Training Boost: How to Foster a Developmental Approach to Resident Assistant Training

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Recommended Citation
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While the roles and responsibilities of resident assistants (RAs) have changed over time, some things will continue to be a priority. Responsibilities such as developing relationships with residents, guiding them to campus resources, providing information, mediating roommate conflicts, documenting underage drinking, and responding to quiet hours violations remain constant. Britt Frye, assistant director for academic initiatives at Marshall University in Huntington, West Virginia, pinpoints interpersonal and communication skills as being at the heart of these responsibilities. “These skills are used in leadership, mentorship, conflict resolution, community building, and assisting students with problems or concerns.” However, a major shift in the paraprofessional RA role is understanding not just what skills are required for the position, but how the role is enacted. This shift involves a more developmental approach to interacting with residents which focuses on enhancing the residential experience rather than simply acting as an enforcer of rules and policies.

RAs’ roles have evolved from being an in loco parentis problem solver and policy enforcer to being a peer mentor or mediator who supports residents and upholds and interprets policies. Programming reflects a shift in the RA engagement with residents from a transactional interaction to an activist perspective that raises awareness of a broad range of injustices and encourages residents to have respect for the rights of others. Given the change in RA roles, the training provided to these paraprofessionals must also evolve. Rather than simply presenting information to RAs in a passive way, training today provides an opportunity for facilitative learning tailored to meet each RA’s needs. Resident assistants need a broad spectrum of skills – from leadership and mediation to collaboration and crisis management – in order to perform their jobs effectively, but training should not involve an arbitrary or random presentation of topics or skills. Ideally, training should be sequential, with one skill building upon another. We propose using a Resident Assistant Sequencing Model (RASM) that respects individual campus and residence life approaches while also considering student development theory, a sequence of specific training topics, and the evolution of the paraprofessional role.

The RA Sequencing Model respects the nuances and distinctions of individual campus programs and serves as a guide and taxonomy that can assist training and development teams to examine specific schedules and topics. The model presents stages of transformational learning for RAs as a sequence that is essentially cumulative, one step building upon another. Understanding how the topics are presented in your institution’s RA training can provide an overview of the weight given to different aspects of training.
otherwise known as alignment, which refers to the expert’s perspective on the importance of particular topics and the time devoted to each one. Examining how your current system sequences the themes can help you address learning outcomes at three different levels: the session, the thematic category, and the overall training program. In our research, we did breakdowns recounting training activities to the minute (i.e., our unit of analysis). However, the process involves much more than just counting minutes. It involves taking the time to examine your training program in order to understand the delivery mode, order of delivery, and weight of importance in terms of the overall training for each RA. Most important, it reminds us that each aspect of the RA’s job is interconnected to the whole synergistically.

The interconnectedness of the training sequence allows RAs to build upon their skills one at a time in a developmental progression. “Sequencing is an important part of the training experience,” says Joshua Maxwell, assistant director of residence life at Bowling Green State University in Ohio. “Knowing that RAs often require training on sensitive topics that can be detail-heavy or trigger staff members, it is important that sessions be sequenced in a manner that allows staff to come up for air.” Just like a ropes course, the learner has to be comfortable with the low elements and the feel of their learning group and must have a sense of personal and physical safety before they can move on to the high wire or the zip line.

Maintaining the flavor of the individual campus programming model and training style is important in reinforcing the institutional and departmental voice and mission. On some levels, normalizing RA training could create consistency from one campus to another, but most of us who have worked in practitioner roles know this is not really how things are done in student affairs. Those who have had an opportunity to work on multiple campuses know that there are differences in campus cultures, institutional missions, and values. Shalik Wilkins-Tate, residence life coordinator at Louisiana State University in Baton Rouge, emphasizes the important connection between RA training and the departmental and institutional mission. “If we do a better job of bringing everything we do back to our purpose, RAs will do a better job of caring and providing for their residents.” Creating a one-size-fits-all RA training model is not the way to approach these vital programs on our campuses, nor does it capture the true nuance of the individual institution. We must be intentional about maintaining our student affairs ethos, our attention to learning, and our ability to keep the student (both residents and RAs) at the center of our work. Respect for the autonomy of individual campus programs to train RAs adds to our national voice as an industry and to the mission of our association. This does not mean, however, that we should confine ourselves to the boundaries of our own campus; it’s important to bring in events and conversations from the world outside, such as #BlackLivesMatter, transgender advocacy, and Get Out the Vote.

RA training should intersect with developmental learning; staff need to gain new knowledge in a way that is tailored to them and their individual experience. In his book Experiential Learning: Experience as a Source of Learning and Development, David Kolb describes how the learner moves through the experiential learning process along a continuum from concrete to abstract and from thinking to doing, a process of learning through the context of previous experiences and knowledge. The learner moves from a concrete experience, reflects on it, learns from it, and then tests it, which results in a new experience. Residence life leaders support using this kind of learning style during RA training. “From my perspective,
the value of presenting training in a developmentally progressive manner is about meeting student staff where they are and helping bring them ALL together towards the end goals,” says Dean Kennedy, director of housing and residence life at Boise State University in Idaho. The progression can also include presenting the expertise of returning RAs, whose perspectives can add to and deepen the overall learning experience and gives the newer RAs a peer mentor with the power of experience. As Frye says, including seasoned RAs allows them to set up “training pedagogically in a manner that will best build the interpersonal competence of our staff.”

Understanding the WHOLE of staff training involves more than just creating a comprehensive list of the important topics and scheduling campus experts to cover each one. “It’s not realistic to be able to provide RAs...
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with examples of every kind of emergency situation they will encounter,” says Kevin Gates, assistant director at George Washington University in the District of Columbia. But helping them understand their identity as a member of the campus team and of the larger community will “give them the tools necessary to do their jobs.” Training is leadership, and leadership includes relationships and collaboration. Helping the RA leader understand their identity is at the heart of the learning process. “This connection of concrete knowledge, experimentation, reflection, and knowledge production embodies the core tenets of experiential learning,” says Vivienne Felix, associate director of experiential learning at New York University. Moving from the passive approach of having a panel of experts present volumes of information to an active approach that requires the engagement and development of learners is the key to our ability to teach RAs what they need to know in a way that enhances their enthusiasm and commitment, allows them to reflect and to learn from their mistakes, and teaches them the competencies they need for a job with so many different roles. Know your learners; create your community.

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