Resident Assistants: Careful Selection and Training for Safer Dorms

Student handbooks often describe residence-hall life with terms like *enriching* and *fun*. While most dormitory residents would probably agree, resident assistants (RAs) might add the word *challenging*. Their work experiences highlight some of the most pressing safety issues that face a campus:

- Students suffering from depression, eating disorders, or other complex mental health problems.
- Residents potentially endangering themselves and others when they prop open doors or dismantle smoke detectors.
- Students engaging in risky alcohol consumption behaviors, such as binge drinking and underage consumption.
- Residents who become victims of stalking or other aggressive, threatening behaviors.

RAs Are on the Frontline

RAs are often on the frontline when resident students deal with these and other health and safety problems. If the RAs have been properly selected and trained, they can serve as an institution’s early warning system, alerting campus administrators to a potential problem before a tragedy occurs.

Having properly trained RAs to promote the safety of residents can reduce the possibility of tragic incidents and accidents — and costly litigation.

For example, in *Stanton et al. v. University of Maine System*, 73 A.2d 1045 (Me. 2001), a student in a high school soccer camp was sexually assaulted by a male friend who accompanied her back into the dormitory. The Supreme Court of Maine held that the university could be held liable if it failed to warn the student of potential threats to her safety. Although resident assistants were assigned to each dormitory floor, they did not meet with the soccer team to discuss campus safety rules and regulations. Furthermore, there were no signs posted in the dormitories warning residents not to admit nonstudents.

Following are some key items to consider including in your RA hiring-and-training process. The accompanying checklist highlights each of the steps.
Selecting the Right RAs

RAs are in a position of responsibility and often of stress. Not everyone can manage the challenges that go with the job. Consider choosing candidates with the following qualifications:

- Good academic and disciplinary records with the university or college.
- Demonstrated level of maturity and reliability in personal, professional, and academic relationships.
- Time management skills.
- Good character references from individuals familiar with the demands of the position.
- Prior, positive experience living in a residence hall.
- Desire to work with individuals and groups in a residence hall setting.

A thoughtful RA selection process includes a written application process, written character references, and an interview. As part of the application, candidates may be asked to provide a written statement that demonstrates their desire to be an RA as well as an example of how they have handled an interpersonal issue with maturity. The most insightful references are obtained when individuals are asked specific questions about the candidate’s maturity, time management skills, and general character.

An RA selection process that carefully screens candidates according to these criteria can lay the foundation for a strong network of resident assistants.

Training Programs for Today’s RA

RA training in community building, conflict resolution, and the development of healthy mentoring relationships with students will serve them well for most of their work. But they also need additional training in building safety and in dealing with students with health or behavior difficulties. Useful training might cover responses to building emergencies, identifying potentially troubled students and those with aggressive and threatening behavioral tendencies.

Building Safety

Security
In May 2004, the Boston CBS TV affiliate conducted an investigation into dormitory security in five Boston-area colleges.’ A reporter entered interior dorm rooms multiple times without permission at all the campuses visited.

RAs should have a thorough understanding of the school's procedures on visitors and security and should scrupulously observe them. At hall meetings they should remind residents about security issues, which may include, for example, propped
doors, locking room doors, and signing in visitors, to help increase residents’ awareness and safety.

Fire
Perhaps the most common structural risk facing college students living in dormitories is the threat of fire. There were 1,380 fires on campuses in 1998, the most recent statistics available. RA training that includes fire safety and building evacuation methods can save lives.

RAs who are trained to report such fire hazards as candles, overloaded electrical outlets, improperly maintained or used appliances, improperly altered structures, and dismantled smoke detectors can help minimize the risk of dorm fires. Should a fire or other emergency occur, however, RA training in building evacuation procedures and in holding evacuation drills can help speed residents’ timely and orderly evacuation. Include in training, though, the point that it is not part of the RA’s responsibility to enter or re-enter a burning building, a task best left to professional firefighters.

Identifying Students Who May Require Specialized Assistance

RAs are not likely to be trained or licensed clinicians nor is it essential for them to be so extensively trained that they can differentiate among psychological disorders. Rather, RAs should receive basic training in recognizing key signs that a resident may require specialized assistance, such as:

- Significant changes in sleep patterns or amounts.
- Significant changes in activity levels (hyperactivity, lethargy).
- Changes in diet, significant weight gain or loss.
- Significant changes in appearance.
- Increased irritability.
- Abrupt changes in friends and social group affiliations.
- Increased use of alcohol or drugs, or both.
- Participation in high-risk activities that may result in physical harm to self or others.
- Talking about death and/or suicide.

An RA’s job is not to give specialized assistance but to help the resident get it. Therefore, RAs should be familiar with such available student support services as the counseling center, student health center, alcohol education coordinator, and academic advising. They can suggest that a resident seek additional guidance from a center, and they may even accompany the resident there. In all instances where an RA suspects a student is experiencing difficulty, however, he or she should also inform professional residence life staff. Professional staff members should make decisions regarding a student’s health and safety.
**Aggressive and Threatening Behaviors**

Because of the fluidity of student life and relationships, stalking or other aggressive behaviors may be difficult to spot on a college campus. However, there are a few key signs that RAs can be trained to recognize:

- Continuous talk about someone in spite of that person’s apparent lack of interest; and persistent e-mail, phone, instant messaging contact despite limited or no interest from that person or his or her requests for no contact.
- Lingering outside dorm room, in halls, or in common areas for the person.
- Defacement or vandalism of the person’s property.
- Disparaging remarks to others about the person.
- Comments from residents about unwanted or undue interest or contacts.
- Threats, verbal and physical, made against the person.

If an RA surmises that a resident may be a victim of stalking or other aggressive behavior, the RA should reach out to the resident as well as immediately apprise professional residence life staff members of the situation. In those instances where the danger to a student’s safety appears imminent, RAs should contact campus security and/or local law enforcement officials directly in addition to informing professional residence life staff.

**Keeping the Student in Resident Assistant**

Don’t forget that RAs are also students with courses and outside interests. Among the leading causes of burnout among RAs is feeling stress over competing demands on their time.

Support systems to help RAs cope with stress can increase their effectiveness and help them better manage their busy lives. Such systems can include RA team-building activities, a support network of professional residence life staff members who are not their supervisors, and dedicated time away from their duties.

Service agreements with RAs that limit their outside employment, require pre-approval for certain extracurricular activities, and restrict academic course loads to no more than 15 or 16 hours, can also aid in keeping stress to a minimum.

A carefully selected and well trained RA who has professional support can help to make residence life an enriching and fun experience for all students.
## Resident Assistant Selection and Training Checklist

### Resident Assistant Selection

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<th></th>
<th>Yes</th>
<th>No</th>
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<td>1.</td>
<td>Good academic and disciplinary record with the university or college.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>Prior, positive experience living in a residence hall.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>Written application includes a request for a personal statement. Applicant’s response indicates a level of maturity and reliability in personal, professional, and academic relationships as well as a desire to work with individuals in a residence hall setting.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>Application process includes request for written references, with referrers being asked to address candidate’s maturity, character, and time management skills.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>Application process includes a candidate interview. Applicant demonstrates knowledge of residence hall life, including general safety, as well as maturity and time management skills.</td>
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### Resident Assistant Training

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<th>Yes</th>
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<td>1.</td>
<td>RAs are trained to include personal safety and building security reminders in hall meetings with residents.</td>
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<td>2.</td>
<td>RA training includes college/university dormitory visitor procedures and security.</td>
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<td>3.</td>
<td>RA training incorporates fire safety information, including recognition of fire hazards as well as building evacuation procedures.</td>
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<td>4.</td>
<td>RA training includes facilitating a mock building evacuation.</td>
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<td>5.</td>
<td>RAs receive training from counseling or other mental health professionals in identifying students who may require specialized assistance.</td>
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<td>6.</td>
<td>RAs are made familiar with the breadth and scope of support services available to students, including counseling services, academic assistance, and medical assistance (on campus as well as in the community).</td>
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<td>7.</td>
<td>RAs are required to inform professional residence life staff of students who may require specialized assistance.</td>
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<td>8.</td>
<td>RAs are made aware during training that they have a duty to the institution and to students’ health and safety that may supercede an individual student’s desires. (They may, for example, have to notify professional staff or security personnel of a threat or problem that a student would</td>
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rather have them ignore.)

9. RAs receive training throughout the year on a variety of student safety issues (fire safety, personal security, and sexual violence) to help ensure ongoing resident safety.

10. RAs receive training in:
   a. Community building.
   b. Conflict resolution.
   c. Mentoring relationships.

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<tr>
<th>Resident Assistant Support Systems</th>
<th>Yes</th>
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<tr>
<td>1. Outside employment limits are specified.</td>
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<td>2. Extracurricular activities require preapproval or are monitored.</td>
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<td>3. Academic course load limits are specified.</td>
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<td>4. Team-building activities are undertaken by the RA staff.</td>
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<td>5. Nonsupervisory residence life professionals serve as mentors to RAs.</td>
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<td>6. RAs are afforded dedicated time away from their duties.</td>
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<td>7. Professional residence life staff monitors RAs for burnout and stress.</td>
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<td>8. Ongoing training and development programs are provided.</td>
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Resources and References

American Psychological Association Topic: Depression
http://www.apa.org/topics/topic_depress.html

Association of College and University Housing Officers—International (ACUHO-I).
http://www.acuho.ohio-state.edu/index.html


Campus Firewatch, Internet Publication
http://www.campus-firewatch.com

CBS-4 Boston I-Team: Dormitory Security
http://cbs4boston.com/iteam/local_story_127154105.html

http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov.bjs


Mowrer, F.W. (1999). Fire safe student housing: A guide for campus housing administrators. FEMA Publication:

http://www.edfacilities.org/rl/fire_safety.cfm

National Fire Protection Association Fact Sheet: School, college, and university dormitory, fraternity, and sorority house fires.

Reslife.net: Information for college and university housing professionals
www.reslife.net

Select institution programs:

Carnegie Mellon University: Avoiding and Resolving Roommate Conflict
http://www.studentaffairs.cmu.edu/student-life/conflict.htm

Emory University: RA Employment
http://www.emory.edu/HOUSING/EMPLOY/ra_intro.html

Loyola University Chicago: The RA Passport Program
http://www.luc.edu/reslife/current/inservices.html

Oregon State University: Conflict Resolution and Mediation Program
http://oregonstate.edu/admin/stucon/conflict.htm

Stanford University: Becoming a Resident Assistant
http://www.stanford.edu/dept/resed/Staff/RA/BecomingRA.html

Texas A&M University: RA Position Description and Terms of Employment
http://reslife.tamu.edu/download/jobs/student/ra.pdf

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