

So, you want to be an RA?

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.

About the Researcher and the RA position

I am currently a senior at Illinois State University. I spent my first six semesters at ISU living in the Residence Halls. My first three semesters I was a resident and my next three semesters I was a Resident Assistant. It was not until I became a Resident Assistant that I began to understand and appreciate the job itself, as well as what it takes to run a Residence Hall. I found that experience as a Resident Assistant was at times extremely hard and at times very rewarding. I believe that this is the nature of the job and find that many past and present RAs share a similar sentiment. My original

reason for considering the RA position was strictly a financial decision. The idea of free room and board was very appealing to me, and I felt that the position would be well worth the benefits. The position is one that suggests an outgoing personality, an ability to convey and enforce policies, and finally the ability to get assignments done in a timely fashion. I believed that my experience as an RA would focus primarily on the resident. I wanted to be a mentor, support system and friend to my residents and thought that this would be my main purpose. At some point in my experience I realized that this was an ideal of the position, but quite far from reality. I found that my main purpose was to meet deadlines and requirements. My experience as an RA is defined by bulletin boards, door decks, enforcing policies, and programming.

Introduction

In my time as an RA, I began to realize that there were many RAs whom also shared negative feelings towards University Housing Services. I also became aware that each RA approached the job differently and thus expected that each RA would harbor different feelings towards their job. However, an overwhelmingly amount of RAs seemed to be unhappy with their position. What I found most interesting is that most of these RAs loved spending

time with residents. If the RA position is one that centers on community development in the residence halls, then why are RAs whom enjoy their residents having such a hard time working for housing? This question is the main catalyst behind my research and my research question. Where does this gap between what RAs perceive their position to be, and what UHS expects of them occur most prevalently? I believe that this gap in ideology occurs in three main aspects of the RA position. The first is in the difference between how much RAs feel they should receive in benefits, as opposed to how much they are provided with. The second main problem between UHS and RAs occurs in the definition of the student first policy. Lastly, there is a large gap in what RAs view as their main purpose and what they find themselves spending most of their time doing. The following paper will attempt to show where these disillusionments occur and how they can be fixed.

Method to understanding the RAs madness

Reconnecting with the community:

I chose to focus my study around interviews and some participant observation. I chose to begin my study by reconnecting with some of the RAs I had previous relationships with due to my own position as an RA in previous years. Upon

reconnecting, I did not immediately ask for interviews for two reasons. I felt that an interview at a later time would be more effective because I could draw on previous conversations, and I did not want to come across as being only research oriented. From these encounters I was able to measure RAs feelings at the present time, and found that they were quite similar to that of RAs when I was working. I also was able to gain perspective on what the current issues were that RAs were facing, and how they relate to my study. I spent a couple hours with RAs during their duty nights, a night in which they are on call for any problem in the building, and found that not much had changed from my time as an RA. I believe that my reconnecting process helped me tailor my questions to current issues RAs are facing, and allowed me to regain a personal relationship with my participants. I felt that this helped to outline my interviewing process, and provided me with honest responses. I did encounter that in some cases RAs I reconnected with were still very shy when I talked about interviewing them in the future, and some simply requested not to be included.

The Interviewing Process:

The interviewing process consisted of five interviews, three RAs and two administrative participants. The interviews

were non-scripted, but I did have a prior notion of what I wanted my questions to answer. By non-scripted, I simply mean that I had no set of questions and no order to my questions. I tried to allow the interviewee to control the flow of the interview as much as possible, while being mindful that I was touching on all the topics I wanted to research. I contacted a few Resident Assistants I knew and then took suggestions of who would be a good person to talk to about my research question. In this sense my sample is a convenience sample and I used the snowball technique to acquire further participants. My interviews lasted anywhere from twenty five to forty five minutes, while consisting of only a limited number of open ended questions. All but one interview was recorded and then analyzed at a later time. In each interview I asked questions that centered on the RAs experience working for UHS in particular. The three standard questions were as follows. Do you feel RAs are adequately compensated? What is the important aspect to being an RA? Do you feel that the University upholds its student first policy regarding RAs? And finally, what would you recommend to Housing to make things better? From these conversational interviews I looked for themes and compiled my results.

Results/Findings

In introducing my findings I would be negligent if I did not stress that the RA job encompassed two sides to my participants. Nearly all participants expressed a certain satisfaction in working with students. When giving answers which seemed to highlight positive experiences, all RAs spoke about their relationship to the resident. No RA interviewed expressed a positive experience in working for UHS. All of the RAs interviewed actually expressed and or showed that working for UHS was a negative aspect to the job. As stated above my research uncovered three distinct problems RAs had with working for UHS. Those had to deal with how RAs are compensated, what their job focuses on, and finally the student first policy placed forward by the University. I found that in the case of these three questions, RAs were in complete unison. This was not necessarily the case with their superiors. There seemed to be a contrast in answers from the RA perspective and the RHC perspective in particular. These differing viewpoints offer some insight into the problems surrounding communication between UHS and their RAs.

Can you adequately compensate an RA?

"I see the RAs as first and foremost, as educators and I guess any educator would tell you there is no compensation for

that job...but I think we do OK." This was the response of Rocky, the RHC I interviewed. This begs the question, what does ISU feel is adequate compensation for the RA position? At Illinois State University, the RA position offers free room and board and a free platinum meal plan. Upon completing two semesters, the RA receives around seventy five dollars a month for the following semesters. This seems like a fairly reasonable deal to most people outside the RA community, but how do RAs feel about it? Alana explains, "I personally don't think its enough. One of my fellow RAs calculated all the amount of time that we spend being an RA. The days we are on duty, the times we are on call, and it's less than minimum wage."According to Rocky there is no adequate way to effectively compensate the RA position. The RAs I interviewed were much more likely to suggest that the university could do a better job. Each RA I interviewed thought that the university was not doing a good enough job in paying them, and some referenced other schools with better benefits. RA Lilly said, "I know that at Northern, the RAs there are paid, um they get free room and board and they also get I think \$900 for an entire semester. And a lot of schools have programs like that." With this being said it is also important to point out that when speaking with RAs, all of them said that the benefits were the initial reason they

considered the position. This is a sentiment that was also prevalent when I was an RA. Rocky actually acknowledged that other schools do offer better benefits, but he was quick to point out that some schools do not meet ISU's benefits. He concluded his thoughts on the topic by saying that he was better compensated back when he was an RA, but he does feel ISU does an alright job.

What is the main purpose of an RA? Ideals versus Reality:

In speaking with RAs it was clear to me that they originally hoped and were under the impression that they would be spending most of their time with residents. They felt that whether it was developing community, offering support, hanging out, or enforcing policies, the majority of their time would be spent on the residence floor. This is what I call the RA ideal. In reality, it seems their job is much more reflexive of what UHS expects out its staff members. As Mary said, "I became an RA to develop my leadership ability and be a mentor. I would like to spend more time on my floor with my residents but I always have deadlines to meet..." She went on to talk about the amount of time she spent doing things which she felt did not help her be an effective RA. One of those "busy work" jobs is putting up

bulletin boards and door decks. This is a monthly assignment of RAs and can take up to hours at a time. One of Mary suggestions is to implement standard and already made bulletin boards across campus, as to create less meaningless work for the RA. This is an idea that Rocky, the RHC rejects. He claims that RAs are selected to bring a unique spirit to each floor and one of the ways they can express that is through bulletin boards. This is an ideology of the purpose of bulletin boards. In reality RAs I spoke with found them time consuming and a nuisance. I actually had two of my interviewees admit to having not changed their boards in months, with one claiming she has not changed them the whole semester. Another requirement of being an RA is to host at least ten or so programs. These are activities for the floor and often go unattended. RAs feel that there is too large an emphasis on programming for the sake of programming. One RA believed that programming was a way of gaining funding and has actually little to do with building community or providing a social activity. Lilly says, "We have to put our programs in a website so they can go show their cronies where the money is going..." It is feelings like this that alienate the RA from their work and their purpose. They seemed to me to express a sense of going through motions to please their superiors. I was often stressed that RAs would like to spend more time on their floors

building community through social interaction rather than what appear to be forced activities. One RA felt that the University was being somewhat sneaky in their methods of dispensing the workload. Alana stated, "But I think the more that I'm here the more they keep adding things that expect of us and how they do that is they say well it's in your contract. But in reality it is just under etc. and I don't think that's right..." This was hard for me to believe, but what it does express is a certain feeling of distrust and unfair treatment of RAs, towards housing. I found that while it is nearly impossible for UHS to explain all that the RA position entails, there needs to be a more concise definition of what the important aspects of the job are.

I thought it was student first?

One of the questions I asked is if the RAs were told they were students first and RAs second, when going through the training process. This was one of the sayings I remembered from my own time as an RA, and I remembered it as being just a saying. When I asked the RAs about this topic, I felt the most emotion in their responses. They were all adamant in saying that the University should do a better job adhering to this policy. When I asked Lilly about this policy and whether UHS upheld the

policy she stated, "They say that but they don't mean it..." She went on to talk about the different times she felt that she was asked to put her personal school work aside for reasons pertaining to the job. I asked Alana whether she felt the policy was upheld and her reply was "Well I feel that that is definitely not true..." She said that while she felt that UHS stressed this notion of student first they did not abide by it. Naturally when I asked the RHC about his feelings on the subject, he had quite a different understanding of the policy. He believed that the University and himself tried to do a good job of adhering to the policy and claims it is put in place for the over achiever. He says that the student first policy is a reminder to RAs not to spend all their time with residents and doing RA related work. Almost as if the policy is a way of reminding RAs that they are at ISU to get a degree. He also says, "Student first doesn't mean that you get to slack on your job because you got stuff to do..." I feel that RAs want the feeling that UHS supports the idea that something's are more important than the RA job and thus RAs should have adequate time to attend them. However, it seems that Rocky is suggesting that UHS uses the policy to remind RAs that have more important things to do other than just being an RA and not to forget about them, or your job. Once again it seems that something which UHS

feels they are putting in place to help RAs is actually a complaint RAs have of UHS. These were just three of the themes that presented themselves in my research and obviously are understood in different ways by RAs and UHS.

Analysis and Recommendations

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.