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Exploring Student Perceptions of Resident Advisors

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the
Requirements of the Renée Crown University Honors Program at
Syracuse University

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and Renée Crown University Honors
May 2014

Honors Capstone Project in Psychology

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to determine students' misconceptions about the resident advisor (RA) role and to further examine the effects of those misconceptions on attitudes toward RAs. The research also aimed to shed light on stereotypes about RAs and ascertain the implications of those stereotypes. Typical misconceptions about RAs include the notions that they lack time for social activities and lead lives that revolve solely around their duties as resident advisors. Stereotypes have consequences, and the possible consequences of these misconceptions include lack of appreciation for the position, displays of disrespect, negative perceptions and judgments toward RAs, and a reluctance to consider becoming an RA.

There were two primary subject pools for the study. One consisted of Syracuse University undergraduate students who had lived in a residence hall for at least one semester in college. The second sample of participants consisted of students who are currently resident advisors. All non-resident advisor participants completed a seven-page assessment with a variety of measures. Part one sought to determine students' overall attitudes toward RAs. Part 2 consisted of a questionnaire in which participants provided their estimates of how much time RAs spend on their duties as RAs relative to other aspects of their lives, such as socializing with friends. Participants were then asked to directly indicate their interest in serving as resident advisors. They were also presented with four scenarios that are typical of a resident advisor's experience and were asked to explain how they believe the RA would react to the incident. The final page of the assessment requested demographic information. The assessment for resident advisors consisted of one chart in which resident advisors indicated the percentage of time they spent on various activities, as well as the four scenarios and demographics page that was also included in the non-resident advisor assessment.

The results indicated that students do not perceive RAs in an overwhelmingly negative or stereotypical light. Students did not believe that RA duties and responsibilities crowded out any other aspect of their lives in particular. Students also believe most resident advisors would respond to potential infractions in the residence halls by first issuing a warning rather than immediately documenting the student for the behavior (indeed, they seemed to under-estimate the extent to which RAs would document students). However, most students indicated only slight interest in the position, and overall attitudes toward RAs predicted their level of interest. Such findings suggest that negative stereotypes of resident advisors are tempered by relatively positive views of individuals about the position that are generated through positive personal experiences. This information could inform future research in residence life and student affairs departments at a number of universities.

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Advice to Future Honors Students

The best advice that I could give for this extensive project is to choose a topic about which you are truly passionate and that encompasses aspects of your

everyday life. This will be a long, stressful journey, but it is surely worth it in the end! Embrace the workload and take comfort in the knowledge that, when it is over, you'll be a much more knowledgeable, well-rounded person who now has finely tuned time management skills! And remember to sincerely thank everyone who supports you along the way. Best of luck with whatever path you choose to follow!

Executive Summary

The role of the resident advisor is multifaceted and can assume many different forms over the course of an academic year. Traditionally, resident advisors (RAs) have been utilized to establish a sense of community and maintain safety in residence halls. Syracuse University is renowned throughout the country for the quality of its Department of Residence Life. As a result of personal experiences with RAs, participation in programming, and interest, many students apply each year to secure one of the 180 resident advisor positions throughout campus.

Nevertheless, despite the role that RAs have in shaping the community and atmosphere in residence halls, negative perceptions of RAs continue to abound. The portrayals of stern, inflexible, overbearing individuals are perpetuated in the media and in several Internet sources. Though most are not aware of the financial benefits of the position, some do assume that RAs only perform the role for the benefit of free room and board. As a result, many incoming students enter college with preconceived notions about RAs. Sometimes, through personal experiences with RAs, these notions are altered in such a way that RAs are viewed more positively. Other times, the negative conceptions persist. Such conceptions lend themselves to negative stereotypes against RAs. Since decades of research suggest that stereotypes have cognitive and behavioral consequences, these conceptions have the potential to be particularly damaging to residents and resident advisors.

When students perpetuate stereotypes about resident advisors, the effect is widespread since both communities suffer a loss. If they harbor resentment or

wariness toward RAs, students potentially miss an excellent opportunity to create a bond with someone who has the ability to provide excellent insight and knowledge that could potentially enhance one's college experience. RAs often serve as a very valuable resource for students and also serve as a point of contact if residents are ever in need. Oftentimes, strong friendships are created as a result as well.

In a similar manner, RAs suffer a loss when residents are unwilling to establish a connection. When residents begin the year with and continue to harbor negative sentiments toward them, the task of building community amongst members on the floor becomes significantly more difficult. RAs also often seek to establish personal relationships with residents, but if they are not open to doing so, it becomes an impossible task. As a result, students may feel isolated by RAs, which only serves to perpetuate the cycle of negativity. Such negative perceptions also have the potential to deter students from applying and serving in the capacity of resident advisors themselves.

The purpose of this study was to ascertain students' views of the resident advisors with whom they have come in contact during their time at Syracuse University. As the title "Exploring the Roles of Resident Advisors" suggests, the goal was to determine the existence of any negative stereotypes students harbored against RAs and determine the degree to which they are experienced within the sample pool. The study was also created to provide insight into what life as an RA actually entails by documenting the experiences of several resident advisors. In essence, this study was designed to provide a valid and reliable measure of

stereotypes and attitudes toward RAs by shedding light on the misconceptions and identifying the inherent implications of such views.

Several negative conceptions were measured throughout the study. These included typical stereotypes such as the notion that RAs do not have active social lives and have very limited time to do much else besides coursework and their duties as resident advisors. Since the purpose of the study was to ascertain misconceptions of resident advisors through personal experience, the subject pool was limited to students at Syracuse University who had lived in a residence hall for at least one semester in college. However, since the university requires students to live in university housing for at least two years, this stipulation was inclusive of nearly every student, with the only exception being most student athletes (who typically live in South Campus apartments). Students were also required to have never served as resident advisors at Syracuse University or any other institution.

All participants were undergraduate students. Most were recruited through SONA, the system through which students in the “PSY 205: Foundations of Human Behavior” course register to participate in research studies. A smaller set of the subjects was recruited through a Social Psychology course in which the professor offered students extra credit upon completion of the assessment.

A second subject pool consisted of students who are currently resident advisors. They were recruited by an email written by researcher Shy Porter that was sent through the resident advisor listserv. Interested candidates contacted Porter directly to express interest in the study.

All participants completed a seven-page assessment with a variety of measures, all of which sought to determine the students' conceptions about resident advisors. Part 1 was labeled "Attitudes and Beliefs" and consisted of 17 Likert-style statements. Students were required to respond to sentences such as "RAs do not have social lives," "People usually have negative perceptions about RAs," and "RAs are leaders on campus" by circling a number from one to five (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). Some statements posed negative perceptions, while others were more positive in nature.

Part 2 was labeled "Time Allotment" and provided two charts with various activities such as "Social Life," "School Responsibilities," and "Physical Exercise". In one chart, participants were asked to identify the percentage of time they spent doing each activity, and in the other, they were asked to identify the amount of time they believed resident advisors spent doing each activity. The resident advisor chart included two additional activities that accounted for RA responsibilities. The purpose of these time allotments was to determine the amount of time that students believed they spent fulfilling kinds of tasks and engaging in certain kinds of activities compared to the amount of time they perceived RAs spent on the same tasks and activities (with the addition of a few RA-related activities). If the results indicated that students believe RAs spend significantly more time completing RA-related tasks than socializing or focusing on other activities that are more typical of the college experience, these misconceptions could underlie negative attitudes.

Following the charts, students were required to answer the question “If provided the opportunity, would you consider becoming an RA (resident advisor)?” by circling one of four answers (“Yes, definitely,” “Maybe,” “Probably not,” or “Definitely not”) on the page. This question served as a direct measure of students’ interest in the position.

Part 3 provided four scenarios that resident advisors frequently encounter. Students were asked to respond to each by expressing in writing the manner in which they assumed the resident advisor in the situation would respond. This was of critical importance as it provided students the opportunity to explicitly express the way they believed most RAs would address situations (punitively, apathetically, sensitively, etc.).

The assessment for resident advisors was slightly different than that provided to non-resident advisor students. It consisted of one chart in which RAs indicated the percentage of time they spent on various activities, as well as the four scenarios and demographics page that was also included in the non-resident advisor assessment. This served as an important tool as it provided the opportunity to compare the ways in which students believe RAs spend their time or would respond to situations and the ways that RAs actually manage their time and respond to various scenarios.

The results revealed that most students do not strongly desire to secure a position as a resident advisor. The mean response to this question indicated that most students would “Maybe” or “Probably not” want to become an RA if provided the opportunity. Interestingly, though, students who perceived resident

advisors as individuals who enforced policies in the residence halls and documented residents for violations were more likely to desire to become resident advisors themselves.

The overall attitude measure was internally consistent and reliable and was shown to have some predictive validity in that it correlated with interest in being an RA and with some of the students' expectations about how RAs would behave in situations that called for their intervention. However, misconceptions about how RAs spend their time did not seem to be related to attitudes toward RAs. The time allotment measure did not reveal any significant differences.

To date, very few studies have been conducted on this topic. Because Syracuse University's Office of Residence Life program is among the best in the country, a study at this institution was appropriate and gathered results that may potentially be generalizable to other institutions. Ultimately, one can only hope that the results of this study will help students cultivate an awareness of and appreciation of resident advisors among students at Syracuse University.

Introduction

At most residential colleges and universities, resident advisors (RAs) serve an increasingly complex function in the lives of students. Although they are

commonly viewed as peacekeepers in campus residence halls, in reality, the role of the resident advisor is multifaceted. RAs serve as role models and mentors who provide advice in personal and academic matters, respond to emergency situations, create programs to build community, enforce policies, and take disciplinary action when necessary. They are paraprofessionals who act as a resource for students and respond to crises by operating as the first line of defense.

At Syracuse University, resident advisors serve a particularly important function in residence halls as they are typically some of the first people with whom incoming students come in contact. RAs remain a pervasive presence throughout the year as they implement programs to promote community within the building, serve as peer mentors for students, and make themselves available to students whenever necessary.

Syracuse University is renowned throughout the country for the quality of its Department of Residence Life. RAs participate in extensive training prior to the start of the academic year in which they are provided with a wealth of information through lectures, forums, and mock scenarios. For ten days each August, they work together with their staff members to plan programs and initiatives, practice addressing a variety of situations, learn protocol, and essentially create an open and welcoming atmosphere in the residence halls.

Once the year commences, RAs begin the work of establishing relationships with residents. As with any position of authority, there exists a wide range of reactions to the presence of RAs. Though some students are receptive to the assistance that RAs provide, others move into the buildings with a wariness

toward RAs that has been cultivated through images in the media and perhaps through personal experience with individuals who served in similar capacities. The portrayals of stern, inflexible, overbearing individuals that are presented through television and the Internet foster the creation of negative stereotypes. As a result, many incoming students enter college with preconceived notions about RAs. Sometimes, these notions are altered in such a way that RAs are viewed more positively. Other times, the negative conceptions persist.

Since RAs serve a significant role in campus housing and form positive, negative, or ambivalent relationships with students, the perception of RAs and the RA role amongst students seems important. However, there is a paucity of literature and studies that explore student perceptions and misperceptions of resident advisors. Previous studies in the psychological literature that have focused on resident advisors have explored self-efficacy among resident advisors (Denzine & Anderson, 1999), role conflict among resident advisors (Everett & Loftus, 2011), resident advisor burnout (Paladino, Murray, Newgent, & Gohn, 2005), and personality traits among resident advisors (Deluga & Masson, 2000). However, none have examined students' perceptions of resident advisors, much less the consequences of those perceptions.

A stereotype is defined as “a generalization about a group of people in which certain traits are assigned to virtually all members of the group, regardless of actual variation among the members” (Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2010, p. 391). It is a cognitive process that is often utilized to maximize cognitive time and energy by creating well-defined thoughts about some topics, and quick and hasty

ones about others. In this way, any number of groups and activities may be stereotyped.

For many individuals, “stereotypes can explain not only what a group is, but also why the group is that way” (Crandall, Bahns, Warner, & Schaller, 2011, p. 1488). They can also “function to represent intergroup realities [...] creating images of the out-group (and the in-group) that explain, rationalize and justify the intergroup relationship” (Alexander, Brewer, & Herrmann, 1999, p. 78). Though stereotypes may be adaptive if they are based on experience and are accurate, they become maladaptive and unfair if they impede individuals from observing individual differences. If this occurs, stereotyping easily lends itself to the development of prejudice. Prejudice is generally defined as “a hostile or negative attitude toward a distinguishable group of people, based solely on their membership in that group” (Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2010, p. 391). One of the first actions that lead to prejudice is social categorization, and, more explicitly, the development of in-group and out-group bias. While the in-group is the group with which the individual identifies, the out-group is the “other” with which the individual does not identify. Generally, individuals attribute positive characteristics to those in the in-group, and negative, stereotypical qualities to members in the out-group. Oftentimes, out-group homogeneity develops, which is the belief that members of the out-group are all alike (Aronson, Wilson & Akert, 2010). This suggests that, while members of the in-group have characteristics that identify them as unique individuals, those in the out-group are homogenous. Out-group homogeneity is similar to the ultimate attribution error in which dispositional attributions are made about an entire group of people.

Resident advisors are often the target of several stereotypes that usually lead to prejudices. Misattributions about the character, tendencies, habits, and lifestyles of RAs are widely circulated throughout the media. An October 2012 issue of *Jerk* magazine featured a “How to Dress Like an RA” spread. Various arrows pointed to props or clothing choices of the female who was, presumably, an RA. One arrow pointed to the RA’s slippers and suggested that she wore them because she never left the residence hall. Another pointed to a pile of alcohol bottles near her feet with a caption that suggested she confiscates and bans alcohol from residents, similar to the days of prohibition. Such images perpetuate the stereotype that RAs are boring, lack social lives, and exist solely to prohibit fun in the residence halls.

Several studies have indicated that stereotypes are rarely accurate (Judd & Park, 1993; MacKie, 1973) and often reflect exaggeration, prejudice, and overgeneralization (Judd & Park, 1993). And while some students are aware of this, the desire to be accepted and “fit in” with the in-group (non-RAs), often blinds them from this reality. This study sought to establish the existence and extent of negative stereotypes and misperceptions about resident advisors among Syracuse University students. Each participant who was not a resident advisor was required to have had personal interactions with RAs on their floors and in their buildings at some point in their college careers. The criteria presented were designed to measure students’ overall attitude toward RAs, ascertain how they believe RAs spend their time in comparison to the way they spend their own time, identify their willingness to become RAs, and determine the way they expect RAs to address a variety of important scenarios that frequently occur in the residence

halls (such as alcohol violations). Such a study is significant because it provides insight into student perceptions of resident advisors and assesses their willingness to become resident advisors. This information could be particularly useful for college departments that work closely with resident advisors and students in residence halls.

The researcher hypothesized that most students perceive RAs negatively, believe that they do not have sufficient time to create and maintain active social lives, do not desire to become RAs in the future, and assume that RAs' instinctive response to incidents is to document students, regardless of the situation.

Method

Participants

Since the purpose of the study was to ascertain misconceptions of resident advisors through personal experience, the subject pool was limited to students at Syracuse University who had lived in a residence hall for at least one semester in college. However, since the university requires students to live in university housing for at least two years, this stipulation was inclusive of nearly every student, with the only exception being most student athletes (who typically live in South Campus apartments). Students were also required to have never served as resident advisors at Syracuse University or any other institution.

All participants were undergraduate students. Most were recruited through SONA, the system through which students in the “PSY 205: Foundations of Human Behavior” course register to participate in research studies. Participation was voluntary and provided research participation credit, which is a requirement for the course. A smaller set of the subjects was recruited through a Social Psychology course in which the professor offered students extra credit upon completion of the assessment.

The second sample of participants consisted of students who are currently resident advisors. They were recruited by an email written by the researcher (Shy Porter) that was sent through the resident advisor listserv. Interested candidates contacted Porter directly to express interest in the study. There was no monetary or credit compensation for their participation.

Through the SONA system and the Social Psychology course recruitment, 176 students who had never been resident advisors participated in the study. Of those, 116 were female, 59 were male, and one preferred not to say. The majority of participants were first-year students (n=92), while there were 42 sophomores, 16 juniors, and 26 seniors. Most students were Caucasian (n=114), while the rest constituted most other ethnic identities.

The resident advisor subject pool consisted of 23 participants. Of those, 17 were female, and 6 were male. Most were sophomores (n=13), while there were 3 juniors, 5 seniors, and 2 graduate students. Most ethnic identities were represented.

Materials

All participants completed a seven-page assessment with a variety of measures, including demographic information. Part 1 was labeled “Attitudes and Beliefs” and consisted of 17 Likert-style statements (see Appendix A). Students were required to respond to sentences such as “RAs do not have social lives,” “People usually have negative perceptions about RAs,” and “RAs are leaders on campus” by circling a number on a 5-point scale (ranging from 1 = strongly disagree to 5 = strongly agree). The measure was designed to ascertain students’ internal beliefs about RAs. Statements could be grouped to determine differing underlying sentiments. Collectively, about seven statements suggested that RAs are overworked and do not have active social lives, three suggested negative qualities of RAs as individuals (e.g. “RAs are boring people”), four suggested that RAs desire power, authority, and compensation, and the final three were positive in nature (e.g. “RAs serve a useful role in the residence hall”). Each statement

was selected to represent one of a variety of reasons why students would evaluate RAs positively or negatively. Some statements posed and measured negative perceptions (e.g. RAs are overworked, mean, have a bad reputation, and do not have active social lives), while others were rather positive (e.g. RAs are influential leaders, role models, and active members of the campus community).

Part 2 was labeled “Time Allotment” and provided two charts with various activities which included “Social life,” “School responsibilities,” “Physical exercise,” “Clubs and organizations,” and “Eating, sleeping, bathing, and personal hygiene” (see Appendix B). In one chart, participants were asked to identify the percentage of time they spent doing each activity, and in the other, they were asked to identify the amount of time they believed resident advisors spent doing each activity. The resident advisor chart included two additional activities: “Directly interacting with residents” and “Other RA responsibilities (i.e. duty, bulletin boards, programming)” (see Appendix C). The total for both charts was required to add up to 100%.

Researchers Ross and Sicoly (1979) studied biases in availability of information in memory. In one experiment, spouses were asked to identify the amount of time they each believed they contributed to various household tasks (e.g. cleaning dishes, cleaning house, shopping for groceries, etc.). The results revealed an egocentric bias for most couples, indicating that at least one of the spouses overestimated his/her contribution to various activities. Such a precedent was important for the current study because of the stereotypes that suggest RAs do not have as much time for various activities as non-resident advisors. Drawing from Ross and Sicoly’s study, one may assume that non-resident advisors may

overestimate the amount of time they believe they devote to certain activities such as socializing, while underestimating the amount of time RAs devote to those same activities. Non-RAs may also assume that RAs allocate a significant amount of time to RA duties and consequently minimize the amount of time they spend engaging in social activities.

Following completion of the charts, students were required to answer the question “If provided the opportunity, would you consider becoming an RA (resident advisor)?” by circling one of four answers (“Yes, definitely,” “Maybe,” “Probably not,” or “Definitely not”). Lower scores indicated greater interest (1 = “Yes, definitely”), while higher scores indicated less interest (4 = “Definitely not”).

Part 3 provided four scenarios that resident advisors frequently encounter. Students were asked to respond to each by expressing in writing the manner in which they assumed the resident advisor in the situation would respond. One vignette presented a scenario in which the RA is doing rounds in the building, notices that a resident has left his/her door slightly open, knocks, and enters without permission. The RA then notices that the resident is quietly drinking a beer while watching an SU basketball game. The participant was asked to note how they felt the RA would respond to this situation. In another scenario, the RA is completing rounds in the building and notices a marijuana odor wafting from a specific room. The RA knows that it is late and that DPS would likely take at least 20 minutes to respond to the alert. By the time the officers arrive the smell would have likely dissipated. Again, the participant was asked to note the way that he or

she believed the RA would respond (see Appendix D for a full list of the vignettes).

Each of the scenarios was intentionally ambiguous to allow for a variety of interpretations and responses. This was accomplished by presenting each scenario in such a way that allowed for a myriad of responses. For instance, in the first scenario, a resident advisor discovers a resident with a beer in his/her hand while he/she quietly watches an SU basketball game in his/her room. Though the student is drinking, he/she is not disturbing the peace on the floor. Moreover, the RA enters the room uninvited. Such a situation does not have a clear-cut and obvious response. Such ambiguity was intentional and created to ascertain the way that students believe RAs would react in situations that do not have clear and evident solutions.

The researcher anticipated that the answers to the vignettes would fall in one of six categories: issue a warning; “punish” the resident by documenting the incident; “punish” the resident if it was a repeat offense; join in the activity; avoid action altogether; or miscellaneous. To establish inter-rater reliability, the researcher enlisted the aid of a graduate student to code 20 samples of the vignettes. The graduate student was provided a list of the categories, and the researcher carefully explained examples for each. They coded the samples separately, and then compared the results.

There were a few discrepancies that were the result of language barriers and inaccuracy in reading participants’ handwriting. Once those were resolved, there were fewer than five samples for which the researcher and graduate student disagreed on coding. Both individuals explained their reasoning for coding the

conflicting scenarios until it was clear where the issue lay. For example, in some samples, participants suggested that the RA would provide a warning *or* a punishment. While the graduate student coded this as a 1 (for warning), the researcher coded this as a 2 (for punish). After discussing the issue, the researcher agreed to code a scenario by whichever action the participant suggested first (for instance, if he/she suggested a punishment *or* a warning, it would be coded as 2 for punish, but if the order was reversed, it would be coded as a 1 for warning).

The assessment for resident advisors was slightly different than that provided to non-resident advisor students. It consisted of one chart in which resident advisors indicated the percentage of time they spent on various activities, as well as the four scenarios and demographics page that was also included in the non-resident advisor assessment. Rather than asking subjects to indicate the number of semesters they lived in a residence hall, the resident advisor assessment asked subjects to indicate the number of semesters that they worked in the position.

Of the 176 participants, 16 non-resident advisor students completed the assessment, and in addition, participated in an interview with Porter. The purpose of the interview was to elicit richer and more nuanced information about students' attitudes and perceptions of resident advisors. Questions included: "How would you describe the role of an RA?" "What do you believe is the standard lifestyle of an RA?" "Do you believe that RAs have 'power complexes'?" and "Have your interactions with RAs been generally positive or negative?" (see Appendix E). All of the resident advisors completed the assessment and participated in an interview as well. These questions were designed to provide insight into the

resident advisor experience. Questions included: “How would you describe your experience as an RA?” “What is the most rewarding aspect of your role?” “What is the most difficult aspect of your role?” and “What would you consider to be the pros and cons of the position?” (see Appendix F). The responses in each interview were transcribed.

Procedure

Most participants who registered for the study through the SONA system were part of a group of up to six persons. The researcher (Porter) provided a brief overview and instructions for the assessment. Subjects were instructed to complete the assessment and remain seated until everyone was finished. Most participants completed it within 15 minutes, at which point the researcher collected the forms and provided a short debriefing in which she explained the purpose of the study.

Subjects who participated in an interview completed the assessment alone in a room with the researcher. The researcher assured each participant that his/her responses were anonymous and none of the information provided would be connected with his/her name. Once they completed the assessment, the researcher conducted the interview, then provided a debriefing (see Appendix E). All resident advisor subjects completed the assessment and participated in an interview afterwards as well (see Appendix F). They too were assured of anonymity.

Results

Internal Consistency of the Overall Attitude Measure

Analysis of the 17 Likert-style questions revealed a Cronbach's Alpha of .79. This measure reveals the extent to which the items are consistent with one another. Since the number approaches 1, it is considered reliable by most standards. The items were cohesive; that is, they hang together to measure a

single overall attitude. There was also no need to discard any of them, as analyses revealed that no one item was depressing the reliability of the scale.

The positive statements within the 17 questions were reverse scored to provide consistency within the measure. The questions revealed an overall attitude mean of 2.38 with a standard deviation of .44. The mean indicates an average response of “Disagree” to the items in the measure, thereby indicating that the student sample did not have very negative attitudes toward resident advisors. Also, there were no sex differences in overall attitudes.

Effects of Overall Attitude

The question phrased as “If provided the opportunity, would you consider becoming an RA (resident advisor)?” revealed a mean of 2.52. This number suggests that, on average, participants’ responses were between “Maybe” and “Probably not.” Lower scores indicate lack of a desire to become an RA while higher scores indicate interest in the position.

Correlation analyses revealed that responses to this question were significantly correlated with the overall attitude measure ($r=.316$, $p<.01$). This correlation reveals that the more negative/positive a participant’s perception of the resident advisor role, the less/more he or she would be interested in serving as a resident advisor in the future.

Further analyses revealed that as students progress throughout college, their interest in working as a resident advisor slightly decreases. For first-year students, the mean is 2.31 whereas for seniors, it is 2.58 (see Table 1).

Table 1: Be an RA * Class

Class	Mean	N	Standard Deviation
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Freshman	2.40	92	.950
Sophomore	2.40	42	1.061
Junior	2.88	16	.885
Senior	2.92	26	1.164
Total	2.52	176	1.020

Based on participant and RA open-ended response to the vignettes, the presence of a perceived and actual lax attitude in response to possible violations of residence hall rules was also computed. A lax attitude corresponded to students indicating that they either expected resident advisors to participate in the activity in which the resident was found, or did not expect the resident advisor to do anything in response to the situation. The mean number of lax responses expected by non-resident advisors was 1.17 (out of 4). This was not significantly different than the resident advisor mean, which was 1.19. This indicates that there were a similar number of students who perceived RAs as being relatively carefree and lenient in certain situations as there were RAs who identified these qualities within themselves.

Responses to the vignettes were correlated with both the overall attitude measure and willingness to be an RA. Recall that lower scores on the “Become an RA” measure indicated greater interest in the position (1 = “Yes, definitely), and higher scores indicated less interest in the position (4 = “Definitely not”). The results revealed a negative correlation between students’ willingness to be a resident advisor in the future and their expectations that RAs would respond to infractions with punishment ($r = -.17, p < .05$). This signifies that the more likely

a student is to desire to become an RA, the more likely he or she is to perceive RAs as enforcers of the rules who document incidents accordingly. The “Become an RA” measure, however, was positively correlated with the measure of leniency ($r = .161, p < .05$). This suggests that students who perceive RAs as lenient are less interested in the position. The “Overall Attitude” measure was also positively correlated with the measure of leniency ($r = .161, p < .05$). This suggests that students who perceive RAs as lax (and therefore less likely to respond to violations) also view RAs more negatively.

Finally, expecting lax responses was negatively correlated with expected punishment ($r = -.28, p < .01$). This suggests that students consider resident advisors to be less likely to effect punishment if they perceive them as more lenient.

Time Schedules

The time schedule measures were not very informative about the source of student’s attitudes toward RAs. The results also did not reveal any significant differences between the ways in which students predicted that resident advisors spend their time, and the actual way that resident advisors manage their responsibilities (see Table 2 and Table 3).

Table 2: Student Responses for Time Measure

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation

Student Self Care	175	2.00	70.00	30.51	11.36
Student Involvement	175	9.00	70.00	32.73	12.45
Student School	175	3	90	36.74	14.910
Projected RA Self Care	176	.00	80.00	22.79	10.68
Projected RA Involvement	176	4.00	50.00	23.68	9.39
Projected RA Duties	176	.00	80.00	24.65	12.35
Projected RA School	176	10	80	28.52	11.14
Valid N	175				

Table 3: Resident Advisor Responses for Time Measure

	N	Minimum	Maximum	Mean	Standard Deviation
Actual RA Duties	23	10.00	65.00	27.13	13.24
Actual RA Self Care	23	5.00	80.00	25.07	17.05

Actual RA Involvement	23	6.00	35.00	20.24	7.44
RA School	23	10.00	50.00	29.09	9.73
Valid N	23				

Students predicted that RAs spent about 23% of their time engaged in self-care such as exercise and health related activities (M=22.8), and in reality, RAs noted that they spend about 25% of their time engaged in self-care (M=25.1). Students also predicted that RAs spend about 24% of their time being social through events, clubs, and organizations (M=23.7), and in reality, RAs spend about 20% of their time being involved around campus and with friends (M=20.2). According to participants, RAs spend about 25% of their time engaged in duty-related activities such as administrative tasks, programming, and interacting with residents (M=24.6), and RAs reported that about 27% of their time is devoted to that (M=27.1). Finally, students projected that RAs spend about 29% of their time on schoolwork (M=28.6), which is almost equivalent to the amount of time that RAs reported spending on schoolwork (M=29.1). The researcher controlled for the addition of two variables in the resident advisor time schedule (i.e. “Directly interacting with residents” and “Other RA responsibilities”) and no differences were revealed.

Vignettes: Comparisons Between RAs and Non-RAs

The four vignettes that concluded the assessment resulted in a few significant findings. Various responses were coded and analyzed for each scenario. The first vignette was related to alcohol. Results revealed that 42% of

students predicted that RAs would punish the resident for underage drinking. In reality, 69.6% of RAs reported that they would. The second scenario involved underage drinking at a party on campus. A majority (53.4%) of students suggested that RAs would simply ignore the residents if they saw them drinking at the party. Only 17.4% of RAs indicated that this would be their response, whereas 73.9% indicated that they would not attend the party. Very few students (2.3%) and RAs (4.3%) indicated that they would punish the students if they saw them at the party.

The third scenario indicated that an RA smelled marijuana smoke coming from a particular room. 55.1% of students believed that the RA would punish the student for smoking, and 73.9% of RAs indicated that they would document the incident as well. Finally, scenario four involved noise violations during Finals week. About 42% of students suggested that the RA would issue a warning first, and would document the residents if the noise continued. 73.9% of RAs indicated that this would be their response as well. Only 14.2% of students believed that the RA would immediately punish the students, and only 26.1% of RAs indicated that they would.

Results revealed that the mean number of punishment responses expected (in which students assumed that resident advisors would document the residents' transgression) was 1.14. This mean was a bit below the mean for reported intentions to punish within the resident advisor sample ($m = 1.69$). It is evident here that resident advisors are slightly more likely to document students for the first offense, rather than issue a warning. Finally, a one-sample t -test for the punishment condition revealed that the non-RA mean (1.14) was significantly

different from the actual number reported by the RAs (1.69), $t(175) = 9.00$,

$p < .001$.

Discussion

The current study is the first of its kind in its goal to identify and explore the extent of stereotypes and misperceptions about resident advisors. Though the setting was one university, there is potential for the study to be replicated and the results to be generalized to other institutions. Taken as a whole, the findings suggest that while negative stereotypes of resident advisors do exist, they are tempered by relatively positive views of individuals about the position that are generated through positive personal experiences.

The overall attitude measure provided a mean that indicated that, on average, most students selected “Disagree” for the options in the measure. Since statements were coded such that they were negatively oriented (e.g. “RAs do not have active social lives), this indicates that students do not perceive RAs in an overwhelmingly negative and stereotypical light.

The overall attitude measure also was moderately correlated with students’ interest in serving as resident advisors in the future. The more positive/negative their perception, the more/less interested they were in the position. Thus, if students perceive the RA role as something that would be beneficial, fun, or interesting, it follows that they would be at least moderately interested in applying to and serving in the position.

However, most students were fairly ambivalent in their desire to become RAs in the future. Most indicated a choice that was either “Maybe” or “Probably not.” Though these answers are not at the extremes of “Yes, definitely” or “Definitely, not,” they do suggest that there are mediating factors that contribute to positive and negative perceptions of the role. Such factors were revealed during the individual interviews. One student noted:

“I think it would be really cool to be an RA. My RA is really cool. But it seems like a lot of work so I don’t know if I would be able to do it or handle all of it. It just seems like a lot.”

Another said:

“I think the RA is there to be supportive to students in their transition to college and to help them if there are any problems that arise that they can’t take care of themselves...and for disciplinary reasons I guess. [But] I

wouldn't want to be an RA because I wouldn't want to deal with the annoying kids.”

So, while some students do acknowledge the beneficial role that RAs serve in the residence halls, they also realize the work involved and express disinterest in serving in the role themselves. These results were fairly consistent with the expectation that students who are fairly uninterested in the position would perceive the role as difficult.

A recurrent theme in the data was the issue of time constraints for resident advisors. Although the *Time Schedules* measure did not reveal results that were consistent with the belief that RAs do not have any free time, the issue of time (and lack thereof) was frequently expressed during the interviews. Though some acknowledged that RAs do manage to have active social lives, others suggested that the demands of the position severely limit the possibility of socializing.

“I think that RAs still like have their own lives, like they go out to parties and all that, but they spend a lot of time looking out for the well-being of the residents like doing bulletin boards and organizing floor events. They spend a lot of time studying too.”

“[They] dedicate a lot of time to being an RA and their schoolwork, but I'm sure that they have active social lives. It's like seeing a teacher outside of school. You assume that they don't have lives, but they do.”

“With my RA, I barely see her sometimes because she's a Psychology major and she's always doing work. I can see that [the RA job is] very time consuming and is a major part of your role in your time here, so it's a major time adjustment.”

“I’m sure [the RA role] involves a lot of meetings and certain duties that are required each day. I’m sure there’s some social life. Not the social life of a normal student, but I believe they can still enjoy themselves. Like any other students, they have classwork but it’s more of a balance, I would think. But I would think it would be a bit of a tighter schedule. Maybe they have less of a social life, but it’s not nonexistent.”

In their interviews, several resident advisors indicated issues of time management as well. Some also noted the impact that the resident advisor title may have on one’s social life:

“It’s a hard balancing act sometimes. It seems like when I’m really busy, my residents come knocking on my door all the time. Sometimes the [RA responsibilities] come at inconvenient times. And then there’s the way that people react on campus when I tell them I’m an RA.... As soon as you tell someone you’re an RA, it pretty much ends the possibility that you’re going to hang out. People’s main priority here is drinking and they know they can’t drink around an RA. I have felt like making new friends is harder this year because of it but at the same time I’ve made a lot of new friends because of the [people I’ve met through the] role.”

“One of the biggest challenges to the position is trying to balance personal and professional life. You can’t let the job overtake your life and at the same time you should be able to balance between personal, professional and academic life. It isn’t always easy to manage those at the same time.”

Another important theme expected to influence perceptions of resident advisors as their likelihood of assigning punishment. The four vignettes toward

the end of the assessment revealed that students believe RAs are more likely to issue a warning before exacting punishment. In contrast, RAs indicated that punishing residents for violations (by documenting the incident and filing an incident report) would be their first resort. Contrary to the researcher's expectations, few of the sampled students suggested that they believe RAs are determined to stop residents from partying or violating policies in the residence hall. This may, perhaps, stem from personal experiences with RAs that were generally positive. One student notes:

“I think there are mixed feelings [about resident advisors]. I don't think anyone's ever going to say ‘I love RAs and I think they're the greatest thing ever,’ but there *are* people who say they had a good RA and ones who say they had a terrible RA. All of it was based on their own personal experiences with [their RAs].”

The assessment also revealed that students who perceived RAs as lenient did not believe that they were likely to exact punishment. Some individuals believed that there is a mixture of responses to various situations. One student said:

“I have one RA who is the definition of an RA because she is very ‘by-the-book,’ and another who is more of a friend than an RA. Seeing both of them makes it seem like there's a happy medium. Even still, I do think that some have power complexes. I've seen the ones who, when they're on duty, they yell at you for having your music on, and when they see you drinking they write you up. But when others come by they might calmly ask you to turn the music down and tell you to hide the drinks better. Some aren't so strict about it but some make it a big deal. The ones who

write us up aren't the ones from my floor. I think it's better to tell you to hide it instead of writing it up because they know that we drink."

This student provides clear examples for the variety of resident advisor personality styles and approaches that influence students' perceptions of the position. However, results from the resident advisor sample indicated that RAs are more likely to punish residents for offenses than issue a warning. Though it may be the case that the RAs in the sample pool adhere to the stipulations set forth by protocol very closely, it may also be that they felt obligated to indicate that they would follow protocol because of the presence of the researcher. Though the researcher assured them of anonymity, she is a mentor resident advisor and is very well known throughout the Department of Residence Life. Knowledge of her position within the department may have motivated the RAs to create responses to the vignettes that were not truly indicative of their actual reactions to situations.

Interestingly, students who perceived RAs to be more likely to issue punishment indicated greater interest in serving in the RA role. Perhaps this is because these students view RAs as individuals who are tasked with the responsibility of properly documenting violations in the residence hall. When they witness RAs fulfilling the obligations of the position by responding to situations in a manner dictated by protocol, they view it as the RA doing his/her duty. If a resident understands and accepts this component of the position and would be willing to complete the same duties if provided the opportunity, he/she would indicate greater interest in the role.

Conversely, residents who perceived RAs as lenient or lax were less interested in the position. This position may have come as the result of witnessing

RAs underreact to situations and thereby fail to meet the expectations of the position. If residents see that current RAs are uninterested in abiding by the rules set forth by protocol, they may be relatively uninterested as well. Students who perceive RAs as lax may closely identify with a hands-off approach with residents. As a result, they would not be interested in serving as a resident advisor because they are confident that they would not be motivated to document students when necessary.

Regardless of various mediating factors for interest in the position, students' attitudes toward the position as well as their desire to become RAs consistently decrease as they progress throughout college. This may be because, as they age, there is increasingly less time to serve as a resident advisor. It may also be because, after sophomore year, students are able to live off campus. For most, once they are presented with this opportunity, they are not willing to return to campus to live in a residence hall. Additionally, as they become older, other opportunities that could conflict with the resident advisor position present themselves (such as internships, part-time jobs, relationships, etc.). And finally, students may appreciate and recognize the difficulty in the RA role more as they progress through college. One student notes:

“I think freshmen don't like RAs because of their authority against them. Like, they don't feel comfortable around them. But I think when you're older you admire them more because they take on a lot of responsibility that other people couldn't handle.”

An RA responded in a similar manner during the interview:

“I do think there are negative perceptions of RAs on campus, but I think that they stop after sophomore year. Upperclassmen who are not RAs don’t believe that RAs are super crazy. They recognize that there are RAs who are on a power trip, but I think it’s mostly underclassmen [freshmen and sophomores] who think that RAs are looking for trouble. But starting sophomore year, I think people realize that the position is great, is competitive, and to get it is a really good thing.

Though the assessment revealed mixed results, it is evident that negative stereotypes and perceptions about resident advisors are not as widespread and pervasive as initially thought. The researcher hypothesized that most students perceive RAs negatively, believe that they do not have sufficient time to create and maintain active social lives, do not desire to become RAs in the future, and assume that RAs’ instinctive response to incidents is to document students, regardless of the situation. The results and subsequent discussion have indicated that this is not always the case. From the overall attitude measure, the researcher was able to determine that students do not perceive RAs or the resident advisor position in an overwhelmingly negative or stereotypical light. In the time measures, students indicated that RAs do not allocate majority of their time to RA-related duties, and do indeed dedicate time to the cultivation of social lives.

As most students indicated “Maybe” or “Probably not” when asked if they would be willing to serve as an RA in the future, very few indicated a strong response of “Definitely not.” Controlling for interest variation among class status (i.e. freshman, sophomore, junior, or senior), this indicates that serving as an RA is an option that a significant amount of students would consider. Finally, most

students did not indicate that RAs would immediately punish them for infractions, but instead suggested that they would first issue a warning. Because of these results, it is clear that the hypothesis was not strongly supported.

One of the key limitations of the study was likely the researcher's position as a mentor resident advisor. Though her status was concealed from non-resident advisors until the debriefing, all of the resident advisors who were interviewed were aware of her position. They were assured of anonymity, but the possibility that the information they wrote could be connected back to them may have restricted their willingness to be completely truthful in the assessment and interview. To control for this, third-party researchers who are not directly tied to the residence life community should complete such a study.

As of yet, very few studies have been conducted on resident advisors and the effects of the position on RAs and the student community. Since the measure of attitude toward RAs in the current study was reliable and had predictive validity, future research endeavors should continue to study such phenomenon. Researchers could also create additional studies that focus on resident advisor turnover rates, reasons for interest in the position, and the impact that resident advisors have in the residence halls and beyond. It may also be interesting to ascertain the factors that cause students' perceptions of RAs to change throughout their college careers. This study and others like it could prove to be beneficial to residence life and student affairs departments at Syracuse University and to similar departments at other institutions around the globe.

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Appendices

Appendix A: Non-RA Overall Attitude Assessment

Part 1: Attitudes and Beliefs

On each scale below, please select the number (and only one number) that best represents how you feel about each statement.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Neutral	Agree	Strongly Agree
RA's do not have active social lives.	1	2	3	4	5
RA's never have any free time to do what they want to do.	1	2	3	4	5
RA's are over-worked and underappreciated.	1	2	3	4	5
Most RA's do not seem to enjoy their job.	1	2	3	4	5
RA's do not do anything fun or entertaining.	1	2	3	4	5
RA's are boring people.	1	2	3	4	5
Residents frequently disrespect RA's.	1	2	3	4	5
People usually have negative perceptions about RA's.	1	2	3	4	5
RA's are leaders on campus.	1	2	3	4	5
RA's only have friends who are also RA's.	1	2	3	4	5
RA's serve a useful role in the residence halls.	1	2	3	4	5
The role of the RA is unclear.	1	2	3	4	5
Most RA's only do the job for the benefit of receiving free room and board.	1	2	3	4	5
RA's do not hesitate to get	1	2	3	4	5

students in trouble.

RAAs have a false sense of authority.	1	2	3	4	5
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RAAs do not follow the rules that they attempt to impose on others.	1	2	3	4	5
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At least one RA has positively affected my college experience.	1	2	3	4	5
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Appendix B: Non-RA Self-Time Allotment Chart

PART II: TIME ALLOTMENT

*Please indicate the amount of time, in percentages, that you believe is appropriate for each category. **The percentages should add up to 100%.***

Think about your typical week during the semester. What percentage of your time do *you* allot to the following activities during the week?

Activity	Percentage
Social life (i.e. spending time with friends, attending non-mandatory events)	
School responsibilities (i.e. homework, projects)	
Physical exercise	
Clubs and organizations	
Eating, sleeping, bathing and personal hygiene	
	Total: 100%

Appendix C: Non-RA Projected RA Time Allotment Chart

Now, fill out the Table from the perspective of an RA. What percentage of time do you think *an RA* allots to the following activities during the week? *Again, the percentages should add up to 100%.*

Activity	Percentage
Directly interacting with residents	
Other RA responsibilities (i.e. duty, bulletin boards, programming)	
Social life (i.e. spending time with friends, attending non-mandatory events)	
School responsibilities (i.e. homework, projects)	
Physical exercise	
Clubs and organizations	
Eating, sleeping, bathing and personal hygiene	
	Total: 100%

Appendix D: Scenario Vignettes

Please read each scenario carefully. Then, explain how you believe a resident advisor would respond to each situation. You may continue on the back of this sheet, if necessary.

An RA is doing rounds in the building. The RA notices that a resident has left his/her door slightly open and so knocks lightly before saying hello. It is then that the RA notices that the student is quietly sitting alone on his/her bed drinking a beer while watching an SU basketball game. The RA knows that the resident is underage. What do you think the RA would do in this situation?

An RA recently received an invitation to a party this upcoming weekend. There has been a lot of buzz about the party around campus and the RA knows that a few of his/her residents will be attending, including those who are underage. What do you think the RA would do in this situation?

While doing rounds in the building on a Friday night, the RA notices a marijuana odor wafting from a specific room. It is 1:00 am. The RA is tired and knows that it could take DPS at least 20 minutes to reply to a “suspicious odor” telephone call. By the time the officers arrive, the smell could already be gone. What do you think the RA would do in this situation?

It is 11:30 pm during Finals week, and just as the RA is about to go to sleep, he/she hears a group of residents being noisy in the lounge. Because quiet hours are in effect 24/7 during Finals, any noise violation should result in immediate documentation of the residents and a mandatory meeting with the hall Assistant Residence Director or the Residence Director. What do you think the RA would do in this situation?

Appendix E: Non-RA Interview Questions

The following questions are to be facilitated by the researcher.

1. How would you describe the role of an RA?
2. What do you believe is the standard lifestyle of an RA?
3. How have your interactions with your RA influenced your perceptions of the position?
4. Have your interactions with RAs been generally positive or negative?
5. Do you believe that RAs have “power complexes”?
6. How do you think RAs are generally perceived around campus?

Appendix F: RA Interview Questions

The following questions are to be facilitated by the researcher.

1. How would you describe your experience as an RA?
2. What is the most rewarding aspect of your role?
3. What is the most difficult aspect of your role?
4. Why were you initially interested in the position?
5. What is the most difficult situation that you have ever had to handle?
6. What would you consider to be “pros” and “cons” of the position?
7. Do you believe you have made a positive impact on residents’ lives?
8. Do you believe that there are negative perceptions of RAs on this campus?
9. How would you describe the role of an RA?