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Resident Assistants as Students and Personnel During the COVID-19 Pandemic

A dissertation

presented to

the faculty of the Department of Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis

East Tennessee State University

In partial fulfillment

of the requirements for the degree

Doctor of Education in Educational Leadership

by

Amy Bayless Korstange

May 2023

Dr. Jill Channing, Chair

Dr. Terence Hicks

Dr. Jean Swindle

Keywords: COVID-19, resident assistants, housing, college student employees

ABSTRACT

Resident Assistants as Students and Personnel During the COVID-19 Pandemic

by

Amy Bayless Korstange

This qualitative phenomenological study explored the experiences of students working as resident assistants (RAs) in college or university housing departments during the March 2020 COVID-19 shutdown. Twelve current and former RAs participated in qualitative interviews exploring their experience as their institutions shut down because of COVID-19. Three broad categories of experience were found: RAs who were considered essential employees and required to work during the pandemic, RAs who were given the option of working during the pandemic, and RAs who were laid off at the beginning of their pandemic. The central research question was regarding the perceived experience of RAs during the pandemic. RA job duties were detailed from before the pandemic and after the shutdown had taken place. Subquestions regarding RAs' experiences with their supervisors, their experiences with their peers, their experiences with support systems at their university, and their academic experiences were also detailed. Coding and subsequent analysis yielded the following themes: role of communication, motivation, confusion, disappointment, negative stress, residential life, and unexpected positives. The research includes a discussion about the differing outcomes based on whether or not RAs had choice in their decision to continue to work during the COVID-19 shutdown. The project concludes with recommendations for practice for staff and administrators in housing and residence life, student affairs, academic affairs, and human resource services. These recommendations included implications for RAs and their relationships, RAs as college students, the mental health of RAs, and RAs as essential personnel. Implications for further research

included exploring the role of college student supervisor as advocate and caretaker, the services offered by universities during times of crisis, and the exploration of being essential personnel and student employees.

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DEDICATION

I would like to dedicate this dissertation to all the individuals who worked as housing personnel during the COVID-19 pandemic. And especially to the twelve individuals who were willing to share their stories with me. Thank you for your work, your honesty, and your on-going care for those around you.

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Chapter 1. Introduction

Introduction

For decades American college students have taken advantage of opportunities to work on campus while attending university, but they have also experienced the accompanying stress with those positions. Students have benefited financially, academically, and socially by working on campus (Athas et al., 2013; Burnside et al., 2018; Cheng & Alcantara, 2004; Kuh, 1995; Lundberg, 2004; McClellan et al., 2018; McCormick et al., 2010; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). A 2018 study by the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators concluded that nearly 80% of all college students are employed at least on a part-time basis while in college (Burnside et al., 2018). For their part, colleges have found that on-campus student employment provides additional, non-monetary, benefits to students. Burnside et al. showed that most of the negative effects on academic performance felt by students who are employed while in college are lessened considerably when students work part-time on campus. Students are more connected to university life and show higher levels of success due, in part, to involvement while being employed. The types and varieties of jobs on campuses are plentiful at a typical college or university, and students and the institutions themselves benefit from student employment (McClellan et al., 2018). The majority of college students are working while they attend school, and many are working on campuses and for their university. These students are experiencing the benefits of working – financial, educational, and in the connections and involvement they experience. Students work in a variety of settings – as graduate assistants, orientation guides, library and recreation staff, or in dining and custodial services to name a few. The numbers of students working has been documented extensively by researchers for many years.

One of the most common positions on college campuses, particularly residential ones, is the Resident Assistant, or RA (Blimling, 2010). An RA is typically employed by Housing or Residence Life and generally works to assist residential students in the acclimation to university life, connect them to university resources, and help to ensure the safety and security of students living in the residence hall (Blimling, 2010). While there is no standard RA job description consistent to every residential institution, there are some relatively standard job responsibilities. RAs are trained to lead their fellow residents in community living and issues such as policy enforcement, roommate mediation, and crisis management. In return, they often receive discounted or free room and board, a paycheck, a better parking space, and other amenities as deemed appropriate by their university. They also often are part of a staff team that develops camaraderie, supports one another, and provides a group experience during their employment (Blimling, 2010; Boone, 2018; Huffman, 2014).

The experiences of students employed on campuses vary in job descriptions and time spent working but are generally the same from year to year and campus to campus. However, student employment changed quickly and drastically in March 2020 when the COVID-19 pandemic brought the resulting changes to campus operations and the departure of the vast majority of student populations from institutions around the country. The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting shutdown of campuses relegated many of these student employees to the status of “essential personnel” thus creating for them a different and complex set of experiences. Residence halls were emptied of their occupants, classrooms and labs were no longer being used as instruction went online, and dining halls and unions were not being patronized by students, organizations, faculty, or staff. While most students went home or to a location off campus to continue taking classes through the semester, some students stayed behind. These students stayed

on campus for a number of reasons, and some were deemed essential to the operations of the university. Many of these students were RAs within the housing operations of the university. Some RAs were given the option to stay as there was work for them to do as many residential colleges and universities left at least one residence hall open for students. Students stayed in the open residence halls for reasons that included their status as international students who could not leave the United States to go home, their permanent home housing immunocompromised individuals, or their status as independent from a parent or guardian (Association for College and University Housing Officers – International, 2020). RAs were needed to fulfill some of their normal job duties for the residents who stayed.

During those first weeks and months of the pandemic, when many people in the general working population found themselves either working from home or not working at all, a select number of jobs were deemed “essential,” which resulted in those who performed those duties not being afforded the chance to opt out of returning to work. An *essential employee*, is defined as “employees whose job responsibilities require that they work during hazardous, emergency weather conditions, or states of emergency in order to maintain critical institutional functions, e.g. public safety or facility employees, information technology, or employees with critical health and safety responsibilities” (Georgia Southern University, 2013). Essential employees were obligated to continue with their normal duties regardless of how potentially dangerous or stressful those jobs were. On university campuses these positions included: maintenance and housing workers, cleaning personnel, and administrative staff (Smith, 2020). Some student employees were also classified as essential and included resident assistants, tutors, graduate teaching assistants, custodial staff, and library staff. Being categorized as an essential student employee had several implications – notably many students were required to remain on campus

and to complete their shifts in-person throughout the emerging pandemic. These students found themselves in the situation of having to manage the normal stresses experienced by many college students during the shutdown including going online for coursework, health concerns, and anxieties related to finances while also reconciling their being asked to stay on campus and do a job while their peers departed the university (Means & Neisler, 2021; Murphy et al., 2020).

At this point it is crucial to note specifically how the experiences of these students were a direct result of the difference between a normal spring in housing and the spring 2020 term. In a typical March, RAs in most housing or residential life offices find themselves doing many of the following tasks: interviewing for another year of working as an RA, interviewing new staff members who will be their RA peers, and completing programs and events for their residents as the semester starts to wind down. They are returning from spring break and learning how their respective buildings will close down after graduation while scheduling and holding meetings with the residents to tell them how to check out successfully. They are meeting with new staff members for the following year and starting the process of saying goodbye to residents who have become friends over the course of the academic year. They are coupling all these work duties with their own end-of-term papers, studying for final exams, and completing the process of finding summer internships or employment. March 2020 was very different for RAs throughout the country.

Statement of the Problem

The experiences of Resident Assistants during the COVID-19 spring shut down was unique for student staff across the country. It is likely their development of identity and belief systems were affected by this experience; experiences correlate to meaning-making. The phenomenon these students experienced will contribute to how they begin to create and own

their thoughts and behaviors. These individuals experienced a phenomenon at the start of their careers that will likely affect their development as individuals and as future employees. RAs were challenged to continue learning and finishing their academic semester while continuing to work with uncertain circumstances. Their experience will influence their belief structure, their ethics, and the way they will work in the future. Current and future employers can benefit from knowledge about how the RAs perceived the experience. For current employers, this information will inform training sessions, the types of relationships that will form between supervisor and supervisee, and the job descriptions these individuals will be willing to accept. For future employers, the way former RAs experienced the pandemic will shape the kinds of leaders they will be and the types of roles they will choose.

Although research is currently being conducted, the evidence is so recent there is, to date, inadequate attention being paid to the experience of RAs during the COVID-19 shutdown and subsequent alterations to their role (Mangan, 2020; Stevens, 2020; Zhu, 2021). As a result, this study is important to housing and residential life administrators, human resources staff, and anyone interested in knowing the experience of college students during COVID-19. In addition, understanding the role of essential personnel and the connection of this role with a student employee role is one that has not yet been extensively researched. The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological study is to explore the lived experiences of college students who served as students and as personnel at American colleges and universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. While there are many types of students who perform essential positions, for the purpose of this study, the participants will be limited to students who worked in housing or residence life from January 2020 to May 2021. RA experiences within universities that did not classify them as essential or other methods of categorization are discussed.

Research Questions

This dissertation is guided by the following research questions:

Central Research Question

What were RAs' perceptions of their experiences during the COVID-19 shutdown?

Subquestion 1

How did RAs describe their experiences with their supervisors?

Subquestion 2

How did RAs describe their experiences with their peers?

Subquestion 3

What were RAs' perception of support mechanisms provided during the pandemic?

Subquestion 4

How did RAs describe the ways their academic studies were impacted during the pandemic?

Significance of the Study

It is important we spend time studying the experiences of all students during the COVID-19 pandemic and the experience of student personnel is so recent that the literature has limited comment. While the timeframe that this study covers has been tumultuous for numerous individuals and societies, the effect the COVID-19 shutdown had on this particular group of college students has not been explored. Not only did these individuals continue working when the majority of their peers had returned home, they also dealt with the challenges of remote instruction and a job description that changed on an almost daily basis. This study provides insight into the unique experiences of resident assistants during the shutdown. University personnel who are charged with supervising students who may be deemed essential will better understand the experience of students. University human resource departments can learn better

ways to determine whether to classify a student as an essential employee and create clear policies and guidelines for student employees. Departments that use student employees can better advertise the benefits and challenges of the position and train their staff for all foreseeable eventualities. Student affairs personnel can learn better ways to support students who are coping with the additional stressors and the benefits caused by being essential employees of the university.

Definition of Terms

COVID-19 Shutdown: The period of time including March and April 2020 during which colleges and universities sent the majority of their students home and moved to remote operations as a result of the rise of COVID-19 (Mangan, 2020).

Essential Employee: “Employees whose job responsibilities require that they work during hazardous, emergency weather conditions, or states of emergency in order to maintain critical institutional functions, e.g. public safety or facility employees, information technology, or employees with critical health and safety responsibilities may be designated as ‘essential personnel’” (Georgia Southern University, 2013).

Hall Director/Resident Director/Area Coordinator: Individuals who are the direct supervisors for RAs. The titles are different on different campuses, but they all function in generally the same way (Blimling, 2010).

Housing and Residential Life: The department on college campuses responsible for the safe housing of all students living in dormitories or residence halls. This department typically falls under the division of either Student Affairs or Business and Finance. Often it is an auxiliary enterprise (Blimling, 2010).

Meaning-Making: The process during which college students internalize the variety of inputs in their lives and begin to produce their own thoughts, feelings, behaviors, and relationships as a result (Baxter Magolda, 2007; Deloz Parks, 2000).

Resident Assistant: College students employed by departments of housing and/or residence life who are charged with helping to ensure the safety of residents of the dorms, community development, and enforcing university policies. Other possible titles for these individuals are community assistants, personal assistants, or resident advisors (Blimling, 2010).

Self-Authorship: A term used to describe the goal of the college student development process, specifically in terms of their ability to define their own beliefs and identity (Baxter Magolda, 2016).

Student Employee: A student working part-time at a college or university fulfilling a specific role on campus. In order to qualify as a student employee the individual must work on campus and be paid by the institution, but their primary role at the college or university be as a student (Kincaid, 1996).

Delimitations and Limitations

Delimitations

The participants in this study were limited to resident assistants or their equivalent personnel title in the eastern and southern United States who were employed by housing and residence life departments during the spring of 2020. Individuals who continued their work as RAs during the 2020-2021 academic year were included as long as they also worked in the spring of 2020. Understanding the shared experiences of RAs during the COVID-19 shutdown across the country as a valuable source of the realities faced by students coming from diverse backgrounds and with a variety of resources will help student affairs practitioners and

supervisors of students. Utilizing the philosophies inherent in phenomenology, a shared identity was pinpointed – that of working as an RA during the COVID-19 shutdown – followed by identification of several essential themes shared by the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). The individuals in this study were student employees present on most campuses with residential students. While almost 80% of college students are employed while attending college, not all are working on campus (Burnside et al., 2018). This study could be transferable to those who do work on campus and in positions outside of residence life. These students include graduate assistants, recreation center staff, custodial and dining services workers, library staff, and student tour guides and orientation assistants. It will be important to note that a common theme for the groups to which these results may transfer is that they are all supervised by members of the university staff and administration.

Limitations

Even though March 2020 was less than 3 years from data collection, it is very possible that emotions and experiences may have been forgotten or that participants could have forgotten the nuances of their emotions and experiences. The research, therefore, is limited by its lack of immediacy. In the meantime, these same college students have lived through two additional years on campus, graduated, or stopped attending for various reasons which adds further cognitive distance to the experiences of the COVID-19 shutdown.

The participants are all from medium or large universities in the eastern and southern United States. It is possible their experience is not similar to students who were working at a school in the northeast, or on the west coast where COVID-19 restrictions were more stringent. The majority of the schools represented in the study are medium to large state-run institutions, and RAs at small, private institutions may have additional or fewer realities associated with their

experience. Even though the location is stated in the purpose of this study it is worth noting here that none of the RAs who participated were from outside the U.S. which limits the scope of the study. The RAs who participated were traditionally-aged college students at the time of their employment which limits the scope of our understanding of the experience of all RAs.

Another limitation of the research is that the phenomenon being studied is localized to one phenomenon – that of a pandemic which prompted closing residence halls. While housing departments had spent time discussing how they might handle a localized epidemic, the scope of a worldwide pandemic and the particulars of this particular pandemic limits the study as well.

To ensure trustworthiness of the research, I set the participants at ease as much as possible for the interview process. I confirmed they were comfortable with the setting and method of interview and each question being asked. If a question was uncomfortable for someone I did not demand they answer. As is allowed in a phenomenological study, I used an interview structure as the foundation to the study but followed different lines of conversation and questioning when specific themes started to develop in an interview. After the interview was completed and the data transcribed, I sent the transcription to the participant to ensure I had accurately represented their experience. My own familiarity with the subject matter through multiple years of working directly with this population of students and personal experience in the March 2020 shutdown affects the questions and the assumptions made. These assumptions could affect theme generation. Because this was the case, multiple levels of triangulation were employed such as member checking, comparison of the literature, and the use of memos in determining the direction of the interviews and in the determination of any bias. None of the participants were from the university at which I am currently employed. There was no prior relationship of any kind between the interviewer and participant. Peer review was used and

multiple colleagues reviewed and commented on the coding and themes found. Memoing was employed to create an audit trail and also used as a tool for reflexivity ensuring honest reporting (Birks et al., 2008).

Statement of Researcher Perspective

As a practitioner of residential life, I have a great deal of experience directly supervising RAs and have a great deal of respect for the students who do this job along with completing their academic studies. I have considerable experience training and supervising their employers. I have opinions regarding the best way to develop job descriptions and leadership skills to maximize student development while they work for housing. Students who are working for the university should be developed as whole individuals who have significant academic priorities while allowing them to gain skills in interpersonal communication, time and people management, and in leading a team. Also worth acknowledging in my perspective as a researcher is that I experienced the COVID-19 shutdown at the same time as the participants. It will be important for me to recognize my own bias as someone who also experienced a time of upheaval and uncertainty in my role as a housing professional. These experiences and opinions also affect my perspective.

Overview of the Study

This qualitative research study is comprised of five chapters. Chapter 1 is an introduction to RAs, student employment on college campuses, and the COVID-19 shutdown. Chapter 1 also includes the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, the research questions, the significance of the study, delimitations and limitations, definitions of key terms, and an overview of the study. Chapter 2 includes a review of the literature surrounding college student development as it relates to student employment, the experience of college students broadly

during the COVID-19 pandemic, and the role played by resident assistants on college campuses. Chapter 3 provides the study's methodology. This includes a statement of the researcher's perspective, an overview of the research questions providing the foundation for interviews, and the method of data collection. Additionally, this chapter includes a discussion of the trustworthiness and ethical considerations in the study. Chapter 4 contains a presentation of the data and includes interview findings and themes discovered. Finally, Chapter 5 includes a summary of findings and conclusions drawn, areas for further study, and implications for practice.

Chapter 2: Review of Literature

Introduction

Working while attending college is the norm for most students currently enrolled in our nation's colleges and universities. This has been the case for almost the last 100 years and the percentage of college students who work is increasing (Burnside et al., 2018; Carnevale et al., 2015; U.S. Department of Education, 2017). After attending class, the most universal experience of college students in the U.S. is employment (American Council on Education, 2006; Kincaid, 1996). In 2006 the American Council on Education reported that 70-80% of students work while attending college. This statistic was true independent of a students' demographic information, age bracket, marital status, or type of institution. Students working while in college has a long history in the U.S. (Blimling, 2010; Kincaid, 1996; McClellan et al., 2018). Student employment on campuses in various roles has also been a consistent part of higher education since the earliest institutions were formed with students working as tutors, library clerks, and in food service (Kincaid, 1996; McClellan et al., 2018). Work colleges such as Berea College in Kentucky and Blackburn College in Illinois were established, in part, to recognize this reality (Pickford, 2018). Kincaid (1996) pointed out that student employment serves as a bridge for those involved in the linkage of school to work. It allows the various aspects of a successful college experience, including financial aid, career and personal development, and academic and experiential learning to come together.

In March 2020 and in the subsequent few months, students working as essential employees on campuses experienced a change in their employment and in their academic experience compared to their non-employed counterparts. The historic development of students working on campus, the perceived benefits of involvement and employment on campus by

students, as well as an identification of negative aspects of working on campus are all research foci. All students faced challenges during the COVID-19 shutdown, and student employees found themselves with additional and unforeseen challenges.

History and Current Status

College students have been working their way through university years for a long time in America. During Colonial times there is evidence of students who worked as tutors with local families and apprentices in local businesses (McClellan et al., 2018). Sometimes faculty would assist students with finding employment opportunities, and sometimes employment was on campus. Students finding employment on campus has been the case since the first American colleges and universities (McClellan et al., 2018; Perna, 2010; Tuttle et al., 2005). With the passing of the Morrill Act in 1862, more universities were built in rural settings making it possible for many individuals who had previously not been near a higher education institution to attend school (National Archives, 2022). These new universities attracted more students who needed accommodations near the college. These accommodations included the construction of residential and dining facilities and brought with them the need for employees. These residential and dining facilities required individuals to work as food service, housekeeping, or administrative employees, leading to more employment by students on campus.

The College Work Study program, the forerunner to the Federal Work Study program, put even more college students to work. Researchers at Columbia University found that as early as 1937, 65% of college students were working (McClellan et al., 2018). As recently as 2015 the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators found that approximately 80% of all students were working (Burnside et al., 2018). Perna (2010) reiterated that for the typical college

student, work is an elemental aspect of their life and the average college student has worked a considerable amount of time.

In recent years colleges and universities have placed more focus on the acquisition of clearly applicable job skills by their graduates. The American Association of Colleges and Universities argued that institutions should place even more emphasis on providing students with opportunities to apply skills and knowledge through hands-on learning of the type available through internships and employment (Jach & Trolan, 2019). With the adoption of an attitude of lifelong learning, students are now learning and working alongside each other throughout their career with additional certifications and job skill attainment (Carnevale et al., 2015). According to Sharp (2017), scholars are starting to encourage universities to create part-time positions for students in order to make financing college more attainable and to create environments where students are more easily retained.

Why are Students Working?

Students work for many of the same reasons now as they have for decades. The literature points out practical and less tangible benefits for student employment. Attending college has generally been at an additional cost to American citizens, and concerns with affordability are not new. College costs continue to rise at a rate faster than many other social commodities (Archibald & Feldman, 2018; Henley, 2014; Kincaid, 1996). The principal reason students work is to offset college costs such as tuition, room, and board (Burnside et al., 2018; Kincaid, 1996; McClellan et al., 2018; Perna, 2010; Riggert et al., 2006). Ma et al. (2020) did extensive research on family income related to college costs and found that over the last 30 years tuition and fee costs have risen faster than inflation and family income. Specifically, they found that between 1989 and 2019 tuition and fees rose 278%, as opposed to median family income which rose only

26% over the same time frame. The increase was slightly less at public two-year colleges which rose 208% (Chan, 2021).

Students also work for less immediate reasons. Getting experience in their chosen major or minor and building professional networks are practical benefits to working that can create advantages when a student graduates. Undergraduate students who work on campus are more likely to find a balance between work and their classwork and course schedules (Daniel, 2020). Kincaid (1996) pointed out that a survey conducted of 1200 human resource professionals in 1995 shows a strong bias for student employment experiences for hiring in entry level positions. Industry leaders have endorsed this claim ever since (Desai et al., 2016; Velasco, 2012). The American Association of Colleges and Universities specifically sites employers' value placed on higher education of their employees in a very recent report entitled "Employer Views on What Matters Most" (Finley, 2021). Studies have also shown that students' grades are positively correlated to working, although the number of hours where it is beneficial seems to be between 16-20 per week (Burnside et al., 2018; Tuttle et al., 2005). A survey by the American Council on Education in 2006 revealed 63% of students who are dependents work because of parental pressure. Some of these parents expect their children to contribute to the payment of college costs, and others expect their students to earn their own spending money (American Council on Education, 2006).

In addition to the financial and practical reasons for working on campus are some less tangible reasons; students work because they want to be involved in the college's mission or vision, because they want to add value to their program, or because it is convenient (Burnside et al., 2018). Working alongside a cohort of peers or other professionals who directly contribute to the mission and success of an institution can help build a student's sense of identity, connection,

and value to the campus (McCormick et al., 2010). In a time of competing priorities and responsibilities, students also benefit from the time saved and the convenience of working near academic resources, housing, and cocurricular activities (Cheng & Alcantara, 2004). Multiple studies have shown that working on campus can directly affect a student's academic performance positively (Athas et al., 2013; Cheng & Alcantara, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, Pike et al., 2008). In addition, working on campus has been shown to benefit retention – an outcome that is beneficial for the student and the university (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 1995; Kuh et al., 1991; Lundberg, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1975, 1993).

Students' perception of their employment has also been studied. A 2008-2009 survey done at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro measured student's job skills pre- and post-employment on campus. Students reported that they gained skills in developing relationships, communicating effectively, exercising leadership skills, and serving as a role model. In addition, they spoke positively of their experience working on campus in support of their academic goals. Supervisors understood they were students first and worked with them to develop work schedules that allowed for their academic schedule. Students also reported that working on campus made them feel important and needed in their larger campus community (Bentrim et al., 2013; Watson, 2013). A 2008 study conducted at Northwestern University found that supervisors and students both believed that the job tasks they were asked to complete and the behavioral components they confronted while working produced learning. Specifically, the participants indicated learning occurred in the following areas: leadership, career development, civic engagement, ethics and values development, and responsible independence (Lewis, 2008).

Where are Students Working?

Students work on campus and off campus; this study focuses on students who are employed on campus. Perozzi, in his 2009 book *Enhancing Student Learning through College Employment*, stated in his introduction, “Colleges and universities provide myriad types of employment for students. From clerical work to research work to resident assistants, an array of opportunities is available to students during their college careers” (p. ix). In 2018 the National Association of Student Personnel Administrators published a report detailing specifics regarding many aspects of student employment. According to survey respondents the following eight areas are most likely to employ students: student life, recreation services/fitness centers, residential life, academic schools or departments, dining facilities, academic support services, and libraries (Burnside et al., 2018). Students work in housing and dining, in the library, as teaching and research assistants, as intramural coaches and referees, in custodial services, and as tutors. Some universities employ students on student government, and others employ admissions tour guides.

Benefits of Involvement and Engagement

The benefits of students working on campus have been documented repeatedly throughout the last few decades even though there is not a great deal of literature focused on the earliest student workers. With the current focus on the benefits of involvement on campus toward retention and graduation, there is a rise in evidenced-based practice associated with the close supervision of student employees on campus. McClellan et al. (2018) showed the importance of individuals working on campus with tasks associated to their fields of study where they would have supervisors who can work with them as students. This creates more value to the position than performing similar tasks in the larger community. Organizations such as the Association for College Personnel Administrators (ACPA) and the National Association of

Student Personnel Administrators (NASPA) engage in work and research for the express purpose of working with students and students as employees. College faculty and administrators acknowledge the importance of on-campus employment as a component of learning through development of learning outcomes and assessment of objectives (Athas et al., 2013; Bentrin et al., 2013; Cotant, 2020; Daniel, 2020; Dorman, 2020). These authors all point to the clear benefits for academic achievement and career exploration and development offered when students are employed on campus with supervisors who are dedicated to a good work product and helping the students succeed academically. Athas et al. (2013) report that being employed specifically within a department in student affairs is a pivotal way for students to put what they are learning in class to practical application and to recognize the transferable skills they are learning. In addition, the research is clear on additional benefits to persistence for low-income and working college students (Mamiseishvili, 2010; Miller, 2019; Perna, 2010; Watson, 2013).

The Student Affairs profession has been working toward the idea that students are whole individuals whose involvement on their campuses is crucial to their learning and development. In 2008, ACPA released a reaffirmation of the Student Learning Imperative which was originally published in 1994. In their ideal, students take part in a variety of experiences while in college, and this participation results in higher levels of learning and personal development. These experiences take place inside and outside the classroom, and all are a part of a student's overall college experience (Calhoun, 1996). Scholars agree that these varied experiences can include the experiences a student has while employed on campus along with any number of other activities. Researchers such as Astin, Pascarella, Terrenzini, Tinto, and Kuh have devoted much of their inquiry to the activities in which college students engage and how those affect their overall success as students. Involvement on campus – including employment – has consistently been

shown to enhance a student's success (Astin, 1975, 1977, 1993; Kuh, 2010; Pascarelli & Terenzini, 1991; Reed, 2018; Tinto, 1975, 1993). Pascarelli and Terenzini (1991) point specifically to research clearly showing the relationship between working in a job closely related to a student's vocational goals and positive net results on success and fulfillment in a career post-graduation. Researchers agree that the more quality of effort assumed by an individual in the curricular aspects of their college experience and the co-curricular offerings on campus, the better the outcome (National Survey of Student Engagement, 2013). In addition, individuals who worked on campus were more likely to experience a supportive environment with a supervisor who allowed the student to learn teamwork, time management, technical skills, and customer service while building their own self-awareness of leadership and personal skill (Baxa, 2017, McClellan et al., 2018).

Scholars have also spent time considering the effects of working on campus on persistence and retention of students (Astin, 1984; Kuh, 1995; Kuh et al., 1991; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991; Tinto, 1975, 1993). Lundberg (2004) examined the relationship between working on campus and persistence finding that working on campus is a way that students can get involved that yields positive persistence. Kuh et al. (2010) have focused on "high-impact practices" and show how institutions who employ many of these practices have high rates of student success and graduation. These practices include first year seminars that are expansive in nature, undergraduate research opportunities, collaborative assignments and projects, and participation in learning communities (Kuh et al., 2010). Kuh et al. specifically indicate that employment on campus can be considered a high-impact practice if several things are true. These same things have to be true for any activity to be considered a high-impact practice:

1. Students need to spend quite a bit of time and effort performing the activity.

2. The position should come with substantive conversations or interactions across campus.
3. Students should be more likely to interact with a diverse group of individuals and also receive frequent feedback on their actions, experiences, and efforts.
4. Students should be able to see how what they are learning is applicable in a variety of settings.

Such an undergraduate experience deepens learning and brings one's values and beliefs into awareness; it helps students develop the ability to take the measure of events and actions and puts them in perspective. As a result, students better understand themselves in relation to others and the larger world, and they acquire the intellectual tools and ethical grounding to act with confidence for the betterment of the human condition. (Kuh, 2008, p. 17)

While there is considerable evidence that working on campus can benefit students, it is important to note that scholars disagree on how many hours a student can work before it has a detrimental effect on their success as students, academically, socially, or otherwise (Burnside et al., 2018; McClellan et al., 2018). A report from Noel-Levitz in 2010 showed that 21% of first year college students plan to work 1-10 hours per week, 29% 11-20 hours per week, and 26% 20 or more hours per week (McClellan et al., 2018). Not all researchers agree on whether or not off-campus employment is a hindrance to student learning and success and how working affects students' grades (Furr & Elling, 2000; Kozak, 2010; Kulm & Cramer, 2006; Wenz & Yu, 2010). Kuh et al. (2008) found that working 20 or fewer hours on campus had the best correlation with higher grades. They compared these students with those who worked more than 20 hours, those who worked off campus, and those who did not work at all (Kuh et al., 2007; Kuh et al., 2008;

Reed, 2018). Cheng and Alcantara state, “For every study which postulates the benefits of student employment, there is an equally compelling study purporting the exact opposite” (2004, p. 2). Lundberg (2004) found that a student’s relationship with their supervisors or colleagues off-campus could still benefit their university years. MacArthur et al. (1990) recognized the benefits of working while in college; however, they found that work distracted students from their academic pursuits and had the effect of detracting from students’ ultimate educational goals (Baxa, 2017). Riggert et al. (2006) point to multiple studies conducted through the latter part of the 20th century that indicate negative outcomes of working in relation to academic and social development of students. They point out, however, that there were also multiple studies that pointed to student success in regard to employment and determined that the results of the various studies were inconclusive.

RAs have a unique experience on campus as they live where they work and, therefore, are often faced with a unique set of job experiences and benefits. Many of the requirements of the RA position correlate directly to Kuh’s requirements for a high-impact practice (Kuh, 2008). Most RAs are full-time students at their college or university, and the typical RA job description has them working between 15-20 hours per week. They are generally charged with assisting the housing department with the safety and security of the residents with whom they work. They often work an on-call schedule and do rounds of residence halls making sure students are safe and not breaking any policies. They are also often charged with community development such as putting together events for residents to get to know one another and the university. In addition, RAs are typically expected to know the residents with whom they live and is often the part of the job RAs enjoy the most (Blimling, 2010; Boone, 2018; Huffman, 2014). Huffman (2014) found

that RAs self-identified in a post-RA environment the pivotal nature of their RA experience in their identity development and in their professional and community member roles.

Challenges Faced by All Students During the Shutdown

By April 2020, more than 4000 American institutions of higher education had been affected by the pandemic. This included 25.7 million college students (Murphy et al., 2020; Rhea, 2020). Hoven, an administrator at Columbia University posits:

From the perspective of college students, COVID-19 has caught them at a most pivotal moment in their personal, interpersonal, educational, and pre-professional development ... For most, it has disrupted the well-worn and expected trajectories from adolescence to adulthood, from dependence to social responsibility and leadership. (Hoven et al., 2020, para. 8)

The difficulties felt by college students who were disrupted mid-semester and then required to move off campus and determine how to learn remotely with limited resources have been well documented since 2020 (Browning et al., 2021; Fruehwirth et al., 2021; Lederer et al., 2020; Munsell et al., 2020). A number of these articles envision an optimistic future that, despite any number of challenges, students attending college during the shutdown will emerge as true leaders and resilient citizens. Multiple researchers are encouraged by what they have seen of college students they have interviewed – specifically in the National COVID-19 Higher Ed Student Impact Study. Hoven et al. (2020) further said, “We believe that . . . society will recognize these students, based on their responses to the pandemic, as the next Greatest Generation” (Hoven et al., 2020, para. 2).

Mental Health Concerns

While there have been several indications that students will emerge in positive ways from the COVID-19 shutdown (Patel, 2020), there is also evidence of considerable negative effects on college students' mental health, specifically in high rates of depression and anxiety (Copeland et al., 2021; Kecojevic et al., 2020; Lederer et al., 2020; Means & Neisler, 2021; Serrine et al., 2021). Serrine et al. (2021) studied the experiences of grief and loss felt by 162 students from 12 states with a median age of 27 as they worked through their individual experiences in the spring of 2020. Serrine et al. reported that 86% of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "The COVID-19 pandemic has significantly impacted my life" (p. 7). Eighty-four percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed with, "The pandemic has significantly impacted my college experience" (Serrine et al., 2021, p. 7). They note the most prominent triggers for feelings of grief and loss by college students were the loss of normalcy associated with extreme change in activity, unemployment, isolation, disruption of their educational experience, and loss of financial stability. A significant contributor to students' feelings of grief and loss was their inability to experience previously normal rituals such as graduations, weddings, religious services, and family gatherings. These types of experiences serve as stabilizing forces in people's lives and, without them, students were feeling a lack of connection (Copeland et al., 2021; Serrine et al., 2021). Researchers are finding that their respondents were experiencing increased difficulty focusing on schoolwork and increased academic struggles, which then led to increased depression and anxiety.

Kecojevic et al. (2020) report that fear of the virus itself also contributed to the depression and anxiety seen in students as was the need to obtain cleaning supplies, medication, and food. Copeland et al. (2021) found there were additional stressors to college students beyond

even the general population. Students faced a new reality without their familiar routine; also, developmentally they are not yet functioning at their full cognitive and emotional capacity, college students struggled in ways the general population did not (Copeland et al., 2021). Munsell et al. (2020) also found that college students were responding more negatively in several areas related to the pandemic than the general public. For instance, college students felt less agency to change their position than the general population and employed more negative coping mechanisms than the general population (Munsell et al., 2020). In an April 2020 survey by Active Minds, an organization devoted to the mental health of K-12 and higher education students, 20% of college students reported their mental health had significantly declined since the start of the pandemic (Liu et al., 2020). Stress over relocation, online learning, social distancing, and anxiety over health and economic stressors were all cited by the student participants as significant contributors to a decline in mental health. Liu et al. (2020) referenced earlier research about existing mental health concerns present in college students and stressed the importance of recognizing the substantial increase in concerns seen on campuses as a result of social distancing and health anxiety. In addition, low-income students were seen to face even greater amounts of anxiety due to fears of meeting basic needs – food, shelter, access to healthcare, or the technology needed to work remotely (Lederer et al., 2020). Finally Browning et al. (2021) found in multiple cases an increase in substance abuse and suicide in college students.

Academic Concerns

A significant contribution to students' mental health concerns during the COVID-19 shutdown is their experience of moving to remote classes (Means & Neisler, 2021; Murphy et al., 2020). Murphy et al. pointed to a variety of emotional concerns resulting directly from the

switch to remote classes. These emotions ranged from nervousness and uncertainty to anxiety. From their *Survey of Student Perceptions of Remote Teaching and Learning*, Means and Neisler found that approximately 20% of students dealt with considerable internet outages, hardware or software concerns, and problems connecting to their classes. These connectivity issues include the inability to meet the high bandwidth of video conferencing programs – particularly in a house where many people are online at the same time (Means & Neisler, 2021). These problems were considerable enough that they interfered with learning. In addition, academic concerns only compounded for students who parent young children. According to Lewis and Goldrick-Rab (2020), 20% of students have young children at home which makes remote learning that much more difficult for those balancing the academic and behavioral needs of their children with their own course schedule (Lederer et al., 2020; Munsell et al., 2020).

Social Concerns

Students were concerned about their own health, and the health of the individuals for whom they cared. Inside Higher Education partnered with think tanks New America and Third Way along with the Global Strategy Group to produce a survey of college students in February 2021. Of the 1,008 respondents, 82% were concerned they would contract the illness and spread it to others, and 86% said they were worried their friends or family would catch COVID-19. For Black and Latinx students, these percentages were higher (Burke, 2021). Students were also surprised by the efforts made by campuses to keep them apart and socially distance. In the health-belief model in social psychological professions, when someone does not feel susceptible to a particular illness or health risk, they are less likely to take measures to be safe (Ezarik, 2021). Students did not feel at risk themselves and, therefore, were confused by campus efforts to keep them safe.

While there were multiple negative outcomes from the shutdown and social distancing required by the pandemic there were also several positive outcomes experienced by students; one positive effect was a reduction in the amount of alcohol consumed by college students (Jackson et al., 2021; Jaffe et al., 2021; White et al., 2020). Normally, alcohol consumption by students is at its peak during their college years (Jaffe et al., 2021). In the case of the pandemic, the return home from school, and more time spent with family correlated with lower rates of alcohol consumption by college students. Living with their parents was seen to correlate positively to lower quantities of alcohol consumption and leads some researchers to conclude that living at home during emerging adulthood may protect against drinking heavily (White et al., 2020).

Student Employee Experience

There are many types of student employees on college campuses. Perozzi (2009) considers a college student employee as different than a college student who works. Student employees are students who receive payment from the university in exchange for work they are doing and report to a supervisor who is also directly employed by the university. This is different from a student who receives a stipend for their service or leadership. They are also distinct from a working college student as that term refers to individuals who work and also attend college (Perozzi, 2009).

Essential Employees Defined

Georgia Southern University's human resource policy manual defined an essential employee is as:

an [employee] whose job responsibilities require that they work during hazardous, emergency weather conditions, or state of emergency in order to maintain critical institutional functions, e.g. public safety or facility employees,

information technology or employees with critical health and safety responsibilities, may be designated as ‘essential personnel. (Georgia Southern University, 2013)

While most students went home or to a location off campus to continue to progress academically through the semester, several groups of student employees were deemed essential to the operations of institutions and were asked to remain on campus and continue their job functions without interruption. At a time when many individuals found themselves working from home or not working at all, a select number of positions were not given the opportunity to decide whether or not to return to their place of employment. If they wanted to stay employed, they had to return to work in person. These positions were most often those with the lowest compensation, and poorly paid employees were required to fulfill job responsibilities that put them directly in harm’s way in the context of a global pandemic (Smith, 2020).

The RA Experience

Resident Assistants, or RAs, are students – most often full-time undergraduates – who work in campus residence halls. It is a role that has existed in some version since the earliest campuses built dormitories for their rural students (Blimling, 1999, 2010). RAs have myriad job responsibilities mostly focused on the safety, security, community, and educational needs of the residential areas in which they work (Blimling, 1999; Huffman, 2014; Mangan, 2020). Boone (2018) found that students apply to be RAs for financial, career development, and personal growth reasons and they are generally drawn by the wish to help their fellow students and form bonds of friendship and collegiality with their RA team. Specifically related to the stress felt by RAs during the shutdown and particularly social distancing efforts is the fact that RAs are

frequently motivated by engagement with those they are serving and their own peer group (Boone, 2018; Huffman, 2014).

Not all residents of campus dormitories left to go home or to another off-campus location. The reality that a large percentage of residential students remained in the residence halls meant that RAs were often still needed to perform the essential roles of someone in charge of safety and security. While the RA role is fundamentally about the safety and security of the individuals living within an assigned residence hall, the majority of RAs take the job and find fulfillment because of the focus on relationships with other college students. The Association for College and University Housing Officers – International (ACUHO-I) conducted a straw poll in March 2020 to determine the reasons why students remained living on campus when most students were required to stay at home. At the time of the poll, only 6% of college campuses reported shutting residence halls down altogether. The other 94% of institutions stayed open for students who could not leave for various reasons, and institutions provided housing for international students, homeless students, those who had aged out of foster care, students who were unable to go home because of financial reasons, students with unhealthy home environments, or those without sufficient internet resources (Association for College and University Housing Officers – International, 2020).

RAs typically uphold the rules of the department for which they are working and hold students accountable to those rules. During the pandemic, RAs were required to conduct public health and wellness reporting at many universities where housing departments relied on RAs to report potentially sick students (Mangan, 2020). Leinen (2021) described the new reality of the RA experience during this time:

The dilemma seems to be between treating people as humans and giving them grace; or, focusing on the well-being and health of others, namely those who are immunocompromised. If he goes with the former, his integrity is put on the line; he did, after all, sign up to be an RA. But if he goes with the latter, then he seemingly is doing exactly the opposite of his job – he plays the bad guy and destroys relationships. (p. 2)

Mangan (2020) reported this same concern – that RAs who began the year being a friend and confidante to nervous first-year students are then required to play “good cop/bad cop” (p. 3). Zhu (2021) detailed concerns voiced by RAs regarding unclear expectations about how they were supposed to enforce the new policies. Stevens (2020) reported that RAs at several major universities, including institutions in Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Vermont, had gone to their administration to demand hazard pay because of perceived inadequate safety equipment.

In recent years the toll of the rise of student mental health concerns has begun to be the subject of research focusing specifically on resident assistants. The changing role of RAs and their responsibilities to assist students in crisis has led to parallel research exploring how RAs are affected when their residents struggle with mental health problems (Thibodeaux, 2021). Specifically, concerns about compassion fatigue and secondary trauma are at the forefront of the industry’s concerns. RAs continued to work with students who were experiencing higher than normal depression and anxiety rates during the shutdown – all while experiencing their own stress.

The research is plentiful on the experience of the working college student and the potential benefits and possible negatives of working on campus or being a student employee while attending college. Educational researchers have also focused heavily on the toll taken on

college students as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic and resulting shutdown of campuses and the move to virtual spaces. There is a lack of research on the experience of individual student roles that this research aims to address through specifically focusing on the experience of the resident assistant.

Conceptual Framework

In order to understand the experiences of learning and development that students undergo during their college years, it is important to start with a conceptual framework that undergirds the research. Educators have found that there is not one limited theory or concept that clearly addresses the cognitive, psychosocial, and learning development that occurs in college, and the best understanding of college student development is in the integration of multiple theories (Owen, 2012).

Student Development Theory

NASPA and ACPA joined forces in 2004 to research and develop a charge to colleges and universities to ensure student learning was being given the necessary holistic attention (Keeling, 2004). NASPA and ACPA posited that student learning is not purely academic: it occurs within and beyond the classroom. Student development is not something that happens accidentally or just in one location on a college campus. Student life and student learning are not separate from one another. The results of their work suggest that “learning, development, and identity formation can no longer be considered as separate from each other; they are interactive and shape each other as they evolve” (Keeling, 2004, p. 8). The entirety of the educational experience – in class and out of class, experiential learning, leadership positions, skill development in a job – contributes to the development of identity in college students. Students

learn through information acquisition and through experiential reflection and emotional engagement with their everyday world – both inside and outside the classroom.

Student development theory has undergone various transformations as theorists work to determine the best possible ways of understanding how students develop cognitively in college and make meaning of life. Basic to this outline is the viewpoint that “creating one grand theory of holistic development is not possible or desirable; however, placing theoretical frameworks in dialectic to inform a holistic view of development is necessary” (Baxter Magolda, 2009, p. 633). With this in mind, the following theories have contributed to the research from a foundational perspective that help us understand how college students’ employment affects their overall development as individuals.

Theories of college student development have advanced significantly since Erikson presented his 1968 theory on how individuals change their attitudes, beliefs, feelings, and behavior through the college years. Erikson detailed eight stages of development stemming from infancy to old age and that developing one’s own identity was the most important task of adolescence. According to Erikson, young adults underwent two distinct phases of development and both were focused on identity formation (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). It was from this starting point that Chickering established eight vectors describing the development of college students. All of these vectors were part of Erikson’s larger concept of identity formation, and Chickering designed these vectors as a way to show how students develop intellectually, socially, cognitively, and emotionally through the college years. He also stated that development of a student’s potential as a human being was a primary goal of the university (De Larrossa & Butner, 2000).

Chickering (1969) originally published his vectors as his effort to show the different stages college students navigate to develop their own identity. Chickering's vectors have been augmented as other theorists have argued that differing identities may influence how students move through the vectors. Most recently, Chickering presented eight vectors through which students move during their college or university years (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). The eight vectors were developing competence, managing emotions, moving through autonomy toward interdependence, developing mature interpersonal relationships, establishing identity, developing purpose, and developing integrity (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Movement through the vectors occurs at different rates for different students and is not directly associated with age. In making their way through these vectors, individuals grow in confidence, awareness of self and others, ability to adapt and change, and in skills. Chickering & Reisser's theory was "founded on an optimistic view of human development, assuming that a nurturing, challenging college environment will help students grow in stature and substance" (p. 40). In his viewpoint, college students work toward competence in skills in terms of their major, in career-oriented skills, and in skills associated with leadership. They integrate their feelings with the actions appropriate for those feelings. They recognize their own success as something they are trying to accomplish and are attempting for the first time. They notice and appreciate differences in people which can lead to deeper and more intimate relationships. They work toward an understanding of self as it relates to appearance, gender, sexuality, culture, and ethnicity – all aspects of identity. The establishment of clear career and life goals, family and life commitments, development and acceptance of authentic self, recognizing one's own beliefs and values while respecting others were seen as part of the process of developing identity.

While Chickering's (1969) findings rested more on internal processes associated with being a college student, other researchers point to more external activities as central to development. Chickering's work focusing on identity formation in relation with Astin's (1984) work on what makes a successful student experience in college combined with a fuller understanding of how a student's experiences in college directly affect their holistic success. Astin demonstrated that a student's involvement in college is a direct parallel to that student's success both academically and generally. He states, "The greater the student's involvement in college, the greater will be the amount of student learning and personal development" (Astin, 1984, p. 307). Much of his theory revolves around the word *involvement* which he defines as the "physical and psychological energy that [students devote] to the academic experience" (Astin, 1999, p. 518). Therefore, an involved student, by Astin's standards, is someone who spends a considerable amount of time on campus, participates in events, interacts with other students and faculty, and is connected through campus organizations or athletics. He is very clear that there is a multitude of ways students can be involved while on campus in addition to the activities listed here.

Astin's theory adds a level of practicality to the overall framework for this study. It differs from others in that he promotes focusing on what students are doing and not what educators are doing. Astin (1993) used his *I-E-O formula* for studying college student development in a large, multi-university study of the undergraduate experience and its influence on cognitive development. "I" represents *Input* or what characteristics students are bringing with them to college. "E" is the *Environment* in which the student lives during their college years. This includes the experiences, programs, policies, faculty, peers, and others they encounter while in attendance. "O" refers to the *Outcomes* or a student's characteristic after being exposed to

these things. “The basic purpose of the model is to assess the impact of various environmental experiences by determining whether students grow or change differently under varying environmental conditions” (Astin, 1993, p. 7). The study contained 192 environmental measures including institutional characteristics, faculty, curriculum, type of financial aid, major, and student involvement. Astin noted that many outcomes related to student employment were found and that any level of involvement by students on campus, including that of employment, was significant in a student’s success. According to Astin, the amount of time a student spent interacting with campus life –whether with faculty, staff, or other students – the more likely their positive connection to campus which would then result in their success as a whole student.

To speak specifically about employment, Astin (1993) found that working part time off campus generally had negative effects on student outcomes whereas working part time on campus generally had positive effects on student outcomes. Astin (1975, 1977, 1993) found significant positive correlations between working part time on campus and the following: self-reported job-related skills, cultural awareness, tutoring other students, and being elected to student office. Working part-time on campus was also positively associated with attaining a bachelor’s degree, cognitive and affective growth, leadership, promoting racial understanding, and environmental consciousness. Astin’s work showed a direct and clear correlation between success as a student and the level of student involvement in their college or university.

Baxter Magolda (1996) contributed to the body of knowledge surrounding college student development with her theories of self-authorship and meaning-making. Baxter Magolda defines self-authorship as “an ability to construct an internal identity separate from external influences, and an ability to engage in relationships without losing one’s internal identity” (p. 12). Baxter Magolda posits that the student affairs profession is committed to the development of

college students as whole individuals. This is a break from the traditions that have separated development into multiple individual facets. She specifically cited the work of Knefelkamp et al. (1978) who separate college student development into five distinct areas: (a) psycho-social, (b) cognitive developmental, (c) maturity, (d) typology, and (e) person-environment interaction models. These theories tend to separate college students further into various groups rather than focus on them as whole individuals evolving within a particular context. For example, development, success, outcomes, and learning all become distinctly understood, but subsequently understood only within an even smaller context, such as gender, race, ethnicity, and sexual orientation. The goal should be, according to Baxter Magolda, to move away from external authority and toward self-authorship. The focus should be on the process of meaning-making rather than specifically on what meaning the students' make (Baxter Magolda, 2009). She pointed to Kegan's *Subject-Object Theory* which places the "activity and evolution – of meaning-making at the core of development...Our meaning-making structures are a combination of elements over which we have control (what Kegan calls 'object') and elements that have control over us (what Kegan calls 'subject')" (Baxter Magolda, 2009, p. 624). Meaning-making, which leads to self-authorship, occurs in three phases: following external formulas, crossroads, and self-authorship. It involves a slow discovery and usage of an internal voice that puts together outside influences and allows a student to manage their own life (Baxter Magolda, 2008, 2009). Barber et al. (2013) further illustrated that students who have experiences in college that promote critical thinking and higher-level reasoning are more likely to move into more complex meaning-making.

Arnett's (2000) research on emerging adulthood was focused on development primarily during the late teens and twenties of individuals in industrialized nations. He took into account

the experiences of young people who were working toward an educational goal and the skills needed for the rest of their lifetime as adults. Arnett cited changes in the average age that individuals begin to have children and showed that people were having children later than in prior decades. He used that realization to show an indication that young adults were experiencing a different development experience than preceding generations and proposed adding a stage to the overall trajectory of development. He called this stage *emerging adulthood*. Arnett, as Chickering, referred to the research of Erickson and explained that Erickson also allowed for a period of time between adolescence and adulthood where individuals were free to try out different types of lifestyles, belief systems, and traditions before settling on their own which they would generally keep for their lifetime. According to Arnett, what characterized the difference between individuals at the early stage of adulthood and at the end of emerging adulthood was a movement from diversity of demographic characteristics and instability to a narrowing of choices while individuals decide or realize who they are and how they will live.

Parks, another researcher who subscribes to the idea of self-authorship, describes two phases leading to self-authorship: hearing your own voice and then cultivating your own voice. She described these two phases as an individual's two great yearnings (Parks, 2011). The first describes the desire to employ your own skills, personality, and individuality to make positive change. The second and equal yearning focuses on the strong desire to belong and experience true relationships, belonging, and inclusion. Ideally, student employment and the experiences a student undergoes can contribute heavily to the cultivating of a student's own voice and leads to self-authorship.

Furthering the focus on development being a holistic endeavor not relegated to specific parts of identity, Abes et al. (2007), bolstered by theories of intersectionality, showed how

postmodern theories embrace a framework of multiple dimensions of identity shown through holistic development. This is found in the integration of the interpersonal, intrapersonal, and cognitive dimensions.

Mayhew et al. (2016) wanted to determine if and how college students were affected by their college experience developmentally, cognitively, and intellectually as had been posited by so many others. Specifically, they focused on six general questions:

1. Did students change while in college?
2. Does the change that happens during this timeframe happen as a result of attending college?
3. Is there a specific type of institution where more or less change is seen?
4. Is any change that happens a result of specific experiences while in college?
5. How do a student's individual characteristics impact the change that occurs?
6. What kind of long-term effects of college are seen in students?

Because Mayhew et al.'s (2016) research is a re-evaluation of prior research by Astin as well as Pascarella and Terenzini, it is helpful to remember that these three researchers focused on how the experience of college affected students. Specifically, they compare the outcomes associated with how college attendance affects students with outcomes pertaining to individuals who have not attended at least some college. Ultimately, they conclude that college attendance and participation have considerable effects on learning and cognition, psychosocial development, attitudes and values, and the moral development of individuals (Mayhew et al., 2016).

Conclusions

This literature review focused on the experience of college students, working college students, and a variety of developmental theories surrounding the experiences of traditionally-

aged college students as they make their way through the complexities of their college career. College students are more than likely working while attending college and many of them work on college campuses. Their work is a part of their college experience and a means of making college affordable. Students also learn while they are working as their positions give them opportunities to try skills and theories learned in class. All these aspects work together to contribute to student identity formation and development.

The COVID-19 pandemic that began in March 2020 and the subsequent shutdown of college campuses was a unique time for college students – specifically those who were working on campus. Not only were students facing the academic and financial challenges typically experienced by college students, they also faced higher than normal levels of anxiety and depression as they encountered new academic challenges, health concerns, the absence of traditional experiences, and higher levels of financial stress. In particular, RAs working in housing departments were juggling many of the same concerns as all other college students, but with an added set of experiences unique to their positions as essential employees during a pandemic.

Chapter 3. Research Method

Overview

The purpose of this study is to explore the lived experiences of college students who served as students and as essential personnel during the COVID-19 shutdown. To hear directly from students who experienced this phenomenon, I asked questions of individuals who had been employed in housing and residence life departments during the shutdown. This was a shared phenomenon for a diverse group of students and, therefore, one where interviews and document review were employed to learn the most from several students' experiences.

Qualitative Method

This is a phenomenological study with a goal of describing the experiences of resident assistants during the COVID-19 shutdown. The stories of individuals who have experienced the same central phenomenon as they are described by the individuals themselves is what leads to a phenomenological study (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). RAs who were working during the timeframe in which colleges and universities were shutting down experienced events unique to that group. Phenomenology is focused on discovering the meaning derived by the participants of a shared experience. Each of these individuals experienced a global pandemic causing their housing department and university to shut down; however, they each experienced that phenomenon differently because they each came into the phenomenon with their own background, characteristics, lifestyles, and needs. This type of methodology proved to be the best choice for this endeavor because "qualitative studies focus on giving voice to those who live experiences no one else could know about directly, asking questions that encourage reflection and insight" (Lapan et al., 2012, p.9). Each individual experienced this unique time in their lives differently, and there was a contrast between students who worked on campus as RAs during the

pandemic and those who did not. Phenomenology allows the researcher to hear from participants who share a common experience and attempt to understand that experience (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). It is ideal in a situation where a group of individuals experienced something unique to them and when multiple realities exist and need to be represented in order to understand a phenomenon (Creswell & Poth, 2018). College students arrive at school with their own backgrounds, experiences, family structures, responsibilities, and goals for what they want to achieve. As a result, no one student has the exact same situation or experience, but each are valid. Phenomenology allows for an understanding of multiple realities coming from the unique contexts from which they derived (Frauenberger et al., 2010). Phenomenology fits well within an overall foundation in student development theory where the focus is on students holistically and recognizing that students are coming from a wide variety of experiences, lifestyles, and backgrounds and have a unique set of goals and responsibilities.

Phenomenology is strongly grounded in philosophy. Researchers examine an experience shared by a group of individuals and attempt to understand that experience. The experience being researched only exists because of some specific context, and without that context, there would not be a reality as determined by the participants. German sociologists Weber and Simmel were instrumental in the efforts to understand shared experiences from the perspectives of the participants themselves and not from the perspective of the researcher. Because only the participants who experienced the phenomenon can effectively make meaning of the experience, it is reasonable to ask them directly (Lapan et al., 2012). From the experiences of the participants we can then find meaning (Moustakas, 1994).

The best way to gain the appropriate level of insight into the shared experiences of individuals is to conduct interviews, ask research questions that are open-ended, and provide the

opportunity for participants to reflect on their version of the phenomenon. For this reason, I used structured interviews with open-ended questions that followed the direction the participant took during the interview. I did this to provide structure to the interview and freedom to pursue issues that were important to the participant's experience of the phenomenon (McMillan & Schumaker, 2010). The goal was to use an interview setting as the basic structure for insightful conversation which then led to the ability to interpret the meaning of the experience of being an RA during the COVID-19 shutdown (Evans & O'Connor, 2017).

Research Questions

The following questions were used as a guide to understanding the experiences of RAs as they worked through the COVID-19 shutdown on their various campuses. The central research question was the goal of the discussion while the subquestions provided direction for the conversation. Although these questions served as the foundation for each interview, specific questions could change based on the direction the conversation took.

Central Research Question

What were RAs' perceptions of their experiences during the COVID-19 shutdown?

Subquestion 1

How did RAs describe their experiences with their supervisors?

Subquestion 2

How did RAs describe their experiences with their peers?

Subquestion 3

What were RAs' perceptions of support mechanisms provided during the pandemic?

Subquestion 4

How did RAs describe the ways their academic studies were impacted during the pandemic?

Researcher's Role

The role of a qualitative researcher is to become more of a part of the research and get personally involved in exploring “day-to-day interactions, how things transpire, and the individual meanings of these events for the people involved” (Lapan et al., 2012, p. 8). The design for this sort of study tends to be more data-driven and flexible and allows for the data and researcher to determine how the study proceeds while still using the outlined research plan. In the interviews held with RAs, I used the research questions as the foundation for our conversation but allowed the conversation to move in the direction the participant chose. Hatch (2002) recommended paying attention to the participant’s interests and focusing on those things. In that vein, some questions were expanded more than others, and some interviews provided more insight into one area over another. Interaction between the researcher and the participant is valued in these types of studies (Ryan et al., 2013). These types of studies are useful for “[shedding] light on phenomena about which little is known” (Squire et al., 2014, para. 3).

Population

The individuals selected to participate in interviews were current and former resident assistants who were working in housing and residence life departments during the spring of 2020. These individuals may or may not have still been college students at the time of the interviews, and they may or may not have gone on to work the following academic year of 2020-2021. The individuals were primarily from large public institutions, but a small group came from small private universities. These universities were primarily in eastern and southern states, and all were identified by former supervisors as individuals who may be interested in telling their stories. Some have continued to work in the field of housing, and others are finishing their degrees.

Data Collection

In order to identify individuals who might be interested in sharing their experiences during the COVID-19 shutdown in March and April 2020, I used the process of snowball sampling. Nanderifar et al. (2017) identified snowball sampling as ideal for use in education research because of its ability to reach potentially vulnerable groups that might be difficult to locate otherwise. I first sent emails to a variety of individuals who work in college and university housing. I asked them to pass along any names of individuals with whom they were in contact who might be interested in participating in an interview. From there I received multiple names of individuals who expressed interest, and I arranged times that worked with the schedules of these individuals. I sent each individual who agreed to take part in an interview an informed consent document and gave each the opportunity to decline to participate after reading the document. I set up Zoom interviews at times identified by these individuals and developed an interview protocol which served as the basis for the interviews. Because phenomenology allows for reflection and analysis as part of the research process in an attempt to understand the essence of the experience being studied, the interview questions formed more of a foundation for our discussion. While all the most pertinent questions were asked in each interview, in some cases some ideas were discussed more fully than in others (McMillan & Schumacher, 2010). The interviews were recorded and transcribed using Zoom software, and I took reflective notes while the interviews were taking place in order to follow up on subject content. Each interview began with the same question. Following a demographic question, I asked each participant to describe their experience of the beginning of the shutdown – how it was communicated to them, where they were at the time, and what they thought was expected of them at the time. From there we moved into a conversation about their experience.

After the interviews were transcribed, I used the qualitative software ATLAS.ti to assist in analyzing the data to discover themes common between the participants and to identify areas of uniqueness. I also used this software to create memos for myself and identified areas of potential bias in an effort to be reflexive. Birks et al. (2008) served as a reminder, “Memos permit the recording of the natural progression of a study along with any changes in direction and the context from which these arise” (p. 70). As the data was analyzed and memos created, I was able to sort and resort data into themes that best represented the experiences of these individuals. The collected data was then coded and themes were identified. The themes were grouped to address the central research question and the four additional subquestions. The transcribed interviews were sent to each participant to verify their willingness to allow for direct quotations. After each participant approved the transcription, quotations were added to provide context and allow for the participants’ unique experiences to be highlighted.

While limited in scope, I employed document review as another form of data collection. The phenomenon is recent and involves a select group of individuals within the larger group of college student generally who have enjoyed a larger representation of their experiences in the pandemic. Where available, I reviewed data and resources pertinent to the RAs’ experiences in the shutdown.

Profile of Participants

Each participant is profiled below; the individuals’ names have been changed, but their relevant demographics have not. Important to note is the job status of each participant as their experience is directly related to their working status following the shutdown. Not all the participants have the title of RA, or resident assistant. Different housing departments use titles to connote differences between where RAs are working or their level of authority within their

community. A community assistant will often work within an apartment community. One participant had a higher-level RA role and the title reflected his additional authority.

Allen: Allen was a community assistant at a 4-year public university in what is called a public-private partnership apartment community or P3. His university is located in the deep South. Allen had been an RA for 3 years; this was his fourth year and he was a senior. Allen was not given an option to stay or leave as he was considered essential. A P3 is an apartment community that is owned and leased by a private company but is staffed by university employees and houses students. The apartment complex where he worked was a permanent residence for most of the occupants of the building. He did not have an option of returning home because his place of employment held so many permanent residents. Being asked to stay and work was good for Allen because he had access to campus resources for his higher-level labs and projects. According to Allen, many of those projects would have been impossible to complete online. He was happy he was able to stay.

Phillip: Phillip was in his first year of an RA position at a 4-year public university in the Northeast. He had been an RA in an apartment community made up of a variety of students, mostly undergraduate. Phillip was a senior and was sent home at the start of the shutdown. He had gone home for spring break, 1500 miles from his university, and learned his job had ended at the same time the university closed and sent all residential students home. He was laid off from his RA position and later had to return to campus where he was given 4 hours to remove his belongings from his room and turn in his keys. Phillip is a self-described glass-half-full individual and is good at being able to put his experiences into perspective. He stated:

I kind of try to put it in perspective and just say, okay, I'm fortunate to be healthy. My family members are healthy. Yeah, my senior year got ruined, but there are a thousand more things that could go wrong.

Don: Don, a senior, was finishing his third year as an RA at a 4-year public university in the Northeast. He was in an apartment building and had no option of continuing his RA position when the university closed. He was laid off from his job and struggled financially when he no longer had the meal plan and stipend provided with his RA position. By his own admission he has a lot of unresolved emotions regarding the shutdown and being given no option of staying. He slept through a final Zoom meeting with his staff after everyone was home. He said he did not see the point is trying to continue relationships with those with whom he worked.

Josh: Josh, a senior, was a third year RA in a position called resident assistant liaison. He worked at and attended a 4-year private college in the South. The university initially told him to stay at home after spring break but then gave the option to come back and work. As he had already told his mother he would be staying at home, he did not go back. Josh was incredibly sad to be leaving and had a lot of friends on a small campus. His liaison position was a leadership role given to individuals who had worked successfully as RAs and served as mentors to newer RAs.

Jameson: Jameson, a sophomore, was a first-year RA who worked in an apartment community on campus at a 4-year public school in the South. He was not given an option to stay or to go and was considered essential. His apartment community was a mix of graduate students, students with families, and undergraduate students. His job continued because so many of his residents were full-time occupants of the apartment complex. For Jameson, the ability to have income and a place to live was of utmost importance. His mother lost her job at the beginning of

the pandemic and his position was now crucial for sending money home to his mother and siblings.

Josie: Josie was a second year RA at a 4-year public university in the South. She was a junior and considered essential. She worked in a traditional residence hall with undergraduate students. Josie described the shutdown as “having to all the hard parts of being an RA without the rewards of hanging out with residents, getting to know them, having fun.” Josie was not given an option not to continue in her RA position.

Arthur: Arthur was a first year RA at a public 4-year university in the South where he was a sophomore. He was not given an option as to whether he could stay or go; he was told to continue working which was fine with him. Arthur was thrilled not to have to go home. He was from a major metropolitan area and felt that he would be safer on his campus than at home. Most of his friends stayed and worked, as well, and he was glad to continue to reside and have access to campus resources. He reflected that it was great to “finally get a good parking space!”

Darius: Darius was a first semester RA who had started his job in January only 2 months prior to the shutdown. He was at a 4-year public university in the deep South and worked in a traditional residence hall. He was a sophomore and was given a choice as to whether or not to continue working. Darius continued to be an RA for the next 2 years with the ongoing COVID restrictions. He was given the option of staying in the position or going home. He chose to stay for all the people who did not have the option to go anywhere else. It worked out well for him as he had close relationships with his co-RAs on the quarantine staff.

Davontay: Davontay had been a summer RA turned academic year RA that year. He worked at a 4-year public university in the South. He was a sophomore and was given the option of staying or going. Because he had an immunocompromised parent and inconsistent housing, he

was happy to be given the option of staying. The summer RA position functions much like an academic year RA; however, the residents with whom the RA is working are summer conference guests. Many universities staff their summer camps and conferences in this way. Davontay struggled heavily with mental health concerns throughout quarantine, and isolation was not good for his continued health. He attempted suicide while working as an RA that semester. At the point in time in the interview when he disclosed this information, I acknowledged this incredibly hard admission and gave him the option of continuing the interview. I also confirmed with him that he continues to have a professional with whom he works to maintain his now-better mental health. Davontay continued in his role as an RA and will graduate this spring.

Madelyn: Madelyn was in her first year as an RA at a 4-year public university in the Southwest. She was a junior and was given the option to stay or go. She had been a conference assistant, as well, which is a job not unlike the RA position. She lived in the same town where her university was located and chose to stay living on campus because it was “just a really peaceful time.” Most of her friends who were RAs stayed as well.

Brianna: Brianna was a first-year RA at a 4-year public school in the Northeast that shut down completely during the initial months of the pandemic. She was a sophomore at the time of the shutdown, and she was laid off and went home. Her role as an RA was over a tight-knit living-learning community of students. She told me a story of seeing one of her residents this past year for the first time since the shutdown. He broke down into tears upon seeing her because he had missed her so much but had not stayed in contact after they had all gone home. She chose to return to the RA position the following school year while operating with all the restrictions.

Mya: Mya was a second year RA at a 4-year predominantly female institution in the Southwest and was a junior. She had been given the option of staying or going and chose to stay.

Eight of the original 36 residents of her floor stayed. Of the RAs I interviewed, Mya had the least amount of change between before and after the shutdown. In her words, “[I] just did the exact same job, just with fewer residents.”

Data Analysis

The first step in analyzing the data was the completion of transcription of the interviews themselves and the development of an initial set of themes derived from a first cycle of coding. As I wanted to ensure my own trustworthiness in the development of codes, I coded inductively which allowed for ideas to emerge I had not originally considered (O’Reilly, 2012). From that point, I coded a second time, allowing the research to be synthesized into themes that were consistent with my own experience and unexpected. The codes were developed in the first and second cycles by using my own knowledge and creativity in looking for patterns consistent between the participants’ experiences. Saldaña states “[Patterns] become trustworthy evidence of our findings since patterns demonstrate habits, salience, and significance in people’s daily lives” (Saldaña, 2021, p. 8). Using this understanding of the importance of noting patterns allowed me to note the significant themes that emerged in each participant’s interview.

Credibility and Trustworthiness

As briefly mentioned above, my own familiarity with the subject matter through multiple years of working directly with this population of students and personal experience in the March 2020 shutdown influenced the questions and the assumptions made. These assumptions could influence the theme-finding. Throughout the study, I attempted to identify my own assumptions, experiences in the same phenomenon, and professional identity in an effort not to overshadow the voices of the participants (Gerber et al., 2021). Several methods of establishing trustworthiness were used, and multiple levels of triangulation were employed. None of the

participants were from the university at which the researcher is currently employed, and there was no prior relationship of any kind between interviewer and participant. Participants were provided a copy of the transcript to edit and return with any changes. Peer review was used, and multiple colleagues reviewed and commented on the coding and themes found. Peer reviewers were contacted and represented experience in housing and in educational leadership – allowing for understanding of topic.

I employed the use of memos to create an audit trail and as a tool for reflexivity ensuring honest reporting. According to Birks et al. (2008), “Memos permit the recording of the natural progression of a study along with any changes in direction and the context from which these arise” (p. 70). Memoing allowed for many moments of reflexivity and purposeful acknowledgement of the researcher’s own role in the process of study. It also served to create an audit trail for triangulation and trustworthiness concerns. For example, I discovered during the process of coding a possible new theme: Fear.

Fear. Fear that he wouldn’t have a job. Fear that the university’s decision to provide a refund would eliminate the need for a job. And then fear partially realized when the pay structure changed – lost compensation. And then a question I asked myself – should fear be a code? (Korstange, analytical memo).

This process allowed me to recognize important new information that I had not seen first-hand nor in previous interviews.

Researcher Memos

As a reflexive researcher, I used memos throughout the analysis process in an effort to recognize and mitigate bias throughout the process of interviewing and analyzing the data. I referenced memos frequently as I worked through the data as a tool to examine the extent to

which my own experience could have been reflected in the themes and the ways I represented those themes in the data. These memos were crucial, not only to the reflexive nature of this research, but also to the themes and to the ultimate conclusions I made. Memos and the reflexive comments made in a journal were useful in analysis and ultimately in framing conclusions and recommendations.

Differences Between Schools

It was interesting and not surprising to see the differences in responses from schools geographically across the United States. Larger schools in the Northeast tended to shut down quicker and not allow anyone to live at the university or stay on staff. Schools in the Southeast were more flexible and tended to allow RAs to continue if they wanted to work. Public versus private schools was not as much a significant factor as was location of institution within the country.

Individual Stories

Different individuals created unique-to-them ways to manage isolation. It was very interesting to note how the RAs combined their RA role with their need to survive as a person/student. One RA lived with a friend on her couch. Another learned to cook and made meals for his staff. The RAs who specifically mentioned groups of people with whom they “cocooned” during the pandemic seemed to be the ones who fared the best emotionally.

My Own Biases

My own experience of the shutdown in housing was largely negative. At the time of the research and analysis, I was still experiencing negative thoughts and emotions related to working in housing during the pandemic. I naturally assumed everyone else’s experience was also negative. Conversations with these RAs made me realize this assumption was incorrect.

In order to mitigate this potential bias, I used a number of procedures. During the analysis process, I reviewed the research to create initial codes. Roller (2019) suggests a process of taking a day or two break between coding the first and second time in order to have a fresh perspective on the outcomes, and I followed this procedure.

Role of the Housing Department/Supervisors

RAs were very aware of their own mental health and the emotional toll during this time. Several RAs noted the caretaking role of supervisors, and the RAs found their aid of considerable importance. Additionally, staff that sent RAs home were required to go back and complete all aspects of the RAs' position themselves. Some RAs mentioned this as an additional example of caretaking.

The RAs Who Went Home

Four of the RAs in the study were laid off from their positions. Some of them went home happily and others struggled. One was counting on a paycheck that he never received for his food, and there were no jobs available after he had to leave. He applied to stay on campus in his apartment and was denied. He also struggled a great deal with the absence of closure/ending/debrief after having experienced a number of stressful situations. The lack of employment choice and consequences felt by those RAs seemed to lead to discontent with their circumstances.

Ethical Considerations

Accurate reporting of an individual's experience in a particular event can be difficult in phenomenological research. Because of this, it is important to employ safeguards to ensure the data reported is what the participants intended to communicate (Lichtman, 2017). After the interviews were transcribed, I sent the transcriptions to each participant in order to have them

correct any miscommunication or misunderstanding and to gain their confirmation that the information I included was their experience. There was also a concern that there could be emotional stress prompted by reliving what may have been a difficult time. The participants were each given the option of stopping the interview at any time. None of the participants appeared to be struggling, although each of them stated life during the pandemic was difficult for them.

Concerns have been raised regarding the ethics of interviews and the veracity of the content provided by participants who are telling their stories (Hammersley, 2013). In this case, I was seeking from the interviews was the participants' own perception of experience and not specifically the veracity of their claims; therefore, the final research findings can be found to be sound.

Researcher Positionality

The relationship between a qualitative researcher and their subject can be an ethical issue because researchers are understood not to be neutral parties but, instead, have their own values, opinions, and beliefs playing a role in how information is received and understood (Mruck & May, 2019). Qualitative researchers are a part of the research process and have the responsibility to be reflexive in their analysis of the research. Reflexivity refers to the process by which a researcher examines his or her own biases and reflects on how those affect their research (Ryan et al., 2013).

To be transparent and reflexive in this research, the following is important to note. In my real-world background as a housing and residential life administrator, I work every day with RAs and with those who supervise them. This was both a help and a hindrance to the research process. Having lived through the day-to-day reality of being a mid-level practitioner seeing RAs struggle made me realize how much we needed to pay attention to their experience. The RA role

exists in some version at most residential colleges and universities with RAs who perform various duties surrounding the community of folks who live on campus. RAs are involved in the administrative aspects of running a residence hall and perform duties such as safety inspections and opening and closing tasks. They are also key players in the building of community among students who live in residence halls or dorms. They were intricately involved in the shutting down of the halls in March 2020, and their experience is what I was interested in researching.

I have worked in the field of housing and residence life exclusively during my career in higher education. While I did not directly supervise RAs during the COVID-19 shutdown, I worked as a mid-level manager – passing down information on job responsibility changes and university goals and passing up to those above me concerns about the health and safety of staff, and the academic, social, and employment needs of students who worked for us. These experiences have shaped my questions and conversations with the students who held resident assistant positions, and one of the most impactful outcomes of this research was the unexpected positives that many students felt as a result of their dual roles. This realization was important, as it drew attention to my own biases and confirmed the importance of recognizing any additional personal bias. Due to my own experience in this field, it was important that I implement methods to mitigate my own biases. Throughout the research process I used memos to assist in the identification of any bias and work through how to best respond to identified bias.

Summary

This study was about the lived experiences of individuals who were working as RAs during the COVID-19 shutdown. It was a phenomenon that few people experienced, and a topic worth studying because it can help supervisors of college students know better how to supervise and recognize the benefits and challenges of having students as essential employees. In order to

understand their experience I used a list of five research questions to undergird a larger interview of these individuals. Their experience and stories are represented in this research. As I also worked in this field during the COVID-19 shutdown, my own thoughts and experiences have influenced the research, and I have made strides to ensure these influences are marked and limited.

Chapter 4. Findings

The purpose of this study was to explore the lived experiences of college students who served as students and as essential personnel during the COVID-19 shutdown and subsequent alterations to their employment expectations and their academic experience. To gain more knowledge specific to their experiences as appropriate to a phenomenological study, I asked a series of open-ended questions to 12 individuals who identified themselves as resident assistants or the equivalent for their university during the COVID-19 shutdown. These student employees revealed a range of themes as reflected in their answers to one central research question and four subquestions. It is important to note, at the beginning of the analysis of this data there were differences in the experience of each RA directly related to how they fell into the three broad job categories following the shutdown: RAs who were considered essential, RAs who were given a choice as to returning to work or not, and RAs who were laid off.

The interview protocol is included as an appendix to this dissertation and was the foundation for the conversations I had with each participant. A table of participant demographics is included in this section as well and provides relevant demographic data and the job status for each participant. An awareness of their job status is important to understanding the data itself and, ultimately, the conclusions drawn as the experience and outcomes for the laid off RAs who were sent home was very different than their still-working counterparts. It is also important to note that I have changed the names of each of the participants but included the correct type of institution and location in the United States in the table (see Table 1).

Table 1***Participant Demographics***

Name	Gender	Job Title	No of Years in Role	Institution Type	Institution Location	Job Status During Shutdown
Allen	Male	Community Assistant	3 years	4 Year Public	South	Essential
Phillip	Male	Resident Assistant	< 1 year	4 Year Public	Northeast	Laid Off
Don	Male	Resident Assistant	3 years	4 Year Public	Northeast	Laid Off
Josh	Male	Resident Assistant Liaison	3 years	4 Year Private	Southeast	Job Optional
Jameson	Male	Resident Assistant	< 1 year	4 Year Public	Southeast	Essential
Josie	Female	Resident Assistant	2 years	4 Year Public	Southeast	Essential
Arthur	Male	Resident Assistant	< 1 year	4 Year Public	Southeast	Essential
Darius	Male	Resident Assistant	< 1 year	4 Year Public	South	Job Optional
Davontay	Male	Resident Assistant	< 1 year	4 Year Public	South	Job Optional
Madelyn	Female	Resident Assistant	< 1 year	4 Year Public	Southwest	Job Optional
Brianna	Female	Resident Assistant	< 1 year	4 Year Public	Northeast	Laid Off
Mya	Female	Resident Assistant	2 years	4 Year Private	Southwest	Job Optional

Introduction

Generally speaking, the RAs fell into one of four categories as to how they responded to their institution's decisions about their continued employment. The four categories were (a) those RAs who were told to return and did so; (b) RAs who were told to go home and their employment ended; (c) RAs who were given an option and chose to stay; and (d) the RA who was given the option and chose to go home. RAs Jameson, Josie, Allen, and Arthur were required to stay. RAs Don, Brianna, and Phillip were not given an option and were told to go home. RAs Darius, Davontay, Madelyn, and Mya were given the option and chose to come back and work. RA Josh was given an option and chose to go home.

RAs, or their equivalent, are employees of the universities at which they work. They live and work directly with students mostly their own age within residence halls or campus apartments. When the COVID-19 shutdown happened in March and April 2020, these students faced new realities in their jobs as well as their academic and personal lives. In some cases, when a university shut down completely and sent all students home, RAs lost their jobs and incomes immediately. In other cases, RAs were asked to return to campus and continue to work with a different set of responsibilities. Still other RAs were given the option of returning or not. In the last two examples, these RAs were usually paid for the remainder of their contract regardless of whether they returned. RAs made their choice whether to return for many reasons. Many, RAs felt like this participant:

I made the conscious effort for myself, and the conscious effort for all my co-workers and the residents who needed me, who didn't have that home life that they could return to, to come back and assist in any way I could.

Another stated, “RAs had to stay behind for those who could not go home, especially for our international students.” Individuals who worked as community assistants at university apartment complexes made the decision to stay because it was their and their residents’ permanent address and they had no other place to go.

To understand fully the unique experiences of these individuals, I used the following central research question and additional subquestions to guide our conversations. From those conversations I identified 10 themes common among the group and analyzed those themes to understand the phenomenon.

Central Research Question

What were RAs’ perceptions of their experiences during the COVID-19 shutdown?

Subquestion 1

How did the RAs describe their experiences with their supervisors?

Subquestion 2

How did RAs describe their experiences with their peers?

Subquestion 3

What were RAs’ perceptions of support mechanisms provided during the pandemic?

Subquestion 4

How did RAs describe the ways their academic studies were affected during the pandemic?

Job Functions of the RA Staff

The job descriptions and actions of RAs as described by the participants are organized by normal job functions prior to the pandemic and then by new job functions following the shutdown. The experiences of the RAs and their job duties prior to the shutdown and those following it are relatively similar school-to-school; however, the RAs who were laid off had very different experiences.

Regular Job Functions

When asked to list their normal job functions, RAs agreed on many of the tasks they completed as part of their jobs prior to the COVID-19 shutdown. It is important to identify these tasks to best understand the magnitude of what they experienced in the new reality after the shutdown. The first question asked of the RAs related to the amount of time they had been RAs at their institutions and what sorts of tasks they performed on a regular basis as their normal job functions. While there was some variance between some of the schools represented, for the most part, the RAs all generally did similar things prior to the shutdown.

A few themes emerged as components of a typical RA's job responsibilities. First, most of the RAs mentioned job functions related to relationship-building. They got to know the residents of their floors or buildings, served as a resource for those residents when inevitable problems arose, advised student groups, and held students accountable for things such as going to class and following certain expectations specific to the location where they lived. A significant portion of the RAs' jobs was connected to administrative functions. The RAs worked a certain number of hours at the front desks of their residence halls or apartments, they put on events and programs for the residents of their areas, and they spent time creating marketing for their departments or buildings. Everyone interviewed mentioned being on duty as a primary

responsibility while working as an RA. Their time on duty included going on rounds throughout the buildings, writing incident reports, keeping students safe by checking for locked doors, assisting when a student was hurt or in crisis, and following up when a student reported needing help.

When asked to describe their duties as RAs, the participants stated job requirements as well as emotional reactions to those job requirements. Brianna reflected:

I just love being able to be a resource for them [other students] or hear about their day, or just be a resource for them, but also just be a friend to them. I mean, they are acclimating to a new school. A lot of them are a little shy. They don't have a lot of friends just yet. And it was even more fulfilling to just watch them grow as academics and as people.

Another individual stated he enjoyed “interacting with my students, making sure that they were getting their social, emotional, and academic needs met.” Another RA, when he was finished listing all the tasks he performed in the job said in summation, “It’s a busy job. There is a lot going on.”

New Job Responsibilities

While the normal responsibilities of the RAs were generally consistent, their COVID-time responsibilities were varied. Darius stated, “We became a lot more business-minded, and we all became a lot more administrative-minded.” For example, instead of spending time creating events for residents to attend or having meals together, RAs spent their time determining who had moved out, when they moved out, and whether they had taken all their belongings. RAs also struggled to manage accomplishing expectations with the new number of residents on their floors. Madelyn said, “I think I had three residents left on my floor, so sometimes I would still

check on the people who had left, but it wasn't a requirement." Another RA was drastic in his description of how the RAs on his staff were spending their time, "Make sure your residents aren't dead and are accounted for. Make sure they are still there. Make sure they are getting food." This was a very different situation from prior to the shutdown when so much time was spent in developing relationships and discussing academic success.

RAs were given new responsibilities after the shutdown had happened and some people had returned to work. Some campuses consolidated remaining residents into fewer buildings which required some of the RAs to move rooms at the beginning of the pandemic. Assurance of resident health and safety was a large part of RA responsibilities. Every RA who participated in the interview listed cleaning, sanitizing, and safety as major parts of their new role. They sanitized doorknobs, elevator buttons, and bathroom fixtures. Other RAs received lists of students who had tested positive for COVID and were responsible for leading professional employees at the university to those rooms when individuals who did not typically work in the residence halls had to assist. Rounds of the buildings took longer because RAs were having to clean, enforce new policies, and keep track of which residents had stayed and which had moved out. Allen described receiving lists of students with positive test results and having to deliver "goody bags" to each of their rooms. Madelyn explained their pivot to online: "All of our duties as an RA turned online. So all of our chats and any traditions or anything you were trying to do you did it on Zoom or Google Meets." Further, the responsibilities at the front desks of their buildings changed as the administrative procedures changed. Madelyn relayed the new process of checking residents out of their rooms:

We turned to a different kind of checkout as well, because it was just a rapid fire, 'Get out!' Usually, we go with each other, like I would have a form and they

would have a form, and we would go through it together. But then they changed it to online.

Davontay recounted being asked to help make some procedural decisions – which was unlike other RAs’ experiences. His supervisor asked, “We’ve got some residents here, how can we start restricting access to the resident hall?” RAs also had to enforce new rules they did not fully understand – masking, social distancing, and no congregating were some of the more difficult ones. Jameson’s frustration with what he was being asked to and its complicated nature is still present in the way he talks about it. He spoke to the difficulty of enforcing policies he wasn’t sure he even understood:

Then, when COVID happened, that’s all we had. To make sure people aren’t having guests over. So it’s like, people started to wear a mask and everything, make sure people were social distancing even the simplest thing like wearing a mask. We still had to wear a mask even though we were outside since we’re still technically on university property. So you had to wear a mask outside and some people didn’t understand that and it was hard trying to explain it to them. And then it was hard to explain to people why they can’t have guests over, especially there were some people who had families, and they need to bring somebody over to watch the kids and so then you had to make special accommodations.

In addition to enforcing unclear and new policies, RAs took on responsibilities at their institutions that had not been part of their roles prior to the shutdown. Allen and others were asked to be involved in classroom set-up. He stated:

RAs had to set up. Classes were set up to be spread out by about six feet. We had unconventional spaces used as classrooms. I remember having to help set up the

basketball court in the gym. It was set up for two classes going at once in our basketball stadium.

Madelyn mentioned having to move lounge and study room furniture around and remove pieces in order to make sure residents were observing social distancing rules. RAs were tasked with still assisting in community development and being a resource for students but were required to do it virtually. Some of them were also asked to contact the residents who had left to go home or do so after the RA was also no longer on campus. One RA mentioned she received an email saying, “while you are home, try to connect with your residents as best you can.”

Mya, Madelyn, and Davontay stated their job responsibilities truly did not change much at all, but they had fewer individuals on their floors. Mya stated her job responsibilities were the same, only with masking and social distancing.

Results by Question

The interview results below reflect the RAs experiences and are reflective of the differences between RAs who continued to work and the three RAs who were laid off and went home. Communication played a key role in every aspect of the phenomenon and was mentioned multiple times by every participant. I included it as one of the themes that emerged from the data. However, communication is an important element related to many of the themes derived from the transcripts, and served truly as an umbrella under which most of the rest of the research outcomes were found. The following table introduces the predominant themes (see Table 2).

Table 2***Predominant Themes***

Research Question	Predominant Themes
Central Research Question What were RAs' perceptions of their experiences during the COVID-19 shutdown?	Communication Confusion Disappointment Motivation Negative Stress Residential Life Unexpected Positives
Subquestion 1 How did RAs describe their experiences with their supervisors?	Communication Distrust Motivation
Subquestion 2 How did RAs describe their experiences with their peers?	Communication Motivation Residential Life Unexpected Positives Disappointment
Subquestion 3 What were RAs' perceptions of support mechanisms provided during the pandemic?	Communication Academics Distrust
Subquestion 4 How did RAs describe the way their academic studies were impacted during the pandemic?	Communication Academics Motivation Unexpected Positives

Central Research Question

What were RAs perceptions of their experiences during the COVID-19 shutdown?

The central research question of this phenomenological study answers the most general question asked of the participants. Each participant worked as an RA during the COVID-19 shutdown, and each had a unique experience based on their personality, characteristics of their institution, family structure, academic needs, and various external issues. The following themes were found to be central for this group of RAs:

- Academics
- Communication
- Confusion
- Disappointment
- Motivation
- Negative Stress
- Residential Life
- Staff Dynamics
- Unexpected Positives

Some of what the RAs had to say overlapped in different categories, and for clarification I have chosen to report the data in the section on each theme that seemed to be representative of the spirit of each participant's comments. For the theme related to academics, I chose to include that data specifically in the section answering subquestion 4 which is related to academics.

Explanation of Themes

This section details the themes that arose after coding and analysis. Some themes are present in every participant's interview and some feature more prominently in specific

conversations. The themes also interact with one another. For example, students were unsure about the circumstances of their classes, their housing, their finances, and their jobs. They had general questions about the pandemic, their own safety, and how they would handle online classes. Because of these concerns, confusion was a relatively constant presence. Confusion was present because of unclear communication and compounded by the fear and distrust involved in the larger pandemic world. The relationships the RA developed with each other because of the realities of their jobs were an unexpected positive. However, these relationships only occurred because of individual motivation to be in relationships with other people and the staff dynamics that developed.

Communication

Significant information related to communication framed much of the additional research because so much of the RAs' experiences directly related to communication of information, new roles, support, and relationships. It is important to look at this data prior to the rest of the themes, as it is pervasive throughout the RA's experiences. Most of the RA participants had saved all the emails from that time, and it was easy for them to remember what was going on as they read through each of the emails. It is also important to define what is meant by communication in this discussion. RAs used "communication" to describe the methods by which they learned about the shutdown and their job status as well as any ongoing information-sharing that happened resulting in learning something new.

Job-related communication happened between RAs and their supervisors, between RAs and their peers, and between RAs and the residents living with them. Additionally, receiving communication in its variety of methods was important as the shutdown was happening and after some of the RAs had gone back to work. Every RA interviewed related that they were on spring

break when talks of the shutdown began to happen. Some were still on campus, and others had left for various locations. Each relayed being confused in some way when the communication started to arrive. As the shutdown was happening communication about the details came through email, and RAs and staffs used texting and groups within the app GroupMe. Regarding the use of texting and GroupMe Allen said, “It was not as professional as sending off an email, but it was also still a way for us to get an update.”

Mya commented that she remembers:

getting an email from our overall Director saying it [the university] was shutting down, and you could stay if you wanted to...and I’m sure it just required a response that we had to say, oh yes, I’d like to come back, and then we came back.

Madelyn, through her saved emails, noted the exact date when she received each piece of information stated:

It looks like the first thing was a message from our Chancellor. We got an email from her on March 12th that said we would be extending spring break. It was that we would stay open. March 16th was when they told us that we were going online for the rest of the semester. Then we got an email from our residence director. On the 17th is when our bosses got to us an email that talked about the desk schedule and checkouts. [We were supposed to] send our residents information on and ask them who was going to stay later. And then it said to follow safety guidelines.

Darius received an email directly from his department head. He said, “The department reached out to all of us individually and asked us specifically on an optional basis to come back or not come back.” Madelyn shared her version of this sort of message:

There was an alert that said, if you want to leave, you can. And usually if you left in the middle of the semester, you'd be breaking your contract, and so you'd have to pay. But because of the situation, they were like, just leave. They were basically encouraging everyone to leave just because it would be easier.

Davontay talked about his experience when the shutdowns started to happen. In his words:

[My friends] were just joking, you're like wow, I wonder what's going to happen, and then boom! We get an email saying 'Hey, spring break has been extended by a week'. And [at that point] that's all the communication we got from any type of university spokesperson. Then we started hearing about schools going online, and calling it quits for studying the rest of the semester, and we we're like 'it'll never happen in [our state]'. And five minutes later after that exact conversation we got [the email] saying yes, we're going online.

Phillip relayed his experience:

At [my institution] they kind of just said, "Go home." I had residents texting me and asking me when are we coming back? And I would relay that same message to my hall director and he would say, I don't know.

Don recounted receiving an email from his supervisor saying his job was over, and then a follow-up email communicating their remaining paychecks. In his memory, the email said, "Hey, you know we're still discussing it, and I think you're still going to get paid the rest of your stipend'... so then they paid us out for the rest of the semester."

For Josh, the announcement came in an in-person meeting. He remembers it being a very rapid-fire thing:

There are messages sent out basically like there's a surprise mandatory meeting on the thirteenth, which would be a Friday. We're basically brought into the classroom and they [said] "Hey, this school is about to shut down. Don't tell any of your friends. They're about to find out."

All participants stated the communication at the beginning of the shutdown was confusing, and they did not know what was expected of them. Most of the information RAs were receiving came from their immediate supervisors, although they also heard from individuals higher up in the hierarchy of the department and the division. The RAs quickly learned their immediate supervisors were not always aware of all the answers to their questions. Josh relayed the confusing nature of what RAs were being told:

They basically realized hey, we're about to shut down this school. And then I remember asking my supervisor, do I need to come back or not? Do I need to go home or not? And then she said, you don't have to go home if you don't want to. But if you are here, like those who did end up staying, if you want to help you can, but you don't have to.

Don's supervisor was even less sure of what was going on. He remembers his supervisor saying, "Yo, it's only a disaster if they close down Disney World' And then they did. Later that day."

Josh also learned about the shutdown prior to the rest of the students at the university. "Don't tell any of your friends. They're about to find out. You are not RAs anymore. It was good having you." Brianna and her peers speculated via text and GroupMe. She stated, "There was kind of talks amongst our staff that we might be leaving, but we didn't necessarily know it was happening." RAs also found themselves being asked by residents what the plan was when the university did not provide as much information as students would have liked. Phillip shared, "I

had residents texting me and asking me, you know, when are we coming back?” For those RAs who did not return to jobs after spring break, communication was also vague and sometimes confusing. Phillip stated:

We were sent home with the idea of, you know, pack your bags and make sure that you take any meds and your textbooks. But you’re going to come back, maybe in like one or two weeks after break. And then obviously, we just never came back.

After the shutdown occurred and it had been decided who was continuing to work as an RA and who was not, communication was still key to understanding the RAs’ roles. Communication between individuals still took place via email, text, and GroupMe and were soon supplemented through Zoom meetings between staff members and between supervisors and their employees. Much of what the RAs were now doing in their jobs was communicated via email. Mya remembers, “I think it was pretty clear. Continue being an RA. We still need you to do on call. We still need you to do these specific things, just a little bit differently, a little more social distancing.” Darius remembers it differently, “Communication was something they could have done better in this sense because we didn’t know what was happening outside of basically our building.”

RAs also were not sure how to communicate information to their residents. Jameson related the difficulty he had in helping residents understand new policies. “It was hard explaining to people why they can’t have guests over. Especially there were some people who have families, so they actually need to bring somebody over to watch the kids.” Madelyn described another unknown for the RAs and residents: “The food situation was something that was a little

concerning for some of my residents because they didn't have anywhere else to go. So, they're like, I had my meal plan paid for. So how are we getting food?" Brianna summarized it:

I do remember at the end of the year having a Zoom meeting with a supervisor, and that might have happened once or twice throughout the year...things would change very frequently, and also, and a lot of the RAs on my staff talked about this. We were not being given information that I felt was necessary for us to... I don't know, we just weren't really given a lot of information that would allow us to be RAs.

Some who were no longer working as RAs found themselves receiving requests to continue communication with their residents. Brianna, asked to communicate with her residents even while away from campus, stated, "We just kind of got an email being like, you're staying home, just so you know. Try to interact with your students as best you can."

Confusion

Making things more difficult for the RA staff was a general feeling of distrust and confusion. It was hard for student staff to know what they were supposed to be doing, who to go to for answers, whether to believe they would continue to be employed, and how long they would be doing a task before it changed. The participants stated they did not know what was expected of them. In many cases the RAs were already away from campus because it was spring break, and their plans to return to campus to work or attend training were unclear. Often the RAs were getting information at the same time as the rest of the university regarding their job and livelihood. Initial and ongoing confusion were present as the RAs attempted to understand what they needed to do as the pandemic escalated and their job duties, evolved.

Most of the RAs learned the details of their roles via email and most staff teams were communicating via GroupMe. Don and his peers had a staff group on GroupMe where they discussed what they thought might be happening. “We had a group text and it was like, 'what have you guys heard? Have you heard anything? What’s going on?’” Davontay and his RA peers also used GroupMe. Their chat was typical of the others. “And we were all thinking ‘Oh my god. We have so many questions. What are we going to do? What does he mean? Am I even employed? Do I have a place to live?’” Allen expressed a similar confusion as he described the timeline of communication:

Then all schools went on spring break and then COVID hit, and we didn’t know what was going to happen. It was a weird feeling at first. We were kind of not sure as to where to go and what to do as students and everything.

Josh’s team of RAs heard a variety of things from their leadership. There was confusion in messaging. He stated:

They were trying to figure out the message and it changed pretty consistently between you had to go home, or you can go home if you want to, or you don’t have to, but if you are here and you want to help you can, but you don’t have to.

For RAs who were given the option of returning, the decision was difficult and confusing. Many of the job responsibilities an RA has would still be needed because there would still be residents in housing. They would still need to check out people, be on duty for the students who were there, and continue to serve as a resource in difficult times. Davontay explained the general feeling of his staff: “We were just confused by the options honestly, because obviously there’s a need for us to be there.” Josh was also conflicted on whether to return. He stated, “I’ve already made the plan, packed my stuff, and I’ve already told my mom

I'm coming back, so I guess I'll go." Jameson summed it up this way, "It was, of course, out of nowhere, and it was kind of confusing as to what was going on."

For the RAs who were told not to return, there was also confusion as they did not know if they would be paid or if they still needed to help their residents. Darius described the confusion saying, "There's no way to prepare for something that hasn't happened before. There's no protocol. You become the protocol."

After their job status had been established, the confusion did not end. Allen stated:

It was a weird feeling at first. We were kind of not really sure as to where to go and what to do as students and everything. [We knew] we had to go to housing personnel [to] basically get passes to put in our vehicles so we would be allowed to be on campus.

Allen knew he needed to get a parking pass, but beyond that, he had no idea what was now expected of him. This was consistent for the other participants who remained working. While they knew they had a job, they did not know what their job functions would be nor how long they would have the job. Jameson specifically was concerned he would lose his position at some point in time during the spring.

Disappointment

Along with many of their non-RA peers who were sent home, the RAs used a variety of words to express their feelings of disappointment at how things ended. Words and phrases such as "very difficult," "sad," "not how it was supposed to be," "unfortunately, that wasn't how it ended," "gut-wrenching," "heart-breaking," "devastating," "my senior year got ruined," and "I have many unresolved feelings." Darius spent a good deal of time reflecting on the disappointment of the experience:

I feel like we got robbed because [the RA staff] had a really good working relationship for 5 months or so, and we really enjoyed that experience. We all work. We complement each other so well, I think we kind of just wanted to finish the job...so the residents who I bonded with for 5 months up until then, all of a sudden – I can't interact with them in the way that I used to, and I can't program for them, and I can't do this, this, and this that I've been doing for them up until this point. I would have loved to get to know the guys for another three or so months. I think I would be a lot closer to them if I had those 3 months but COVID protocol was detrimental to relationship-building.

The RAs tended to describe their disappointment in the same two categories as Darius did. They were sad not to be able to continue working with their staff and found it difficult not to be able to finish a year with the residents on their floors and with whom they had built great relationships. Phillip, who had been an RA with this group for 3 years, stated, "A lot of the people there had been my friends and mates and people I knew for 2 years. I mean, it was supposed to be this nice graduation." Many of the RAs talked about the lack of closure with a staff group with whom they had worked a sometimes difficult and emotional job and who were looking forward to rounding out a good school year. Brianna, who clearly had a close relationship with the residents of her floor and who saw herself as someone who really cared about their success as students and as individuals, stated:

It just felt so sad because I cherished my students so much. I mean, I know you have good connections with kids and it was incredible to have that just taken away... it's so disappointing. When all of a sudden something is cut off, and you

don't get to experience it the way that you thought you were going to. It was sad, you know.

Brianna went on to relay an incident involving one of her own residents as he departed the campus. She said:

I just remember there was this one student of mine. He was just crying. He was just so upset. You know, it was just really hard to just like watch everyone leave. It just makes me realize there is a half a semester of that type of bonding that we missed out on, and it makes me emotional to think about it now.

While these RAs talked about the disappointing ending with their residents, Don was disappointed not to have the end to the school year and the college experience he was looking forward to having: "I was graduating and stuff. I was excited for the rest of my semester and stuff. I was excited for everything job-wise and school-wise and whatever, and then I just, went home."

Motivation

The RAs talked quite a bit about what was motivating or discouraging about that time. Their motivation seemed to come from several different directions, many of which were no different than they would have been without the shutdown. Motivation was also related to different aspects of their experience and can be broken down into three areas requiring motivation: (a) Motivation when deciding whether to return to the job; (b) motivation for why they wanted the job in the first place; and (c) motivation for acting as they did within their jobs.

One of the most underlying motivations for RAs remained at the core of why they continued to do their jobs: feelings of humanity, selflessness, a desire to serve, or personal fulfillment. Darius stated, "I think we all made those calculated risks and decided to come back

for all our residents and to make it easier on people who did not have that option.” Darius was one who had a choice of whether to come back, and, therefore, was possibly more able to see it as an act of charity. He went on to say, “I don’t regret helping everybody, because regardless of what option they gave us or not, I believe they really did need us.” Brianna stated:

I just loved being able to just help them or hear about their day, or just be a resource for them, but also just be a friend to them ... it was fulfilling to just watch them as academics and as people.

Brianna, found this connection could be maintained virtually or through relationships that did and did not violate COVID policies.

Having a close staff was a major motivator for RAs to continue to work and often involved getting together without their supervisors knowing. RAs were not timid about breaking the rules at this time in an effort to have some measure of normalcy – much like the residents with whom they were working. “We made dinner and stuff together, and we were really close people. We all just wanted to see each other again.” Josh’s peer group of RAs got together in a kitchen and subsequently found themselves responsible for breaking pandemic-era policies regarding social distancing and the number of people allowed in a room.

The ability to be on campus using university resources and spaces they loved was a major motivator for RAs to choose to come back to work and could become an unexpectedly positive outcome of having to return to work. Allen stated, “I think it was just a beautiful thing that we were able to do and to still stay involved and not have to give up the things that we love to do across campus.” He was also one who benefitted from university resources in completing 3D models and other assignments that would have been very difficult to accomplish off campus. Davontay was practical about balancing his virtual academics with being with friends. “I hated

online school and needed some sort of socialization.” Mya said, “I took the offer because I didn’t want to live at home. I didn’t want to do my work from home. I wanted to do it from the dorms and continue my position with my friends who were studying.”

On the other hand, RAs were quick to point out that things were difficult and they often had to convince themselves to keep going. More than once RAs made statements such as, “It took a lot of determination to want to continue,” and “It took a lot more dedication.”

Negative Stress

There was quite a bit of negative emotional stress associated with the new RA roles which was complicated because of coupling the new restrictions and academic processes with their RA position. Words used to describe this negative stress were “gut-wrenching,” “heart-breaking,” “traumatic,” “chaotic,” “stressful,” “devastating,” and “sad.” Brianna, one of the RAs who was immediately sent home stated, “It just felt so sad, because I cherished my students so much. I mean, I [had] good connections with kids. So to have all that just taken away was just so upsetting.” Many of the comments made by RAs who did not finish out the school year revolved around feelings of loss. Don specifically told of unresolved bitterness and frustration because of the way his role ended. He explained:

I feel like I have a lot of, I guess, unresolved things, in a way. I mean it was a calling, you know, you have to stay up till midnight with these people. Multiple times a week, sometimes on the weekend dealing with stressful situations where you go to bust a party and they're swearing at your [RA] partner's face calling them names and you get to debrief with them and go through these stressful experiences. Or you get a call, and it's someone contemplating suicide, or something like that, and you have to be there with them and you're going over

these situations, and it was just like normally, you get that debriefing period because going through a ritual like graduating, or you get spring weekend. All these events at the end of the year you get to come together and celebrate all this stuff. Instead it was just “Okay. We'll see each other.”

For Don, doing a difficult job was made possible because of the relationships he had with his fellow staff members, and when the end-of-year rituals and the debrief times with his staff were taken away, he felt disappointed and bitter.

For the RAs who continued to work, the many new job requirements and the rules associated with living in a communal space were difficult. Allen shared of the new job requirements:

It was more taxing now because we had to be more vigilant with what we were doing. We had to keep students engaged and give them a sense of community while also having to adhere at all these new rules.

Determining ways to continue to build community in an environment where distancing from others was required was quite difficult for the RAs. Doing a job in isolation from other people was lonely and isolating. When asked about the difficulties of the position Darius stated, “It’s like we’ve been trapped in the building for months at this point and we just want to have this moment as a team like we used to.” Darius also struggled to respond to the new realities without frustration. When reflecting on his time responding to the changing expectations he expressed:

Sorry! I deal with a brand-new experience in the way we are all dealing with a brand-new experience. There’s no way to prepared for something that hasn’t

happened. I just learned this. Now something new is protocol. I'll do it. And I'm like, okay, thanks for totally changing how we're doing things!

The stress and isolation were particularly difficult for Davontay who admitted to attempting suicide. He described being an RA in a building that typically served 450 residents where only 50 people were left and he had four residents on his floor. In his words, "Now I was alone, which was like the worst thing."

Along with these negative emotions and stress was a consistent fear. The RAs found themselves fearful of all sorts of things they had not had to couple with their position before. They mentioned a long list of unknown things that troubled them such as their finances, their own health, and the health of their family and friends. They wondered how long they would continue to be employed and where they would live if they were no longer employed. These constant concerns were stressful for all the RAs. For the RAs who immediately went home, they feared they would not be paid for the remainder of the semester. Don stated, "For a while we didn't know if we were going to get paid...[our supervisor] was like 'You know, we've discussed it, and I think you're going to get paid the rest of your stipend.'" But Don's supervisor had no real knowledge of whether Don would be paid. Darius, spoke about the questions he and his fellow staff members had, saying:

And we were just like 'oh my God! We have so many questions. What are we going to do? What does he mean? Am I even employed? Do I have a place to live?' There was just so much stress because the classes and thinking about loved ones; there was a lot of uncertainty at the time.

Allen put into words the fear associated specifically with the virus itself. He wondered, “Just how deadly is this? I was lost. I think it did take the first month. It was bad, because it was like, I don’t know what school’s going to be like.”

Residential Life

This theme pertains to the reality of living life in a residence hall of individuals. With the advent of new policies and practices, RAs were affected professionally and personally as they lived in a socially distant world with residents who were also sharing their space. RAs often combine being a resident of the community in which they live with working for all the other residents of the floor or building. They live where they work which was described by Mya as “living in a fishbowl.” Learning how to walk the line between friend and peer and someone with authority is a balance many RAs learn while living with the residents and performing job functions. Living where they work means RAs spend considerable time balancing their job functions and their relationships with the residents for whom they work while experiencing life as a college student also living in a residence hall.

Relationships with Residents

Every RA interviewed stated in some way that getting to know and help people was a major factor in finding their jobs fulfilling. They used words and phrases such as “involved,” “social activities,” “bonding,” “personal interactions,” “look after,” “guide,” “counsel,” and “act as a liaison between them and the larger university” to describe their preferred method of working with residents in their buildings.

Many of the RAs who were given the option to return and chose to do so cited having a sense of responsibility for the residents with whom they worked or residents in general. Because there were a number of college students who did not have the option of going home, many RAs

chose to return to continue to work when others did not have the same option. Specifically for these RAs, international students were seen as individuals who did not have the option of returning home; continuing to work on their behalf was something several RAs mentioned as important. Jameson mentioned that he had “a good amount of people who stayed, like I was saying earlier. We have grad students, and people’s families, that's like their actual home, so they're not going.” He wanted to continue to work on their behalf because he recognized the apartment complex where he worked was their permanent home. Allen also recognized the apartment complex was his residents’ permanent home. He stated:

But as [RAs] since it's apartments, the students are paying the rent. So they're going to want to stay in the place where they're paying rent monthly, so our job didn't condense. [RAs] had to stay behind for those who could not go home, especially for our international students.

The job they found on their return to campus was not always easy for them to understand and they communicated their frustration with the fact that they really could not spend the kind of time they would have liked to with residents. Darius stated, “We tried to keep our distance from the residents. COVID protocol was... detrimental to relationship building. I wanted to build a relationship with these people, but in the same sense it’s hard as it’s actually hurting my job.” Brianna also related the difficulty of not getting to socialize as part of her job. “It was, you know, very difficult at the end. I no longer had that personal interaction with them.” Regarding trying to do the job as he understood it now, Allen said:

It was more taxing now, because we are having to be more vigilant with what we were doing – how are we able to keep the residents engaged and give them a

sense of community while also having to adhere to all these new rules that are being set about.

Allen also pointed out the difficulty of knowing which residents were positive for COVID. He had concerns about what would happen if those students left their rooms: “If we knew that they were positive and they were leaving their rooms, it would be out of our hands and it'd go up the ladder with housing.” Allen voiced the common concern that students would face judicial consequences with the university should they be found responsible for failing to abide by COVID policies.

As in the larger society, there was an emphasis on being safe and staying healthy. The RAs handled the safety concerns with their residents in their own ways. Darius stated, “There was masking. There was social distancing. There were all of these things, and there was, you know, no congregating.” Allen asked his residents “Hey! Do you feel like this? Have you been in close contact?” and mentioned there were thermometers all throughout the buildings to check temperatures. He also “[made] sure that they weren’t in contact with anybody else for a good two weeks or the ten days.” Madelyn described all their duties at the area desk where they assisted residents: “You could only have one person at the desk at a time, and everyone had to be wearing a mask everywhere. We had wipes to wipe down the whole desk area in between our shifts.”

Several RAs focused on the helping aspects of their jobs within the restrictions they now faced. Multiple RAs spent time checking on residents and monitoring who was where, who needed something, and who had checked out. Madelyn talked about “[making] sure they are still there. [Making] sure they are getting food. [Making] sure that your residents aren’t dead and are accounted for.” Brianna focused on “[making] sure that there was no one, you know, doing anything wrong, really, and just making sure everyone was safe.” Allen mentioned the

confidential part of knowing which students were positive for COVID: “So it was kind of having to monitor where their rooms were. We would know, but we couldn’t tell other people.”

Not all the RAs interviewed willingly enforced COVID policies with their residents.

Darius explained his efforts at enforcing these new rules:

So we were asked to, I mean, if people are just hovering around breathing on each other like by a table, I say maybe, you know, stop that. But outside of that, we really didn’t actively enforce any of that.

RAs were hesitant to enforce policies they did not fully understand themselves and struggled with holding students accountable for something the RAs themselves did not want to have to do.

Darius pointed out his continued willingness to work on behalf of residents even though it was difficult:

I don't regret helping everybody, because regardless of what option they gave us or not, I believe they really did need us. I mean, because the help that was always provided in the buildings, and the capability of us to respond to whatever situation may arise, regardless of what residents we have there or not was still important and useful.

Although there were RAs who struggled with aspects of the shutdown, their own success as students, and the frustration of not being able to interact with people the way they wanted, none of the RAs interviewed stated they would choose not to return as RAs if given the option again.

RAs as Residents

RAs were also residents during this time. Josh illustrated this when asked about how he handled being an RA along with being a resident: “It’s hard to divorce it completely from just being a student.” RAs were regular college students who had the same reactions to the threat of

COVID as their friends. Davontay remembers joking around in January and until spring break about the virus. “And we were just joking around, like wow, I wonder what’s going to happen, and then boom! We get an email saying spring break had been extended by a week.” The RAs experienced the same restrictions, new systems, academic changes, and stress as their non-RA peers who lived next door and on their hall with them. They dealt with food service concerns, elevator usage, and social distancing measures that significantly limited their own interactions with others. New administrative processes also affected RAs in the same way as non-RA residents as did isolation procedures when RAs tested positive or were exposed to someone who had. When Brianna was required to isolate when she encountered a positive case, she relayed that she had a friend over while she was supposed to be isolating. A resident on her floor reported her to her supervisor and Brianna was placed on job probation. As the regular residents had done, RAs found ways to be together even when they knew they were not supposed to do so. Brianna was guilty of this even prior to her job probation and said, “So it was a lot of great bonding, and even shopping. We might order Domino’s pizza and just sit around. I quite enjoyed it!”

When an RA had to isolate as a normal resident, it created more work for that individual’s RA peers. RAs often did everything they could to keep exposure from happening, so they did not negatively affect their staff peers. At the same time, the RAs were scared and lonely. Davontay had an especially hard time. As a younger student he had done online school and hated it; he was also dealing with some significant family stress. He shared there was “just so much stress. Because the classes, thinking about loved ones, you know, there was a lot of uncertainty at the time.” He had a history of mental health concerns, and in his words, “Now I was alone, which is like the worst thing. I was in that big empty place by myself. It was extreme isolation.”

Josh also explained his emotional reaction to being told to leave, “I have a very distinct memory of myself and my friend Trevor. We’re on the sidewalk right outside the apartment complex saying goodbye and sobbing.”

Unexpected Positives

The most unexpected and welcome surprise was the number of positive outcomes that arose during or as a result of this experience. RAs noted new skills they developed and relationships built with staff members or supervisors as things that they were happy to have experienced during the shutdown. Madelyn stated it succinctly and with some surprise: “I honestly had an okay time.”

RAs credited the following things as positives during this time. The dynamics of their staffs and the friendships they established with their fellow RAs carried them through the spring. Mya stated, “It was just like I was spending time with my friends because the responsibilities were lessened overall, and I was not as stressed out as I had been.” A couple learned how to cook well. Darius mentioned, “I learned to cook a lot more. As a result, I made this really good entrée. I still haven’t been able to replicate it in two years!” Several mentioned the benefits of having a supervisor checking in on them. They recognized this would not be the case had they not been working as RAs. A couple mentioned their academics and indicated that moving to a pass/fail system was ideal for them and that being an RA gave them something else to focus on when online classes were not stimulating. When asked about the balance of RA and academics Mya stated, “I don’t think it was overwhelming at all, being an RA at the same time. I feel like there was a lot less pressure.” Darius agreed. “I feel like I was able to do everything I needed to do, and, in fact, it kind of made learning easier.” Davontay reflected that he was “really happy the

university initiated a pass/fail system at that time to really kind of help people because some people just can't do online stuff."

Madelyn shared, "I liked being on campus during the pandemic. I could pick up my food and go walk around and eat at a park and it was just really peaceful. It was really calm and chill."

Allen mentioned, "I think it was a beautiful thing that we were able to do and to still stay involved and not have to give up the things that we love to do across campus." Mya spent time outside. "We took two hour walks every day, because what else could you do during the pandemic but go outside and spent time with people. I don't remember feeling a lot of pressure."

For Jameson the unexpected positive was a job when his friends and family were being laid off or not finding work at all. He spoke of his concern that other people in his life were having to deal with the pandemic without an income; however, his RA position afforded him a stipend as well as his housing. Josie, when speaking to a group of students applying to be RAs, stated "It's a lot different when you aren't in quarantine. Be prepared to be up all night where right now we can go to bed." The fact that the pandemic restricted RAs from being able to build close relationships with their residents and also drastically limited the number of events and activities the RAs completed was mitigated by the fact that RAs could get a good night's sleep every night. Arthur was much more practical. "I didn't want to go home. My parents were there, and they would have all these expectations. My staying meant I had a great parking spot and my own space." Arthur made a point of saying that he really liked the fact that he got to stay for his job and was not worried about his own health. Besides that, his friends were on campus, and they could do whatever they wanted with even fewer restrictions because online classes were very easy for him and his friends. Phillip summed up the general feeling of most RAs: "Yeah, my senior year got ruined, but you know, there's a thousand more things that could go wrong."

Subquestion 1

How did RAs describe their experiences with their supervisors?

RAs broke down their experiences with the supervisors into two general areas. They had one set of experiences with their immediate supervisors and another set of experiences with the senior administrators in the Housing department and across the university. For the most part the RAs saw their immediate supervisors as individuals who were frequently lacking information but who worked tirelessly on their behalf and advocated for them with the rest of the department and university. On the other hand, RAs most frequently viewed the higher administrators with suspicion and distrust.

The RAs relied on their immediate supervisors for timely information about the university's response to COVID-19 and for details on how their job was changing. Some thought their direct supervisors had good information that was reliable and clear. Others thought their supervisors did not have access to the best information and were distrustful of what they were being told. Madelyn stated, "His [her supervisor's] information was pretty sound and it wasn't like I needed to go talk with somebody else. So at least we kind of knew what was going on." Jameson shared:

His [immediate supervisor's] biggest job was trying to make sure we were safe, but then also communicating to us what was going on and what the department was saying and everything because, again, we are just the student workers... Most of the time he was trying to keep us out of the dark and make sure we knew what was going on.

Other RAs were more distrustful of the information they were receiving from their immediate supervisors. In general, they did not hold unclear communication against their immediate

supervisors, but instead found fault with the larger department or university for not providing them with sufficient, clear communication about what was going on in their areas.

The RAs were distrustful of the departmental and university leadership. They felt that information was changed all the time and without warning, and they often felt as though they were putting themselves at risk for COVID without the power to stand up for themselves and still maintain a job. Many felt as though they had to agree to risk their own health to maintain employment. Phillip, when speaking about his distrust of university administration, described his university's incomplete and unclear communication by saying:

The communication coming from the housing department at [my university] had already been kind of lacking. It was a lot of "Here's the message," you know. It wasn't a conversation. It was "Do this. We have questions about this. We'll get back to you." They don't get addressed, you know, usual bureaucracy, whatever. And then during COVID, I think that was a little bit exacerbated.

Many of the RAs mentioned how much they appreciated their immediate supervisors acting as advocates for them. Phillip stated, "He [immediate supervisor] was very much an advocate for us at times." Jameson, who was very concerned about his own health but needed the employment, appreciated his supervisor's advocacy: "He would tell us if he didn't feel comfortable doing it, he would tell us not to do it either...He was more like trying to make sure we were, as workers, being safe and everything." Jameson was working on behalf of a family with children who needed to have childcare come in and assist with the children. The department's COVID policies stated no outside visitors could be inside a university residence. Jameson's supervisor advocated for him on behalf of this family who needed childcare and developed a solution that worked for the students and the administration both. Jameson also

mentioned his supervisor's advocating for RAs no longer doing health and safety inspections where they enter a resident's room checking for safety violations. According to Jameson, "At a point in time were still required to do them, but then my supervisor made sure to talk to his supervisor and be like, hey, they shouldn't be doing that because of COVID." Jameson very much appreciated his supervisor's willingness to talk through possible solutions and advocate for him with administrators on behalf of residents who needed help.

RAs very much appreciated their supervisors' efforts at keeping up the morale of the staff. Mya mentions the general attitude when she returned to work: "I think when the RAs returned it was kind of, you know, morale boosting. Like so glad you are back!... I'm so happy you're here." Mya spoke about how her supervisor worked "just to keep our spirits up."

Many supervisors made clear efforts to make sure the RAs were mentally healthy. Some RAs struggled with their own mental health quite a bit during this time of isolation and loneliness. Allen specifically talked about his supervisor's efforts:

He just wanted to make sure that because nobody really knows what's going on in somebody's head, especially when they've been cooped up in their room all day because their classes are online, they can't go anywhere. It can take a toll on a person, and I think that [his supervisors] were really good at checking in on their staff, especially in their little communities, making sure that all was well... it gave us the sense that they really do care.

Madelyn also mentioned her supervisor "[checking] in occasionally and be like, 'how are you doing?'"

Other RAs appreciated the things their supervisors did to recognize the strangeness of the year and not trying to act as if everything was normal. Brianna talked about how her supervisor

changed their normal job performance evaluation into something that made more sense for their actual situation:

At the very end of the year we had kind of like a combination performance review discussion about everything. But it was less a performance review because it was like, how can you evaluate success when no one has really experienced this, you know, before. So it turned more into a conversation, which I appreciate.

RAs noticed and appreciated the extra work their supervisors took on to assist the RAs and keeping them from being overwhelmed. Phillip talked with clearly evident pride about his supervisor taking on the responsibilities of an entire large staff after the RAs went home and there was a need to shut down a very large building: “My supervisor said your employment’s kind of done, and I think he individually went through and did like all seven hundred rooms, checked all the keys, etc.” Josh pointed out that his supervisor continued to reach out even after they were at home. He stated, “[The department sent] out a thing of sort of like, Here, you know. Here are the resources for this kind of stuff. We’re still here for you.”

The actions taken by the administrations of the universities and the larger housing departments shaped the way RAs experienced supervision. Allen mentioned the attitude he felt coming from the administrators in housing. “I think with Housing there was a sense of gratitude from the upper level of Housing just for the RAs and the CAs to have continued efforts.” Davontay was proud of the way his university handled the shutdown and talked about his pride in being from a university that did so well. On the other hand, several other RAs did not admire the way their larger university handled the shutdown. Phillip shared his frustration with how his large university closed at the shutdown sending international students elsewhere:

We had students that would stay through the winters and summers and [the university] would have played the card of ‘Oh, we can’t ensure the structural integrity, we can’t make sure that you’re following protocol. We can’t make sure that you’re following this, that, and so you know, unfortunately that’s the negative side of a very large institution that they’re very firm on the rules and regulations they have.

Subquestion 2

How did RAs describe their relationships with their peers?

During the shutdown and subsequent few months, RAs had to rely on each other in multiple ways. They described times of bonding, confusion, distrust, fun, hard work, and collective performance action. Many of the RAs described the disappointment of moving to a different version of working together than they had prior to the shutdown. RAs who stayed to work and those who returned to their homes reported feelings of disappointment. The experience RAs had with their RA peers can be described in three overarching categories. Staff relationships, teamwork, and comprehending their new reality were the general ways RAs experienced peer relationships.

Staff Relationships

The relationships RAs have with each other are often a key indicator of how fulfilled an RA is in their position. With the new social distancing rules, many RAs were not supposed to congregate and much of the disappointment was related to social distancing. Darius stated:

We were really good friends and would have Fun Nights and stuff like that. We made dinner and stuff like that together and we were really, really close people, and I think we just all wanted to see each other again. I feel like we [RAs] got

robbed because, like we were working. We had a really good working relationship for five months or so, and we really enjoyed that experience. We all work. We complement each other so well; I think we kind of just wanted to finish the job... We just want to have this moment as a team like we used to a month ago.

Mya's perception of staff relationships was, "It was just like I was spending time with my friends because the responsibilities were lessened overall." Don was an RA who had to go home, and he was no less disappointed not to be able to finish what he started with a group of RA peers. Specifically, he noted that he had been with this particular group of RAs for almost 3 years and they were supposed to graduate together. He mentioned that after they all left, they "never talked about it...yeah, it's just these people that I saw weekly for so many weeks that I went through and so many hours is just...gone."

Teamwork

RAs relied on one another for work-related reasons as well. RAs always have to work together in order to be most effective, but these RAs learned quickly that they needed each other to get all the things completed they still needed to accomplish in their revised job duties. Darius explained: "We just expected people to do their job, because, I mean we depended on one another." Allen compared his staff's reliance on each other in his description of their team:

It was a real sense of family, because you know, it's like you have the one brother that likes to do this, that in another situation might be a little rowdy. But you know what he's good at. And then you have the sister who likes to take charge in certain situations. So you kind of like, let them take charge, and you come in as support. We also said that, like between us not everybody needs to be a leader.

Some of us are better at supporting for a certain situation, and when someone just needs to talk.

One of the key job functions of RAs is being on duty. During the university shutdown, the RAs knew their team members relied on them not to get sick because if one person got sick, everyone else's jobs were affected. Allen stated, "We were in the mindset that we need to be a lot more careful, knowing that if one of us goes down then the workload goes up." Jameson noted, "The biggest thing is when people started to leave, other worker's speed is now, picking up after them." Several RAs noted that their staff teams created systems and procedures to make sure they limited exposure to COVID for their team. Darius said, "There was one time where we had a potential exposure with one of our residents and nobody knew how to respond. What my staff and I did was make a conscious effort not to leave the building."

RAs generally experienced positive outcomes with their teammates; however, some aspects of their new reality tended toward the negative. Making things more difficult for the RA staff was a general feeling of distrust and confusion. It was difficult for student staff to know what they were supposed to be doing, who to contact for answers, whether to believe they would continue to be employed, and how long they would be doing a task or procedure before it changed to a different protocol. Mya described "interdepartmental quarrels." Distrust was present throughout the spring and in supervisory relationships but was also present between RAs on the same staff after they all started distance learning. Josie describes her experience:

It [was] stressful in the buildings, but my first year [2020] I was in a building with only three RAs so balancing [being] in class with someone who needs to be let back in their room, and it caused a lot of tension between me and my co-workers because it got to the point, a lot of times you wondered if they were actually in

class as much as they say, because there were definitely those who just didn't want to take care of the problem.

While this was described specifically by Josie, many of the RAs felt experiencing a level of distrust amongst their staff members while balancing doing a job and completing their academics made their roles more difficult.

Navigating New Responsibilities

Combined efforts to determine what was happening and how the RAs were supposed to be doing their jobs was mentioned by all the RAs. It was a team effort to determine if and when they were supposed to return to campus, what their new job was, how to fulfill the new job requirements, and whether or not they would continue to have a job because of administrative decisions or their own health. Often RAs were getting information at the same time the rest of the university was, or even afterward, and in the meantime guessing what it was they were supposed to be doing.

At the beginning of the pandemic, finding information involved group chats, collective emails, and text messaging between staff members. Brianna said, "There were kind of talks amongst our staff that we might be leaving. We didn't necessarily know it was happening... We're just going to leave for a little bit, you know, and I don't know what's going to happen." Don and his staff used the messaging app GroupMe; he stated, "And then we didn't know for a while [if] we were going to get paid, you know, we had our group share, and it was just like, what have you guys heard? Have you heard anything? What's going on?"

After the RAs' return to campus and work, the GroupMe and text messaging continued between staff members. They communicated about duty concerns, clarified job responsibilities, complained about the new responsibilities or lack of communication, and supported each other.

Subquestion 3

What were RAs perceptions of support mechanisms provided during the pandemic?

The RAs generally did not mention the larger university efforts at support. While there were some comments directed toward the efforts of faculty members to make online academics easier and more accessible for everyone, most of the other comments made by the RAs about supports were directly related to their own supervisors. There were comments from the RAs both applauding and criticizing the efforts of their university administration.

Josh, an RA at a small, private school where RAs were first told to go home and then told they could come back if they wanted, had an experience that was unique to the group that directly pertains to how he felt supported by the larger university administrators. He stated, “It was basically just like the Vice President of Student Services has shown up on my door with a garbage bag and was like, you need to pack up your stuff, and you need to get out of here.” The vice-president relayed what appeared to be confusion on his campus with what also amounted to a genuine care for the students who were leaving. “It was so evident that the people in charge were trying their best,” he stated about his campus’s senior level administration. Other RAs had positive things to say about how senior administrators in housing were handling the shutdown. Allen stated:

I like the way that [my university] as a whole handled COVID as fast as we did, with putting things out for the residents, and just making sure that campus was as safe as possible. I think we did a pretty good job at it with housing as well. Just the fact that we were able to open.

Allen was also happy he was working at an institution that allowed students to stay somewhat involved across campus. From his perspective, it made his – and his peers’ experience – much

better overall. He said, “I think it was just a beautiful thing that we were able to and to stay involved, and not have to give up the things that we love to do across campus.”

The topics most often mentioned by the participants about their experiences with entities outside their own staff were communication from higher levels around the university and the lack of opportunity to be involved in decision-making. Darius described his experience:

“Communication was, I think, that was something they could have done better in this sense, because we didn’t know what was going on outside of basically our building.”

He also communicated frustration with those in higher administration making decisions that would affect his experience as an RA and as a student without consulting him:

Occasionally, the housing department would have an open forum where you could call in and listen to all the big-wigs in the housing department talk about how we’re going to address the pandemic. It gets communicated to us eventually, so, I mean, that really doesn’t accomplish anything. We have no say, and what’s going on? We have no say about how things are done... I just learned this. This is going to be protocol. Thanks for totally changing how we’re doing things. Part of me want to give them the benefit of the doubt, because it was a new experience, but also, all you had to do is just give us a little bit of say in how we think things should be done in the halls. Listen to our voice, because we are ultimately the boots on the ground. We know what’s going on in the buildings.

Brianna would have also appreciated more frequent updates and the opportunity to be able to be involved in the decision-making process:

[They could have provided]...maybe a little bit more consistent communication. I would have liked, perhaps, more regular updates. But that might have been asking

a little bit too much, because no one really knew what was happening and updates were changing so much. We were the people who were getting daily updates like ‘You know what you heard yesterday, that’s not what we’re doing’ ... We were not being given information that I felt like was necessary for us to be RAs.

Subquestion 4

How did RAs describe the ways their academic studies were impacted by the pandemic?

The RAs reported quite a few consistencies between institutions regarding their academic experience. Most did not enjoy remote learning even though, for some, it was easier than on-ground learning. However, the relief stemmed more from faculty changing their expectations than from the content or mode of delivery benefitting the participants. Darius reported that he appreciated the institution of the pass/fail model and felt he “was able to do everything [he] needed to do, and it kind of made learning easier.” He went on to say:

You feel like professors acknowledged the fact that there was all of this stuff going on, and then adjusted their curriculum to make sure that students were able to be more successful, knowing all of the things that were also going on. [Pre-pandemic] you can expect more of your students, and you can expect them to retain more information without all that psychological stress going on, and as a result you make the curriculum easier to respond to the world. Several professors I had push backed deadlines, or gave you more time on a certain subject. So for me, personally, I felt like that semester was easier.

Davontay agreed with the positive outcomes associated with going to a pass/fail system. “I’m really happy the university initiated a pass/fail system to really kind of help those people, because some people just can’t do online stuff.”

Some of the RAs believed the new version of academics was not as challenging as on-ground work was prior to the shutdown. Mya mentioned:

It was my last two semesters, so I was kind of winding down a little bit. I didn't want to do my work from home, I wanted to do it from the dorms. Continue my position with my friends who were studying. I don't think it was overwhelming at all, being an RA at the same time, at all. Being an RA at that time really gave me something else to focus on when those classes weren't as stimulating.

Regarding being an RA and completing academic work, Madelyn stated, "I feel like we had a lot of downtime, so it wasn't too hard to balance it." Allen talked about how his classes were not as motivating online or as helpful because his upper-division classes were designed to employ resources that weren't available to him as a virtual student. "A lot of my courses were building courses so I didn't have the material to do 3D models or things like that so that kind of put a damper on my motivation."

Some RAs struggled a great deal with the online classes. Davontay relayed that completing class online "took a lot more dedication. I did online school when I was younger and hated it because I need some form of socialization [to do well]." Jameson felt the added RA duties and the complexity of fully online classes was very difficult to manage. He stated:

I am terrible with online classes. They are easier to pass, but harder to learn. A lot of my teachers didn't go straight to Zoom; they just went online and told us to do everything on our own. So now it's extra hard because I'm learning extra for myself and I am an RA with more work. It was a lot for the span of a month.

Some RAs struggled with trusting their co-workers when it came to reporting when they were in or out of class as everyone stayed in their rooms all the time. Josie relayed the following about trusting her peers:

It caused a lot of tension between me and my co-workers because it got to the point a lot of times when you wondered if you were actually class as much as you say, because there were definitely those who just didn't want to take care of the problem. Somebody has to take care of the issue, but now that we were in online classes, we have more work to do, and more of us were spending more time in class, because you couldn't so easily skip class if you weren't feeling up to it that day.

Summary

In March 2020 colleges and universities of all sizes and types were forced to respond to the beginnings of the COVID-19 pandemic. These responses affected students, faculty, staff, and administrators alike, and students who were working for the university were affected in ways their peers who were not university employees were not. Specifically, the students working as resident assistants for housing or residence life departments all over the country faced challenges unlike their non-RA peers. Not every RA had the same experience. There were some who were told their jobs were essential and they had to stay and work with a new set of duties. Some were given the option of whether they wanted to stay in their position. Others were told their jobs had been discontinued as the university was shut down completely to all residential students. RAs faced challenges in each of these categories, and those challenges existed alongside the stress and worry of being a student in the beginnings of a worldwide pandemic.

Twelve current and former RAs agreed to be participants in a qualitative interview where the goal was to hear and understand their experience as RAs during the COVID-19 shutdown. The participants were identified by former supervisors who recommended their participation, and an email was sent to each asking for their willingness. Everyone who participated was given the opportunity to decline to continue at any point of the interview, and they were each provided a copy of their transcript after the interviews were complete. From analysis of the data the following themes were found and explored: communication, confusion, disappointment, motivation, negative stress, residential life, staff dynamics, and unexpected positives. RAs also discussed their job responsibilities before the shutdown, and after they returned to work as RAs. Their relationships also played a large role in their experience. Their staff peer relationships, supervisory relationships, their relationship to the larger university, and their experience with virtual academics alongside working were explored.

Chapter 5. Discussion and Conclusions

The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented and unexpected experience that caught most people, institutions, companies, and communities off guard. University leaders often prepare for disasters, but those plans did not transfer well to the pandemic. Housing and residence life departments faced challenges in areas that were unexpected, and the impersonal nature of the COVID-19 pandemic was very difficult for student staff who took the job of RA primarily in order to spend time with people and promote community development. This study was designed to understand the experience of RAs from their perspective.

It is important to note at this point that the question I originally intended to investigate assumed that all RAs who had worked during the pandemic were considered essential by their university administration. I learned this was not the case, and while it changed the title and original purpose of the research, I quickly learned that understanding the experiences of RAs during the pandemic was still crucial.

Statement of the Problem

This phenomenological study was conducted to explore the lived experiences of college students who served as students and personnel at American colleges and universities during the COVID-19 pandemic. Specifically, this study focused on the students who worked as resident assistants for housing departments at colleges with a residential component in the United States. As the research progressed, it became evident the original research question should be adjusted somewhat to focus on exploring the lived experience of RAs during the COVID-19 shutdown more generally. These students were affected by the pandemic in ways that their non-RA peers did not experience, and individual RAs experienced the phenomenon differently based on

location within the country, leadership decisions made by the leadership of each RA's institution, and their own individual needs.

I began this study by reviewing literature specifically focused on the experience of students who work as university employees alongside their academic studies. As became clearer as the study progressed, each RA's experience was unique, and each person was affected directly by their own background, geographic location, family demands, academic discipline and needs, and their personality. Because phenomenology is designed to allow for an individual's experience to lead to meaning, creating a qualitative study where a phenomenological approach was used was most important for this study (Moustakas, 1994). Creswell and Creswell (2018) indicate the benefits of phenomenological research when attempting to understand a particular group of individuals' experiences during a particular shared phenomenon. I used open-ended questions and allowed the conversations to proceed as each participant directed in order to seek to understand and appreciate each individual's story. Current and former RAs were identified by staff who are still working within the field of housing, and each of those current and former RAs were sent an invitation to participate. From the responses received I set up interview times and dates with those who understood the project and wanted to participate. Interviews were completed via Zoom, transcribed, and analyzed. Each participant was afforded the opportunity to review and comment on their individual interview. From there, I reported the findings and research gleaned from the responses of the participants. It became clear from the data that, while not all RAs had the same experience, there were multiple consistencies from RA to RA.

Discussion and Conclusions Drawn from Findings

RAs faced challenges at the start of the pandemic that will influence their foundational development as human beings, workers, and community members. The shutdown and

subsequent few months were full of change and uncertainty, and RAs experienced this phenomenon in ways that will affect them as adults. This discussion also draws heavily from research on successful development and involvement of students while in college (Astin, 1984; Chickering & Reisser, 1993; Kuh, 2010). In particular, the viewpoint espoused in Chickering & Reisser (1993) that a “nurturing, challenging college environment will help students grow in stature and substance” is pivotal to the implications discussed (p.40).

RAs and Relationships

The RAs talked quite a bit about what was motivating or discouraging about the ways they experienced the shutdown and subsequent months of work. RAs are usually motivated to apply for RA positions and continue working because of their interest in relationships with residents and the ability to help others; both were significantly affected in a pandemic world where social distancing and isolation were the norms. The relationships they form with residents and with one another are often a primary motivator for the individuals doing the job to feel fulfilled and enjoy their work. Not only were the RAs forced to social distance as the rest of the campus community, they also felt disconnected from the people with whom they originally agreed to work. It was difficult for them to find meaning and purpose in a people-oriented position when they were not allowed to interact personally with those individuals. This reality of feeling a loss of purpose coupled with their own need to isolate made being an RA in the spring of 2020 very difficult for many of the study participants.

Ironically, the RAs who seemed to fare better emotionally were the ones who broke the rules and mingled with their friends in the residence halls or elsewhere on campus. The RAs who broke policy by interacting with friends or who found ways to be with others seemed to handle the stress and the associated difficulties of their positions and their academics better than the

ones who were alone. The ones who were truly isolated or sent home and did not work had the most negative things to say about their experience during the shutdown and the timeframe that followed for finishing the semester.

RAs as College Students

Many college students generally felt immune to COVID-19 and behaved as if they would not be infected (Latkin et al., 2021; Sharma et al., 2021) and the study participants were no different than their non-RA peers in sharing this viewpoint. Several of them recognized their position as younger, less risky citizens and chose to go back to work because others would not be able to do so. Multiple RAs made decisions based on an acknowledgement of their own lower risk and exhibited a willingness and desire to work for and serve others who needed help.

Moving online for their classes appeared to affect RAs the same way it affected their non-RA peers (Means & Neisler, 2021; Murphy et al., 2020). Allen, Davontay, and Jameson struggled with virtual classes. Other RAs found online classes easier and were glad they also had the RA position to keep them occupied. Many RAs mentioned appreciation for moving to a pass/fail model in the interest of maintaining good mental health alongside the stress of physical health concerns. RAs described a lack of motivation to complete their virtual classes, confusion on the switch to a virtual modality, and stress related to their academic success in an online format.

RAs and Mental Health

RAs were very focused on their mental health and on the emotional toll being taken on themselves and those closest to them during this timeframe. They were isolated from their friends and family, their job duties were different, they experienced fear for their own safety, and the uncertainty of their job status weighed on them mentally and emotionally. The three RAs

who were laid off dealt with different anxieties and fears, but no longer had the support of peers or supervisors.

Nearly all of the RAs appreciated their supervisors' focus on their levels of anxiety or depression. The RAs mentioned that supervisors held meetings specifically to focus on mental health, allowed RAs to take time away to do something fun or relaxing, or sent messages to check on the RAs. However, the supervisor's focus on mental health did not mean that RAs did not struggle. Every RA mentioned the difficulty of this time, worrying about family members, their academics, and their finances; RAs who were laid off no longer had a supervisor to whom to turn for support.

It was meaningful to many RAs when the larger department or division reached out to them and noticed the role they were playing; these RAs appeared to have a more positive mental outlook. The RAs enjoyed being part of a larger endeavor to keep institutions open and appreciated when they were thanked by various levels of administration for their efforts.

RAs as Essential or Not

Not all institutions classified RAs as essential employees or kept the residence halls open after the COVID-forced shutdown. Of the 12 RAs interviewed, four were considered essential, three as non-essential, and five were given the option to stay or to go. Generally speaking, the three RAs who were considered non-essential responded more negatively to the experience than did their still-employed counterparts. They struggled with the abrupt ending of their careers as RAs, their relationships with former mentors, and the lack of closure for their school year and tenure as student employees.

The RAs considered to be essential struggled with their new job duties and the communication of new rules they had to enforce. They also struggled with institutional

communication that was ever-changing and unclear in a time when there was not much precedent for how things should proceed. Allen, Jameson, Josie, and Arthur were the RAs considered essential by their universities. None of the essential RAs indicated a negative response to being considered essential. Returning as staff while learning remotely was something they expected and felt was appropriate. At no time did they mention frustration with being told to continue to work; instead, they seemed resigned and contented to continue receiving a paycheck and have lodging. Even when their jobs were vague or confusing, or when they did not want to enforce a university policy with which they did not agree, at no point did they indicate they regretted having the RA position.

Allen, Jameson, Josie, and Arthur were all considered essential employees. None of these individuals were informed of their employment status at the beginning of their employment. From a human resources or employment law standpoint it is important to note that none of the RAs who were considered essential ever mentioned being informed that they would have to continue working in the face of an institution-wide crisis. If had been mentioned in their job contracts, none of them recalled the expectation.

The RAs who were given the option of continuing in their RA role did so in a generally agreeable manner. They elected to return to work after weighing the costs and benefits to their own health, comfort, home and family relationships, and friendships. They were happy to return, and most cited their own appreciation that this was an option for them.

The individuals who were contractually obligated to stay and those who actively chose to stay had a more positive experience than those who were laid off. There were more positive emotions and memories from essential employees and those who chose to stay than those who had their job interrupted and were sent home. This is an important reality to consider. While it

was certainly more difficult from a job expectations and action standpoint to continue working, the RAs who did so generally reported less negative stress or emotion. Recognizing the reasons for that would be helpful for individuals who supervise students, or in departments where there are student employees.

Central Research Question

What were RAs perceptions of their experiences during the COVID-19 shutdown?

How the RAs perceived their experiences of the shutdown was directly related to their role during the shutdown. Those who were laid off without continued financial and emotional support experienced a particular set of outcomes, and those who continued to work either in a mandatory fashion or because they chose to continue had another set of experiences. Generally, those who continued their employment found a more positive set of outcomes than those who did not, even though their experiences were not without challenges.

The following themes were found and correlate with the larger body of literature for how college students dealt with the pandemic as well as research on college student employment generally and the resident assistant position in particular. The experiences of these RAs, as represented through these themes indicate considerable implications for their identity development seen in their behavior and beliefs.

The ways in which RA job duties changed from before the shutdown and afterward varied by institution; several of the relational aspects of being an RA, including face-to-face communication and community development, were the most significantly changed. Blimling's (2010) work lists many of the job responsibilities of a typical RA, and the RA participants carried out all of those responsibilities prior to the shutdown. Most significant are two roles: ensuring student safety and developing relationships with residents. RAs are typically charged

with the safety and security of the residence hall in which they work or the campus on which they are employed. Every RA interviewed discussed their new responsibilities involving sanitizing surfaces, cleaning desks and lobby areas, and ensuring residents were abiding by new policies designed to keep people safe and healthy. While they may not have all understood all aspects of the new procedures for masking and social distancing, the responsibilities of keeping students safe was not new for them. Secondly, RAs are also typically charged with relationship development which includes knowing the residents on their floors and encouraging the development of relationships and community (Blimling, 2010; Boone, 2018; Huffman, 2014). Relationship building is often the part of the job that RAs enjoy the most (Boone, 2018; Huffman, 2014). With the changing face of public health and emphasis on social distancing and not being in community, relationships could not be developed in typical ways. Several of the RAs discussed the disappointment they felt in not being able to spend time with their residents or when their residents left the building without being able to say goodbye to them.

Communication and confusion were frequently-mentioned themes with the RA participants. It was important to the RAs that their supervisors had clear answers and that those answers were provided in a timely manner. Unclear communication began with how the shutdown was communicated to them. Many of the participants still had the emails and texts where they learned what was going to happen at the institution. Communication regarding the status of the university itself was followed by what they should expect from their job, or their job loss. After their role was determined the RAs learned of their new job responsibilities via email, text, and group messaging primarily. As was the case in so many institutions, conflicting information was provided, and the plans changed frequently. This led to quite a bit of confusion, and the RAs cited examples about their own efforts to learn what was happening.

Motivation and the residential experience are closely related in this research. For this study the residential experience reflects how students living in a residence hall participate in the community of their building. A major motivator for RAs in their position is relationship development with those individuals for whom and with whom they are working (Boone, 2018; Huffman, 2014). With the focus on COVID-era social distancing came separation from other residents and from their staff team members. This was especially difficult for RAs who took the social distancing part of their job seriously. There were a few RAs who chose to ignore some of the new rules and still meet as a group. Those individuals fared better emotionally than either the RAs who were laid off or the ones who followed the expectations for isolation and distancing that came from their supervisors. The recognition RAs received from those individuals in higher levels of administration at the university was mentioned multiple times by several RAs. Students enjoy playing a larger role in their campus's story and feeling needed and important. McCormick et al. (2010) reported that students report positive outcomes when working with other students to help the institution be successful. This drive to positive contribution was seen most clearly in the stories of the RAs who were given a choice to return to work or to go home. These individuals saw themselves as fulfilling a role for the larger university community that would contribute to the success of individuals who had nowhere else to go and allowed the immunocompromised to be able to stay safe at home.

RAs were experiencing the same types of negative stress and disappointment as other students along with their own work-place stressors. Depression and anxiety were already present in the lives of a large percentage of college students and those numbers rose (Copeland et al., 2021; Kecojevik et al., 2020; Lederer et al., 2020; Means & Neisler, 2021; Serrine et al., 2021). As seen in other college students' experience, RAs were negatively affected by COVID-19

(Sirrione et al., 2021). Much of the negative stress felt by the RAs who were laid off was directly related to their inability to experience what they always imagined would be the end of their college career and tenure with a particular RA staff. Many researchers chronicled this version of grief felt by those who were not able to attend ceremonies and rituals such as graduation (Copeland et al., 2021; Sirrione et al., 2021). The reason for grief can easily be correlated to the end-of-year celebratory events often held by residence hall staff to celebrate the end of a year of working together. College students experienced a decline in mental health as a direct result of the pandemic, and this was seen in the very real struggles of more than one participant and directly in the instance of the RA who attempted suicide while in isolation.

The RAs cited several unexpected positives in their experience. Having only experienced negativity personally with working in housing during a pandemic, my expectation was that the RAs I interviewed would also have only negative experiences. This was not the case. Patel (2020) indicated that research was showing that college students were going to emerge from the pandemic with multiple positive traits. The participating RAs showed many examples of an ability to see the positives in their experience, and every RA who continued working stated it was an experience they are glad to have had. From interpersonal closeness with staff members with whom they were working, to relaxed time spent on a beautiful campus, to easier classes, and finally to a great parking space, the RAs listed things they enjoyed while performing a difficult task.

Subquestion 1

How did RAs describe their experiences with their supervisors?

Overall, the RAs interviewed had positive experiences with their direct supervisors. They appreciated the difficulties their supervisors were experiencing as they attempted to decipher and

then communicate ever-changing expectations from administration. Especially important to the RAs was the role their supervisors played as advocates for them. This is an important outcome on which to focus as a practitioner in student affairs. It was clear that the RAs were concerned about what they were being asked to do, and they did not always trust that what they were being asked to do kept their health and safety in mind. The RAs recognized that priorities had changed with regard to their physical health and they were perplexed by the change. Having a supervisor who was willing to advocate for their RA team was crucial. Several of the participants mentioned their supervisors' focus on the RAs' health – physical and mental. Supervisors were helpful in assisting the RAs in determining how to complete their job tasks and stay safe from the virus. Supervisors also helped decipher the expectations when RAs were not sure how best to proceed with assisting a resident when the COVID regulations were not clear. A supervisor's recognition when their employees were struggling and helping them create a workable solution was helpful. Finally, the RAs noticed and appreciated their supervisors' focus on mental health, and several mentioned feeling taken care of by their immediate supervisor throughout the spring and ongoing pandemic. For the RAs who were laid off, their supervisors became responsible for completing all the aspects of closing buildings that would typically have been completed by an entire staff of RAs; more than one RA mentioned such instances in appreciation for their supervisor. Bentrin et al. (2013), Watson (2013), and Lewis (2008) all confirm positive outcomes for college student employees when they are supervised by a full-time university staff member who recognizes the importance of supporting all aspects of the working student experience.

Subquestion 2

How did RAs describe their experiences with their peers?

The RAs talked quite a bit about the supportive nature of having a good group of peers on whom to rely. They knew which RA had which skillset and enjoyed the opportunity to work together as a team. They enjoyed getting together to have fun. They also appreciated that they had peers with whom to work out the unusual new job duties and expectations they were receiving from their supervisors. This is not significantly different from good RA staff dynamics at any point in time – not just during times of high stress. Building a staff team where the individuals' talents and characteristics have opportunities to be used continues to be a good way to work with RA staffs. There will always be difficult situations when working directly with a floor or building of college students, and allowing for the creation of a team where each individual feels supported by the others will help each RA to be successful.

RAs also mentioned distrust and frustration with some of their peers. They did not always trust their peers to be truthful about whether they were in class and able to assist someone in need. Focusing on building a staff team where honesty and support are valued, as well as ensuring everyone is held to the same standard as the others is crucial (Blimling, 2003). Dean (1991) spoke of this imperative as well in her discussion of the supervisory skills necessary in working directly with resident assistant staffs.

Subquestion 3

What were the RAs perceptions of support mechanisms provided during the pandemic?

Beyond the immediate attention of their supervisors, the only other individuals the RAs felt were supportive were their professors. They appreciated their professors' efforts to alter classes to make them easier, and they liked that their professors went to a pass/fail system of

grading. RAs did not mention any of the groups on campus typically charged with being supportive of students, and is a topic pertinent to anyone who works in student services. Ross et al. (2020) found it was possible to support students well through unprecedented circumstances – specifically the pandemic.

Subquestion 4

How did RAs describe the ways their academic studies were impacted during the pandemic?

Working on campus is positively related to academic success for students (Athas et al., 2013; Cheng & Alcantara, 2004; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Pike et al., 2008). Being near academic resources as a result of being employed by the university is advantageous to a student's academic success (Cheng & Alcantara, 2004). This reality can be seen in multiple responses by RAs who were glad to have stayed on campus to study with their friends, have access to labs, and still be able to be active in their extracurricular pursuits. The RAs who participated in this study experienced the same realities as other college students whose academic studies were moved to virtual in the spring of 2020. There were many challenges cited by researchers regarding the difficulty of this switch to online (Means & Neisler, 2021; Murphy et al., 2020). These challenges were all faced by the RAs as well; however, more than half of the RAs interviewed stated they found the switch to online or pass/fail classes to be easier and appreciated professors who understood that there were many difficult things happening in the larger world and made concessions on their assignments. Some RAs absolutely did not enjoy the online experience, but even those RAs appreciated the professors were understanding to their situation.

Implications for Practice

This phenomenological study of the experiences of individuals working as RAs during the COVID-19 shutdown has shown a variety of outcomes that can be useful in the practice of student staff supervision. The following are implications stemming from both the research and the conceptual framework detailed earlier in this dissertation and are intended for individuals and departments working in student services, human resources, student affairs, and housing in particular.

- In this study, RAs who chose to stay and work because they were motivated to do so in some way had the most positive experience. The primary motivation for RAs to want to be RAs was relational and was a theme throughout the study (Boone, 2018; Huffman, 2014). They mentioned repeatedly this motivation affected their day-to-day jobs and their own mental and physical health. Professionals working with RAs and student staff need to ensure they are creating student positions that are mindful of a student's motivations but also not to take advantage of those same motivations to an unethical level. Creating positions that allow for students to discover what drives them is important as is focusing on their development of their internal drive to be in relationship with others. Chickering & Reisser (1993) argued as well that recognition and understanding of this motivation is a key part of a college student's development of their own identity.
- Human resource departments and offices that oversee the employment of students need to determine which positions are essential and what it means to be an essential student employee. This includes determining the ethics involved in requiring student employees to be essential, writing clear job descriptions and agreements that delineate

the general circumstances in which a student might expect to be deemed essential and required to work, and determining the way in which students will be made aware of this status during the advertising and the onboarding of the position. There are numerous types of positions students hold on campus, and while some of those positions could be seen to be essential, there are many that are not. Determining appropriate compensation and benefits for students in these essential positions is also important. Additional work should be done across campuses to ensure all essential employees are aware of their status and know when their services may be needed.

- Administrators at the highest levels need to be involved in the recognition of students who are doing a difficult job for their university. Just as various members of administration attend athletic events that focus on student athletes and other administrators meet with senior members of the student government, administrators should focus some recognition of student employees who are doing a job that is integral to the day-to-day operations of the larger university. RAs noticed when those individuals in higher administrative positions made mention of their efforts and appreciated them. One of the reasons college students choose to work on campus is their ability to be involved in a community that means so much to them and since Astin has shown repeatedly that the level of a student's involvement is directly tied to their success in college, administrators should pay attention to their efforts and recognize them (Astin, 1984, 1993).
- Departments that employ students should spend time and financial resources on efforts to train their full-time staff members in management and supervision of teams. The RAs mentioned repeatedly that their staff team was important to them for

communication, understanding their job functions, morale, fun, and having someone know their skills. It takes intentionality and skill to develop an excellent staff team. Administrators should spend considerable time and effort assisting full-time employees in knowing how to do this well. RAs mentioned things such as the importance of having leaders as advocates, having someone assist them in working out their job functions, and missing their staff relationships when they were laid off. They communicated via text and group messaging systems constantly, and those without staff teams where they felt they could be honest struggled with distrust and suspicion. These issues are all handled well by supervisors who know how to develop teams well. One of the main tenets of Kuh's High Impact Practices is a student's connection to full-time faculty or administrators at a university (Kuh et al., 2010). Ensuring that supervisors of students know how to best lead them is imperative to student success.

- Academic departments, as well as those who supervise students, should pay attention to how students felt cared for and supported in stressful times and create systems to allow for flexibility when students are dealing with something difficult. Departments that exist to be of service to students need to ensure the services they are offering are what students actually need and will use. They also need to make sure they are communicating those services to students in language and methods the students recognize. It is notable that not one RA listed a service offered by their university as a support during the shutdown. This could indicate a clear opportunity for learning and change.

- Mental health continues to be a focus for college students. Students are arriving at college with a built-in awareness of their own mental health stemming from years of attention to it in their K-12 education (Sirrione et al., 2021). Administrators and supervisors of student staff need to develop systems that allow for students to be mentally and emotionally healthy while still completing a job that sometimes brings with it stressful situations. Trauma-informed supervision skills are important, and training supervisors to balance attention to job skills with a student's mental and emotional health, along with their physical health, is important.

Implications for Further Research

This qualitative study has revealed several areas for continued research. They include determination of job statuses, accurate job description development, communication of employment expectations, onboarding needs, and on-going supervision concerns. Mayhew et al. (2016) concluded that college does indeed affect the development, learning, attitude, and values of college students. Additional research is necessary in the following areas in order to ensure the development that will occur does so as positively as possible.

- Further research should be conducted in the combined roles of human resources and student employment. Opportunities for research exist in developing philosophies and practices related to whether or not students should be considered essential personnel and how those determinations are made. Methodologies of the ethics involved in having essential student personnel could be developed along with determining how and when communication of those methodologies should occur. Understanding how and when specific roles are communicated to student employees is another area that could be explored.

- An examination of the caretaking role of supervisors is needed. It is clear from this research that student employees recognized and appreciated their supervisors – especially in their advocating for them and their care of them. Determining the level of responsibility practitioners have for those for whom they have supervisory responsibilities is important in a college setting when the employees are also students. Research areas could include how and when appropriate training takes place for supervisors in a care-taking role and how that training is developed and communicated.
- RAs did not mention what efforts the larger campus community was making in an effort to support students. It is important to pay attention to why students did not see the efforts of the larger campus community in supporting them during a difficult time. Research could be done in determining which resources students accessed during the pandemic and why those were most important. It could be important to determine necessary responses by universities in the development of new support services. It could also be important to identify which support structures are most valuable to students working as employees of the university.
- Researchers are already doing good work in the area of college student mental health as well as the mental health of RAs in particular (Lynch, 2019). This research needs to continue as RAs will continue to face students in crisis and need be supervised by individuals who know how to manage traumatic professional experiences.
- Housing professionals should continue to research how the effects of the pandemic have been felt by the newest group of professionals within the housing profession. These individuals may have worked as RAs during the shutdown, and their

experience then will directly affect their experience as full-time professionals.

Research areas include understanding how these newest professionals are navigating their pandemic experience with their new roles as full-time professionals.

Understanding what skills and attitudes they bring to the position is crucial to understand for the future of the profession. Knowing what additional training or resources they could need could also be important.

- Further research should be conducted looking at how their experiences as RAs during the shutdown has affected former RAs in their employment as full-time professionals in any number of careers and vocations. Research areas could include qualitative studies of full-time professionals exploring how their experience has affected their current expectations of their own supervisors or team members. It could be important to learn what questions they are asking of new employment opportunities and what expectations they have of the job itself that are a direct result of their experience as an RA during a global crisis. Exploring attitudes toward work and stability could be important. Quantitative surveys could be conducted to discover what skills former RAs attributed to their experience in the crisis.

Chapter Summary

Individuals who worked as RAs during the COVID-19 shutdown in the spring of 2020 had a variety of experiences. This qualitative, phenomenological study of those experiences has led to quite a few conclusions for practitioners and researchers. These conclusions focused on the RA participants' relationships, their experience as no different from other college students, their mental and physical health, and their employment status.

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APPENDIX: Interview Protocol

Begin the interview:

Hello, my name is Amy Korstange and I am a student at East Tennessee State University in a doctoral program. I am conducting an interview about the experiences of college students who were considered essential employees during the COVID-19 shut-down in the spring of 2020. It is my understanding that you fall into this category. Is that correct? None of the information you provide me will be identified directly with you, and your comments will be kept anonymous. If at any point in the interview you would like to stop, please let me know and I am happy to conclude the interview. Are you comfortable with proceeding with the interview?

Questions:

- Name and Job Title
- What were your job responsibilities in this role?
- How many months or years had you been in this role prior to March 2020?
- How was the shut-down and your own role communicated to you while the shut-down was happening?
- What was your supervisor's role in this process?
- How did your job responsibilities change or stay the same during the shut-down and subsequent months/weeks?
- What was your perception of what was expected of you and your peers?
- Describe your experience working and also completing academic classes during that time.
- Describe your experience with higher level administrators either in Housing or at the university during this time.

Conclude the interview:

Thank you very much for your willingness to participate in this interview. Should you want it, I am happy to send you a copy of the interview transcript so you can confirm you communicated what you wanted to communicate. I will send the transcript to your preferred email address should you desire a copy. Here is my contact information should there be any information you think of later that you'd like me to know. Thanks again.

VITA

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