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A Pivotal Point in Identity Development: The Impact of the Resident Assistant Experience

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Abstract

Does serving as a Resident Assistant (RA) in college impact students' identity and long-term leadership skills? This article details a grounded theory qualitative research study where alumni are interviewed about their RA experience five to ten years post-graduation. The study revealed that a profound change (labelled a pivotal point) occurred in participants' lives while they were serving as RAs. These former student leaders unanimously identified the role as important to their overall identity development and leadership skills. Even though the RA experience often caused a significant disruption in self-perception, it was also a catalyst for significant change in areas such as self-awareness, empathy, communication, community development, and stewardship. Being a former RA holistically contributed to participants' current identity as professionals, friends and family members, and community liaisons.

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Introduction

Colleges and universities within the Council for Christian Colleges & Universities (CCCCU) recognize the importance of leadership development among students. Often, these campuses have invested in student leadership development by offering co-curricular programs with the goal of lifelong change (Council for Christian Colleges and Universities, 2012a). Some of the primary ways in which leadership development occurs include positions in student government, intercollegiate athletics, and student peer support services. Of the latter, the role of Resident Assistant (RA) is among the most prevalent on residential college campuses.

The primary duty of RAs is to foster an atmosphere for academic, social, cultural, and emotional growth in residence halls (Burchard, 2001). These student leaders staff residence halls at most residential institutions. The RA role has been recognized extensively in the literature (Beers & Trudeau, 2015; Blimling & Miltenberger, 1990; Boyer, 1987; Brown & Parrish, 2011; Murray, Snider, & Midkiff, 1999), and its importance is widely acknowledged by higher education administrators. RAs often interact with more students on a daily basis than do other professional student development educators. For generations, these student leaders have provided counsel, peer-to-peer influence, and served as a “front-lines” representative of the university (Deluga & Winters, 1990).

The RA position often requires involvement with student behaviors that range from inspiring (such as academic success, acts of service, and spiritual growth) to dangerous (including impulsivity, drug use, and interpersonal conflict). Typically, RAs are required to spend many hours per week assisting their peers within the residence hall, although most go beyond these requirements to invest relationally within their living area (Kolek, 1996). The RA plays a critical role for colleges and universities, particularly in the daily development of students in holistic ways (Onofrietti, 2000). In essence, RAs serve as paraprofessional counselors and crisis intervention specialists (Blimling, 2003).

Although RAs must perform these important relational and administrative functions to fulfill institutional needs, their development as leaders is also typically an institutional priority. To recognize and highlight the importance of leadership development, many studies have been conducted with RAs while they were attending college. These studies have indicated positive outcomes associated with being an RA while in

college (Athas, Oaks, & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013; Blimling & Miltenberger, 1990; Cooper, Healy, & Simpson, 1994; Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998; Murray et al., 1999) as well as the positive outcomes of college involvement, including a sense of belonging and personal growth (Bronfon, 2018; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Terenzini, Pascarella, & Blimling, 1996;). Other studies have demonstrated the positive relationship between holding a student leadership position and academic performance (Cooper et al., 1994; Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998), the counseling interventions of RAs (Owens, 2011; Schuh, Shipton, & Edmund, 1986), the influences RAs have on their peers (Ender, McCaffrey, & Miller, 1979; Vacc, 1974), and on RA stress and burnout (Hardy & Dodd, 1998; Hetherington, 1989; Hornak, 1982; Nowack, Paladino, Murray, Newgent, & Gohn, 2005).

However, minimal research has addressed the ways in which the RA experience impacts student lives post-graduation. According to Chambers (1992), the study of student development programs should be both short-term and long-term. Therefore, when exploring the impact of leadership programs, it is important to measure the impact over time. A post-graduation study expands awareness of the lasting effects of the RA experience. Research on this population will benefit both the institutions that invest substantial resources into the RA development and the students who experience this unique co-curricular, leadership development experience.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to explore alumni perceptions of their RA experience on a CCCU campus and describe its influence on their leadership skills five to 10 years post-graduation. Through a series of interviews, the specific aim was to uncover the meaning these individuals made from their RA experience and how it relates to their current practice of leadership. Using a grounded theory methodological approach, this study attempted to ascertain a theory or identifiable construct of experience related to a particular context grounded in the experience and perceptions of the participants (Creswell, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). The intent was to create or discover a theory of leadership development related to having been an RA at a CCCU institution.

Literature Review

Over the past few decades, numerous studies have demonstrated the college experience is a critical time for the vocational and academic growth of students (Astin, 1985, 1993; Chemers, Hu, & Garcia, 2001).

According to Astin (1984), student involvement is the investment of time and energy into the collegiate experience and is one of the major components to personal, social, and emotional development in students. Astin's research (1977; 1984) indicated the expanse of student learning is directly related to the quality and quantity of student involvement. One important form of student involvement is leadership participation in roles such as the RA position, athletics, or student government. Therefore, students who hold leadership positions tend to score higher academically and demonstrate greater levels of personal change than those who do not participate in leadership (Astin, 1993; Cress, Astin, Zimmerman-Oster, & Burkhardt, 2001).

In a similar study, Cousineau and Landon (1989) concurred academic proficiency and satisfaction are positively affected by leadership participation. Additionally, being an RA in college has been associated with higher levels of educational involvement (Cooper et al., 1994; Hernandez et al., 1999; Kuh, 1995). Decades of research have concluded involvement in leadership roles has a positive influence on students' academic progress such as a higher GPA and more faculty relationships (Feldman & Newcomb, 1969; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). According to this research, RAs likely have a higher level of academic success than the average college student (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005).

Interpersonal Growth in College

In addition to positive academic outcomes, a variety of interpersonal benefits are associated with being an RA. Astin (1993) explored leadership participation and found the greatest gains were associated with high degrees of peer interaction. Astin described a student's peer group as the "single most potent source of influence on growth and development during the undergraduate years" (1993, p. 398). The nature of the RA role requires consistent peer-to-peer interaction. This prolonged, interpersonal engagement can help create a sense of belonging and a number of other positive outcomes. According to Brazzell (2001), "Students yearn for a sense of belonging [in their community] and the lack of it may prompt some to abandon either their institutions—or worse—their education" (p. 31).

Burchard (2001) noted the role of an RA is to foster an atmosphere of interpersonal growth in their residence halls. He also discovered being an RA naturally creates opportunities to form relationships and connect socially with other students. Additionally, working as an RA is positively correlated with interpersonal competence (Hernandez et al., 1999; Kuh,

1995). Although a sense of belonging can be an “enduring, yet elusive goal” (Cheng, 2004, p. 216), it appears interpersonal growth materializes when students become RAs and experience heightened social interaction with both the students for whom they are responsible and their peer leaders.

Psychological Well-Being

Beyond academic and interpersonal growth, psychological well-being is enhanced as a result of being an RA (Diener et al., 1999). Studies have demonstrated student leadership positions are platforms for the personal development of students (Astin, 1985, 1993). Kezar and Moriarty (2000) reported students who participated in co-curricular experiences such as leadership training or internships designed to promote leadership development among students, were more likely to have confidence in their leadership abilities and a higher self-perception. They also discovered student leaders who put effort toward developing their leadership skills also improved their ability to set goals and make educated decisions. In short, students who became RAs are more likely to experience higher levels of self-satisfaction in college (Moriarty, 2000).

According to Kouzes and Posner (2002), leadership roles also help students gain confidence in their abilities and personal attributes which aids in character development long after college is completed. Some of these characteristics cultivated by RAs include dependability, cooperativeness, determination, maturity, self-control, and independence (Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Students who become RAs develop traits that encourage personal growth. Positive psychological well-being has been established as an important indicator of the quality of life and persistence (Diener et al., 1999; Eid & Diener, 2004; Pavot & Diener, 2004). Additional studies claimed students who participate in leadership opportunities are more likely to graduate than students who do not assume leadership roles (Cress et al., 2001).

Utterback, Barbieri, Fox, and Solinger (1990) asked the question, “How and to what extent are college students affected by the experience of being an RA?” (p. 45). Their study used the Student Developmental Task and Lifestyle Inventory (Winston, Miller & Prince, 1979) based on Chickering’s (1969) vectors of identity formation. The inventory was given to first-time RA applicants as well as returning RAs. Seemingly contrary to previous studies, their research indicated new RAs were no less developed than veteran RAs. The researchers’ surprising findings caused them to postulate either the Student Developmental Task and

Lifestyle Inventory may not be suitable for measuring the distinctive aspects of RA development or “the developmental effects of the challenges of being an RA are longitudinal and may not become evident for several years” (p. 53). Outcomes assessment for RA alumni is necessary for greater understanding of this population of student leaders (Pace, 1979). Allowing an extended amount of time to pass post-graduation may allow former RAs to better reflect upon and thus develop greater understanding and meaning regarding their RA experience.

Impact of Leadership Programs on Alumni

Chambers (1992) recognized one of the keys to measuring the effectiveness of leadership development programs involves the assessment of changes in participants over time. He insisted, “assessment of leadership programs be both short-term and long-term” (Chambers, 1992, p. 347). Despite this recommendation, considerably less material is available that focuses on the long-term outcomes associated with alumni leadership development. Although there are numerous reasons to seek a greater understanding of the outcomes resulting from college attendance, the motivation for this study was to understand how serving as an RA impacts a person’s long-term leadership development.

From the existing literature, it has been shown being an RA in college is connected to academic (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005) and interpersonal growth (Athas, Oaks, & Kennedy-Phillips, 2013; Burchard, 2001; Hernandez et al., 1999) as well as positive psychological well-being (Brandfon, 2018; Eid & Diener, 2004; Kouzes & Posner, 2002). Each of these characteristics is likely to continue post-college due to the nature of development it embodies. Therefore, it can be presumed because students are developing through the RA position during college, their life trajectory will be altered; and they will likely leverage the acknowledged personal and interpersonal skills and leadership traits after graduation into their lives post-college.

However, these conclusions are currently based only on assumption. Multiple studies suggest additional research on the impact of student leadership positions is necessary to test the veracity of these assumptions (Cooper et al., 1994; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Student leadership has been studied in a variety of ways, including extracurricular activities, residence life, and athletics (Martin, 2000). The study of co-curricular leadership elaborates on the relationship between student involvement and student development. However, it does not specify the level or type of students’ involvement (Hernandez et al., 1999; Kuh, 2003; Terenzini et

al., 1996) or the type of leadership model utilized. It also does not focus specifically on student leaders who have already graduated. Although these studies were valuable, additional research must now address specific levels of involvement, specific leadership theories, and the impact they may have post-college (Gellin, 2003). Thus, the current study provides a first step in helping to fill this gap in the literature by examining the impact of the RA experience (at a CCCU institution) on the future leadership and character development of RA alumni.

Qualitative Methodology

This qualitative research study utilized the theoretical framework of grounded theory (Creswell, 2002; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Eight participants from a small, CCCU institution were recruited for a semi-structured interview which explored the ways in which the RA experience in college impacted their current leadership. Participants were selected using the criterion-sampling method (Patton, 2002). The main criterion included those who graduated between five and 10 years prior to the onset of the study. The criteria were established so graduates could gain a more mature perspective on the development that had occurred as a result of being an RA and would be able to reflect on the impact the experience has on their current leadership perspectives, abilities, and activities (Pace, 1979).

Participants were identified by utilizing student affairs professionals of the university selected for the study; using the selected criterion, they helped identify those RA alumni who fit the criterion. Email addresses were obtained through the alumni office on campus. Recruitment of participants involved emailed letters of invitation by a well-known university employee. Once reply emails were received from willing participants, the author sent a confirmation email explaining the data collection needs and the participants' involvement. The eight participants were selected based on accessibility, willingness to participate, and geographical proximity. Each alumnus who fit the criterion, communicated a desire to be involved, and was selected to be a part of the study was given a preliminary individual interview appointment.

Questions utilized during the interviews were composed by the researcher to reflect the nature of their RA experience. Because participants were asked to recall information from five to 10 years earlier, it was necessary to allow adequate time for participants to remember the experience and offer detailed descriptions. The intent was to

focus on gathering data that could lead to both a textual and a structural definition of their experience as an RA as it relates to leadership development. Once these descriptions were obtained, understandings, connections, and present-day impact could be extrapolated from the participants' experiences.

Research Process and Data Analysis

Participant interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim. After the transcripts were reviewed, the data were entered into the QSR NVivo software program to facilitate qualitative data analysis. The use of this software supported and expedited the research process by categorizing topics and groupings for analysis (Wholey et al., 2004). During the initial coding process, 540 phrases were identified through an open coding process to initially identify each unique idea mentioned. In the preliminary open coding phase, 42 initial categories or nodes were identified and reviewed for subject matter and continuity (Creswell, 1998). A subsequent axial coding process analyzed the list of nodes for commonalities, grouping similar themes together. Last, selective coding was conducted by examining the axial codes. Utilizing the constant comparative method of sorting and resorting, these categories were reduced and combined to identify key themes (Creswell, 1998). Ultimately, these groups were refined to 28 premises and further divided into five categories. The five categories that emerged were self-awareness, empathy, communication, community development, and stewardship. These categories coalesced around three main themes of identity development: personal, relational, and leadership.

To provide triangulation and ensure trustworthiness, the emerging themes were reviewed at each stage with an outside auditor for interrater reliability. All participants were then invited for a follow-up interview to confirm or dispute initial findings and to elicit greater depth to the study. Prior to the second interview, each participant was provided a diagram of the collective findings from the first round interviews to review and comment on during the second interview to clarify or correct any of the information gathered. The second interview phase involved asking participants a series of follow-up questions, developed by the researcher, designed to explore and confirm emerging themes. This process of member checking provided additional trustworthiness viewed as essential for the credibility of qualitative data analysis (Guba & Lincoln, 1981).

Results and Discussion

Overall, participants described the RA experience as having an impact in the development of their understanding of self and others. Additionally, the participants reported a reconceptualization of essential aspects of leadership which had a long-term effect on their attitudes and behaviors. Specifically, lasting connections emerged between participants' recall of their RA experience and perceptions regarding their personal, relational, and leadership identities. When considering their past involvement as an RA, participants commonly referred to an enduring change in their self-understanding, relationships with others, and leadership capabilities and philosophies.

Central Theme: Pivotal Experience

The participants perceived the lessons learned from the RA experience to be profound, a pivotal event in their identity development. The experience was a turning point that contributed to the individual understanding of personal, relational, and leadership identity. The theme of personal identity included the category of self-awareness, the theme of relational identity included the categories of empathy and listening, and the theme of leadership identity included the categories of community development and stewardship.

The term pivotal point can be closely associated with the term turning point from the research and theoretical literature in the field of psychology. The phrase turning point is defined as a perceived, long-lasting redirection in the path of a person's life (Clausen, 1995; Settersten, 1999). Clausen defined a psychological turning point more thoroughly as an instance when a person undergoes a major transformation regarding views on identity or the meaning of life.

In the interviews with former RAs, "pivotal point" was employed to describe the occurrence that altered the participants' developmental process and perception of leadership. As one participant stated, "[The RA experience] was pretty important and pretty pivotal for where I am now. It's changed me." Rather than an undeviating process of growth throughout college, participants reported retrospectively that they experienced the RA role to be an interrupting event that became a pivotal point in their growth and development.

As confirmed by participants through follow-up interviews and member checking, the RA experience was a central event that contributed to the personal change and understanding of their personal,

relational, and leadership identity experienced five to ten years later. Within these themes, five distinct categories of impact emerged: growth in self-awareness, empathy, communication, community development, and stewardship. Participants viewed the RA experience as a foundational element to their identity as professionals, friends, family members, and community liaisons.

These results support Kouzes and Posner's (2002) theory that college leadership roles help students gain confidence in their leadership abilities and personal attributes. This finding also adds to the evidence that students who participate in co-curricular experiences, like the RA position, are more likely to have confidence in their leadership abilities and have a higher level of self-understanding (Kezar & Moriarty, 2000).

Within the theme of personal identity, the RA experience served as a pivotal point in the development of the awareness, discovery, and understanding of self. The personal identity development that occurred as a result of this experience led to a major transformation in self-understanding and enhanced leadership capabilities. The detection of personal strengths and increased self-awareness led to the ability to articulate and implement those strengths with confidence post-college.

Within the theme of relational identity, participants confirmed with confidence their experience positively contributed to the way they presently build relationships and interpersonally engage. More specifically, the findings indicated significant changes on empathy development and communication style/practice. Participants reported a pivotal point of positive impact on their empathy levels by way of the RA role, modifying the way empathy is both practiced and understood. Additionally, participants' communication skills were expanded by the RA experience by becoming better listeners and viewing conflict more optimistically. These findings support the evidence that it is possible to improve one's empathetic ability (Kunyk & Olson, 2001) while viewing conflict as an opportunity for growth (Lillis & Schuh, 1982). Empathic leaders are more likely to have an appropriate degree of openness about diversity and the differences between cultures (Atwater & Waldman, 2008; Choi, 2006). These results support the previous evidence that college involvement improves interpersonal communication (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), increases social development (Stuart et al., 2011), and expands social awareness (Whitt, 1994).

In addition to a greater awareness of self, an increase in empathy, and redefined communication skills, participants described and confirmed

how their leadership identity also significantly changed throughout their RA experience. The role generated a desire to lead confidently and well, while also instilling the essential and foundational components to do so. Whether through leadership roles at work, within their families, or in their local communities, participants experienced a leadership identity shift post-college. This aligns with previous research on extracurricular involvement in college (Hernandez et al., 1999; Kuh, 1995; Lillis & Schuh, 1982) as well as research on long-term leadership impact (Downey et al., 1984; Schuh & Laverty, 1983; Sommers, 1991), and also adds to the body of research by providing a focus on RAs post-graduation.

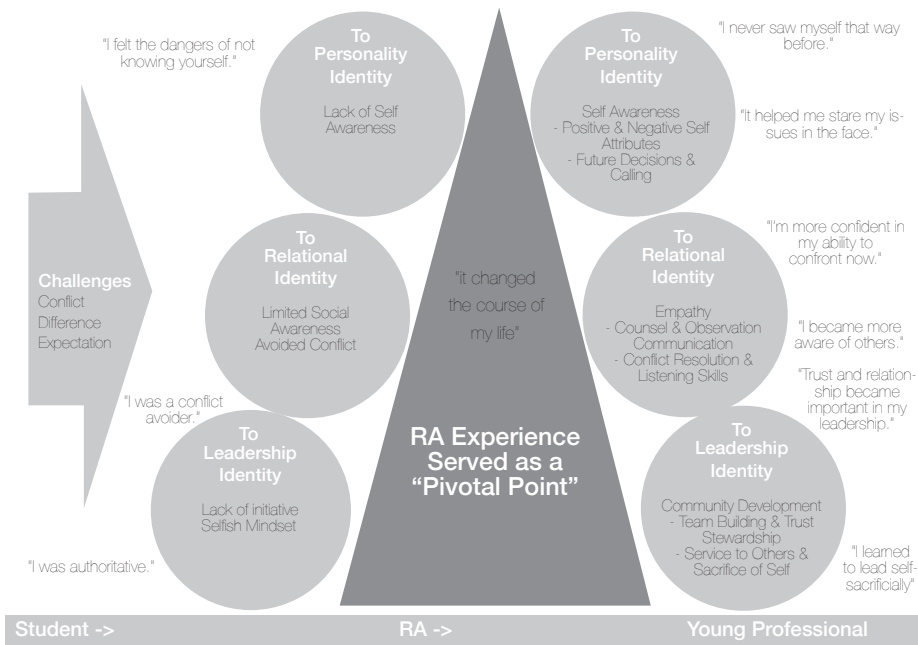
Within the theme of leadership identity, another significant area of impact, participants expressed commitment to community development, including stewardship. Participants explained and confirmed how their views on and practice of stewardship were considerably developed through the RA role -- a change that now included high levels of emphasis toward serving the needs of others. Three distinct aspects were located within the category of stewardship: active service to others, sacrifice of self, and leadership theory development. The RA role instilled an others-focused mindset of leadership that encouraged new approaches to acts of service. As a result, participants cultivated a regular practice of offering time and energy to make a difference for someone else.

Stewardship has been defined as “contributing to society” (Barbuto & Wheeler, 2006, p. 308). According to the literature on leadership, servant leaders function out of core values and an ethical framework oriented to the service of others (Behr, 1998; Chewning, 2000; Greenleaf, 1991), making service the essential core (Farling et al., 1999; Greenleaf, 1991; Patterson, 2003; Russell & Stone; Spears, 2010). As such, the findings in this study add to the evidence that a servant leader assists the needs of others prior to serving their own needs (Greenleaf, 1991; Patterson, 2003; Senjaya et al., 2008). This study further supported the idea that effective leadership places the good of the followers over the self-interests of the leader (Laub, 1999). Servant leaders are perceptive to a larger community beyond themselves (Liden et al., 2008). For the participants, this understanding translated into the way they lead others post-college in their current professions and lives.

As a result, this study offers additional support for research on the positive outcomes of college and leadership involvement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Terenzini et al., 1996; Whitt, 1994). Participants reported confidently on the long-term effects the RA leadership role had on

their leadership practice post-graduation. More specifically, the results of this study indicated three identity shifts as a result of the RA experience, as displayed in Figure 1.

Figure 1. Process of identity development through RA position



Conclusions and Future Study

This study contributes to the research by providing a focus on the RA experience at a CCCU institution, five to 10 years post-graduation. Participants made positive correlations between their experience and a changed personal, relational, and leadership identity. The experience caused a significant disruption in self-perception, interpersonal communication, and personal leadership theory. The five categories of self-awareness, empathy, communication, community development, and stewardship comprised the themes by adding depth and understanding to the participants' experience. The RA role was a pivotal point to the development of these individuals into caring and committed professionals, friends and family members, and community liaisons. Participants unanimously confirmed the experience as one of the most distinctly significant and pivotal experiences of their identity development. The grounded theory that surfaced from interviewing these former RAs contributed to a deeper understanding of the ways in which the RA

experience has impacted the perspective on and practice of their leadership post-graduation.

This study included a comprehensive analysis regarding the positive outcomes associated with being an RA while in college (Blimling & Miltenberger, 1990; Kimbrough & Hutcheson, 1998; Murray et al., 1999) as well as the positive outcomes of college involvement (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, Terenzini et al., 1996; Whitt, 1994). The central theme of pivotal point provides the appropriate description for the change that occurred in the lives of the former RAs. The participants unanimously recognized the RA role as an interrupting event amidst the challenges of conflict, difference, and expectations that became a pivotal point in their growth and identity development. Findings suggest the RA experience caused a significant disruption in their self-perception, interpersonal communication style, and approach to leadership. Over time, the experience led to the emergence of a more refined and understood personal, relational, and leadership identity.

Previous leadership studies have examined various facets of student leadership, including extracurricular activities, residence life, and athletics (Martin, 2000). This research elaborates on the relationship between student involvement and student development. However, it neither specified the level or type of students' involvement (Hernandez et al., 1999; Kuh, 2003; Terenzini et al., 1996) nor the type of leadership model implemented. It also did not focus specifically on student leaders who have already graduated. Although these studies were valuable, further research must address specific levels of involvement, specific types of leadership theories, and the impact they may have post-college (Gellin, 2003). The findings from this study demonstrate the variety of benefits associated with the RA leadership experience over time. However, future studies could identify and isolate other student leadership roles in various college settings to ascertain long-term effects. Further effort is necessary on the study of leadership alumni to identify dimensions of growth and development as well as possible instruments for measuring these scopes. Suggestions for future research might expand the construct of student satisfaction, retention, and student development among future generations of student leaders.

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