
Original Paper

Comparison of the Resident Assistant position in the United States and United Kingdom in Higher Education

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Abstract

The job responsibilities of the peer-to-peer paraprofessional staff for residences in higher education institutions, whether in the United States or the United Kingdom, can play a critical role to the retention and success of residential student in higher education settings. This study examines and compares qualities, characteristics, attributes, and responsibilities of live-in paraprofessional student positions within Housing and Residential Life departments in the United States and United Kingdom. Discussed herein is an understanding of the job responsibilities of paraprofessionals in both countries. Given the ever-changing landscape of higher education in a global society, this essential student-held position serves as a critical resource for residential students. Additionally, this study investigates the influence of learning and skill development through the resident assistant position and implications for practice and future research opportunities.

Introduction

Higher education student housing can be traced to the Middle Ages when students studied at the University of Paris, and then, in Oxford and Cambridge, England (Cowley, 1934). At the turn of the 19th Century, early American educators sought to bring the *Oxbridge Model* to the United States to “invigorate undergraduate education at American universities” (Duke, 1996 pg.5). Although many American institutions tried to replicate pieces of the Oxbridge Model, including its living communities, curriculum, comprehensive exams, tutorials, and more, the *residential college* was the most emulated part of their model (Duke, 1996). American universities were successful in recreating the Oxbridge Model as living communities for students in residence.

The idea of Resident Assistants (RAs) in the halls in the United States did not emerge until the 1960's. A Resident Assistant is a full-time undergraduate peer paraprofessional typically assigned to a residential community of undergraduate students in some portion of a residence hall, floor, or wing (Blimling, 2010). These paraprofessional staff played a critical role in managing residence halls since this time (Upcraft & Pilato, 1982). Bailey and Granpre (1997) indicate the importance of the RA position noting, “for decades, the resident assistant position has been regarded as the cornerstone in the operation of housing departments and the enhancement of student learning and development” (p. 40). The RA position has evolved over time in both the United States (US) and United Kingdom (UK). A deeper look into this evolution and a comparison of the modern job description of this critical residential peer mentor position and the lessons that can be learned during the ever-changing environment of higher education universities to ensure best practices. Further, as institutional values shift, financial security fluctuates, and political agendas infiltrate higher education (Bess & Dee, 2012), the complexity of this student position should be studied and compared.

Literature Review

Contemporary RA Role in US

The current role of the RA has not changed tremendously in terms of its specific, outlined job description

(Boone, 2016). However, the demands, breadth, and depth of the job responsibilities, as seen in contemporary residential living programs across the United States, have expanded enormously, particularly in complexity (Boone, Davidson, & Bauman, 2013). The role of the RA is evolving and complex (Papandrea, 2015).

Today's increasingly diverse student population faces a myriad of challenges. With drug usage and mental health issues rising among college students, RAs are called to provide support and service to different tasks with greater efficiency within housing and residence life operations (Papandrea, 2015). Furthermore, modern-day students enter higher education with increasingly complex emotional and personal challenges, resulting in a more stressful RA role (Brandt Brecheisen, 2014). When we juxtapose the ever-growing complexity of the RA job with the needs of future iGen students, who are "on the verge of the most severe mental health crisis for young people in decades" (Twenge, 2017, p. 93), the need for a review of the RA paraprofessional role is greatly warranted.

Resident Assistant Position in the UK

The RA paraprofessional role in the United Kingdom has evolved differently than its US counterpart. The shift from providing housing for students to developing a community of students began in the Middle Ages, first experienced at the College de Sorbonne at the University of Paris (Duke, 1996). As Cobban (1988) shares insights into student housing as, "...a community of scholars with like-minded interests which in theory, at any rate, were to live together in harmonious amity and in an environment of stimulating intellectual exchange..." (p. 14). The aforementioned reference offers understanding into early living-learning communities. The evolution of student housing took on the dualistic purpose of living accommodation and development of the resident.

College of Sorbonne students were young, some were poor, and the need for college housing was critical. In response, the first hostels were established to provide independently organized group housing not affiliated with universities (Duke, 1996). As the hostel model spread throughout much of the United Kingdom, its structure modified. The university asserted its authority, and hostels soon became part of the greater university community.

Although early versions of the hostel structure were not universally adopted across higher education in the United Kingdom, eventually a model established at Merton College in Oxford in 1264 AD proved long-lasting. Merton College developed on-campus housing governed by fellows, a position financially supported by the endowment, who were selected from recent graduates (Duke, 1996). Shortly thereafter, the title *residential colleges* were given to this student housing model (Cowley, 1934). The residential college structure also had faculty members as live-in residents, so they could nurture student learning outside the classroom. Nomenclature for titles in residential living were established in these early stages of student housing and included "deans, fellows, proctors or bedels" (Cowley, 1934, p. 709). Additionally, responsibilities for student control and discipline were given to live-in faculty.

The university experience in the United Kingdom has changed over time. The creation of the Church of England in 1521 shifted the curriculum, as well as what would be funded for students attending higher education institutions (Duke, 1996). The Church of England model now accommodated fee-paying students to attend university and established the need for colleges to have a more influential role in the development of the student. The role college was to now undertake in developing students also included what happened in student housing (Duke, 1996). The UK housing system was also influenced by models from its European neighbors.

German curriculum and their rationale for education affected both UK and US higher education. German influence led to reforms in the structure of degrees, teaching as a profession, and student assessment. However, the most meaningful change was the role of the student housing *fellow*. Those in this position could now marry, tutor, and instruct undergraduates. From these simple beginnings, we see the idea of student life emerge into its present-day form. Herein education's purpose to enrich intellect and character is developed (Duke, 1966). Still, the responsibility of cultivating mind and body emerges as a bifurcated role, one given to academia and the other to student life. Currently, in the UK, residential life/housing, or *accommodations* as it is commonly referenced to, has many resemblances to the US model, and as such, is experiencing the same evolution of the RA paraprofessional role.

Conceptual Framework

The competency framework developed for the National Housing Training Institute (NHTI) with twenty selected attributes was utilized as a model of comparison to the RA job description data. NHTI core competencies and the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International's (ACUHO-I) Body of Knowledge definitively define 20 competencies student housing professionals aspire to master to advancement within the field of campus housing (ACUHO-I, n.d.) (see table 3). Utilization of NHTI competencies provides a framework from which a holistic examination of the RA role and its accompanying responsibilities can proceed. Importantly, in this study, NHTI competencies are used as an framework to compare RA position descriptions, helping to decipher job scope, reach, and its prioritization of tasks.

Purpose of the Study

The evolution of the live in monitor role in student housing in the higher education setting in both the US and the UK began in similar manners (Duke, 1966). However, throughout the history since the inception of higher education, it is clear that this role before it became a peer to peer position, has changed dramatically, yet a modern study of the two international live in student staff programs has not been conducted.

Scholars have studied the peer to peer role by examining; RA staffing (Horvath & Stack, 2013), training (Bowman & Bowman, (1995, 1998) the legal implications of being a RA (Boone, Davidson, & Bauman, 2016), and RA evaluations (Bailey & Granpre, 1997). However, the scope of such research does not provide findings from an international context, nor does it study how the RA positions compare. *How does the RA job description in the US compare to that in the UK? What are the priorities of the positions in each country? Do the role responsibilities outlined in job descriptions correspond to those that the RA's actually perform?* Response to these questions is the focus of this study.

The findings from this study may guide international institutional administrators as they examine and discuss the success of their RA position in meeting the demand of an ever-evolving higher education landscape. Moreover, the purpose of this study is to attain a deeper understanding of skill development, program priorities and best practice for both residential and paraprofessional positions. Finally, to uncover the differences of the programs. In comparing these programs, the intention is to discover and share enhancements for both programs. Ideally, pragmatic findings from this research provide qualitative information to guide the international higher education student housing profession in meeting the demands of current and future college populations.

Methodology

This study is an examination and comparison of the qualities and responsibilities of live-in staff Resident Assistants (RAs) in the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK). This study uses NHTI Competencies as a theoretical application in a qualitative methodological approach (Booth et al., 2016; Leedy & Ornrod, 2019).

We used a multiple case study approach to serve as our framework for our qualitative research design for focus group data. This study explores contemporary phenomena within a real-world context, "especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident" (Yin, 2017, p. 15). Working within the purpose of case study research design, its use is supported in two ways. First, we consider whether the context of RA job descriptions that were collected are relevant to the experience of students serving in the RA role, a condition that takes place in a real-life setting. Second, case study design intends to clarify the relationship between contextual circumstances and the phenomenon being investigated, for which simple quantitative evaluation would not suffice (Yin, 2017).

In the UK, housing paraprofessional staff are called a myriad of things, including RAs, wardens, sub-wardens, etc. In the US, resident assistants are generally called RAs. In this study, we use the terms paraprofessional staff and RA interchangeably. We defined RAs as students that live on campus to serve as resources, provide peer assistance, crisis management, and liaison with the housing office (Bliming, 2010). They are selected through an application and interview process by student life professional staff.

Compensation for the RA position in the United States is routinely a single room and a meal plan (Horvath and Stack, 2013). In the United Kingdom, however, compensation varies with an hourly wage and perhaps a combination of discounts on housing, further, not all RAs lived on campus (James Greenwood, personal communication, December 12, 2021).

Site Selection

College/University participation in this study is comprised exclusively of ACUHO-I member institutions. Institutional size varies among participating schools. Specifically, 23.5% of participating schools have less than 5,000 enrolled students, 17.5% have between 5,001 - 10,000 students, 21.4% have enrollments between 10,001 - 20,000 students, 15.4% have 20,001 - 30,000 students, 11.5% are institutions with 30,001 - 40,000 students, and 10.7% of institutions boost more than 40,001 enrolled students. Data collection adequately represents institutions from all ten ACUHO-I regional affiliations, although representation within each region varies (see Table 1). A majority of responding institutions are public colleges and universities (67.1%, n=157), the remaining are private schools (32.9%, n=77). Southeast (20.1%, n=47), Great Lakes (14.1%, n=33), and Upper Midwest (11.0%, n=32) regions are the most participatory. Notably, several Canadian institutions are included in the ACUHO-I US affiliated regions.

Participant Selection for Focus Groups Non-probability purposive sampling strategy with a selection of typical cases, is most appropriate for the second data collection phase, selecting focus group participants (Coyné, 1997). Thirteen focus groups (see Table 2), each from a unique institution of higher education, gave data for narrative analysis. To increase diversity of participant experience, the selection of host institutions for focus groups was based on several pre-determined criteria. In particular, focus group selection criteria included: (1) diverse regional representation for both the UK and US, (2) rural, urban, suburban settings, (3) housing occupancy (number of beds), (4) enrollment size of the institution, (5) public vs private school status, and (6) and the social identity diversity among participating students.

A total of 70 students participated in focus group data collection efforts. Criteria used to select RA participants included diverse experiences in years of service in the paraprofessional role, various majors, and diverse social identities. Participation was voluntary and required informed consent. Focus group facilitators gained permission to audio record focus group discussions to create a verbatim transcription used in later analysis (Leedy & Ornrod, 2019; Kvale & Brinkmann, 2008).

The number of focus groups is determined by information saturation. Specifically, the decision to commence focus groups is not based on a predetermined number. Instead, this decision is made when the research team agrees they have obtained a level of saturation with the content collected. This decision is guided by indicators of repetitive answers and an understanding that additional focus groups would likely add very little new content to our findings.

Procedures

After obtaining IRB research approval from all of the research team's institutions of employment, solicitation for participation ensued. Selection of institutional participants was an intentional process. The initial recruitment of participants began with a survey sent to 950 ACUHO-I member institutions nationally and internationally, by ACUHO-I office staff. From this membership pool, 295 completed Qualtrics surveys were received and included in data analysis, with institutional representation from 234 schools. The survey requested participating schools to upload a copy of their paraprofessional job description(s). The last question on the survey solicited interest in the institution's desire to participate in a subsequent focus group. A prioritized criterion, previously given, to select focus group institutions was developed and implemented. Lastly, the research team divided responsibility to make contact with selected institutions to arrange focus group (FG) sessions.

Upon agreement to participate in an FG session, the host institution provided both access to RAs to recruit for participation and helped with FG logistics. For all place-based FG sessions, the host institution provided a contact person who helped reserve a private space on campus to conduct the focus group session. Synchronous FG sessions were also completed when face-to-face arrangements were not possible given travel limitations of the research team.

Data Collection

Data collection for this study was two-fold: archiving RA job descriptions in a central repository and through RA focus group sessions. This study collected RA job descriptions across varied institutional types using a qualitative methodological approach. A total of 426 unique RA position descriptions were given for inclusion in the study. Job descriptions were collected for paraprofessional positions both nationally and internationally. The research team collected 426 unique job descriptions from the 234 of the 950 member institutions of the Association of College and University Housing Officers-International. From the analyzed data, 67.1% of the job descriptions were from public institutions, and 32.9% were from private institutions.

Focus Groups

The second means of data collection was from focus group participation. Thirteen different focus group sessions were held in the US and UK: seven within each country respectively. In the US, there were 31 total participants from seven different institutions. Within this group, 20 participants identified as women, 11 as men. First year students comprised 55% of the participants, whereas 35% were second year students. Only 10% of FG participants were third year (+) students.

In the UK, there were thirty-nine total participants from six different institutions. Demographic information for UK focus group participants includes 17 women, 18 men and four gender fluid/non-binary persons. UK participants worked primarily with first year students. That included 27 RAs out of the 39. Twelve RAs worked with mixed classes (i.e., a myriad of first-year undergraduates through graduate residents) and three with Upper-Class, four indicated Other. Racial composition is as follows: Black, (N=16) Asian, (N=2) Hispanic/Latino, (N=18) White, (N=1) did not share. Fifteen participants were graduate students, four were 3rd year students and ten were 4th year students. Notably, the UK designation for class year differs from the US designations. For example, fourth year status in the UK, could also indicate graduate student status. The US participants were not asked about their home country. The UK participants were asked and indicated a high number of persons from countries other than the United Kingdom with distribution as follows: (N=10) UK, (N=7) India, (N=3) US, (N=2) China, (N=2) Taiwan, (N=1) from each of the following: Botswana, Bulgaria Chile, Spain, Greece, France, Latvia, Nigeria, Norway, Poland, Peru, Romania, Sri Lanka, Singapore and, South Korea. Institutional websites indicated that for each of the six UK sites, the enrolled student population comprised at least 50%+ International Students. One school boasted closer to 70% composition from an international student population.

Data Analysis

Information analysis of qualitative materials took place in two stages. First, document analysis occurred directly following the collection of RA job descriptions. A thorough content analysis was conducted of the descriptions collected. Content Analysis involves the classification of text by which researchers can draw conclusions through the development of a structured coding scheme (Rose, Spinks, Canhoto, 2015). The researchers developed a structured coding scheme and conducted the review. Subsequently, supplemental qualitative data collection was collected through interviews with professionals and paraprofessionals. The research team conducted meetings to decide appropriate interview questions after analyzing content data. These meetings were purposely executed after completing document analysis of the RA job description to inform interview questions asked of RAs.

RA job descriptions yielded from survey data collection were imported into NVivo software to aid in analysis. The competency framework developed for the National Housing Training Institute (NHTI) with twenty selected attributes was utilized as a model of comparison to the RA job description data. Conducting a position analysis in juxtaposition with the attributes described through NHTI to ascertain alignment with what was being asked of current RAs domestically and internationally was a critical tool to further understand the RA position. Through this document analysis, the results were coded based on the topics and themes presented in each of the twenty selected attributes from NHTI. Using the NHTI Competencies as a baseline for comparing the role and responsibilities of the RA position, exploration of the knowledge and skill expectations necessary to meet the needs of the current and future students enrolling in colleges and universities. We employ a qualitative methodological approach to analyze

themes from a large repository of RA position descriptions collected from varying institutional types. Data collected from job description analysis is then compared to data obtained through RA focus groups. Developing communal association, assessing student needs, and developing peer relationships are the most salient responsibilities expressed across the data; however, all 20 NHTI competencies are mentioned in more than a quarter of all position descriptions (see table 3). Focus group participants voiced concerns over the job scope, despite training and learning support given to the role. Additional findings and implications of practice are given.

Data collection occurred at six different United Kingdom university sites and seven United States sites. As mentioned above, locations were identified after the content analysis of job descriptions. The criteria for the selection of sites included an emphasis on a variety of institutional sizes, types, geographic locations as well as setting (urban, rural, suburban). Further, criteria included selecting students with multiple years of experience in a paraprofessional role, students from various majors, and those with diverse bio-demographic traits. Findings added to a new body of knowledge directly exploring the influence of the RA role in learning and skill development in relation to meeting the needs of current and future college students.

Qualitative examination was enhanced through content analysis of the job descriptions and the investigation of the skill development of RAs. In focus groups, discussions with housing professionals and RAs helped assess the influence of learning through the RA role. Furthermore, skills learned from job completion that RAs believed to be important. Finally, the researchers explored whether job descriptions align with their current RA role as provided through individual and group testimonies.

Limitations

Generalizability was not the goal of this study. Notably, this study may be limited by factors such as institutional culture, the number of participating sites and RAs, and geographical location of the contributing schools. The research team also acknowledges trustworthiness concerns that may have arisen from self-reporting. Lastly, developing a coding scheme with content analysis can be open to interpretation, introduce bias, and limit findings (Rose, Spinks, Canhoto, 2015). Still, panel review by the four members that comprised the research team assisted in mitigating bias.

Notably, a limitation was that the US institutional structure does not mirror the UK. Traditional college terms within the US system require 4 years for baccalaureate degree completion, followed by graduate school. In the UK, while some programs are 4 years in length, they have a 3-year undergraduate experience. This comparison is a limitation in that when asked on demographic survey, UK participants were given the US structure and thus the knowledge of their true class standing is not definitive. Of further note, several focus groups in the US occurred before the pandemic happened. All the UK focus groups happened once travel opened again during the pandemic. Thus, responses are limited based on context at the time and noted when applicable.

Findings

Document Analysis Results

Utilizing the National Housing Training Institute (NHTI) competency model, all 20 of the identified NHTI attributes are present in some capacity in at least 25% of RA job descriptions. Nine attributes were present in at least 80% or more of these position descriptions, and three of the attributes in over 90% of collected RA job descriptions. The top three attributes are: focus on community development (96.2%), ability to assess student needs (95.1%), and developing relationships with peers (93.7%). On the other end of the spectrum, four NHTI competency areas appear in less than 60% of job descriptions: serving as a resource or referral person (57.8%), customer service (56.6%), accountability (38.5%), and goal setting (25.2%). Understanding the significant presence of NHTI competencies in RA job descriptions led to further exploration of their application in practice. Such examination was a primary focus in our focus group sessions.

Focus Group Analysis Results

Each site was selected based on their participation in the RA position description survey process. The focus group data from these institutions provided similar, but also unique perspectives regarding RA

experiences.

Many themes and concepts emerged from the focus groups held with current RAs. Categorizing themes into five main topics for both the US and UK includes the following: attributes of RAs, responsibilities of RAs, learning and advancing support for RAs, and aspirations of RAs. When you overlay these with the NHTI highest reporting competencies; on community development (96.2%), ability to assess student needs (95.1%), and developing relationships with peers (93.7%).

When reviewing interpersonal attributes or characteristics participants indicated an RA must possess, the US and UK responses were surprisingly similar. They posited the following skills are necessary to be an effective RA: active listening, approachability, communication, empathy, friendliness, team attitude, and resourcefulness. Regarding personal attributes, participants shared adaptability, community building, confidence/maturity, conflict resolution, creativity, emotional intelligence, leadership, patience, resilience, responsibility, stress management, crisis management and time management.

The most significant focus group finding that was shared in all six focus groups conducted in the UK was the emphasis RAs placed on resident communal association and the desire for pastoral care, monitoring student's mental health. This was also clearly a priority for the program as expressed by administrators as well. This can be attributed to concerns brought on by the pandemic and students' feelings of isolation and anxiety. While RAs were on call, they were required to do flat check-ins in person or by phone each week. This continued throughout the academic year. It was shared from the US focus groups that heavy emphasis was placed on building relationships and communal association in the first 6 weeks of school, it was clear that after that timeframe, that job responsibility was not emphasized as it was in the UK. In the US there is an emphasis on resident connections; however, it is not sustained in the same way throughout the year with weekly check-ins as in the UK. Further, while mental health overall is a concern in higher ed (Boone, Davidson, Bauman, 2013) there is a more fully developed institutional infrastructure to manage student crises than in the UK.

Attributes of an RA

Although neither the US nor UK participants shared the attribute of self-reliance, this was an observation the research team found prevalent among the UK participants. This is particularly compared to the US perspective of customer service and institutional structure. This was confirmed through their spoken narratives "...you need to learn how to get around, you can have classes all over town and you may live across town (UK participant quote)" There exists a striking difference between the US and UK campuses. Many campuses were spread out in the UK, and there were no shuttle buses. Except for one campus visit, there was not a campus center in the same way as most of US campuses where all things are often located in one general area, sometimes spreading out further into the community. In the UK, each campus had main buildings of note; however, most of the campus was spread throughout the city or town. Although there are campuses in the US that are similar, particularly in cities, typically shuttle services are provided. In addition, many services, including health care, are off campus in the UK, and students are aware of how to navigate this on their own, thus showing a self-reliance attribute different than in the US. RA's then, must help navigate not only the campus but the larger community for residents in the UK on a much larger scale than in the US.

RA responsibilities

Regarding RA responsibilities, eleven focus groups key themes centered on duty and crisis response, programming and engagement, and making resident connections. While this was executed differently on each of the US and UK campuses, all focus groups shared similar responsibilities in these areas. For example, one area that differed among both UK and US campuses was desk duty. Several campuses in both the UK and US had RA's serve desk duty, which could include mail and package distribution, however, this was not a universal responsibility of RAs at all schools.

A significant difference in the US and UK role was RA willfulness in job function. As shared by a participant, "I think every time that I go to the room to the new residents, I think that this person is gonna remember me as the way I still remember the person who helped me" Specifically, UK RAs actively voiced an interest in seeking more and doing more than their position required. All UK focus groups shared this theme; they felt underutilized on their respective campuses. They particularly voiced a desire

to provide more services for resident mental and health well-being. It is to also be noted that UK RA staff were not on call overnight, campus security took over at midnight. Security also oversaw all lockouts in 5 of 6 campuses in the UK. US RA staff were required to be on duty through the night and handle lock outs. US RA's did not feel they could work more, in fact, they felt that they worked too hard. This was a distinct difference between the two countries.

Programming occurred in the UK and U.S in similar ways with passive and active programmatic initiatives. Focus group participants shared titles of programs that were complementary; everything from career planning baking together, and larger building-wide events. Differently than in the US, the legal drinking age is less in the UK, thereby permitting alcohol at their programmatic events. As such, poor behavior from intoxication is less prevalent. UK participants explained they did not struggle with alcohol in the same ways they had heard about in the US higher education structure. Funding and expectations of programming and thematic approach varied from campus to campus in both the UK and the US. One direct quote from a participant; "Quality vs quantity events are better. So many events with low turnouts, bigger quality events would be better".

Learning and advancing support for RAs

Shared as a theme in eleven of the thirteen focus group sessions, learning and support for RA's including several insights. Again, there are many similarities between the UK and US participant experiences. They share on-going workshops and training tended to be helpful. Fittingly, hands-on and scenario/case study based training were perhaps most beneficial in building their RA skill-set. US participants discussed a variety of training opportunities, including mixed reviews for a new virtual and self-guided training. UK participants shared multiple training sessions prior to residents' arrival and throughout the school year were helpful. When elaborating on their preparedness for resident incidents of mental health, both UK and US participants spoke to apprehensiveness and fear in responding in crises. One focus group participant articulated, "While one issue I personally run into is people being very isolated. So, I would say shift the balance away from [trainings] like alcohol abuse and more towards loneliness." Despite RAs feeling well-trained in most areas of operations, their response to and care for students in crises both in the U.S and the UK appeared daunting to participants. Further, the participants' mental health required the need to find balance as a student and staff member. They voiced a longing to interact with people outside of the RA role and without campus ties. This perspective continued to grow after the start of the pandemic.

When all focus group participants were asked about their job functions, the broad range of RA responsibilities gave an overall sense of feeling overwhelmed. They characterized too much of their role was stuck in the category of *other duties as assigned*. One participant offered,

"We filled a gap when a need arises...there is a lot more not in the job description, however I felt there was not a lot to our job on paper." In the US, such tasks included being asked to respond to non-residential programs on campus, assisting with RA training, selection, and more. Interestingly, some of these assigned duties had legal ramifications (Boone, Davidson, Bauman, 2013). In the UK, participants discussed this practice was particularly prevalent during COVID, when they felt *additional asks* exceeded normal boundaries. US participants focus groups happened prior to the pandemic.

Aspirations of RAs

The theme of RA aspirations was discussed among twelve of the thirteen focus groups. Aspirations of the RA role evoked the changes participants wished to see for the position. Using deficit-based considerations they described aspirations from several perspectives including: inconsistent compensation, absent universal job responsibilities, deficient communication from the main office and professional staff, lack of promotion in the RA position, and disconnect between the realities of the position. Additionally, the expanded nature of the RA role seemed too encompassing, as they were called to be policy enforcers, programmers, resource agents, and mental health caregivers. Lacking in the UK is a universal job description and/or RA role requirements, circumstances exacerbated by no standard compensation structure. While in the US, RA job descriptions and remuneration among institutions seems more consistent, the approach favors including far too many role expectations. Still, some American colleges and universities are developing new ways to manage the disconnect of asking student

paraprofessionals to do disparate responsibilities that can put RAs at odds with the very students they are being asked to serve. Such developments seek to minimize the overwhelming effects of *the other duties as assigned* on student paraprofessionals.

Focus group participants confirmed the RA compensation package varies by institution. The standard room/board compensation package most associated with US RA, is different in the UK (Horvath & Stack, 2013). Compensation in the UK model is mainly allocated through an hourly wage and sometimes a discounted room rate on campuses due to tax laws that require a hourly wage (Service, 2015). In addition, RAs from five of the participating UK schools were not assigned a specific floor or quad for which they had primary responsibility. Instead, they had responsibility for the entire building or a designated part of campus when they had office hours. Likely the lack of a proximity-based area of responsibility supported the rationale allowing RAs to reside in off-campus accommodations at many schools in the UK. This can vary by school but is vastly different from the on-campus live-in requirements noted at all US study sites.

The US and UK participants desire an intentional support system and structure from the housing/accommodations office. The RAs spoke specifically about the need to be heard and have a voice with the professional staff on their campuses. This was not conveyed in a negative way, simply the desire to establish a rapport and conduits for feedback. The supervision of RAs varied greatly at each campus, despite each school having professional staff members that hired, trained and monitored each RA. However, the consistency of individual meetings between RAs and their direct supervisor varied greatly. Who the RA was assigned determined such frequency. Moreover, RAs in the UK were paid an hourly wage for meetings, a practice that inevitably influenced meetings frequently and length. Both US and UK participants agreed clear procedures, policies, and documentation, ensued during one-on-one meetings. The structure of response and expectations were understood. Further, most RAs expressed knowing support could come from their direct supervisor.

Cause for concern for the future of the position both in terms of structure as well as sustainability was discussed. In the UK, recruitment for staff members was difficult and they were struggling with the promotion and hiring of the RA position. Perhaps inconsistencies of the role from school to school worsened this change. US participants also shared recruitment for the position had become increasingly more difficult, however not to the extent of the UK institutions.

Interestingly, when you overly the common theme groups; attributes of RAs, responsibilities of RAs, learning and advancing support for RAs, and aspirations of RAs with the NHTI highest reporting competencies; on community development (96.2%), ability to assess student needs (95.1%), and developing relationships with peers (93.7%) you can see direct correlations. The competencies speak to developing relationships with peers and being able to assess their needs and develop communities. The themes also talk about the priority of pastoral care, community development, and meeting student needs. The aspiration of the RA is to do a good job and be there for their residents, they seek training to be able to meet their resident needs and become more competent. The incongruence and “other duties as assigned” in their job description can detract from what they believe is the priority of their job. They clearly speak for more communication and transparency in job responsibilities and training.

Discussion

There is much to be learned from what was shared from US the UK study participants and the comparison between the two. Critical factors found from the focus groups are grouped into three areas: cycle of the RAship, review of the RA position and mental health/pastoral care.

Cycle of RAship

The recruitment, selection, hire, training and supervision of RAs as well as retention of RAs, is inclusive in the cycle of RAship. This factor assumes alignment between RA attributes, RA job descriptions, and actual experiences of the students who serve in these positions. In turn, how does the cycle of RAship influence recruitment and retention efforts for these positions? There are the RA attributes or characteristics that participants thought of the position before applying. Then the skills they learned after being in the position for a year or more. Finally, what their residents think of what they do and how all this affects the cycle of the RA job from recruitment to placement through retention and exit interviews

upon leaving the position. There is a clear disconnect between what RAs thought the position entailed before they applied, and what they actually experienced while fulfilling their role. In addition, there continued to be dissatisfaction in the misalignment between what they were trained to do and what they were asked to do. When focus group participants were asked what they thought their resident students thought the RA roles does, expressions of lacked alignment between the actual job description and the role surfaced. This experience was consistent between US and UK resident assistants.

In response to deep analysis of RA job descriptions and given RA testimonies, practitioners must review and align the knowledge of potential candidates for the RA position. Ideally, this would aid in retention efforts. Although job descriptions are provided during the recruitment phase, an understanding of all the job encompasses is clearly still not happening. Further, role expectations are not completely outlined in RA job descriptions, and this ambiguity leads to dissatisfaction and confusion in the position. In review of the competencies, it is also clear what the RA's believe is important in their role. Through the selection process and continuing in the position, understanding the expectations and being transparent with not only job descriptions but also when institutional pivots, crises or environmental/financial/political/societal/ global landscape changes occur.

Review of the RA position

The second critical consideration centers on reviewing the RA position. The job descriptions submitted to this study did not vary overwhelmingly in scope, size, and responsibility. Some institutions had specific job descriptions by type of RA (e.g., first year RA, graduate RA, etc.), while others had a universal approach for the position. Furthermore, it was evident that many of the position descriptions need to be revised to illustrate the increasing demands of the role and responsibilities in current times.

Differently, RA job descriptions varied dramatically among UK institutions. While there is strength in developing a job specifically for one's institution, there are also limitations in not having a unified position recognized institutionally, culturally, and societally. The RA position in the US is a coveted role and is usually centralized in the states. Faculty, administration, stakeholders, and future employers are aware of what is asked of RAs on campus. In the UK, this is not the case. Further, in all but one UK institution, RAs did not have specific residents or floors for which they were responsible. This is very unlike the US model where an RA typically lives on the floor with their assigned residents and engages with them daily. The US model has benefits and limitations. Sense of ownership, responsibility, and community with specific floor/units, etc., are positive motivators for RAs to assist students. Boone (2015) confirms motivations to help others is a primary desire among US resident assistants. The knowledge of specific residents and sense of camaraderie can lead to increased RA retention. However, workforce sustainability after the pandemic gave cause for concern. Typically, as a naturally-occurring recruiting strategy, students see RA's doing their jobs in the US; on the floors, building relationships, helping people, and this inspires residents to seek the RA position for themselves. During COVID-19, given student housing temporarily closed for most institutions, and student-to-student contact was limited when there was housing, future recruitment may be negatively impacted. Notwithstanding, residing among students one is expected to supervise can be incredibly taxing for RAs. Such accommodations can promote *living in a fishbowl*, where privacy is lacking. RAs also forego living with their contemporaries, their peers and friends, so they can serve as a leader and role model for younger resident students. The inability to live with peers and missing the benefit from their community of friends can lead to burnout (Conlogue, 1993).

Finally, centralization allows for strategies across the association for training, recruitment, and retention as well as competency-building standards to be established and assessed. However, several US campuses are moving toward bifurcating the RA job description or even eliminating it in its current form. When we look at the NHTI competencies, it is difficult to imagine someone who is able to excel in all areas. Further, several areas pose a conflict. RAs are asked to build a community with the same students that they are asked to monitor behavior while on duty. Thus, several schools are splitting up the RA job into two or more student staff positions focused on community development or on hall logistics (e.g., mailroom, lockouts, etc.) and conduct (Conn, 2020). One such example is at New York University, in which a newly created position, Incident Response Administrator, IRA, responds to daily crises and serves in an overnight shift similar to that of an RA. Leaving the traditional RA role to focus on floor rounds, noise

violations, and community engagement (Conn, 2023).

Mental health/pastoral care

Many participants from both the US and UK professed a need for increased attention toward mental health/pastoral care. However, the meaning given to this term varied by context and resident relationships. In the US, the term *pastoral* has typically been used in the context of religion; however, it was expressed repeatedly by staff and focus group participants in the UK. In its latter use, it complemented a need for heightened mental health services. It was clear that although it was a pre-pandemic need, it had become the primary concern for all the UK campuses in the aftermath of the pandemic world. The singular focus was compelling. Mental health services in the UK are vastly different, as is health care in general. Campuses typically do not have onsite Counseling Services or have limited access to one social worker. Health Care in the country is universal and free, so each sector has its own Health Agency. In speaking to focus group participants and professional staff, it was evident some health agencies are better than others. Some were very collaborative with the institutions, and others less so. These agencies provide services to address eating disorders, identity, addiction, depression/anxiety etc.

The US also struggles with mental health, pre, during, and after the pandemic. As mentioned, the new generation of students, iGen or Generation Z, is in the midst of a mental health crisis (Twenge, 2017). Feelings of loneliness coupled with pandemic isolation have only exacerbated mental health needs. As such, a review of RA paraprofessional role and its accompanying responsibilities is greatly warranted. Participants remarked on their residents' concerns, but also their own mental health and feelings of seclusion. It seems evident that with greater review and understanding of the evolving nature of the RA position, it could be further clarified and refined for the next generation of student leaders serving in that capacity.

Implications and Potential Future Research

Understanding what today's residents need is paramount as we examine the RA role and what should be its focus for all higher education institutions around the world. It is recommended future research considers a climate study to explore resident needs. Further, a study to investigate paraprofessional and professional staff perspectives of the resident assistant (RA) role in the United States and United Kingdom student housing models has great potential for future research. It would be important to delve deeper into this topic with a climate survey of residents and paraprofessional staff to understand if strategies employed are meeting the needs of residents, and to uncover other ways we can meet residents' needs. Finally, a climate study could provide a closer look at paraprofessional staff needs to determine their necessary training and support.

Increased qualitative data collection via individual interviews and focus groups with UK and US paraprofessionals and professional staff at selected institutions, meeting a diverse set of criteria, would prove beneficial to either support or provide new evidence to the claims made in this article. The research findings may also guide institutional administrators in the United States and United Kingdom to engage in discussions on examining what other institutions are doing with their RA positions to meet the demand of an ever-evolving higher education and societal landscape. As we have made comparisons as well as explored differences, there is much to be learned from and among one another. Further, a qualitative examination will share possible indication/evidence of learning for competency and skill development of RAs, as well as highlight competencies and skills most associated with successful paraprofessionals. Study results may further provide insights to help educate housing professionals on the scope of the RA job for similar sized institutions. Finally, empirical findings from this research seek to provide qualitative information to guide the college student housing profession in meeting the demands of iGen (Twenge, 2017), from a recruitment and retention perspective.

Conclusion

It is important to continue to examine the complexity of the RA role in both the UK and US, and even more globally. What can we learn from one another? How can we capture synergies in learning and creating? What is working well across the globe? In critical review, are we asking too much of the RA position? It is clear that workforce sustainability at all levels in the housing profession is a concern as

evidenced by ACUHO-I inclusion as an imperative for the State of the Profession (ACUHO-I Future of the Profession Imperatives, 2023). The RA position is the conduit by which so many student affairs professionals begin their careers. Further, the nature of the peer professional position to student success and retention is clear. Answers to these questions can only be found through future research opportunities and endeavors.

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Table 1: Responses by ACUHO-I Regional Affiliation

Region	Number	Percent
International Affiliations	17	7.3%
AIMHO (Intermountain)	15	6.4%
GLACUHO (Great Lakes)	33	14.1%
MACUHO (Mid Atlantic)	24	10.3%
NEACUHO (Northeast)	23	9.8%
NWACUHO (Northwest)	12	5.3%
SEAHO (Southeast)	47	20.1%
SWACUHO (Southwest)	13	5.6%
UMR-ACUHO (Upper Midwest)	32	11.0%
WACUHO (Western)	12	5.3%
Other (not listed)	6	2.6%
TOTAL	234	100.0%

Table 2: Focus Group Information*United States*

FG 1 four-year private, mid-sized institution

FG 2 four-year private, large institution

FG 3 four-year public, large institution

FG 4 four-year private, large institution

FG 5 four-year private, large institution

FG 6 four-year public, mid-sized institution

FG 7 four-year private, large institution

United Kingdom

FG 1 four-year public, mid-sized institution

FG 2 four-year public, mid-sized institution

FG 3 four-year public, large institution

FG 4 four-year public, small institution

FG 5 four-year public, mid-sized institution

FG 6 four-year public, large institution

Table 3**NHTI Competency****Number of Position Descriptions in which Competency is Mentioned****Percentage**

Community development	n=410	96.2%
Assessing student needs	n=405	95.1%
Developing relationships with peers	n=399	93.7%
Accessibility and/or availability	n=382	89.7%
Policy enforcement	n=378	88.7%
Problem-solving skills	n=378	88.7%
Programming	n=372	87.3%
Crisis management	n=360	84.1%
Role modeling	n=348	81.7%
Recognizing the needs of diverse students	n=321	75.35%
Managing multiple priorities	n=317	74.4%
Written communication	n=306	71.8%
Peer advising	n=304	71.4%
Respecting personal limits	n=302	70.9%
Observation	n=294	69%
Working with change	n=254	69%
Resource and/or referral person	n=246	57.8%
Customer service	n=254	56.6%
Accountability	n=164	38.5%
Goal setting	n=110	25.2