflect on their overall experience as an RA and how the position had affected them as a person.

Four of the RAs spoke about how the responsibility of the position has made them feel like a role model to the other residents. Andrea said, "I just like making new friends

and, not holding a position of power, but knowing that I'm making a difference. I'm important. People are looking up to me instead of passing me." Albert stated, "It's weird being 'that guy' on the floor. Everyone looks at me differently than if I were just another resident, which is not always bad. It's probably a good thing in some situations." Rachel summarized this feeling when she said, "The thought of being a role model. I've always wanted to be a role model for other people, so I feel like I've done that from what I've seen."

The other two RAs spoke about their identities with relation to their staff dynamic. Jenn talked about the differing personalities on her staff and where she fits in. She said, "I'm right in the middle. They call me Switzerland. I'm just neutral." Sophie described her staff dynamic:

> We have some people who are more emotional in that blue area and then some people who are the complete opposite who don't want hugs or recognition. To know who your staff members are and how they react is really nice because it puts it in perspective. Not everyone is like you. Not everyone thinks like you for multiple reasons. I'm [an analytical] personality. Everyone has their role. That isn't necessarily wrong. There doesn't have to be a right way. You're both trying to get to the same outcome.

**Development of a Purpose.** The development of a purpose involves clarifying career and personal goals. The interview questions that were intended to elicit descriptions of this vector were focused on the academic majors of the RAs.

Two of the RAs, Andrea and Albert, had declared their majors at the start of their freshmen year and had continued in those majors through the time of the interviews.

Albert said, "It's Elementary Education. It's been that since the beginning." Andrea said, "English Education. It's been my major since I got on campus."

Rachel had initially declared her major to be Spanish Education at the start of her freshman year. Rachel did talk about a short time where she switched it during her freshman year. She stated, "Freshman year it was Spanish Education and I actually switched it to English Education. That didn't last very long, maybe a month, then I went back to Spanish [Education]."

Jason had declared his major to be Communication at the beginning of his freshman year, but had yet to choose a concentration in that major. However, he did mention another career goal when he said, "With ROTC, I'm trying to get contracted and do the best of my ability there."

Sophie did switch her minor program, but she did so with a clear idea of her career goals. She said:

I did switch my minor. I've always been a psych/pre-med major. That's something I've wanted to do for years. I want to go into psychiatry. I had a sociology minor, but I changed that to neuroscience, both of which I'm equally interested in. I didn't dislike sociology. It just made more sense because some of the classes double counted and because I have psych and pre-med which are two totally different majors. Then the neuroscience, some of those will double count. Then I have departmental honors, which is like another minor, so I tried to make it double count as much as it could.

Jenn was the only sophomore RA in this study to have changed her major during her sophomore year. She said:

I came in as a communication disorders and sciences major. I wanted to be a speech pathologist. Then I took the intro class and I hated it. I hated it. It was once a week for an hour and I dreaded it. It was bad. So I changed it to undecided. Then in my intro to psych, I took it as a gen ed, and also a class in high school. I found the stuff interesting, so I took a couple more classes and changed my major. At first I had it as a psychology major with a double minor in sociology and family and consumer sciences, but I did not like sociology, so I changed it to women's studies and that's right along with my path. It's grand. I feel like that's a big weight. I've found my niche. Right where I'm supposed to be.

**Development of Integrity.** The development of integrity involves developing a set of personal beliefs, being open to understanding the beliefs of others, and matching those personal beliefs to personal behavior (Chickering and Reisser, 1993). The interview questions that were intended to elicit descriptions of integrity focused on the RAs' interactions with people who were different than them and their own personal growth in the position. In accordance with Schaller's (2007) findings, it was challenging for the sophomore RAs to describe their integrity since they do not necessarily have a full grasp of their identities.

There were only two RAs who were able to clearly describe acts that characterized their development of integrity. One of these acts occurred when Jenn confronted two of her residents who had a heated difference of opinion with one another. When the situation turned to be disrespectful, Jenn stepped in to help. She said:

> Basically it was one girl who felt one way and another girl who did not approve at all. The way I was raised is that everyone is equal. We all have differences, but

when it all comes down to it, we're all the same. She was all up in arms and would not accept the way of the other girl. That was really hard. Then I felt bad for the other girl because it was really emotional and the girl had no mercy. That was just hard because you had to make her understand that, "Hey, you're words are hurting."

The other instance that reflected on the integrity of an RA was when Albert described his responsibility to complete the required tasks of the RA position. He talked about occasionally falling behind on responsibilities, but not necessarily feeling that it was important. He said:

If you're doing a door dec or a bulletin board and you don't keep up on it, say you're on the 5th floor. [My supervisor] doesn't go up there every day to check up on stuff. No one is going to notice except the floor.

**Development Through Transition**

To answer the second research question, the interviews were coded and analyzed with regard to Schlossberg's (1995) theory of transition. The RAs' responses to the interview questions (Appendix B) helped to understand their level of development along the four components of transition, *situation, self, support,* and *strategies,* which will be discussed in the following sections.

**Situation.** As stated in the literature review, the situational aspect of a transition involves the person's sense of control over the situation, their perception of control over the situation, and previous experiences with similar transitions (Schlossberg, 1995). The interview questions were designed to understand the situational aspects of the transition

for the RA. The questions began by looking at where they identified they were prior to

RA training and then in the first few months in the position.

When asked about what they knew about the job prior to beginning the RA

position, three of the RAs spoke about not knowing the full scope of what they were

getting into. Jenn said:

> I knew it was a big thing, like with training and everything, and I just think it was
>
> more than I was expecting. It was a lot more in depth, like the situations that you
>
> could encounter. That was a lot more than I think I was expecting and I think that
>
> was probably the biggest transition.

Sophie shared a similar perspective:

> It was kind of funny because I thought I was really prepared. I had all my door
>
> decs done and I had the ideas for my bulletin board. Then you actually get into
>
> training and you realize how much more there is to the position than the door decs
>
> and things like that. It makes you realize, "Oh, I wasn't as prepared as I thought."

Two of the RAs in this study spoke about the RAs from their freshman year

experiences and how those former RAs had shared information about the position. Jason

stated:

> I felt like I was prepared a little bit because I was really close with [RAs from my
>
> hall last year]. I was always asking questions like, "What would you do in this
>
> situation?" I was always curious about how they handled things. I just kind of
>
> picked up on things, so I felt I was a little prepared for certain situations.

Rachel said:

My RA was super nice last year and she would always tell me things, like what to expect, so I had a good idea of what the job was going to entail. I'm not going to lie, I was not very prepared.

Albert had worked as a Conference Assistant during the summer preceding his entry into the RA role. He felt that the CA position gave him a partial understanding of what he would see in the RA position. He said:

I feel like I was decently prepared. I was a Conference Assistant over the summer, so a lot of what happened for training, we did for CA training. The policies for the school year and over the summer, I thought they were pretty similar. I think personally, I was decently ready for coming into the RA position.

**Self.** The *self* component of the transition into the RA position is reliant on the individual identity development of each RA. Each of the questions that addressed the vectors of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of identity development helped contribute to the understanding of how the RAs' identities shaped their transition.

The most prominent aspect of identity development mentioned by the RAs was their competence in the transition into the role. After completing RA training, they still were unsure about their abilities to complete the role. Jason said, "[The transition] was kind of rough for a little bit because I'm only 19 and it's a big responsibility. You kind of get the hang of it. Once you get used to the flow it becomes pretty easy."

Jenn was also unsure about her competence. She said, "I just think it was more than I was expecting. It was a lot more in depth, like the situations that you could encounter. I think that was probably the biggest transition." Andrea echoed this feeling when she said, "Actually I was a little more nervous after training because of all the stuff

that could happen. The stories I had heard from [returning RAs] from their years. So that was more nerve-wracking."

The other main aspect of social identity development that affected the RAs' transition into the position was their development of autonomy and interdependence, which is directly related to the following section, which details how they reached out to their supervisors and other staff members for support.

**Support.** The support system for a person going through a transition can shape how the person views the transition and how positively or negatively they perceive the transition (Schlossberg, 1995). The interview questions were designed to understand the support systems for sophomore RAs. These questions were focused on who the RAs reached out to for help in the beginning of their time in the position and when they felt stressed.

Five of the six RAs stated that the other RAs on their staffs were helpful in the transition to the position. When asked about particular people who were helpful in her transition, Sophie said, "I'm really lucky for the staff that I have. There is myself and another RA who are both new, and the rest are all [returning] staff. So they've been really nice and helpful." Jason stated, "Basically the whole [complex] staff because I know if I have any questions, they're there to help." Andrea spoke about the commonality she shares with the other new RAs:

> Definitely the other RAs who were newbies. Just relating on the same page. We
>
> were all going into it blind. We had the upperclassmen help us a little bit in
>
> Through Open Doors and Behind Closed Doors in training.

Four of the RAs also mentioned that their supervisors were helpful in making the transition into the position. Jason spoke about the availability of his supervisor:

I usually go to [my supervisor or the returning RA on staff] because I'm not afraid to ask for help. I just want to get things right and I know [my supervisor] has been [in his position] for a couple years and I think this is [the returning RA's] fourth year.

Jenn spoke about having two supervisors and how they both support her. "I definitely think [my supervisors] are different people and they have different strengths and I think them together has made it an easy transition."

Sophie also has two supervisors and has identified how they help her:

It really helps out. Especially with our director team. We have one who is very [team oriented] and one who is very [task oriented]. What one lacks, the other is very strong in, so as a team they make this perfect unison that is really helpful for whatever we're looking for.

In addition to staff and supervisors, family was also important in the transition. Rather than relying on the staff team, Rachel said that her family was helpful in making the transition into the RA role. She said, "I call my family three or four times a week. They've always supported me. I think they're my main support and they're always there for me." Jenn explained that it was the combination of family and staff that helped her, "Having that [staff] support team has really helped. And my mom. I think that's really been helpful, having someone to talk to. Knowing I can turn to someone if something stressful happens."

**Strategies.** Strategies are methods that help people handle stress, including problem solving and time management (Misra and McKean, 2000). The interview questions that were designed to understand the RAs' strategies for handling stress were straightforward. The participants were asked about stressful situations they had experienced, how they calmed down after stressful events, and whom they reach out to during times of stress.

As stated in the section on *development of competence,* the four female RAs were able to improve their time management strategies through the position to better cope with the workload of the position. Sophie said, "It's helped me schedule things better and my life better. Honestly, as stressful as it may be and with all the things that it may add, it's helped me be less stressed with my life."

When asked if the stress of the RA position has impacted other areas of her life, Jenn put it very simply. She said, "I think prioritizing my life. That's one thing. I don't know how to put a specific word to it."

As far as other ways to cope with stress, there was a similarity to what was mentioned previously in the *coping with the emotions of the position* section. Four of the six RAs go to the recreation center to manage the stress and five of the six said they like to reach out to other people. Jenn said, "I go running. I like to run a lot. I like to work out. And then just hanging out with my friends outside of the job." Albert shared:

> I go do racquetball. Just trying to take time. That's something I did last year too. I realized I would talk to everybody about it. Any time I would feel overwhelmed or stressed, even though stuff needs to get done, I realized that was not good, so I would take time. Even if I couldn't afford to, I would just go out and do

something: go to late night [pizza], go to the rec for something. I realized, Yes, it

needs done, but at the same time I'm freaking out so I'm just going to do

something I want to right now for like an hour and come back to it.

Andrea preferred a more internal approach to handling the stress of the position.

When asked what she does when the position get overwhelming, she said, "Take a bath.

Just baby myself for a little bit."

## Perspectives on RA Training

To answer the final research question of this research study, the interview guide

featured eight questions that specifically focused on RA training. The responses to these

specific questions, as well the participants' responses to other questions that related to the

training process, were coded and analyzed. The identified categories include: exhaustion,

team building, beneficial sessions, and areas for more training.

**Exhaustion.** When asked about their feelings during the training process, each

RA spoke about feeling exhausted throughout the experience. When asked to describe

RA training, Sophie said, "Exhaustion! Is that a good word?" She followed it up later in

the interview by saying:

> I felt like it was really long, but looking back, it was all information that you
>
> needed. We were doing training all day, then at 10 o'clock you could start
>
> working on your floor. That threw me for a loop. It was like, "Oh, well, that's far
>
> less time than I thought I was going to have." So I think it's all necessary, but it
>
> was very straining.

Jason explained a similar feeling when he was asked if there was anything he

didn't like about training. He said, "That each event was like 10 hours. Like 8am to 6pm.

It was just exhausting. Then you have to go back and work on your bulletin boards and door decs. It's overwhelming. It's just kind of exhausting."

Andrea stated:

I didn't like how long it was. Like the days. The set time was fine, like the two weeks, but the days were long. It was like, you have to do this, you have to do this, then after the long day, guess what: [You have to look for maintenance issues.]

**Team building.** Each of the RAs spoke about particular moments during the RA training process that stuck out to them. While some of the moments were directly tied to specific training sessions, the one general aspect that each RA spoke about was team building.

Jenn said, "I really liked bonding with the staff. I liked getting to know and how we all came together with our buddy staff for the ropes course. That was really fun. That was probably one of my favorite days." Jason shared a similar sentiment: "You've got the bonding, like the games we have to play and the puzzles. It was pretty cool. I liked that." When asked what she enjoyed about training, Sophie said, "The bonding between everyone. The camaraderie. All of it except how little sleep I got." Andrea followed this up by saying, "What did I like? I guess getting to know everybody. That's one of the things I like to do. That was fun."

**Beneficial sessions.** The RAs were asked about which specific sessions or training experiences they found to be most beneficial. They identified two sessions that stood out as the most helpful. One such session that each RA spoke about was "Behind Closed Doors," a role-playing session in which new RAs are required to confront

situations that are acted out by returning RAs. The other session the participants referred to was the *smoke* out, where they responded to a mock fire in a residence hall that was filled with artificial smoke.

**Behind Closed Doors.** The participants all identified the experience of going through the motions of confronting different situations they might encounter during the year as especially beneficial. When asked about his favorite part of training, Albert said:

I really liked how to handle situations. Handling situations like conduct. That was one thing that I didn't know if we were supposed to know this already or how I was going to know this. That's one thing that they really drilled into your head. You knew how to handle situations going into them. That's one thing that training did really well with.

As a response to the same question, Jason stated:

Closed doors and open doors, they prepared you. Like, "This is how the situation is going to go. If I mess up, this is the consequence you have to face." It puts you on the spot in front of other people.

While participants identified that Behind Closed Doors was a beneficial part of training, they also spoke about their apprehension toward the activity. When asked how training could have gone better for her, Andrea said:

Maybe if it was more relaxed. Like stuff was hyped up like "Behind Closed Doors is going to be hard, but you can do it." Don't even say it's going to be hard. Just let us go do it so the anxiety wasn't there.

When Jenn was asked whether she felt ready for the RA position after training, she shared:

Yeah, I was kind of nervous about it after the Behind Closed Doors. Like, Oh my god. Oh crap. Now I really don't know what to expect, but at least I have the experience now." In a way it was beneficial, so that was nice.

*Smoke out.* Another session that five of the six RAs mentioned in the interview was the smoke-out of a residence hall. The university police department simulated a fire in one of the halls and had RAs handle the situation as if an actual fire had broken out. Sophie said, "When we did the smoke-out, I was the one who had to knock on doors and get everyone. I didn't expect to have to go into a smoked building and actually go through that."

Jason said, "The smoke out. You don't want that to happen, but you never know so it kind of prepares you for if a fire breaks out."

Albert explained that the experience was beneficial when he stated:

I didn't think I knew the fire alarm procedure that well until we had a fire alarm go off one day and I did know what was going on. I grabbed everything I needed to do and realized it was stuck in my head from training.

**Uncomfortable sessions.** Two of the RAs mentioned that certain sessions during training made them uncomfortable. The common denominator was that each of these sessions focused on some aspect of diversity. The first session was a 45-minute video that showed a conversation between people of different races. The video was followed up with an open discussion where the RAs were encouraged to speak. Jenn stated, "I think the movie had a good purpose and brought light to diversity, but it was a little crazy. Yeah, I think it was too much."

Still talking about the video later in the interview, Jenn said:

One thing we talked about afterwards was, "How many of you wanted to say something, but after everyone was saying things you decided not to?" We all raised our hands. I think it had good meaning, it just was like, "Holy crap."

In reference to the same diversity video, Jason said, "I liked how that one diversity video was kind of hard on other people, but I liked that because it kind of opened your eyes."

The other session that an RA felt was uncomfortable was Safe Zone training. This is a session where a certified facilitator educates the group on issues facing the LGBTQ population and how to be a good ally to people who identify as LGBTQ. Andrea said:

The uncomfortable ones for me were the LGBTQ, Safe Zone. Like signing off because you were either in it, neutral, or against it. That was the most uncomfortable part of training. What was hard was when they put you on the spot and say sign this document where you agree with what it says, but the words are twisted in a way where you feel bad if you don't sign it. Stuff like that was like "was that necessary?"

**Areas for more training.** When asked if there were areas that they needed more training on, the participants identified two main themes: more hands-on training with scenarios and more time spent on paperwork.

Four of the RAs stated that they wanted to learn more by actually doing the actions than hearing and reading about them. Rachel said, "I just needed someone to physically show me as opposed to saying, 'Read this binder and hopefully you get it.' I would have liked somebody to show me." Jason also spoke about wanting more interactive training:

I would do more closed doors and open doors because I think that builds your

confidence up and if they had two days of that people would be more confident in

themselves.

Four of the six RAs also wanted more experience with handling the paperwork

side of things. They spoke about how the paperwork side of the position was spoken

about in training, but they would have preferred hands-on practice. Albert said:

We just had a lot of questions as far as [reports on residents] and doing those. So

writing them out and knowing how long those were supposed to be. Incident

Reports, I didn't know how often those were going to be written. I think those we

kind of flew over really fast.

Students identified that they had briefly addressed some administrative forms in

training and it would have helped to do a mock form for practice. Sophie said, "I mean

the paperwork was difficult the first time you did it. The ones that we didn't go super in-

depth through, like room changes and things like that." Rachel stated, "I would say how

to fill out different forms. I would say I was kind of shaky on how to fill out incident

reports and lockouts."

**Summary**

This chapter reviewed the themes found during individual interviews with

sophomore RAs. Through these interviews, the researcher was able to gain insight into

their social identity development, their development through transition, and their

viewpoints on RA training. Chapter V will conclude this research study by providing a

discussion of the findings, recommendations for residence life professionals, and

suggestions for future research to follow this study.

# CHAPTER V

## Discussion

This study was conducted to examine the development levels of sophomore RAs, to understand their transition into the position, and to understand their perspectives on RA training. To achieve these goals, the following research questions were asked: (1) Where are sophomore students who are RAs at in their development upon entering the position? (2) How do sophomore students describe their transition into the RA position? (3) In what areas could additional training and support be beneficial to sophomore students in the RA position? In this chapter, the results of this study are discussed, recommendations for residence life professionals are made, and recommendations for future research are provided.

### Discussion of Findings

Chapter IV described the data collected from the one-on-one interviews with the research participants. The following section will describe the findings of this study, how the findings relate to the current literature, and how they provide insight with respect to the research questions. This section will be broken up into three themes that follow the research questions this study sought to answer: the development of levels of sophomore RAs, the transition into the RA position, and the perceptions on RA training.

**Development levels of sophomore RAs.** This research study used the seven vectors of Chickering and Reisser's (1993) theory of identity development to understand the development levels of sophomore RAs. The most significant vectors that impacted the RAs' experiences are discussed here.

*Competence.* Fitch and Winston (1993) stated that the purpose of RA training is to prepare the RAs with skills to effectively complete their responsibilities and to practice handling difficult situations. This study found that sophomore RAs considered training to be a time where their understanding of the RA position and their competence in completing the responsibilities of the position greatly improved. This competence was tested when the RAs had to transition into the role at the beginning of the academic year when residents moved into the halls.

Schaller and Wagner (2005) found that RAs face significant challenges in balancing their academics with the responsibilities of the job and the findings of the present study also found that they struggle with this balance. The RAs in this study stated that one of the biggest challenges of the position is their ability to effectively manage time spent completing their responsibilities as students, their responsibilities in the RA position, and any other outside obligations.

*Autonomy and interdependence.* Fitch and Winston (1993) stated that new RAs are likely to be unsure of themselves with respect to the responsibilities of the role, so they tend to reach out to their supervisors for support and guidance. The present study found that sophomore RAs do rely heavily on their supervisors for direction, especially during confrontational situations. Jason and Jenn both spoke in detail about specific events where they reached out to their supervisors for assistance during challenging situations.

The present study also found that sophomore RAs rely heavily on their fellow staff members for support and advice when it comes to everyday responsibilities. Each RA in this study described situations when they would either text the RAs on their staff

about a question or rely on their staff members for emotional support during challenging times of the year.

*Managing emotions.* Paladino et al. (2005) identified that the multiple responsibilities of the RA position can put RAs at risk for overstress and burnout. The current study found that sophomore RAs tend to feel overwhelmed by RA training as a result of the high amount of information they were given and the long hours they were expected to be in attendance. After the completion of training, the RAs perceived the day-to-day responsibilities and frequent deadlines of the position to be high-stress components of the job. Their emotions were especially tested through confrontations of policy violations.

The RAs explained that they experience the stress of having multiple responsibilities and they tended to handle that burden by leaving the residence hall to participate in other activities. They said that going to the Student Recreation Center and speaking with family members and friends outside of the position were effective ways that they used to deal with the stresses of the RA job. The RAs said that they were able to come back to the hall and complete their responsibilities more effectively when they take that time away from the building.

**Transition into the RA position.** This research study examined the transition of sophomore students into the RA position with respect to Schlossberg's (1995) transition theory. The two key components that the sophomore RAs in this study described were their support systems and the strategies they used to cope with the transition into the position.

*Support.* Schaller (2005) found that sophomore students tend to reach out to their parents, friends from their freshman year, or a trusted faculty member during times of turmoil, and a follow up study by Schaller and Wagner (2005) found that sophomore RAs often do not find social support in their friends from freshman year. The current study identified that sophomore RAs tend to rely on other sources for social support. Some of the RAs in this study spoke about how they do not keep in consistent contact with their friends from freshman year due to the time restraints and responsibilities of the RA position. Rather they tend to bond with their fellow RAs on their staff teams and use them for social support. Albert specifically mentioned that RAs really bond together during stressful times of the year when deadlines start to mount. The sophomore RAs did mention that they reach out to their family members, but not one of them spoke about relying on a faculty member for support.

As stated previously, sophomore RAs also rely on their supervisors for direction and support in the RA role. The RAs said that their supervisors were important to having a positive transition experience. They reached out to their supervisors in a variety of situations, including asking for advice on planning a program and dealing with day to day conflicts between residents.

*Strategies.* Misra and McKean (2000) found that sophomore students are less developed in their basic coping skills such as time management and problem solving. The current study found that sophomore RAs reported having improved time management skills and being better at balancing responsibilities because of the additional requirements of the RA position. They reported that having less time to complete more work forced them to establish a system that made more efficient use of their time. John, the RA who

admitted that his time management was a weakness, recognized that the position revealed to him that it was an area for improvement.

**Additional training.** As mentioned previously, Fitch and Winston (1993) stated that the purpose of RA training is to prepare RAs for the role, give them practice in handling difficult situations, and to foster relationships between staff members. The sophomore RAs in this study believed they were underprepared when it came to completing more administrative aspects of the position. They mentioned that paperwork was talked about during training, but they would have liked more hands-on experience with filling out different forms that are required in the position.

The sophomore RAs also agreed that they wanted more sessions that involved experiential learning rather than lecture-style training. They felt that they retained more information when they were able to physically do the required task rather than just talk or read about it. Rachel said, "I just needed someone to show me as opposed to saying, 'read this binder and hopefully you get it.'"

**Recommendations for University Housing Professionals**

The RAs in this research study all spoke about the positive influence of the housing professional staff on campus. The housing professionals host the extensive fall training that the RAs said prepared them for the responsibilities of the role and they also provide the consistent supervisory support that the RAs often relied upon. From this research, there are a few findings that should encourage further action on the part of university housing professionals. Professionals who rely on these sophomore RAs as valuable members of a residence hall team should invest time and effort in them in order

to help them achieve the responsibilities of their position more completely and efficiently.

One such way housing professionals can do this is by assessing their current practices for RA training and soliciting feedback from RAs on what information they were able to retain and what they needed more training on. The results from this research study encourage housing professionals to implement more hands-on training and experiential learning sessions during RA training because this is what the RAs remember when they are in the position. With a better understanding of how to complete their responsibilities, these RAs will be more competent and confident in their role.

Another suggestion for housing professionals is to review aspects of training during weekly staff meetings throughout the first semester. RAs reported feeling overwhelmed by the amount of information they received during training. Reviewing the information afterward would help RAs recall certain aspects of training and improve their performance in their position. One specific area that was addressed was paperwork. The RAs did not feel competent in filling out paperwork at the conclusion of training. Providing opportunities to practice filling out forms in these staff meetings would be helpful.

The supervisors of sophomore RAs should also make an effort to understand the experience of each individual staff member as it relates to that staff member's development. Especially important are the RA's level of competence, ability to manage emotions, and level of autonomy. Supervisors typically meet with each staff member individually on a regular basis and understanding the developmental needs of the students

is critical to this process The supervisor should take the opportunity to ask intentional questions related to these developmental areas during weekly one-on-one meetings.

Questions about these areas could include the following:

- Is there anything from training that I can clarify?

- Have you run into any situations that you weren't sure how to handle?

- How have you been able to balance classes and the position?

- How have you been managing the stress of the RA position?

- Have you been reaching out to other staff members when you have questions?

These questions and their responses are especially relevant during the first month of the school year when RAs are just figuring out the role and becoming comfortable with the position.

**Future Research**

This study focused on sophomore RAs who, by the requirements of the institution, were new to the position. A potential follow-up study could choose to look at junior or senior RAs who are also new to the position. Such a study would help to clarify whether some findings of this current study were related to the students being sophomores or whether the findings were related to them being in the position for the first time. Another potential follow up to this study would be to provide a longitudinal perspective. This would involve interviewing sophomore RAs during their first year in the position and re-interviewing them during their junior year and their senior year. A longitudinal study would provide perspective on the students' developmental growth throughout their tenure as an RA.

**Summary**

This chapter discussed the findings of this research study, how the findings relate to the research questions, suggestions for university housing professionals, and suggestions for future research. The participants of this study were able to speak at length on their experiences in the RA position, their transition into the RA position, and their opinions of RA training.

Each of the RAs in this study was capable of completing the responsibilities of the RA position, and they each had their own areas of strength and areas of improvement. Hall directors who supervise RA staffs should be aware of the unique challenges and contributions that come from having sophomore RAs on a staff. Supervisors should be aware and knowledgeable about issues and transitions sophomore RAs may go through and how to be a positive influence in these students' development. Being a proactive supervisor for sophomore RAs will help increase the effectiveness of the overall RA staff and enhance the development of these students.

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APPENDIX A

## CONSENT TO PARTICIPATE IN RESEARCH

**Understanding the Development of Sophomore RAs**

You are invited to participate in a research study conducted by Aaron Hollis, supervised by Dr. Dianne Timm, from the Counseling and Student Development department at Eastern Illinois University.
Your participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Please ask questions about anything you do not understand before deciding whether or not to participate. Generally, the researcher and potential participant read through and discuss the informed consent information together.
You have been asked to participate in this research study because you are a sophomore student in the RA position.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
The purpose of this study is to better understand the development levels of RAs who are in their sophomore year of college. This information help student affairs professionals better support the students they supervise and provide a better experience to future RAs in the position.

## PROCEDURES
If you are a volunteer to participate in this study, you will be asked to:
Coordinate with the researcher to set up an hour of time in which to meet with the researcher and answer questions related to the RA position. The interview will be audio recorded and then transcribed by the researcher.
The audio recording will be on the researcher's laptop and will only be heard by the researcher.
After the conclusion of the interview, the participant will be asked to read through a written transcription of the interview to verify the accuracy of the transcription.

## POTENTIAL RISKS AND DISCOMFORTS
There are no foreseeable risks or discomforts to the participant.

## POTENTIAL BENEFITS TO SUBJECTS AND/OR SOCIETY
There are no potential benefits to the participants.
The potential benefits to society include the potential for student affairs professionals to better understand how to support and supervise sophomore RAs in order to provide the most benefit to students in the position.

## CONFIDENTIALITY
Any information that is obtained in connection with this study and that can be identified with you will remain confidential and will be disclosed only with your permission or as required by law.

Confidentiality will be maintained through the use of pseudonyms rather than participant names. Any mentions of specific names in the interview process will be altered to protect the identity of the participant or the person mentioned. Data will be kept on a password protected laptop that is only accessible by the researcher. Data from this study, including the audio recordings and transcriptions, will be kept for a period of three years, as required by the Institutional Review Board, and then it will be promptly destroyed. The information in this research study will only be seen by the researcher and his thesis advisor in order to ensure the proper coding and treatment of data.

**PARTICIPATION AND WITHDRAWAL**
Participation in this research study is voluntary and not a requirement or a condition for being the recipient of benefits or services from Eastern Illinois University or any other organization sponsoring the research project. If you volunteer to be in this study, you may withdraw at any time without consequences of any kind or loss of benefits or services to which you are otherwise entitled. There is no penalty if you withdraw from this study and you will not lose any benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.
You may also refuse to answer any questions you do not wish to answer.
The investigator may withdraw you from this research if circumstances are which warrant doing so.

**IDENTIFICATION OF INVESTIGATORS**
If you have any questions or concerns about this research, please contact:
Aaron Hollis
(217) 581-7695
arhollis@eiu.edu
Dr. Dianne Timm (Faculty advisor)
(217) 581-2400
dtimm@eiu.edu

**RIGHTS OF RESEARCH SUBJECTS**
If you have any questions or concerns about the treatment of human participants in this study, you may call or write:

Institutional Review Board
Eastern Illinois University
600 Lincoln Ave.
Charleston, IL 61920
Telephone: (217) 581-8576
E-Mail: eiuirb@www.eiu.edu

You will be given the opportunity to discuss any questions about your rights as a research subject with a member of the IRB. The IRB is an independent committee composed of members of the University community, as well as lay members of the community not connected with EIU. The IRB has reviewed and approved this study.

APPENDIX B

Interview Questions

1. How has your year been?

    a. What is different about this year compared to last?

2. What did the transition into the RA position look like for you?

    a. Have there been people to assist you in that change?

    b. Where has that support mostly come from?

    c. Have you had previous experiences that prepared you for the RA position?

3. What has the RA position been like?

    a. What are your responsibilities?

    b. Are some responsibilities easier than others?

    c. Have there been challenging aspects to the position?

    d. Is the position what you expected it to be?

4. Do you have other obligations outside of the RA position?

    a. How has it been trying to balance academics, the RA position, and outside commitments?

    b. How have your classes been this year?

        i. Have you declared a major?

        ii. Have you changed your major?

            1. If so, what influenced the changed?

    c. Have you been able to stay in contact with your friends from last year?

5. How has your floor come together?

    a. What have you done to facilitate a positive community?

    b. Have your supervisors and staff members been able to assist you with this?

    c. How has it been interacting with a diverse group of people?

        i. Residents

        ii. Staff members

6. Tell me about your staff dynamic.

    a. Do people on your staff work together well?

    b. Are your staff-members friends outside of the work environment?

    c. Have there been any conflicts among your staff?

7. What do you most enjoy about the RA position?

8. What about the position is stressful?

    a. How have you handled those types of situations?

    b. Has the stress of the position impacted other areas of your life?

    c. How do you calm down after a stressful event?

    d. Who do you talk to when you're feeling stressed?

9. What has it been like being on duty?

    a. Have you had to respond to any emergency situations?

        i. How have those gone?

    b. Have you had to document any residents?

        i. Has that been challenging for you?

        ii. What were your thoughts during the documentation?

10. Have you had any problems with the RA position?

    a. How do you address those problems?

    b. What do you do when the position gets overwhelming?

    c. If you could change anything about the RA position, what would it be and why?

11. Do you feel like you've grown from being in the RA position?

    a. In what ways have you grown this year?

        i. How has the RA position influenced this change?

    b. Has that impacted your relationships with others?

        i. Friends from last year.

        ii. Current staff.

        iii. Residents.

12. Describe RA training?

    a. What did you like about training?

    b. What did you not like about training?

    c. How prepared were you for the position before training started?

    d. Did you feel ready for the position after training?

    e.  Which sessions did you think were especially helpful?

    f.  Was there anything you needed more training on?

    g.  How could training have been better for you?

13. What parts of the job surprised you the most?

    a.  Why were they surprising?

    b.  How have you managed those challenges?

14. Is there anything we didn't cover about the RA position that you would like to talk about?