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Title: Revelations from a Resident Assistant Mentoring Study: Misalignment on Mentoring

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Revelations from a Resident Assistant Mentoring Study: Misalignment on Mentoring

What do we really know about mentoring Resident Assistants (RAs)? Does mentoring affect RAs’ leadership efficacies? To address these two research questions we created a successful collaborative research project between Housing and Residence Life (HRL) and Leadership Studies faculty. We wanted to learn more about mentoring encounters/relationships and leadership efficacy (self-efficacy and leadership behaviors). Any successful assessment or research project requires communication and delegation of tasks. Leadership Studies faculty and HRL worked together on this particular assessment by:

- Creating of a Memo of Understanding (MOU) between Housing and Residence Life and Leadership Studies based on mutual benefit and research/departmental needs;
- Attending face-to-face meetings;
- Delegation of tasks regarding communication with HRL staff to Britt Frye;
- Delegation of tasks regarding Institutional Review Board to Drs. Early and Hanna;
- Ongoing email correspondence between Early, Frye, and Hanna;
- Dissemination of a journal article by the primary researcher, Dr. Early to all graduate level and full-time staff by Britt Frye, Assistant Director for Academic Initiatives; and
- Communication on logistics (e.g., reserving rooms, ordering food, informed consent forms).

In order to determine if mentoring encounters had an impact on resident assistants’ leadership efficacies (self-efficacy and leadership behaviors). The learning outcomes of the research project were of mutual benefit to the researchers and practitioners. The primary researcher, Sherry Early wanted to address a gap/limitation in her dissertation research; the practitioners wanted insights on relationship dynamics between paraprofessional and graduate assistant (GA) and full-time staff.

HRL and Leadership Studies faculty worked together with this assessment equitably. Historically, this assessment came about by Sherry Early approaching the Assistant Director for
Academic Initiatives, Britt Frye via email and initiating a meeting and attached a copy of her dissertation research in the form of a journal article for his reference. Sherry Early met with Britt Frye and we discussed our professional histories with Housing and Residence Life (HRL). Sherry then discussed how HRL continues to be an area of interest in her research agenda as faculty. Britt Frye stated he was receptive to collaborating for further research on mentoring relationships and leadership by providing access to Marshall University’s HRL staff. Sherry completed the Institutional Review Board process. Together, Early, Frye, and Hanna developed a timeline for a two-week period for focus groups and interviews. Britt Frye reserved the space and advertised this opportunity to participate to HRL staff.

Factors contributing to the positive working relationship included:

- Not making assumptions about one another’s intentions or needs regarding the assessment;
- Being transparent regarding tangible outcomes of the assessment (e.g., HRL’s need for a professional development training on findings);
- Willingness of HRL to provide financial resources, meeting space, and communicate with HRL staff;
- Willingness of the researchers to come to the Huntington/undergraduate campus from the South Charleston/graduate campus in the evenings to conduct focus groups; and
- Researchers were responsible for all administrative IRB aspects (e.g., informed consent forms).

The theoretical framework that guided this study was Mentoring Theory and the Social Change Model of Leadership; the conceptual framework that guides this study is Astin’s Input-Environment-Outcome Model. Together, they account for students’ pre-college experiences, current collegiate experiences, and perceptions of their leadership efficacies. Within mentoring literature there are two aspects; 1) mentoring for interpersonal development and 2) mentoring for career development. **Findings related to this assessment included HRL GAs and full-time staff emphasized the career development or vocational aspect of mentoring with their staffs. However, paraprofessional staff identified a need for the interpersonal development aspect of mentoring.** This identified misalignment was rather shocking to the GA/full-time staff. From the RA perspective, they had identified mentors to help further their careers (faculty, family members, coaches, etc.) who were not their supervisors. **They expressed when a critical incident occurs on their floor, the staff tends to focus on the student and may unintentionally neglect the RAs’ emotional wellbeing.** This has resulted in RAs turning to returning RAs as opposed to their supervisors for support. **Another important finding was that although HRL staff were not identified “mentors” they were seen as leaders by the paraprofessional staff.**

The innovative component of this assessment from the Student Affairs perspective is that we have isolated the misalignment between paraprofessional staff needs and what professional staff has been providing. In doing so, an examination of communication, culture and transparency within Marshall University’s HRL program has ensued. The innovative component of this assessment from the Academic Affairs perspective is that we have been able to not only hear from the protégé (in dissertation research) but also from mentors when it comes
to leadership. Moreover, we can role model a successful, mutually beneficial partnership between HRL and Leadership Studies.

Lessons learned from this collaboration include that you can address limitations in your dissertation research. Sherry Early was able to use a multi-institutional, quantitative study and compare findings with a single institution, qualitative study on mentoring and leadership efficacy. We also learned the value of hearing from both mentors and protégés. **In this research, we were able to pinpoint the misalignment between RA needs and what the supervisors were providing.** We also learned some Student Affairs practitioners want to engage with faculty, but they can be intimidated to approach them. Waiting for Student Affairs professionals to come to faculty is a potential pitfall. So, faculty reaching out (especially those with a Student Affairs background) make the receptivity to collaboration much higher. I have also learned the power of transparency through a co-constructed MOU. This document not only lends itself toward mutual benefit/accountability for both faculty and practitioner, but also allows for discussion for future collaborative endeavors for a sustained relationship.