

# THE RESIDENT ASSISTANT

second edition

Working with College Students  
in Residence Halls



Gregory S. Blimling

Miltenberger

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# **The Resident Assistant**

**Working with College Students  
in Residence Halls**

**Second Edition**

**Gregory S. Blimling**

Dean of Students

*Louisiana State University*

**Lawrence J. Miltenberger**

Dean of Residence Life

*Indiana State University*



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# *Preface*

The foundation of nearly every residence hall program across the country is the Resident Assistant position. These student-staff members fulfill a most difficult assignment, that of supervising and assisting an entire floor of undergraduate students. The Resident Assistant is in the vanguard of the field of student development, since comparatively speaking the RA has the opportunity for extensive interaction with a large number of students. This presents the possibility that the Resident Assistant may have a significant impact on the development of these students. The authors believe that whether or not the Resident Assistant is prepared to accept this responsibility is directly related to the quantity and quality of in-service education received.

Co-authored by individuals with extensive residence hall experience, this book is primarily designed to be used as a text in courses taught to Resident Assistants in colleges and universities. In institutions where courses for credit are not provided, the book may be used by full-time residence hall staff as a resource for development of in-service education programs for Resident Assistants. The book may also be used as a personal manual which will assist the individual Resident Assistant in doing the best possible job in a difficult assignment.

The Resident Assistant position is relatively similar across the country, but is subject to some aspects of constant alteration and is certainly variable to some degree from campus to campus. As a result, the authors have provided information that should be basic to Resident Assistant positions in almost all locales, but it is expected that residence hall staff on a particular campus will add to, alter, or otherwise enhance the information in such a way as to tailor usage to the individual campus environment.

The book is divided into six sections. The first section contains chapters dealing with the history, philosophy, and influence of residence halls on the development of students. This section also examines the unique combination of roles of the Resident Assistant position. The chapters in section two discuss aspects of college student behavior including: patterns of student development, the importance of peer counseling, and interpersonal communication. Behavior problems, conflict resolution and suicide are the topics covered in section three. Section four deals with common problems encountered by the Resident Assistant including: alcohol, drugs, human sexuality, and cults. Sec-

tion five deals with two very important aspects of the RA position: the development of community in the residence hall setting and residence hall programming. The final section is directed at the personal development of the individual Resident Assistant. The chapters in this section focus on time management, stress management, and study skills.

The authors wish to avoid the use of sexist language in this book, and recognize that the consistent use of masculine personal pronouns (he, his, him, himself) is often inaccurate and may be interpreted as sexist. Because the English language does not provide us with an easy remedy to this problem, we have followed the example of other authors by using masculine pronouns throughout approximately half of the chapters and feminine pronouns throughout the remaining chapters.

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# **SECTION 1**

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# CHAPTER 1

## *The Roles of the RA*

You have probably heard the expression "overworked and underpaid" many times. If it ever applied, it applies to a Resident Assistant, or an RA, as this person is commonly known. If you are now at the stage where you are only contemplating becoming an RA, primarily because of the financial assistance it may offer, the job simply does not pay enough. You can earn more money and spend much less time doing any number of part-time jobs in college. Most RAs receive minimal remuneration, usually a single room and a meal contract for the year, and some receive a small stipend. This simply is not enough for all the work that you will be expected to do.

What is perhaps more important is that an RA's experience in college is uniquely different from that of other students. You need to consider this very carefully. As an RA, you will not always be a part of the group activities in the living unit. Some students in the unit will ostracize you, not because of you personally, but because of the authority figure that you may come to represent. You will be intentionally left out of some group discussions and often not invited to share in the "inside information." Many duties within the building will be asked of you, some of which will no doubt force you to reorder your personal priorities. You will be among the first students back to school in the fall of the year and among the last to leave in the spring. The same will be true of each vacation period.

Great demands by other students and by the student affairs staff will be placed on both your personal time and study time. Many activities with which you may have wanted to involve yourself will be forced to take second place to duty nights, working at the information desk, or advising students in the living unit. Even your friendship patterns will be somewhat defined by the residents that you are assigned to advise. All these demands, requirements, and expectations you assume when you accept the responsibility of a resident assistantship. It is not an easy job. Think very carefully before you accept it.

Though the responsibilities are very great and the demands that will be placed upon you throughout the academic year may be even greater, you will also benefit greatly from this experience. The RA fills a unique role as a teacher and a leader that few students are privileged to experience. No other group

on campus will receive the training, assistance, and attention that you will as a resident assistant. This is a real opportunity to grow, to learn, and to experience responsibility in a working situation.

### **Some Expectations of the RA**

From campus to campus the responsibilities of the RA vary. Below are listed some common ones shared by most resident assistants on campuses throughout the country:<sup>1</sup>

#### ***Administrative Details***

1. Prepares necessary reports and records.
2. Assists with public relations by being able to explain residence hall programs and staff duties to faculty, guests, parents, and students.
3. Assists with room checks as required by hall operation.
4. Assists with communication among staff members, students, and residence programs.
5. Keeps residence hall director informed of major plans developed by students.
6. Maintains a good liaison relation with housekeeping personnel.
7. Regularly works the hall information desk, performing the necessary duties, and reporting on time.

#### ***Helping to Provide Control***

1. Sets an example by adhering to rules and regulations of the University.
2. Knows the university and residence hall regulations.
3. Knows the rationale for given university rules and regulations.
4. Assists students in knowing what is expected of them.
5. Explains the reasons for given rules and regulations.
6. Encourages students to confront other students with violations.
7. Assists in individual growth toward accountability.
8. Knows and interprets university philosophy of discipline.
9. Reports behavioral infractions according to determined policies.
10. Supports or does not openly disagree with university regulations.

#### ***Helping to Establish a Healthy Residence Hall Environment***

1. Helps students develop a respect for each others' rights and freedoms.
2. Helps students develop a respect for private and university property.
3. Encourages residents to attend residence hall and university programs.
4. Encourages faculty to visit his wing to talk informally with students.

1. Parts adapted from: Greenleaf, Elizabeth A., *et al.*, [eds], *Undergraduate Students as Members of the Residence Hall Staff* [Washington, D.C.: NAWDC, 1967].

5. Knows and communicates well with the residents in his wing.
6. Is tolerant of different life-styles.
7. Encourages an atmosphere conducive to study.

#### ***Assisting Individual Student Needs***

1. Is aware of individual student goals, abilities, and potential for achievement.
2. Is aware of social isolates and helps them make friends and become a part of the campus community.
3. Is aware of attitudes and behavior patterns of the residents in his/her wing.
4. Knows resources in the campus community to help students.
5. Is able to refer students for help effectively.
6. Is aware of adjustment problems for new students.
7. Is available for casual contacts and develops a pattern of available times.
8. Is a good listener and counseling helper.
9. Has good interpersonal skills.
10. Is aware of his own strengths and weaknesses (is self-aware).
11. Shows concern for people and their problems.
12. Follows up with students who have had a problem to see the results and to learn if other assistance can be given.
13. Assists students with class scheduling.
14. Assists students in developing effective study habits.

#### ***Hall Government Programs***

1. Encourages students' responsibility for their own residence hall programs.
2. Helps students to get involved with university clubs and organizations.
3. Provides creative suggestions for hall programs.
4. Has activities and programs in his wing.
5. Supports hall programs by personal attendance.

#### ***The RA as a Role Model***

No matter what responsibilities you are specifically assigned as an RA on whatever campus, there are four basic roles that you will assume. The first and perhaps the most influential role that you have as an RA is as a role-model. Remember, when you are placed in a living unit within a residence hall as a staff person, the very fact that you hold this position says to every student that you possess certain characteristics that the university respects and considers important. To new freshmen, you are looked to as a model for them to emulate. This, incidentally, is one of the primary arguments used for having undergraduate RAs in undergraduate residence halls. At one time, many uni-

versities used graduate student RAs, because it was thought that these graduate students would be able to assert more control over undergraduates and provide better counseling.

However, one of the key elements in determining appropriate role-models is to find role-models with which students can easily identify. If the role-model is too far removed from what the individual believes he can become, the role-model has less influence. In other words, the standards and behavior exhibited by the role-model must be perceived as attainable by the undergraduate student. Much of the behavior and many of the accomplishments of the graduate student are simply not seen as attainable by an entry-level undergraduate student. The advantage that undergraduate RAs may have is that their experience is not too far removed from the experiences of an incoming freshman. Thus, the incoming freshman can more readily identify with a younger RA than with an older one.

As an RA, you model behavior that others will come to assume as appropriate behavior for students in college. If you emulate good study skills, there is an increased chance that new students in your living unit will also begin to emulate this pattern of study. Likewise, if you spend most of your time throwing a Frisbee up and down the hallway, drinking beer with a certain group of people in your living unit, or continually find that your time is occupied by your boyfriend or girlfriend, you are setting an entirely different model of behavior and communicating your values by your actions.

As an RA you are expected, as part of the role-model responsibility, to live by the rules, regulations, and policies that the university has set. Unless you can abide by them, do not expect your residents to do so. And, if you cannot abide by these policies, you have no business being a resident assistant. When you accept responsibility as an RA, you also make a commitment to the position as it is defined. If you disagree with the institution's policies or regulations, try to change them through the appropriate supervisory channels. If you cannot change them and still cannot live with them, resign. Do not do yourself, the university, and your residents a disservice by not enforcing the rules or by pretending that the policies and regulations do not exist.

Whether you like it or not, your RA position extends outside of your residence hall and on to the campus. This does not mean that you go about campus enforcing random rules and regulations, advising students on this and that, and generally asserting your staff position in places where it is not called for or welcomed. It does mean that your role-modeling responsibility carries beyond your living unit. If you believe that you shed the cloak of resident assistant when you leave your living unit, you are mistaken. While on campus—and at some universities off campus as well—you are expected to conduct yourself as a member of the staff. It is amazing how many RAs believe that as soon as they leave the residence hall, they can become as wild and reckless as they please. Not only is this illogical, it is irresponsible.

Nor should you misuse your role as an RA. Perhaps the classic example of misusing one's position as an RA comes in writing editorials for the school newspaper. As a student, you are entitled to submit whatever opinion you wish to your newspaper. The fact that you are an RA need not enter into it. Some RAs, however, feel they must initial every item they submit as though they were making official policy statements. Thus, when they send in their editorials, they sign them with their names and their position title—resident assistant. Unless you have been elected to make an official policy statement for your residence programs office, avoid attaching your personal opinions to your position. Remember that the views you hold as a resident assistant do not necessarily reflect the views of every other resident assistant at your college or university. Not everyone reading an editorial, however, will make the same inference. A reader might instead assume that you speak from a position of authority and responsibility and, thus, that your opinion should carry more weight and stature.

Your role as a model for other students is one of the most important duties that you will assume. Handle the responsibility carefully and with the respect it deserves.

### **The RA as a Counselor**

The second role that the RA serves is as a counselor, consultant, or advisor. The word *counselor* may be a misnomer. The RA might more appropriately be considered to hold a helping or advising role. This function is an integral and important part of being an RA. Students undergo many adjustments, many stresses, and many crises throughout the academic year. They are torn away from their families, the comfortable and familiar surroundings of their homes, and their established friends. They are asked to live among a group of peers whom they do not know and asked to study and produce more than they have ever had to before. At the same time, they are undergoing tremendous psychological adjustments in their transition to adulthood. It is in the residence hall, in the day-to-day living environment, that many of these growth experiences, emotional traumas, and crises come to light. It is in the residence hall that the students' values will be challenged by other students. Their knowledge of themselves and their ability to work with other people will be tested. For many students who are accustomed to a quiet, private environment, a group situation is very threatening and difficult. It is the RA who is expected to help students through this unique experience.

Think for a moment how many hundreds of challenges are placed before a student within just the first two weeks of college. Think back to your own experiences when you first entered college. You did not know how to register for classes, or how to get a meal pass, or what to do if you were ill, or who to



go to if you were experiencing some problem with a teacher. Simple things like these can become real problems for students who want to be accepted and are afraid to ask someone for help for fear that they will be labeled as less mature, less intelligent, or not part of the group. You are the person whom they must seek out to find this information. Providing information and "advice" are very important functions of the RA position and among the primary reasons for its existence.

To do this in a counseling framework, you must begin to establish a positive, friendly relationship with every person in your living unit—not selectively with only those you like, but an open, understanding, and warm relationship with each person in the unit. You must be accessible to everyone. You must be viewed as fair, consistent, and knowledgeable about the university. Only then will people come to you with their concerns. Only after they know you as a person will they come to you with their problems. People do not talk with somebody about their feelings whom they do not know and trust.

The advising/helping role can be taken one step further. It is the RA who has the best opportunity to help students who are experiencing minor problems and to help identify students who are experiencing major problems. Identification of students who are undergoing some form of personal crisis or severe depression can literally save a student's life by preventing suicide—a critical problem in college which will be discussed later in this book.

### **The RA as a Teacher**

The third role that the RA assumes is that of a teacher. By this we mean teaching in a formal sense, not simply the informal teaching involved in role-modeling. The RA teaches many things, specifically: (1) the RA provides general information about the university, about things that are happening on campus, and about services that the university offers; (2) when the RA, along with the members of his floor, invites a member of the counseling center or a speaker to the living unit, he is creating a situation in which formal learning takes place and, by organizing this meeting, he becomes part of the teaching process; (3) the RA teaches group-process skills, in floor meetings, in groups planning an activity, in floor elections, through student activities within the building, and through intramural activities—all situations in which the RA helps define, through modeling behavior or through formal teaching, appropriate behavior and skills; (4) the RA teaches values both through his own personal behavior and through late night discussions (bull sessions) in which such issues as sex, religion, politics, and career plans are discussed. The RA is an agent in this teaching process and at the same time becomes a learner, for not only does he challenge other students' values, but his own values are also challenged.