Protecting RAs—and Their Residents—from Burnout

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Editor's note: At residential colleges, resident advisors (RAs) play a key role in student success—they're often the first people to notice if a resident isn't attending class or is struggling with another difficulty that impedes retention. But how can residential institutions make sure that the RAs themselves don't burn out? One university has found that a set of practices has helped retain its RAs as well as help keep residents on track.

The University of Vermont (UVM) is using restorative practices—a particular set of ways to head off or respond to problems—not only to help make students' residential life experiences better, but also to make the RAs' experiences better.

Most RAs sign on because they want to help other students. What they sometimes find, however, is that they end up being the administration's rule enforcers, says Ted Wachtel, president of the International Institute for Restorative Practices.

"RAs feel whipsawed," he says. "While many residential life departments say their mission is to build community on campus, when it actually becomes time to confront problem behaviors, they resort to punitive measures. This stigmatizes and excludes community members rather than bringing them together with their peers to find community solutions to what are ultimately community problems."

At UVM, RAs were charged with building good living environments in their halls through the use of community standards (CS)—a student development philosophy that encourages students to be accountable to other students. However, at UVM, RAs had no training on how to actually implement CS on their floors, says Stacey Miller, UVM's director of residential life.

As a result, some RAs burned out. Before 2010, when UVM began implementing restorative practices in residence life, it was typical for a dozen or more RAs to quit after the fall semester at UVM. After the implementation of restorative practices, however, only one of UVM's 129 RAs resigned.

How it works

Each August, the RAs participate in three days of training in restorative practices, which are borrowed from several disciplines, including education, counseling, criminal justice, social work, and organizational management. During the training, the International Institute for Restorative Practices (IIRP) teaches UVM residential life staff use talking circles throughout the school year to help residents start discussions about community standards.

RAs to use practices that range from informal to formal.

Informal practices including making statements or asking questions that encourage residents to reflect on their behavior. For example, RAs might simply respond to loud music with simple statements, telling students how their behavior makes them feel. Or they might ask a restorative question like "How do you think you're affecting others?"

On the more informal side of the continuum are talking groups, called talking circles, in which whoever is holding the "talking piece"—a designated object—has the chance to speak without interruption. Among the most formal practices are "restorative conferences," which might be used to resolve conduct code violations or other conflicts that could lead a student to leave a particular institution.

UVM residential life staff use talking circles throughout the school year to help residents start discussions about community standards—what they envision a good residential experience to be like and how they can set and meet standards that create this experience.

Talking circles can also be used when the identity of a wrongdoer isn't known. If there is anonymous vandalism, for example, RAs convene a circle that allows students to express feelings and brainstorm ideas to prevent a recurrence. The culprit is often in the circle, hearing others' reactions to the actions and gaining an understanding of how he or she has adversely affected his or her peers. That understanding and perhaps the fear of being discovered often discourages further problems.

More formal are restorative conferences. In the first year of restorative practices at UVM, a student, skateboarding in a hallway in violation of rules, inadvertently hit a sprinkler head, which began spouting water. Ten rooms suffered such severe water damage that their occupants had to move temporarily.

Although the student came forward and admitted what he had done, and although family insurance covered the loss, the young man was ashamed to face his peers and at risk of leaving the institution. Students were upset and angry as rumors spread that the act was deliberate. UVM, in response, held a formal restorative conference with 30 participants, including all the students whose rooms and property had been damaged. The skateboarder's roommate and his RA, both there to support him, accompanied him to the conference.

When the other students realized that the incident was truly an accident, their anger subsided. As the other students spoke, the young man had an opportunity to understand how he had negatively impacted so many people in his residential community.

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Education department broadens graduation rate disclosure requirements: The U.S. Department of Education has released a plan to broaden its current measures of college student success. It will expand its graduation rate reporting requirement to include part-time and returning students.

Current law requires that schools track graduation rates only for full-time, first-time students, excluding students who do not take a linear path toward graduation. The expanded requirement will affect the approximately 7,000 postsecondary institutions that report their graduation rates through the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) of the department’s National Center for Education Statistics (NCES).

The department says it will develop easy-to-use templates that institutions can use to meet graduate rate disclosure requirements and convene a summit this year to highlight promising practices in collecting and disseminating student-success data. The department says it will also make improved data collection and reporting a focus of grant programs.

For more information, view the report “Action Plan for Improving Measures of Postsecondary Success” at www.ed.gov/edlabs/ous/initiatives. The department says it will post details about processes and timelines there in coming weeks.

Report details student success effort’s outcomes so far: The new report “Replenishing Opportunity in America” details lessons learned by 22 higher education systems participating in the Access to Success (A2S) Initiative.

The A2S initiative is an effort among 312 two-year and four-year institutions to help public systems increase the enrollment and success of low-income students and underrepresented minority students. The initiative began in 2009, when the institutions pledged that by 2015, they would halve enrollment and completion gaps. “Replenishing Opportunity in America” is a mid-term report about what the institutions have attained so far.

Overall, the A2S systems have seen the following results:
- Increases in enrollments and degrees, with increases among underrepresented minority students and low-income students driving the improvements.
- Smaller access gaps. Two-year institutions have no access gap, while four-year institutions have seen some improvements.
- Improved success rates for all students at four-year institutions. However, the increased success rates still leave gaps.
- Continued low success rates at two-year colleges, where attainment gaps remain persistent.


Traditional-age students’ college choices: The 2012 research report “Why Did They Enroll? The Factors Influencing College Choice” examines traditional-age students’ reasons for choosing the colleges they did.

According to the study report, produced by Noel-Levit, “economic issues—how much will their educations cost, how will they pay for it—weigh heavily on the minds of students.” Specifically, the study found that:
- Among students attending public four-year and two-year campuses, cost was a key factor in students’ enrollment decisions. At four-year private colleges, it ranked third behind academic reputation factors.
- At two-year career schools, cost—which 81 percent of survey respondents ranked as important—was fifth behind employment opportunities, financial aid, academic reputation, and personalized attention.
- Financial was among the top enrollment issues for students at four-year private campuses. At two-year private institutions, financial aid was a close second behind employment opportunities, with nearly 86 percent saying that financial aid was an important factor in their enrollment decisions.

Academic reputation was also a strong factor, ranking as one of the top three enrollment factors at all institution types; at least 70 percent of students said it was an important or very important factor in their enrollment decisions.

The study report is available through www.noellevitz.com/papers-research-higher-education/2012/2012-factors-to-enroll-report (registration required).