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Title: So, you want to be an RA?

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**About the
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Abstract: In this paper, I discuss the results of an ethnographic project about Resident Assistant's attitudes toward University Housing Services, at Illinois State University. Using conversational interview techniques with 6 specific participants and several informal participant observation and conversations, I show that in general there are negative attitudes and feelings towards UHS, by RAs. These attitudes are based on a lack of trust in UHS and their methods. Based on these preliminary findings, I argue that RAs attitudes towards UHS stem from a feeling of a lack of appreciation and understanding on behalf of UHS. I recommend that the university increase the benefits of RAs, as well as hosting seminars that focus on RA feedback for UHS.

**Initial
Exercises:** Analysis Of A University Text:

The Illinois State University Housing Services mission statement:

In this text the university uses basic and straight forward language to highlight their mission in housing. The focus is on a diverse inclusive environment. The buildings are referred to as Residence halls, rather than dormitories. The university emphasizes this distinction by referring to dorm life as being a residential community. This type of wording makes one believe they are choosing to be part of a community, rather than being part of a policy which requires students to spend their first two years living in the dorms. The mission states that the university housing wishes to help students in the areas of civility, responsibility, and independence. This is also an attractive idea, although there are plenty of restrictions included in living in a residence hall. Another common theme in the housing services mission statement is the use of ambiguous words such as a "quality" living experience, and "creatively" stimulating learning outside the classroom. These words sound good, but they do not offer any idea of what one can expect from the residential community living experience. I feel that the housing mission statement is straight forward for the most part and easily understood. The website itself is very plain in its presentation. The background is white with black words, and the surrounding areas are yellow and red. This is successful in not distracting the reader from the mission itself.

Question: Assignment #6:

I am interested in researching a topic related to RAs on campus and how they feel about their job as well as working for University Housing Services. I am interested in this topic primarily because I was an RA for three semesters here at ISU, and while I enjoyed certain aspects of the job, I was also bothered by certain policies. I am interested in the feelings and attitudes of present RAs toward their jobs and UHS. In finding this out I hope to depict how their feelings might affect their performance as an RA and a student. In my experience talking with RAs the most common reason for becoming one is for the benefits offered by the university. A second reason is because many RAs believe that it will look good on their resume. I plan on asking questions that take both of these reasons into account, while also asking questions that offer some insight into whether RAs feel the job is worth while in the end. Questions which answer what they expect from the University as well as what the University can expect from them. In doing this research I hope to offer a common ground in which the university can count on their RAs to effectively perform their jobs, as well as RAs feeling they are correctly compensated. I feel that the most common feelings amongst RAs will be negatively directed toward UHS and I believe that this affects their performance and life. I also believe that feedback from RAs can lead to a better understanding of what should be expected of an RA, as well as a firsthand perspective of the most effective way to be an RA.

Assignments #11, 16

In speaking with some of the RA's I worked with and know, I have found that there is an increasing problem in retaining RA's. I heard that in the past weeks numerous RA's have decided to quit and move off campus, while others have been told that their work is unsatisfactory. In this sense there seems to be a gap between what University Housing expects and requires from RA's and what RA's feel their jobs are. I plan on further examining the relationship between University Housing and RA's, with a focus on RA's attitudes towards Housing and administration. I will ask questions that help define RA's position in housing, as well as how they feel about their jobs. I hope to come to a conclusion of whether RA's feel that they are equally compensated for their work, or whether they are dissatisfied with housing administration and policies.

Plan: Research Plan: My research plan is one that will consist of interviews and observations. I only plan on observing only a few nights during my research as most of it will be based off of interviewing RAs. As far as the interview process goes I want it to be conversational and very informal. I believe that by simply recording my conversations with RAs I will be able to get a good idea of what it is that RAs are dealing with regarding housing. I would also like to ask an RA to keep a very brief time log of

what a usual week is like for them.

Schedule:

Monday 22nd, October- Sunday 28th, October

Interviews:

Mary- A by the book RA, she ends up doing more work than the average RA because she believes in all aspects of the job. She enforces policies and focuses on the residents equally. Her major complaint of UHS is that of compensation and time allocation.

Lilly- She was the most upset with UHS out of all my participants. She felt that UHS showed her what to expect out a business oriented organization. Her most specific complaints were that of being over worked and not believing in the UHS requirements of RAs.

Ray- I found this interview to be especially interesting because Ray actually helped me gain an understanding of both an international student's experience at ISU and a Assistant Resident Hall Coordinator's experience.

Alana- She felt that UHS did not do a good job of upholding their student first policy. She was also disappointed in the etc. portion of the contract. She felt UHS did a poor job of describing exactly what the job entailed. Her biggest complaint came in what she felt was a lack of support by UHS.

Rocky- He provided me with an RHC perspective to the issues raised by RAs. While he was supportive of the RAs he also stressed that the policies of UHS are for the most part fair.

Observations:

Tuesday Night: On Duty with Alana

Saturday Night: Find RA to spend time with On Duty

Tuesday or Thursday: Observe a meeting between a residence hall staff.

Data: Assignment #8:

Sitting inside the Hall lobby for a couple minutes I observe the front entrance to the resident halls. The lobby is set up in a circle and as I sit down I realize that aside from the desk attendant I am the only person in the lobby. I sit for what feels like a minute and then the first students return from the way of the cafeteria. As they walk through the doors they are giggling and walk directly toward the staircase located in the back of the building. In a few minutes I see people come and go from the front

of the building. Everyone seems to have a place to get to in a rush. A bus arrives and about 10-15 students get off. As they come in they are broken into groups of friends. Three students walk alone and go directly to the elevators, I then see a friend of mine and approach him.

Assignment #9:

Fieldnotes in Ethnographic Research

I found the reading on Emerson to be very useful in helping wrestle with central issues and goals of ethnographic work. Early on Emerson writes that it is the job of the ethnographer not to determine "the truth," but rather the multiple truths that are present in others' lives. Emerson echoes this point by stating that the ethnographer never becomes a member in the same sense that those "naturally" in the setting are members. These two points seem to outline the limitations of what an ethnographer can do and should attempt to do. I feel that Emerson is making these limitations known to the reader as a way of helping us understand what an ethnographer should attempt to achieve in good ethnographic work. It seems as though the author is warning the reader about making any attempt in defining a community after becoming a "member" for a short period. The author suggests that one simply takes good notes and reports accordingly in the hope that the multiple truths can define themselves. In the opening paragraph Emerson explains that an ethnographer must be both a participant-observer, as well as accumulating a written record. Emerson speaks more about what it takes to write effective fieldnotes. The author states that what an ethnographer finds out is inherently connected with how she finds it out. This seems to offer insight into the notion that if a researcher uses methods which are biased then the report will be skewed. In the same sense if a researcher goes into a study with certain expectations, they can alter their methods of research in such a way to meet those expectations. This Chapter seems to warn against being an ethnocentric researcher, while giving light to ways of avoiding this fault.

Assignment # 12: Interview about networks of friends with an RA.

Who do you consider friends? People that I have known for a long time, and people I can talk to and trust. People I can be myself around.

How did you meet your friends at ISU? A few through my boyfriend and ummm a few through classes, a few through my floors in the residence halls and after becoming an RA I met alot of them.

Who would you consider a friend at ISU? Like close friends or associates. I

have associates I talk to.

Who are your friends at ISU, as you defined the word earlier? Brandiss, Clare, Kym, my boyfriend.

Is there a difference between the friends you've made at ISU and those from back home? Yes, at home I have more of a history with them and the people involved in their lives. So their friends are my friends. The people here I don't know what they have been through.

Would you say that you have a diverse group of friends at ISU? And why? Yes, I feel like I have my RA click and my close friends click and then the people who live on my floor. I feel each group is different and would not normally hangout with each other. As far as ethnicity, I don't just hangout with people of my same ethnicity.

Do you feel that being an RA helps or hurts your chances of making "friends," as you define the word? I feel like it does both. On one hand it allows me to meet new people and gives me the opportunity to build the friendship I defined. But then also it takes away time from the friends that I already do have and have made me miss important events in my friends lives.

Do you consider your staff and other RA's to be friends? I consider some friends and others associates. Although if we are not doing something work related we would rather spend time with our other friends, due to the lack of free time we have.

Assignment #14

I chose to interview a Graduate student who is currently a Assistant Residence Hall Coordinator. I thought that he would be perfect for this project because I know him through working for housing, and I know that he has been very social during his time here at ISU. In speaking with him he offered insight into similarities and differences that were present in his experiences as an undergraduate student in India, and his graduate experience here at ISU. Interestingly enough he originally had no intentions of leaving India after he graduated from college. He spoke about the notion that going somewhere overseas for graduate degrees is becoming the norm in India and that a large influence on him were his parents and friends. He said that many of his friends were leaving for graduate school and his father was very forthright in his wishes for him to do the same. The process of coming to ISU is based primarily on the GRE. Upon completing the test and receiving the results, he received a list of schools which were considered in his range. He chose ISU over Northern Illinois because Northern deferred his acceptance. I also found it interesting that ISU, NIU, and University of Missouri were considered in the same group as possible suitors. When he arrived at ISU he spent one semester as a normal grad student and then realized that he would like some financial support while studying here. He applied to all of the graduate assistantships he was aware of and only heard back from Housing. Thus he chose to accept the position. When he first came to the U.S he said that the other Indian students at ISU found him to be immature and always joking. A characteristic that can still be seen whenever he chooses to reveal a playful smile. Although most often now he is serious and as he said straight forward. He claims that the grad position has had a large impact on his new strictly business mentality. I asked how the position has affected his social life and he said that he is living with residence and thus sees and meets new people often. He said it has been a great

experience as far as meeting people through his job. He was however critical of the amount of time that the job required, and while he was supportive of the UHS policies you could see that he also had some other feelings. He spoke to me about his hesitance to be publicly critical about Housing and said that he has been keeping notes on his experience as a grad assistant.

Discuss: My findings suggest that there is a discontent amongst RAs with UHS policies and methods. In particular my participants complained of being under appreciated, over worked, and mislead. RAs expressed a feeling of their position being undervalued. They felt that they should receive a monthly payment from the time they begin as an RA. RAs also complained about the way they spent their time. While the position is advertised as one which requires alot of time and organization, the RAs feel that the use of their time is not the most effective. They would like to spend more time with the residents and less time meeting UHS deadlines and requirements. The last finding is that UHS does not honor or fully explain their student first policy. RAs complained of feeling like the RA job was always placed ahead of their schoolwork. They would like more support in being a student, and not just an RA.

EUI Links: Assignment #7

<http://www.ideals.uiuc.edu/handle/2142/1858>

This is the only ideals archives I can actually access. I found that the article is quite similar to what I look to explore. I am more interested in how being an RA, specifically working for University Housing, affects the RA as a person. This ethnographer is interested in the roles of an RA and how these roles are perceived by both the RA and the residents. I feel that I am also interested in the roles RA's play because this will offer insight into how they define themselves and how the job affects that definition. This ethnographer was an RA at the time of her project and thus she had an inside perspective, this is very similar to my situation. Whereas this researcher focuses her study primarily on the Donn-Barton residence halls I am not focused on how buildings shape RAs, but rather how RAs are shaped by their jobs. Overall I found this to be very helpful in the sense that it showed me what tools were effective for her in her process.

Reflect: Reflection: I have found my research process to be very unorganized and without urgency. I feel that because of my close ties to the RA community or my research population I felt that I could let the project sit for awhile. In doing so I did not think about the idea that I felt guilty when originally getting back in touch with my old staff for a project. I found that it was uncomfortable to simply bring up my motive for reaching out and

realized that the research process would have to formally start after a few friendly visits of my old relationships. I did however gain very important information in my discussions with RAs and found that it helped me shape my own research question. It felt as if there were plenty of RAs who held feelings similar to mine when I was an RA and thus made me believe that my interest was applicable. I also have found that when first introducing the idea of interviewing RAs based on their feelings of housing they become somewhat distant and hesitant. I have had many calls to people I think would respond that have not gotten anywhere. In a different light I have also found that once the project got started I gained a sense of importance in my project and thus became energetic about the interviews. I am interested in finding out how much more info I can gain before putting together the final project.

Recommendations: <http://media.www.dailyvidette.com/media/storage/paper420/news/2007/09/11/News/Ras-Undergo.Selective.Interview.Training.Process-2959782.shtml>

This article was given to me by a fellow classmate. I believe that it touches on one of the central problems that RAs have with University Housing. I have heard complaints both when I was an RA and now as a researcher about the Tuesday and Thursday meetings. This article talks about the idea that at ISU the learning process to becoming an RA is constant and is exercised through workshops on Thursday usually, while Tuesday is reserved for in hall agendas. I believe that many RAs would rather spend a little more time training prior to getting the position, than scheduling their Tuesdays and Thursdays around 3:30 to 5:30 for RA related material.

In my conversations with RAs at ISU, there is an overwhelming opposition to University Housing Services. I tried to uncover some of the reasons behind the negative feelings RAs express toward their experience with UHS. In analyzing my research I feel that there are two distinct feelings that RAs harbor towards UHS, which are driving a wedge between the two sects. In my interviews there seemed to be a distrust of UHS and the reasons behind their policies. Whether RAs were questioning the intent of program requirements, or whether they were questioning what actually falls under their job title, there is certain distrust at place. It felt to me that RAs are feeling taken advantage of and in some cases neglected and lied to. For RAs to be told that etc. in the contracts they signed essentially covers any job that needs to be tended to at the moment is disheartening. It comes as no surprise that RAs would suggest better pay or benefits, because they feel that they are going beyond the duties of the contract they signed. A better job of fully developing and writing down what is to be expected from an RA might help in explaining to RAs their positions. The second attitude which RAs seemed to hold towards UHS was one of questioning the

meaning behind policies. RAs made it very clear that they would like more time to build community on their floors and develop relationships with their residents. These are two areas of the job which UHS also value highly. The difference seems to be in how these objectives can best be accomplished. It is quite apparent to me that UHS's policies towards programming and bulletin boards as building community are failures. Not only are residents not showing up, but RAs are expressing feelings of being distracted or overwhelmed by these requirements. It would seem to me that UHS could do a better job of asking what RAs feel are the best ways to involve and then build residential community. I find that here there may be two underlings at work. Either UHS does not trust RAs to take their job seriously enough to achieve these objectives without the strict requirements, or Lilly was onto something by suggesting there is funding at stake in these programs. Either way UHS needs to do a better job hearing RA opinion. In my analysis of the relationship between RAs and their attitudes towards UHS, there is a definite wedge between the two ideals of what the RA position constitutes. While their ideologies might be similar, it seems to me that the two sides would take different measures to achieving them.