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Candidate Pools or Puddles: Challenges and Trends in the Recruitment and Hiring of Resident Directors

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Researchers examined the perspectives of 274 senior housing officers and 283 graduate students on the declining number of resident director candidates. Data from two separate surveys indicated that quality of life, remuneration, and interest in the residence life profession were significant issues. Implications for professional preparation, practice and research are explored.

Over the last 40 years or so, housing and residence life programs have reached several milestones including: (a) increased professionalism in the field, (b) the creation of standards and guidelines for professional practice, and (c) substantive professional education (Riker, 1993). Since the 1960s, residence life operations have changed from staffing dormitories with housemothers to providing residence halls with paraprofessional and professional residence educators (Frederiksen, 1993; Schroeder & Mable, 1994). As the philosophy of student development and the residential experience for college students have evolved over time so has the philosophy and nature of staffing these programs and services.

Residence life positions, specifically, the resident director, were considered the key entry points for new professionals in student affairs. Residence life positions have served as the predominant area for work by graduate students (e.g., practicums, assistantships, internships) and new professionals (Richmond & Benton, 1988; Richmond & Sherman, 1991). Notably, Hunter (1992) found that an undergraduate's experience working in residence life was the single most common introductory experience. Midlevel residence life professionals identified practical work experience in residence life as the most frequently cited type of prior student services experience (Delaney, 1990). In fact, Frederiksen (1993) claimed "the housing and residence life career field has become a primary provider of basic student affairs professional work experiences and in so doing offers an excellent experience foundation for other career fields within student affairs" (p. 176).

Beyond serving as an entry point into the profession, residence life staff have emerged as essential collaborators in the development of community and engaging students in the learning process. For example, developing community on a college campus can be essential in promoting tolerance and acceptance of diversity as well as encouraging the personal development of students (Anchors, Branch Douglas, & Kasper, 1993). The critical element necessary for ensuring the success of residential programs in the development of community, attaining the goals of student development, and enhancing student learning is professional staff with sufficient credentials, training, and experience (Stimpson, 1994; Winston & Anchors, 1993).

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Despite the affirmation in residence life of the importance of professional staff in live-in positions, staffing has been identified as one of the major challenges confronting residence life programs (Blimling, 1993). Challenges to hiring agents in residence life as well as to the candidates themselves specifically include (a) the decrease in the number of students enrolling in preparation programs, (b) the difficulty in finding qualified personnel, (c) strong competition for the best graduates, (d) policies regarding quality of life issues, (e) the feminization of the profession, and (f) an expectation that staff live in the residence halls (Blimling). Although preparation programs experienced a slight decrease in the number of students enrolling in the late 1980s, the profession is offering more options for professional preparation and educating more students than ever before (Coomes & Talbot, 2000; Phelps Tobin, 1998). The number of students pursuing master's degrees in student affairs preparation programs as well as the number of degree programs available had increased between 1973 and 1994 with a slight decline by 1998, during which time, the number of student affairs preparation programs at the master's degree level doubled (Coomes & Talbot; Phelps Tobin). Given the increasing numbers enrolled in graduate preparation programs, what accounts for a possible shortage of candidates for entry-level residence life (live-in) positions?

In the past warning flags have been raised and interventions urged to preempt an emerging crisis that now faces residence life in particular and the profession in general. More than a decade ago two prominent national associations examined the recruitment and preparation of new professionals and observed "the profession has ignored changing societal attitudes about work, working conditions, and compensation, and now finds its activities unattractive to so many young people" (ACPA & NASPA, 1989, p. 8). Soon afterward, Woodard and Komives (1990) forewarned the profession to examine "the changing expectations of future workers" (p. 222) and cited residence life positions as one example of an area in student affairs in need of redesign. "Young professionals today are not as willing or interested in taking live-in positions with long hours, lack of privacy, and relatively low pay for a person with an advanced degree" (Kearney, 1993, p. 288). Observations by faculty in graduate preparation programs affirmed the suspicions of some practitioners indicating there was a greater reluctance by graduate students to accept live-in positions in graduate school or in their first professional positions (T. Cawthon, K. Douglas, J. Hirt, & P. Love, personal communication, April 2, 2000). Further, faculty noted the following: (a) graduate students have many more options for assistantships, practicums, and internship experiences in functional areas other than residential life, (b) some students feel burned out after working in a live-in position during graduate school, and (c) some students seek a different quality of life.

A significant amount of activity and energy has emerged regarding this issue as evidenced by the popularity of programs offered at national conferences (such as ACPA, ACUHO-I, and NASPA), conversation among colleagues, surveys at the regional level, and the seeming changing nature of national conference placement experiences by staff recruiters for residence life. Programs at national conferences on this topic attracted large audiences willing to actively participate and generate discussion concerning the impact on individual cam-

puses and the profession at large. At two national conferences, seasoned residence life professionals expressed their frustration trying to generate enough interest among students in order to have a pool of candidates to interview (M. D'Attillo, personal communication, April 3, 2000; March 1, 2001).

Despite the abundance of anecdotal evidence supporting claims that the number of emerging professionals interested in working as resident directors on college campuses is declining, little, if anything, currently exists in the literature and research confirming this problem or defining the extent of the problem experienced by senior housing officers across the country. Additionally, a paucity of current research or literature confirms the employment intentions of graduate students upon completion of their program of study. A shortage of well-educated and trained professional staff working with students in residence halls will have a significant impact on the development of community, the student learning process, and the personal development of students. As a result, an effective response will require investigating the extent of the problem, identifying the impact on selection and hiring procedures, and determining intentions for employment among graduate students.

The purpose of this manuscript, then, is to describe two studies that examine the problems noted above: namely, the lack of data on senior housing officers' perceptions of the declining resident director pool and the lack of data on graduate students' intentions to pursue residence life positions. In addition, this paper analyzes and discusses the similarities and differences in perspectives between senior housing officers and graduate students with regard to the current challenges in recruiting and hiring resident directors. For the purposes of this study, *resident director* is defined as full-time, live-in, entry-level positions in residence life with direct responsibility (programming, supervision, discipline, etc.) for residents within a building or complex of buildings.

In Study 1, the researchers sought to confirm empirically what had been reported anecdotally within the past five years by senior housing officers. The following research questions guided the first study:

1. Within the last five years, do senior housing officers report a decline in the number of qualified emerging and new professional interested in working as resident directors?
2. What do senior housing officers report as evidence of the phenomenon on their campuses?
3. What do senior housing officers report as possible explanations for this phenomenon on their own campuses as well as nationwide?

Study 2 was designed to examine this phenomenon from the perspective of current graduate students in student affairs preparation programs. In this study, the researchers focused on the experiences of graduate students in residence life (as paraprofessionals) as well as their intentions to pursue residence life as a career among the variety of functional areas within the student affairs profession. In Study 2, the following research questions were addressed:

1. What experiences have current graduate students had with residence life at both the undergraduate (i.e., resident assistant) and the graduate (i.e., live-in graduate or assistant resident director)?
2. What are the intentions of current graduate students in pursuing residence life as a career and what influences those intentions?

STUDY 1 METHOD

Sample

For Study 1, surveys were mailed to a convenience sample of 516 senior housing officers (SHOs) representing as many campuses across the nation, with 274 (53.0%) returned. Each of the SHOs and their respective campuses had current individual and institutional membership with ACUHO-I at the time of the study. While there were a number of private and public two-year institutions included in the sample, most were either four-year private (40.9%) or four-year public (53.3%) institutions. Within an overall housing capacity range of 100 to 10,000 beds, nearly half (48.9%) of the sample had housing capacities that fell within the range of 1,000 to 5,000. Approximately two thirds of the sampled institutions had resident assistant staffs that ranged in number from 20 to 100, and full-time resident director (RD) staffs of 1 to 10 (63.9% and 66.3%, respectively).

Instrument

To address the research questions of this study, the researchers designed a single survey with 39 items grouped into 4 sections. Items and response categories were generated through discussion with experts in residence life. Each item on the survey measured a single characteristic, independent of the others, and therefore did not require a test of homogeneity or internal consistency (Fink & Kosecoff, 1985). The first section gathered institutional and departmental data. The second section assessed the SHOs' perspectives regarding the decline in qualified RD candidates over the past five years. In section 3, the nature and extent of the phenomenon on individual campuses was assessed. The fourth section focused on the SHOs' explanation for this occurrence both locally on their own campuses and nationwide. All items in the last three sections were either true-false or arranged on a Likert-type scale.

Procedure

In the fall of 2000, the researchers purchased from ACUHO-I a mailing roster of all senior housing officers who were current members of the organization. Only individuals with current ACUHO-I membership at the time the roster was purchased and who worked within the continental United States (N = 516) were mailed the survey along with a cover letter, which served as both a consent form and an explanation of the study. Follow-up notes were sent to all participants encouraging their participation. All empirical data were collected by November and entered into the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS). Analysis of the data included descriptive statistics on all items in the survey.

STUDY 1 RESULTS

Means and standard deviations were calculated for all Likert-type scale items. For true-false items, the percentages of responses answering *true* were also calculated. The results reported below reflect the research questions asked and the sequence of items on the survey.

Perception of the Phenomenon Over the Past Five Years

To the statement, "There is a shrinking pool of qualified emerging and new professionals interested in working as a resident director," the participants' responses indicated that the phenomenon has become progressively worse over the last five years. On a scale of

1 (*not at all accurate*) to 5 (*very accurate*), the mean score to the accuracy of the statement for the past five years was 2.79 (*SD* = 1.13); for the past three, 3.50 (*SD* = 1.13); and for the past year, 3.67 (*SD* = 1.30).

Extent and Nature of the Phenomenon on Individual Campuses

Participants who indicated that this phenomenon has occurred on their campuses within the last 12 months (*n* = 250) were further asked to respond to items that describe the nature of the phenomenon on their campuses within the past 12 months (i.e., how this phenomenon manifests itself). The results for these items are reported in Table 1. Among the highest indicators, to which nearly half of the sample agreed with or reported to be true, were: (a) there were fewer overall and fewer qualified candidates applying for RD positions; and (b) RDs were vacating positions within one year of employment. As a result, nearly one third of the SHOs report having to hire less-qualified candidates and having to run searches during the middle of the year or to conduct a last-minute search in order to have a full staff at the start of a term. In addition, one in five SHOs reported that they have opened their residence halls at the beginning of the fall term with at least one RD vacancy.

Explanations for the Phenomenon

When asked to respond to items on the survey which offer an explanation for the lack of interest on their own campuses, the highest scoring items (with a mean of 3.0 or higher out of 5.0) were: (a) the quality of life in general, and particularly for RDs with children, is inadequate; (b) the salary is too

TABLE 1.

Extent and Nature of the Phenomenon of Declining Number of Resident Director Candidates on Individual Campuses Within the Past 12 Months

Items	**Mean**	***SD***
We have fewer applicants for RD positions.	3.61	1.32
We have fewer qualified applicants for RD positions.	3.76	1.32
We have hired staff with less than required qualifications.	2.41	1.51
We have hired staff with less than preferred qualifications.	3.05	1.48
We have current staff managing more than their assigned building(s).	1.97	1.58

True-False Items	**% answering True**
We have consolidated residents into fewer floors/buildings.	4.0
We have lost RD staff during the academic year.	42.3
We have replaced RD staff during the academic year.	38.7
We have lost RD staff after only one year of working here.	55.6
We have opened residence halls with RD vacancies.	21.1
We had to run a last minute search for RD.	55.9

TABLE 2.
Explanations for the Phenomenon of Declining Number of Resident Director Candidates on Individual Campuses

Items	Mean	*SD*
RD salary is too low.	3.27	1.31
Benefits are insufficient.	2.23	1.18
Administrative demands of the position are too much.	2.96	1.15
Administrative demands of the position are too little.	1.73	0.83
Quality of life is not suitable.	3.06	1.14
Quality of life is not suitable for people with children.	3.58	1.30
RD staff burns out quickly here.	2.85	1.21
Location of the institution is unappealing.	2.40	1.37
There is little prestige associated with the RD position.	3.20	1.21
True-False Items	**% answering True**	
We do not allow RD staff to have pets.	69.9	
We do not provide accommodations for non-married couples.	45.3	
We require staff to use university furnishings.	18.1	

low; and (c) there is little prestige associated with the RD position on campus (see Table 2). It was also noted, albeit to a lesser degree, that the administrative demands on RDs were too high and that staff policies prohibiting RDs from having pets (particularly cats and dogs) in their apartments were unacceptable.

Senior housing officers were similarly asked to respond to items (reported in Table 3) that suggest a reason for why the housing profession as a whole is increasingly unable to attract qualified candidates to the RD position. Interestingly, while there was moderate agreement that quality of life may explain part of the phenomenon, there was broad agreement that the phenomenon has its origins in graduate students' preparation for the student affairs profession. The SHOs report that they believe the lack of interest in the housing profession among graduate students, may be due to their experiences as undergraduate resident assistants. In addition, SHOs indicated that there is a decline in the number of qualified students from graduate preparation programs.

STUDY 2 METHOD

Sample

The sample for Study 2 consisted of 283 graduate students enrolled in 13 student affairs graduate preparation programs across the U.S. Respondents included 205 females (73%) and 78 males (27%). Over two thirds (71%) of the sample were between the ages

of 22 and 25, with the average age 25.3. The racial representation of the sample was: 71% White, 11% African American, 6% Asian American, 6% Hispanic, 2% foreign national, and 4% other. Approximately one third of the participants (31%) were just starting their graduate program and nearly half (45%) of the sample reported that they had completed more than half of their program. When asked to indicate their current graduate assistantship, 81 (28%) reported that it was in residence life. Other graduate assistantships in the sample were in the following functional areas: student activities (7%), academic advising (6%), career services (5%), admissions (4%), Greek affairs (4%), and general student affairs administration (4%). Thirteen percent reported having assistantships outside of traditional student affairs areas. Finally, with regard to prior professional experience in student affairs, 34 (12%) reported having an average of 1.8 years of professional experience prior to enrolling in their graduate program.

Instrument

For the graduate student sample in Study 2, a separate instrument was developed and a pilot test was conducted with graduate students in a master's degree preparation program. Similar to the survey for the SHO group, each item on this survey was designed to measure a single characteristic; therefore, no test of internal consistency was conducted (Fink & Kosecoff, 1985). In addition to a section which collected demographic data, the survey included three sections: (a) the nature and quality of their undergraduate experience in residence life; (b) the nature and quality of their graduate experience in residence life; and (c) professional intentions for student affairs practice. Because of the differences in previous and current experiences in residence life as well as the different intentions of the participants, each section allowed participants to skip items that were not relevant to their experience. The items on the three sections noted above were arranged on a Likert-type scale.

Procedure

During the fall of 2000, the researchers identified student affairs preparation programs from the ACPA Commission XII Directory (Coomes & Talbot, 2000) which had a minimum of 20 students and which

TABLE 3.

Explanations for the Phenomenon of Declining Number of Resident Director Candidates Nationwide

Items	Mean	*SD*
The number of qualified students from graduate preparation programs has declined.	3.46	1.06
There is a lack of interest in the housing profession.	3.75	0.95
RD staff tends to burn out more quickly than they have in the past.	3.35	1.12
Graduate students with undergraduate experience are no longer interested in residence life.	3.41	0.98
Generally speaking, the quality of life for RDs is poor.	2.93	1.11

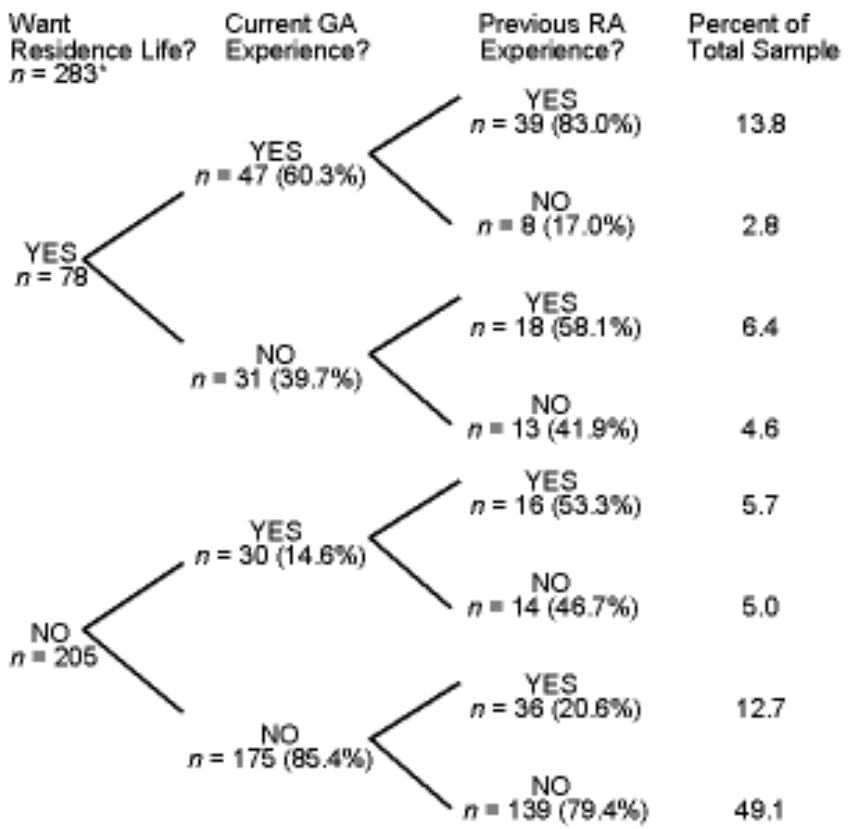
represented various geographic locations in the U. S. Thirteen programs were identified, with a total of 414 possible graduate student participants. Research packets were prepared for each of the graduate program coordinators which contained a cover letter to the program coordinator along with materials for each of their graduate students: a set of surveys, a cover letter with a consent form, and a return envelope. Program coordinators were asked to collect the sealed surveys from the students and return the entire packet to the researchers. Follow up notes were sent to all graduate program coordinators encouraging their assistance in collecting the data. A total of 283 usable surveys were returned, representing a response rate of 68%. All the data were entered into SPSS and analysis of the data included calculations of frequencies, means, and standard deviations for all items.

STUDY 2 RESULTS

As in Study 1, descriptive statistics for the data were calculated. The results reported

FIGURE 1.

Intentions to Work Professionally In Residence Life Among Graduate Students (N = 285)



Note. Two cases missing.

below respond to the research questions asked and reflect the sequence of items on the survey.

Undergraduate and Graduate Experience in Residence Life

One of the first things examined in the data was the varying experiences and intentions of the sample related to residence life. Of the 283 participants, 109 (38%) had been resident assistants (RAs), 77 (27%) held positions as a live-in residence hall graduate assistant (GA), and 78 (27%) intended to pursue residence life as a career (Figure 1).

Closer examination of these data revealed that nearly two thirds (68%) of the 205 participants who did not intend to pursue residence life as a career did not have the combination of both RA and GA experiences, while half (71%) of the participants who did want to pursue residence life as a career had both RA and GA experiences. Not surprisingly, the data suggested that graduate students with both RA and GA experience are more likely to pursue residence life than participants who had only GA or RA experience or who had neither. It is impossible from these data to ascertain which single experience (the RA or GA experience) will more likely result in a graduate student pursuing residence life.

Intentions to Pursue Residence Life as a Career

As noted previously, 28% (n = 78) of the graduate students in the sample reported that they intended to pursue positions in residence life while 72% (n = 205) did not intend to pursue residence life. The reasons why some did not intend to pursue residence life are reported in Table 4, and the reasons for those intending to pursue employment in residence life are reported in Table 5. The mean scores reported in these tables are based on the degree to which participants agreed that the stated reason influenced their decision on a scale from 1 (*had nothing to do with my decision)* to 5 (*a significant factor in my decision*).

Most of the reasons for pursuing resi-

TABLE 4.
Explanations for Graduate Students' Not Pursuing Residence Life

Items	Mean	*SD*
Overall experience in residence life thus far	2.63	1.53
RD salary	2.39	1.35
RD benefits	2.15	1.26
Administrative demands of RD position	2.94	1.51
Quality of life in general	3.91	1.31
Quality of life for people with children	3.11	1.67
Provisions for people with pets	2.60	1.72
Provisions for domestic partners	2.80	1.69
Burn-out associated with RD position	3.50	1.56
Lack of interest in residence life profession	4.11	1.32

TABLE 5.
Explanations for Graduate Students' Pursuing Residence Life

Items	Mean	*SD*
Overall experience in residence life thus far	4.06	1.05
Financial considerations	3.46	1.16
Challenging nature of the profession	3.82	0.94
Possibility for promotion and advancement	3.62	0.97
My current qualifications	4.04	1.11
Chances for employment	4.01	1.18
Quality of life	3.48	1.03
Prestige of residence life	2.60	1.05
Level and nature of student contact	4.37	0.76

dence life as a career that were offered in the survey were considered important influencing factors. "Level and nature of contact with students" had the highest score with a mean score of 4.37 (*SD* = 0.76), followed closely by reasons (scoring above 4.00) that seem to reflect the participants' expressed intentions to continue on a professional track that started at the graduate or undergraduate level. It is interesting to note that "the prestige of the residence life profession" was not a strong influence in pursuing residence life, suggesting that the participants may not view the stature of the profession as highly as other functional areas in student affairs.

By comparison, participants who did not wish to pursue residence life had lower mean scores for the reasons suggested by the survey for such a career path. The only item which scored high among these choices, and which may offer some explanation for the moderate scores on the other items, was lack of interest in residence life. This item scored 4.11 (*SD* = 1.32) and may indicate that all the other possible reasons are immaterial when there is general lack of interest.

Closer examination of comparable reasons for pursuing or not pursuing residence life indicate that financial benefits and overall previous experience play stronger roles in pursuing residence life than in not pursuing residence life. On the other hand, quality of life appears to have a more significant influence on the decision to not pursue residence life than to pursue it.

COMPARISON OF RESULTS

When reviewing the descriptive statistics on the variables that may explain the decline in RD candidates, several differences emerged between the SHOs in Study 1 and the graduate students who chose not to pursue residence life in Study 2. Three of these variables—reflecting items that assessed what each group believed to be the reason why new professionals are not entering candidate pools on a scale from 1 (*not a reason*) to 5 (*a significant reason*)—

were of particular interest to the researchers: quality of life, salary, and interest in residence life as a career.

In order to examine these differences more closely, a multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was conducted (see Table 6). The MANOVA included position (SHO or graduate student) as the independent variable plus the three dependent variables (quality of life, salary, and interest). A significant main effect difference was indicated using Wilks's Lamba criterion of $F(3, 398) = 45.64$, $p < .0001$. When examining the univariate results, data revealed that quality of life is of greater concern for the graduate students than for the SHOs ($p < .0001$). Similarly, graduate students report lack of interest in residence life as a greater concern than was perceived by SHOs ($p < .05$). On the other hand, SHOs viewed salary as a more influential variable than did the graduate students ($p < .0001$).

INTEGRATED DISCUSSION

Entry-level residence life positions are integral in supporting the academic and educational mission of institutions of higher education. Each year, job openings in these types of live-in positions dominate the postings at both ACPA and NASPA national conferences (Komives, 1998). The challenge for senior housing officers in generating candidate pools with qualified candidates or filling anticipated openings or newly vacated positions with qualified candidates is substantiated in the abundance of anecdotal information, supporting the need for research into the extent of the problem and the identification of strategies to mediate the negative effects of such a phenomenon. The data from senior housing officers and graduate students collected in these studies offer valuable, though sometimes conflicting, perspectives on the significance of particular issues. Three specific areas—quality of life, remuneration, and lack of interest—were of particular concern.

Quality of Life

When comparing items that measured quality of life as a variable in the decision-making process, the results indicated that both SHOs and graduate students identified quality of life as a significant reason for why graduate students do not pursue residence life as a career, particularly for those individuals with children. However, when

TABLE 6.

MANOVA for Quality of Life, Salary, and Interest by Position

Variable	Graduate Students Mean	(*SD*)	Senior Housing Officers Mean	(*SD*)	*F*(1,401)	*p*
Quality of Life	3.88	(1.33)	2.95	(1.11)	57.67	.000
Salary	2.38	(1.35)	3.29	(1.31)	46.52	.000
Interest	4.05	(1.33)	3.79	(0.91)	5.18	.023

Notes. Wilks's Lamda $F(3, 398) = 45.64$, $p < .0001$.

comparing means between the two groups, quality of life appeared to be a significantly greater concern for the graduate students than for SHOs. Graduate students indicated greater intolerance than senior housing professionals of the lifestyle of a live-in staff member that may include late-night disruptions as well as day-to-day challenges of living and working in a single environment. While senior housing officers may regard this lifestyle as a cost for the other benefits of a career in residence life, graduate students appear to have a different perspective on the trade-offs that are necessary and appropriate for a career in student affairs. In essence, to graduate students the lifestyle and quality of life of a live-in RD are simply not worth it, especially when there are so many other career options in student affairs that do not require this particular hardship.

Interestingly, for the graduate students choosing residence life as a career, quality of life was not highly rated as one of the reasons for the choice. The students were concerned with the level of student contact, previous experience and related qualifications, chances for entering the profession and advancing, and the challenging nature of the job. For entry-level live-in staff the fishbowl-like existence has been identified in the literature as a serious quality of life concern (Hirt & Creamer, 1998; Jablonsky, 1998). New professionals in live-in positions need support balancing the professional role, new job, and new environment (Barr, 1990; Super, 1986; Toma, Clark, & Jacobs, 1998).

In sum, these data suggested the general issue of quality of life is paramount for graduate students considering residence life as a career option. However, their view of quality of life is inextricably intertwined with their experiences or lack of experience in residence life. Senior housing officers may need to consider what adjustments can be made in these areas and how they may debunk some of the myths graduate students might have about quality of life issues in the residence life profession. This concept of quality of life is rather slippery, however. This survey did not define the phrase "quality of life" to participants, so it is possible that there were varying ideas of what is a positive quality of life and what is not. Follow up research may consider the following questions:

- How is "quality of life" defined?
- Do graduate students, resident directors, and senior housing officers define "quality of life" differently?
- Are graduate students realistic in their assessment of how important quality of life issues are to them prior to taking a professional position?
- Are there practical ways in which quality of life issues can be mediated in order to attract graduate students into resident director positions?
- Can or should quality of life issues at the undergraduate RA position and the graduate level live-in position be addressed in an effort to attract and retain students in residence life positions professionally?

Remuneration

The data suggested a possible explanation for the declining numbers of RD candidates may be that SHOs and graduate students differ in their perspectives of remuneration (salary and benefits packages). Both groups —those who planned to pursue a career in residence life and those who did not— indicated that salary and benefits were less-significant factors in their decisions. In fact,

remuneration was nearly at the bottom of their respective lists. On the other hand, SHOs reported that the low salary (moreso than lack of benefits) was one of the main reasons that graduate students were not attracted to the RD position. SHOs and graduate students not pursuing residence life differed in their perceptions of the significance of salary in attracting young people to the RD position. However, the two groups did not differ in perspective with respect to benefits. Therefore, this discussion will focus on salary.

One possible explanation for the difference in perceptions with respect to salary might be the naïveté of graduate students when it comes to salary; that is to say, they may be exiting their graduate work with the expectation that they are not entering a high-paying career and, by extension, there are more important things than money (such as student contact, opportunities to educate others, self-development, etc.). In fact, the results of this study confirm Hunter's (1992) claim that intrinsic factors such as the relationships with other students and professional staff and the experiences graduates students had as undergraduates are primary reasons that motivated them to pursue a career in student affairs. In more practical terms, they may also be exiting their graduate programs believing that just about any dollar amount that exceeds their graduate assistantship stipends is a great leap in their financial situation. Combined, these expectations may lead graduate students to believe that money is not the most pressing reason for choosing a particular career in student affairs.

On the other hand, SHOs may view increasing salaries as a possible solution to recruiting more graduate students into residence life. It is important, however, to keep in mind that although there were first- and second-year graduate students in this study, they were not actively engaged in the process of looking for employment at the time these data were collected (fall semester). Therefore, these graduate students may not understand (until fully engaged in the search process) the variance in salaries among RD positions (depending on such factors as institutional type or geographic location) and thus believe that salary won't be an issue. The response of SHOs in this study indicated that salary has been raised as an issue in the hiring process. The idea that not all RD positions have the same salary range, albeit a simplistic one, is a lesson many graduate students truly don't learn until embedded in the process of seeking employment.

The issue of salary or compensation has surfaced in our literature as an issue linked to the retention of new professionals (Woodard & Komives, 1990), but not in terms of recruiting specifically into residence life positions or the field in general. Therefore, these data suggested that SHOs be cautious about this type of solution, as it may not have the anticipated impact. In fact, if there is additional money to be spent, it may be better allocated for enhancing the quality of life for RDs. Follow up research may consider the following questions:

- Is there a way to offer a broader perspective to graduate students in a job search regarding salary and compensation issues? And, if so, who might be best positioned to offer that perspective?
- In what ways can faculty of graduate preparation programs and professional associations work together to provide current and accurate compensation information to graduate students?

Lack of Interest

Senior housing officers reported a lack of interest in the profession (of residence life) among graduate students and new professionals as one explanation for the decline in the number of qualified candidates for resident director positions. Graduate students suggested they were generally not interested in pursuing residence life as a profession (72%), and they indicated a lack of interest as the primary reason offered by the survey. Overall, only 28% of the graduate students in this study were interested in pursuing live-in positions, yet that is fairly consistent with previous research (Richmond & Sherman, 1991); however, among those who had undergraduate experience as an RA and who held GA positions in residence life, 71% intend to pursue employment in residence life.

In addition, SHOs also reported a lack of interest in RA positions on the part of undergraduates. Less than 4 out of 10 (38.5%) graduate students had participated in the RA experience at the undergraduate level. For years, the majority of undergraduate students who served in paraprofessional positions were most often found in residence halls (Salovey & D'Andrea, 1984), yet more recently opportunities to serve in paraprofessional positions at the undergraduate level have expanded significantly (Carns, Carns, & Wright, 1993). Witnessing the day-to-day issues and stresses combined with their perception of the quality of life associated with the RA position, undergraduate students interested in a paraprofessional position may be far more inclined to seek opportunities in other areas in student affairs. The detrimental effects of job stress and burnout among RAs have been well documented (Benedict & Mondloch, 1989; Deluga & Winters, 1990; Hetherington, Oliver, & Phelps, 1989; Nowack, Gibbons, & Hanson, 1985) and the lack of interest in graduate assistant positions and RD positions as documented by this study may be a reflection of the perception of stress associated with the RA position.

Nevertheless, encouragement by those in the field and critical experiences have been identified as essential considerations in how one chooses a career in student affairs, and serving as an undergraduate RA was identified as the most likely way for a student to be introduced to student affairs work (Hunter, 1992). Overall, graduate students reported that 28% held a GA position in residence life, the most often cited type of work for graduate students among a list of 27 functional areas developed from ACPA's membership category materials. Do these data reflect a significant change from five years ago? or ten or fifteen years ago?

Based on the results of this study, there doesn't appear to be a loss of interest in pursuing residence life once in graduate school. However, those graduate students in residence life positions and those intending to work in residence life are not always the same individuals. Some graduate students who intend to work in residence life after graduation have had no residence life experience as an undergraduate (RA) or graduate student. This raises the issue of what kinds of experiences determine who is a "qualified" RD candidate. Concurrently, SHOs also believed that there are fewer qualified graduate students emerging from preparation programs.

Pinpointing if there is a lack of interest or where the lack of interest originates from is a more complex issue. What elements converge to determine a lack of interest? Is "lack of interest" interchangeable with "desire for other opportunities?" That is,

does the pursuit of other options indicate a lack of interest in a particular option or a desire to have alternative or multiple experiences?

Some current faculty in preparation programs firmly believe that more diverse opportunities for graduate assistantships exist, and thus, students seek alternative options in preparing to enter the profession (T. Cawthon, K. Douglas, J. Hirt, & P. Love, personal communication, April 2, 2000). On a national level, reliable historical data on the type of graduate assistantships offered among preparation programs and any changes over time are virtually nonexistent. Logically, an extension of the premise that more options for experience exist at the graduate preparation level would be that more options exist for entry-level employment as well. To lend further ambiguity to the issue, no reliable databases for entry-level positions in general or for resident director positions exist on a national level. Without databases it is impossible to document historical changes in the number of positions offered or the number of potential candidates available (Komives, 1998).

At this juncture, it is virtually impossible to be definitive about the lack of interest by GAs and new professionals for live-in positions as reported by SHOs. It is possible that lack of interest in live-in positions as well as a myriad of other issues, events, and concerns have converged to redefine who may be interested in pursuing live-in positions, for how long, and under what conditions of employment. Follow up research may consider the following questions:

- In relative terms, do we see the same proportion of graduate students (relative to the number of positions available) interested in pursuing residence life even though their qualifications and previous experiences in residence life may differ from past candidates?
- Are more residence life positions available across the country now than there were five, ten, or fifteen years ago? That is, have new residence life positions emerged and the minimum qualifications of RDs increased while the number of graduate assistantships and graduate students with previous experience simply not kept pace?
- Are residence life professionals doing all they can to generate interest in the field? How proactive have professionals been in generating interest? What strategies exist for generating interest from a national perspective? from a regional perspective? or a local perspective?
- Can we broaden the definition of "qualified" to accommodate both the desires of those who intend to work in residence life without experience and the need for SHOs to hire new personnel?
- Have the responsibilities associated with RD positions grown more complex in recent years, changing the nature of how "qualified" is defined in general or more specifically to some types of institutions?
- Do these numbers reflect a decrease in what existed five, ten, or fifteen years ago?

LIMITATIONS

This study has several limitations that must be considered when interpreting the results. The primary limitation with the survey is related to the narrowly constructed responses from the participants. The participants were asked to reply to items and to expand on their thoughts in the Additional Comments area to provide evidence of and explanations for the phenomenon. It is possible that some manifestations of and explanations for the

phenomenon were not elicited nor thoroughly examined. Analysis of these open-ended comments did not reveal any additional or particular evidence or explanation that warranted further discussion. As graduate students, the participants may not have been aware of the nuances of residence life positions.

The study utilized two instruments with slightly different wording from two distinct participant pools. The senior housing officers were familiar with professional issues, vocabulary and concerns related to professional life. The graduate student participants may not have been as familiar with the issues, the language, or the concerns. It is possible that different interpretations of these concepts between the SHOs and graduate students may have influenced the results.

FURTHER RESEARCH

The declining number of resident director candidates is a relatively new phenomenon in the housing profession. Little is known or written about this problem using empirical research; therefore, the findings from this descriptive study suggest several areas for further research. First, for those who must deal with the problem it would be useful to learn and understand how their colleagues across the nation have begun responding to it. Also, since graduate students and the preparation programs from which they emerge have been implicated in the discussion of this problem, it would be useful to focus research efforts on these students and programs. Specifically, graduate students in student affairs preparation programs could be surveyed to learn about and understand their intentions with respect to pursuing residence life as a profession. In addition, faculty members in student affairs preparation programs and practitioners who supervise graduate students in assistantships or internships may also, in a separate study, be able to offer insight to the phenomenon.

This study also suggested that a closer examination of several issues focusing on quality of life is warranted. Potential or current graduate students may be able to offer valuable information as to the role quality of life plays in their career decision-making process. More specifically, what current RDs consider quality of life factors may be useful in addressing this issue.

Finally, only a paucity of current research exists on any potential link between burnout among RAs and graduate students in residence life positions and the impact burnout has on (a) choices to pursue a master's degree, (b) the type of graduate assistantship sought, and (c) employment goals in student affairs. Research in this area may offer new insights. Further, in the literature of the 1980s and early 1990s little, if any, documentation has materialized about interventions designed to address the issue of burnout and their success or failure. In essence, there is no yellow brick road to follow that will help us understand the precise origins of where and how burnout may be a factor in career decision-making within residence life.

SUMMARY

The results of these studies suggested that the diminished pool of resident director candidates is a complex issue that cannot be distilled into a single reason or simple explanation. A framework is offered from which to begin to construct a response to the dilemma experienced by senior housing

officers across the country as they struggle with determining the root causes for limited candidate pools for resident director positions. Further, the results suggested that more exploration is necessary to understand the quality of life provided by the resident director experience, the discrepancies in the perception of the role salary plays in the decision-making process, and the issues that fuel a lack of interest in live-in residence life positions.

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