

# Support of a Custom Programming Model

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## INTRODUCTION

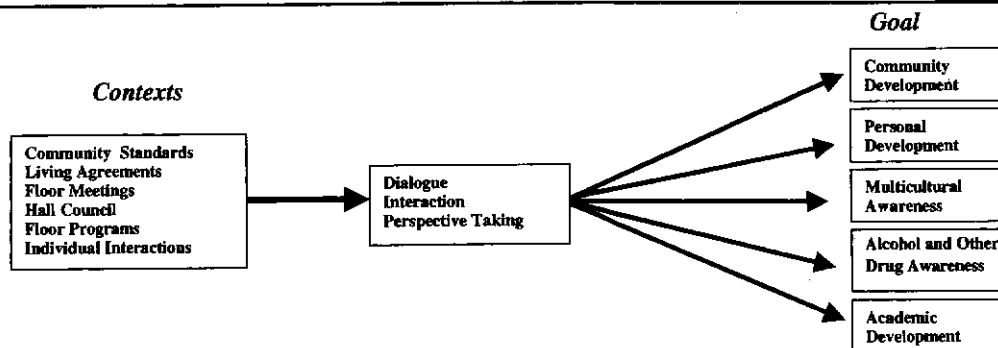
Staff at a private, midsized four-year university in the Northeast developed a Resident Advisor (RA) training program in support of a custom programming model (see Figure 1). An assessment tool was designed to examine how well the RA training program supported the departmental programming model. Over the course of four years, staff tracked the success of the programming model and the hours spent on skill-based RA training in support of the programming model. The purpose of the assessment project was to determine how RA training could be modified to support the programming model. General assessment data from 2002 are shared. Residents' description of the RA role data are shared from 1999-2002.

learning from peers was an essential component of the training experience. RAs fostered dialogue, interaction, and perspective taking at weekly floor meetings in each of the contexts outlined in the programming model, including community standards, living agreement, floor meetings, hall council meetings, floor programs, and through individual interactions with their residents.

## METHOD

### RA Training Hours/Context Areas

RAs spent 10 days in a comprehensive fall training program, which focused on five competency areas: individual interactions, conflict mediation, facilitation, programming, and crisis management. Within these competencies, training sessions covered several different context areas. For example, facilitation included facilitating dialogue in floor meetings, floor standards development, and implementation of living agreements. When practicing skills, RAs used examples of special subject areas including alcohol and other drugs and academics. On average, 9% of the training hours were focused on each specific competency area. Issues of diversity and multiculturalism were included in each session (i.e., what issues are present when mediating a conflict between international students) and another 3.5% of training hours were allocated to issues of inclusive environment and language. Each training session offered an opportunity for participants to practice what they had learned in that session.



**Figure 1. A Developmental Residence Life Programming Model.**

**TABLE 1  
DEMOGRAPHIC REPRESENTATION OF  
RESPONDENTS**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Year 2002<sup>1</sup>%</b>
Class Year	
Freshman	64.8
Sophomore	24.2
Junior	7.6
Senior	3.4
Gender	
Female	62.5
Male	37.2
Transgendered	0.3
Ethnic Background	
African American	1.6
American Indian/Alaskan Native	0.3
Asian/Pacific Islander	5.7
Latino(a) American	2.4
Non-Resident Alien	N/A
White/Non-Hispanic	81.8
Other	8.2

<sup>1</sup>N = 384

### Community Survey Instrument

To assess and benchmark the impact of the programming model, staff created an annual "Community Survey." The survey assessed student perceptions of community, academic climate, personal involvement in community, and the RA role. The annual survey was administered beginning in 1999.

The 2002 survey was distributed to a 20% stratified, random sample of 1,022 students living in the residence halls who were enrolled full-time. The sample was acquired from university records and stratified by residence hall, gender, and ethnicity.

Residents in the sample were invited to take the web survey via an e-mail invitation that provided a link to the survey. Respondents were offered the opportunity to enter their e-mail addresses into a drawing for two \$25 university

book store gift certificates.

Following the initial e-mail invitation, students who used an alias to respond to the survey or who did not want to continue receiving reminder messages were prompted to contact the listserv manager via electronic mail for removal from the mailing list. Other students were sent reminders to complete the survey. In the 2002 survey, 384 students responded for a response rate of 37.6%.

## RESULTS

### Demographics: 2002

Survey respondents were representative of the campus residence hall population. A majority of respondents were freshmen (64.8%), women (62.5%), and white (81.8%). Table 1 denotes the complete demographic profile of 2002 survey respondents.

### Resident Perceptions of RA Role: 1999-2002

One of the goals of the programmatic initiative was to change the perception residents had of RAs from being disciplinarian/authority figures to being facilitators/educators. Perceptions of the RA as an educator rose 10% over 4 years while perceptions of the RA as an authority figure declined over the same period. The definition of the RA as a friend remained fairly constant, with a 4.6% increase over 4 years. Having almost 13% of students characterize RAs as educators in the 2002 survey represents a distinct shift in how students perceive and interact with RAs. Through the use of the custom programming model, the need for RAs to facilitate dialogue and to create opportunities for dialogue, interaction, and perspective taking in the goal areas specified became essential elements of the RA position. It became apparent that staff needed

**TABLE 2  
RESIDENT DESCRIPTION OF PRIMARY RESIDENT ADVISOR ROLE**

<b>Yearly Comparison</b>	<b>Friend</b>	<b>Facilitator</b>	<b>Authority Figure</b>	<b>Disciplinarian</b>	<b>Educator</b>
2002 <sup>1</sup>	58.6%	23.4%	2.6%	2.6%	12.8%
2001 <sup>2</sup>	60.2%	21.0%	1.8%	2.2%	14.8%
2000 <sup>3</sup>	54.5%	29.0%	6.2%	3.3%	7.0%
1999 <sup>4</sup>	54.0%	32.0%	8.2%	3.3%	2.5%

Alcohol and drug education on our floor	19.0%	81.0%
Discussing issues related to diversity on our floor	19.0%	81.0%
Creating a floor environment that assists me in studying	21.1%	78.9%
Encouraging people on my floor to get to know each other	16.4%	83.6%
Get to know me as an individual	24.0%	76.0%
Encouraging people on my floor to share perspectives and have open dialogue	15.4%	84.6%

<sup>1</sup> N = 384

to match individuals and job actions with departmental philosophy and intention through selection, retention, and training efforts (see Table 2).

### RA Commitment to Programming Model: 2002

Of primary interest were resident perceptions of the RA commitment to the six goal areas of the programming model. Residents surveyed reported most disagreement with whether RAs had made a commitment to discussing issues of diversity and alcohol and other drug issues, creating an academic study environment on the residence hall floors, and getting to know them as individuals. Residents felt that RAs were doing a good job programming in most goal areas. It was evident that RAs struggled with facilitating conversations on diversity related topics and making floor programs as interesting to students as floor meetings (see Table 3).

### Resident Participation: 2002

Resident responses to questions that determined participation in weekly floor meetings and floor programs yielded interesting data; 66.7% of

residents attended weekly floor meetings frequently or very frequently. Of those in attendance at weekly floor meetings, 72.4% participated in discussion-based gatherings. These are positive indicators that floor meeting attendance is increasing and residents who attend also feel compelled to participate and share perspectives.

The RA Training Program has increasingly focused on teaching RAs the importance of helping residents share their perspectives through dialogue. Interestingly, 45.6% of residents attend floor programs frequently or very frequently, and 65.9% of those attending participate frequently or very frequently in floor meetings. However, the success getting students to attend and participate in weekly floor dialogues is not mirrored in residence hall programming efforts, though these numbers are relatively high.

Having residents participate in floor meetings is a foundation for the success of the custom programming model. Staff has identified this as an ongoing priority. Five years ago, weekly floor meetings were not part of the culture of this institution. In fact, students and staff were initially not supportive of this idea. Currently, having a majority of students attending weekly floor meetings frequently or very frequently represents

**TABLE 4**  
**RESIDENT ATTENDANCE AND PARTICIPATION IN FLOOR MEETINGS AND PROGRAMS**

Year 2002 <sup>1</sup>	Very Infrequently	Infrequently	Frequently	Very Frequently
I attend floor meetings held for my community	12.0%	21.4%	37.8%	28.9%
I participate in the floor meetings that I attend	10.7%	16.9%	46.1%	26.3%
I attend floor programs designed for my community	13.0%	41.4%	33.6%	12.0%
I participate in the floor programs that I attend	12.2%	21.9%	46.9%	19.0%

<sup>1</sup> N = 384

a positive shift in trend. A good part of this change can be credited to time spent focusing on weekly floor meetings in RA training programs, individual meetings, and hiring and evaluation processes (see Table 4).

## **DISCUSSION**

Designing a custom programming model that outlines educational outcomes is of great assistance in the recruitment, selection, training, and evaluation phases of the RA staffing process. Additionally, such a model serves to state departmental goals and how the goals are to be accomplished as well as demonstrates departmental values and philosophies in action. Staff also is able to describe how the residence hall experience impacts student learning impact to constituents across campus.

Understanding how students perceive the roles of the RA is a vital indicator of departmental culture. Time spent on perceptions of the RA role during the training process for student staff is essential. Providing staff resources is extremely important in supporting their roles as facilitators and educators.

How to challenge and support RA programming is a continuing issue of concern to most residence life professionals. One recommendation is to link the RA programming role with the hall council programming role. Staff needs to help students distinguish a program from a floor meeting. Data from the survey demonstrated that students were more actively attending and participating in weekly floor meetings where they were able to have a voice in the development and maintenance of their community. With only 42.3% of residence hall students frequently or very frequently attending programs, staff is missing a large number of students through programming efforts. Sharing leadership roles and fostering active participation in discussions create more attractive opportunities for students to become actively involved in their residential communities.

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