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Walking the Thin Line: The Challenges of Policy Enforcement for Resident Assistants

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INTRODUCTION

Throughout the United States, resident assistants (RAs) manage residence hall environments, develop communities, and contribute to the educational mission of student affairs. RA positions provide leadership experiences, opportunities for personal and professional development, and the potential to influence and assist students with whom they live and work. Some, however, ask whether the RA job is too demanding for students (Dodge, 1990) and if too much is expected of RAs (Bierman & Carpenter, 1994). Housing professionals have been encouraged to reexamine student staffing patterns in light of resident learning needs, and, if the RA job is still crucial, to make it more workable for full-time students (Fotis & Butler, 1999).

Although being an RA can be very rewarding, it can also be stressful and result in burnout (Deluga & Winters, 1990, 1991; Fuehrer & McGonagle, 1988; Palmer, 1996). When RAs are expected to enforce policy or mediate conflicts with peers, their roles as friend and staff member can seem incongruent and result in confusion, psychological dissonance, and lower levels of job satisfaction (Deluga & Winters, 1991; Fuehrer & McGonagle, 1988; Kuh & Schuh, 1983). Additionally, RAs who are zealous in enforcing policy may not be as well accepted by residents as are RAs who are more lenient and accommodating, while RAs with a high desire for power, authority, and control may find little

support from residence life administrators (Deluga & Winters, 1991).

Because the orientation to rules and relationships differs for individual RAs, supervisors need to adapt their approaches to staff supervision accordingly. For instance, one RA may have strong interpersonal skills but experiences great difficulty confronting residents. Another RA may feel comfortable enforcing the rules but be less skilled in developing relationships with residents. Effective supervisors employ different supervision strategies based on an RA's orientation to rules and relationships (Porterfield & Pressprich, 1988).

Furthermore, supervisors' expectations for RAs to develop positive communities, enhance student learning, and promote the development of residents also must consider that RAs are students. Therefore, supervisors should assist RAs in their own growth and development (Bierman & Carpenter, 1994). From a developmental perspective, RAs may face some situations that stretch or exceed their abilities. By understanding RAs and their development, an effective supervisor can apply theoretical constructs to assist RAs in making decisions and processing their experiences (Ricci, Porterfield, & Piper, 1987). As RAs develop, their efforts to promote positive communities may be more successful if they have appropriate supervisory support.

Blimling (1995) identified five common responsibilities of RAs: (a) handling administrative details, (b) helping to provide control, (c) helping to establish a healthy residence hall environment, (d) assisting individual student needs, and (e) supporting hall government programs. Faced with personal developmental tasks and issues, how do RAs handle numerous and sometimes competing job demands? How, for instance, do RAs balance their roles as peer and friend while simultaneously helping to "provide control" by enforcing policy? Upcraft and Pilato (1982) called this conflict the "cop-counselor problem" and suggested that some negative fallout from each confrontation is likely. Residents are apt to resent the intrusion of a confrontation and even floor members who were not directly involved may react negatively to the RA. Upcraft and Pilato maintained that, "RAs will never win any popularity contests for enforcing rules, but they may win respect if they handle this role properly" (pp. 143-144). Yet, the concept of handling discipline properly is nebulous. How *should* RAs handle rule enforcement? How do staff learn to be neither too aggressive nor too passive, neither

too strict nor too lenient?

RAs make decisions about balancing their various roles, but little research exists on how they navigate resulting role conflicts. Learning how they manage conflicting roles is crucial to understanding the RA position. With these insights, administrators can more explicitly define RA positions and can subsequently clarify strategies for recruiting, selecting, training, and supervising RAs. The purpose of this study was to develop a more complex understanding of RA experiences. Although other data were collected, the focus of this article is the role of RAs in policy enforcement and how that role is balanced with other roles.

METHOD

To examine RAs' experiences with policy enforcement and potential role conflicts, a qualitative study was designed. Data were collected in individual interviews with 20 RAs from three universities in different states.

Sampling

Because access and research approval issues were slightly different at the three universities from which research participants were drawn, the selection process for interviewees also differed. The first campus is a state university housing 3,500 students and employing 100 RAs. The assistant director of residence life notified all RAs of the study. The researcher then randomly selected RAs from the staff roster. RAs were contacted by telephone, the study was explained, and RAs were assured their participation would be confidential and their identity known only to the researcher. Ten RAs agreed to participate and later were interviewed.

The second institution is a highly competitive, public university with 4,500 residents and 140 RAs. The interviewer was on campus just one day, so the director of residence life arranged interviews with 4 RAs. Each understood that residence life administrators knew of their participation; however, their responses were confidential. All consented to that arrangement.

The third campus is a highly competitive, private university with 4,800 residents and 120 RAs. The researcher was granted approval to compose an e-mail message that was forwarded to RAs by the assistant director of residence life. RAs interested in participating contacted the researcher. Six RAs volunteered and participated

in confidential interviews.

Participants

Twenty RAs were interviewed and are identified with pseudonyms. Participants included 9 men and 11 women; 1 Asian American, 5 African Americans, and 14 Caucasians; 3 sophomores, 9 juniors, and 8 seniors. Eleven RAs were in their first year on the job and 9 were second-year or third-year RAs.

Interviews

Individual, in-person interviews followed a semistructured format using the interview guide approach (Kvale, 1996; Patton, 2002). Interviews lasted between 45 and 90 minutes, and were audiotaped and transcribed with personally identifiable details removed.

Questions focused on participants' motivation for being an RA, conceptions of a "good RA," rewards and challenges of the position, and experiences with policy enforcement. Questions most relevant to policy enforcement included:

1. Please describe a recent situation in which you were aware of a policy violation in your residence hall. How did you respond to that situation? Did you approach the person(s) who was (were) violating policy? Why? Why not? How did you feel about your response?
2. How do you feel before approaching a resident to enforce a policy?
3. How has your role as policy enforcer been explained to you?
4. How did you explain your role as policy enforcer to residents?
5. Do you ever feel like your supervisor, residents, and other staff members have different expectations for policy enforcement? If so, how do you resolve those conflicting expectations?
6. Do you think the administration wants you to enforce all of the policies? Why or why not?

Data Analysis

Data collection, coding, and analysis occurred simultaneously using the constant comparative method of data analysis (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). Each transcript was coded, and common themes and patterns in the data were identified. Open coding resulted in 82 codes and 12 categories. The "enforcement" category is highlighted in this article.

Detailed descriptions of participants and data provide information for readers to judge the transferability of these findings to other settings. Trustworthiness in the findings was enhanced through several common techniques. Investigator triangulation was evident in the use of two researchers, while data triangulation was enhanced by the diversity of participants from three different types of institutions. When possible, RAs participated in member checks to ensure the accuracy of our interpretations. Field notes, transcripts, and other documents created an audit trail for the study. Dynamic exchanges between the researchers enhanced data coding and analysis. Finally, throughout the study, focused discussions and debriefing with several residence life professionals challenged our thinking regarding the data and conclusions.

To interpret the following findings, several sources of subjectivity are noted. First, the authors are former RAs and former residence life professionals who supervised undergraduate, graduate, and full-time staff on several campuses. Therefore, they bring to the study a sensitivity to the demands of an RA position. Second, all participants communicated a desire to do well, but RAs who volunteered for interviews may have had a higher than average commitment to their jobs compared with RAs who chose not to participate in the study. Third, because participants were employed on three campuses, specific job expectations and staff training programs may have differed. All, however, were expected to enforce campus policies in their residence halls. Fourth, although the adequacy of the sample size will be judged by readers (Patton, 2002), it is noteworthy that very similar stories and themes emerged from RAs on each of the three campuses.

FINDINGS

Policy enforcement was difficult for RAs. Although this finding was not surprising, understanding *why* it was difficult provides valuable insight into RAs' experiences and the challenges they faced. The desire to maintain good relationships with residents, fear of the actual confrontation, and balancing multiple roles were three primary reasons policy enforcement was challenging for RAs.

Maintain Relationships

The most common concern of participants was

that confrontations would damage their relationships with peers or make residents hate them. The RAs wanted to be liked. For example, Jackie (senior, experienced RA, Caucasian) felt "really bad" confronting residents. "I don't want people to not like me, and I have a really bad problem with that." She described this feeling as human nature. "People have this drive to be liked and be accepted. . . . And if you punish someone by catching them doing something wrong . . . they're not going to like you very much at that moment." Although she believed "the rules exist and we have to follow them and we have to enforce them," doing so made her "feel like [she was] not a nice person anymore."

Kate (sophomore, first-year RA, Caucasian) also was concerned that residents would not like her, yet knew "it's going to get out of hand" if she did not enforce policy. However, she did not like to file incident reports because "I'm afraid they're going to get mad at me." She confronted residents because "I know that's what I have to do."

Brad (sophomore, first-year RA, Caucasian) also wanted to meet job expectations, but he struggled to be both friend and confronter. Suspecting that underage residents were drinking, he warned them to keep the noise down. He did not want them to "get in trouble," nor did he feel a warning was adequate. He explained the challenge of balancing both roles.

I've tried to get myself into a delicate position where I'm close enough that I'm their friend, and they'll tell me stuff that's happening, any problems that could arise that they might want to keep secret, but then again, I'm trying to stay far enough away where I am in the position to [discipline them]. Not taking discipline action, I felt that maybe I can make sure they're in the friendship position with me, because I can't tell where I am in their minds. And I felt, if I took disciplinary action—because it was several of my residents—since they're so close, the entire hall would form against me. And it's hard to deal with. It's hard enough to deal with one resident mad at you, but when you have 26, it can be a lot rougher.

Confrontations made Brad nervous and they were stressful for him. "It's something I do not like to do."

Although many RAs feared losing friendships with residents, Greg (junior, experienced RA, Caucasian) believed that enforcing policies violated the relationships of trust he worked hard to build. He described his view of the most challenging aspect of the RA job.

[It is] walking the thin line between friend and enforcer of college policies, especially with alcohol issues. It is really hard to maintain that ever-so-strange relationship. You are their friend and confidante, yet you also have to turn them in if they ever do anything wrong. It takes a long time and a lot of work to build up a relationship of trust, so when you feel you need to come down on them to enforce a college policy you always feel that you are violating that trust in a way. On top of all that, they are your friends as well, and you never want to get them in any kind of trouble, even if sometimes it is for their own good.

Faced with a policy violation, Greg felt “almost always nervous and a little sorry to crack down on them.”

It is hard to be the enforcer when you have to do so within your peer group. You think about the reaction you will get, the rumors and such that will be passed around. It is hard. RAs want to be well liked too, and it is not a real popular thing to do to bust someone for drinking or to yell at them for trash in the hallways. Plus it is not that hard to imagine yourself in a similar situation, so you definitely sympathize.

Attempting to preserve relationships, a few RAs talked about apologizing to residents during or after confrontations and some RAs appeared to take responsibility for “getting residents in trouble.” Kristen (junior, experienced RA, Caucasian) for example, was afraid to file an incident report “because you’re affecting something that goes on their transcript. You’re affecting something that stays with them for the rest of their life.” This comment also demonstrated the misunderstanding of an experienced RA, because the incident she described would not appear on the student’s transcript. Similarly, Dana (senior, experienced RA, Caucasian) described the campus alcohol policy as a federal law that

she had to enforce. Dana’s statement illustrated a subtle but important misperception, because RAs enforce campus policies, not federal or state laws.

Finally, some RAs raised the issue of talking with residents after confrontations in an effort to maintain good relationships. In these conversations, some residents apologized to RAs for putting them in the awkward situation of enforcing policy, especially when the RA and resident had a positive connection prior to the incident and the violation was egregious. RAs also spoke in interviews about lingering tensions, hostilities, and damaged relationships with residents that developed after confrontations took place.

RAs’ efforts to maintain positive relationships with residents are desirable and facilitate fulfillment of other roles, including developing community and helping residents. However, those efforts also can interfere with expectations to enforce policy. RAs who tried to develop friendships with residents struggled to be faithful to their relationships with peers and employers.

Fear Consequences

Some RAs expressed fear of the actual confrontation. Situations were unpredictable, and staff wondered what would happen when they approached people. This anticipation and uncertainty contributed to RAs’ apprehension. Like others, Cedric (senior, first-year RA, African American) expressed a sense of nervousness at approaching situations without knowing what was occurring. Although most confrontations went smoothly and residents often apologized for putting Leah (junior, first-year RA, African American) in an awkward position, others were more difficult. “It doesn’t happen very often, but you’ll have a situation where a person yells at you or curses at you that makes you fear every situation initially.” Before he approached residents to enforce policies, Michael (senior, experienced RA, African American) also wondered how they would react. He watched RAs enforce policies who were lenient like he was. “And when they finally do write somebody up, everybody hates him for doing his job.” Chip (junior, first-year RA, Caucasian) also was concerned about potential reactions. He feared being ostracized and called racist or sexist by residents.

Balance Multiple Roles

Participants articulated the difficulty of balancing the competing demands of building relationships with residents while simultaneously enforcing campus policies. Similar to parenting and supervising, knowing where to draw the line between being a friend and a disciplinarian was challenging and stressful for RAs. Even knowing she did the “right thing,” Kristen felt like she was “one of the most horrible people in the world because I got [a resident] into all this trouble.” She was concerned about being perceived as a “Bad Cop,” even for a night.

As an RA, you’re trained to be their friend, and there to talk, and you’re there to enforce policy, but when it comes right down to it, that’s the worst feeling in the world. . . . And that just really breaks my heart. . . . That’s the really hard thing to deal with, because you don’t want to have to affect them in that way. You want to affect them positively.

Like others, Kristen hoped the confrontations and interventions would be helpful to students in the long term, but it did not make that role any easier to handle.

As a teacher of children, Leah could confront them because she was always in an authoritative position.

But as a student, these are people I have classes with, that I use the same bathroom with, that I’m going to see in the student center on campus. So it’s harder to confront someone like that than it is someone you always have authority or power over.

Winston and Fitch (1993) suggested the RA position generally lacks “the authority to compel residents to modify their behavior, attitudes, or opinions” (p. 321). The “power” of RAs depends on their ability to “persuade or influence residents by the force of example and the quality of personal relationships” (p. 321). Hence, RAs have little actual authority and may be unsuccessful if they try to assert it too forcefully.

As a senior and experienced RA in a residence hall with first-year students, Brittany (Caucasian) had less difficulty confronting, but still felt conflicting expectations.

I mean, the residents want you to always be in that friend mode. They want you to be that cool person that they’ve gone to dinner with or gone to the movies with or painted toenails with and not the person who has to write them up for being drunk. The administration wants you to be the person who paints your toenails with the girls, but also equally, if not sometimes more important, at least in the past couple years, they want you to be the rule enforcer. Especially when it comes to alcohol.

Although Brittany seemed to balance this conflict more easily than some others, it still created awkward and uncomfortable situations for RAs and residents.

As friends, the RAs understood they were in a precarious position. Many participants believed that a resident who was a true friend would not put them in the difficult spot of having to confront a policy violation. Some RAs tried to maintain some distance from residents or not get “too close” to them so those relationships would not prevent them from upholding their enforcement responsibilities. Said Brad, “A good RA knows the residents well enough that they can sense problems, but then again, isn’t too close that when they do have to take disciplinary action, they don’t want to because they’re too close to their residents.” When he had to confront residents, he felt “bad.” According to Brandy (sophomore, first-year RA, African American), residents “are my friends, but they’re not my friends.” Although she treated them as friends, departmental policy prohibited her from driving them in her car, which was one barrier she faced. “They can be my friends, but they just can’t be my friends. It’s hard.” Chip also was aware of that friendship balance and wanted to avoid the hypocrisy of confronting some residents but not others.

I think I’m friends with [residents] in the sense that we can go hang out together, but I also want you to know that I’m doing a job here. You still need to follow the rules, whether you’re my friend or you’re not.

Similarly, Kelly (junior, first-year RA, Asian American) was frustrated that some residents could not separate her from her job. Expectations to confront residents frustrated her and created a hindrance to knowing them. “In order to know

them, they need to open up to me, and some people can't do that because they see too much of my RA side."

Dave (senior, experienced RA, Caucasian) emphasized the importance of RAs in developing community in residence halls and explained the daily conflict they faced.

You can say all you want about us being college staff, but at the same time, we're peers of these people. And I want to live in a friendly environment with them. And it's hard. It's interesting, because it's this dual role that they expect us to fill which is almost contradictory, where they want us to be a policy enforcer, and yet they want us to develop this sense of community and togetherness and bonding. You can do both, but can't do both to their extremes. You have to kind of come to the middle on both of them. And I think it's finding a balance between the two, between a level of strictness, and a level of community.

Dave articulated the complexity of the RA role. Building community and relationships while enforcing policy is a significant struggle for RAs who are genuinely attempting to meet both responsibilities. Are RAs empowered to "come to the middle" or are they expected to both build close relationships and community and strictly enforce policy?

DISCUSSION

The experiences of the RAs who participated in this study provide vivid illustrations of the significant challenges faced by undergraduate student leaders in residence halls. Most participants expressed a desire to forge positive relationships with residents. Ironically, this wish made the responsibility to enforce policy much more difficult to manage. Many RAs felt nervous about confronting residents and found the interactions stressful, because they wanted to be liked, feared the uncertainty in approaching situations, and found it difficult to balance the dual roles of friend and policy enforcer. Documentation of RAs being harassed and assaulted by residents (Palmer, 1996) suggests some apprehension is warranted. However, most participants in the study did not express an explicit fear of violence. Instead, they were concerned about venturing into unpredictable territory where

immediate and long-term negative consequences could result, and, therefore, sometimes they were reluctant to confront.

Future research should closely examine the role of race in confrontations. Even though firm conclusions are premature based on this single study, it is noteworthy that three RAs expressing fear of confrontation consequences were African American and one was a Caucasian RA in a hall with primarily African American residents. Do residents react more negatively when confronted by an RA of a different race, or do RAs approach those situations differently? An anticipated reaction (positive or negative) could change the dynamics of confrontation.

This study also provides support for previously cited research that RA positions are stressful, that they face role conflicts, and that supervisors need different strategies for working with RAs who are more comfortable enforcing rules than developing relationships and vice versa. These findings have implications for recruitment, selection, training, and supervision of RAs. Based on this research, the following recommendations are offered.

Examine RA Recruitment and Selection Messages

Residence life administrators should examine carefully the messages conveyed through the RA recruitment and selection processes. In posters, informational meetings, conversations, and interviews, the range of responsibilities should be fully explained and explored so candidates can develop a more complete and realistic view of the job. Many will hope to avoid confrontations, but those attracted to power and authority must also understand expectations for relationship and community building. Brittany believed that a departmental expectation for zealous enforcement—confronting not just obvious situations but actually looking for violations—had larger ramifications.

It puts us in a very awkward position, especially when we have such trouble getting good candidates to be RAs anyway. When we are the ones who have to be the bad guys, and when it seems as if the administration is using us to weed out all the bad seeds, then that certainly is in the student body's eye. It gives us a negative reputation and scares away people who might otherwise be

interested in filling the position. Not everybody can stand up to either the rowdy football player who's giving them a hard time when they're trying to write them up for an alcohol or noise violation or something like that, and if that's what is advertised, then I think we're going to lose a lot of valuable resources who would otherwise be great RAs.

Brittany believed those issues could be addressed in a campaign to educate the community about the RA position "and also by not hiring those people who basically get off on writing people up and use it as an authority power trip." She also thought the administration wanted to hire someone like that "and I think they're the ones that give RAs in general kind of a bad rap, because we don't all see it as a power situation." Those who sneak around looking for violations or seek revenge on residents can be "weeded out" in the selection process, Brittany noted. On the other hand, if vigorous enforcement is the expectation but is not advertised, some candidates may pursue a position very ill suited to their strengths and desires.

Acknowledge Difficulty of Multiple Roles

Residence life professionals should explicitly acknowledge to RAs the difficulty managing multiple roles. Doing so would create opportunities for staff to share their fears and concerns and talk with experienced RAs, such as Brittany, who have been successful in managing both roles. How, as a sympathetic peer, can an RA attend to both relationships and rules? To focus too much on friendships with residents is to ignore policy. To be vigilant in policy enforcement is to risk damaging relationships—"violating trust," "being ostracized," "having the whole floor hate me." Even when confrontations went smoothly or better than expected, many RAs experienced fear, nervousness, and apprehension because the interaction *might* go poorly and have negative personal consequences. If RAs are not certain their supervisors understand this predicament, they may be unwilling to discuss their difficulties with them for fear of putting their jobs in jeopardy, whether or not that outcome is likely.

Discuss a "Discretionary Zone"

How much latitude do RAs have in

addressing incidents? Explicit conversations can clarify standards. Many new RAs in particular interpret policies and directives literally. Therefore, those RAs may believe the expectation is to confront and document every single policy violation. Some RAs are filled with angst at that prospect, but ignoring violations can result in their feeling guilty for not meeting expectations or cause concern that they will be discovered and terminated. As many participants noted, neither option feels good. To ignore violations is to fail to meet job expectations, and to confront is to jeopardize relationships with residents.

On the other hand, some RAs confront violations only in extreme circumstances. Does every violation need an "official response"? If, for example, a resident is 10 minutes late escorting out a guest when visitation ends, does that violation always need to be confronted, documented, and submitted for more formal action? Ultimately, can staff reach agreement that some violations are always in need of a swift and consistent response such as those behaviors that put students at significant risk of immediate harm? Assault and extreme intoxication (in contrast to a 21-year-old student stepping into the hall with a can of beer) are two examples of situations that involve considerable risk versus those where discretion may be acceptable.

An examination of RAs' cognitive and moral development in relationship to their approaches to policy enforcement also could be valuable. For example, if an RA tends to be more dualistic, is the RA more likely to accept directives of authority (supervisors) more literally and, therefore, display less flexibility in policy enforcement? How might those RAs handle discussions of a discretionary zone?

Based on the standards of the particular campus, residence life professionals could identify parameters within which RAs have discretion regarding policy enforcement. Discussing the nature of these boundaries can assist student staff members in understanding the values that undergird the roles of community builder and policy enforcer. By recognizing the relationship between these roles, RAs and administrators can discuss strategies that will help student staff members balance the tension inherent in the expectations of the RA position.

Follow-up After Confrontations

Subsequent to all confrontations, supervisors should follow-up with RAs. For more routine

matters, this might occur during regularly scheduled supervision or staff meetings. Following more complex or contentious confrontations, more immediate discussions should take place. RAs who handled difficult situations well could be supported and affirmed. If RAs exacerbated an incident by losing their tempers, acting beyond the scope of their positions, or behaving inappropriately, that should also be discussed. In any case, conversations can promote positive developmental outcomes for RAs and perhaps encourage improved relationships with residents. Additionally, administrators can provide ongoing clarification regarding expectations of RAs. Even experienced RAs expressed anxiety about managing their roles of policy enforcer and friend, suggesting the value of conversations about these issues beyond presemester training.

Normalize Relationships

Talk with RAs about normalizing relationships with residents following confrontations. RAs raised this issue, highlighting a need for residence life professionals to address it. Preliminary findings indicate follow-up occurs if a good relationship existed prior to a confrontation and does not happen if the RA and resident were not close or lived on different floors. This issue should be explored in future research. During RA training, discussions about repairing relationships following confrontations are advisable. Additionally, this discussion is also important when meeting with residents in judicial meetings stemming from incidents. Residents should be encouraged to repair their relationships with the communities that were damaged by their actions and with the RA, especially if confrontations were heated and difficult. Both the RA and resident might be cautious and wait to see how the other behaves in their next interaction. Each should be encouraged to follow-up with the other. If necessary, this meeting could be facilitated by the supervisor.

Explore Apologies

Although the issue of RAs apologizing to residents for confronting them arose infrequently, it is important and needs to be examined in future research. Discussing with both RAs and residents the importance of normalizing relationships following confrontations can clarify the RA's role in community development, as well as the purpose of community standards in a residential

environment. RAs who understand and appreciate their role in promoting positive community standards may be less likely to apologize to residents for doing their jobs.

CONCLUSIONS

The voices of these RAs likely sound familiar to residence life professionals. This study indicates that balancing the roles of friend and policy enforcer challenges both first-year and experienced RAs at different types of institutions. Confrontation is an important life skill and RAs who learn it well will likely reap the benefits in other settings and relationships as well as in their residence halls. Residence life administrators who understand why confrontations are difficult for RAs can offer ongoing support for managing the tensions between their roles. Consequently, RAs can become more effective community leaders and develop personally and professionally.

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