RESIDENT ASSISTANT TRAINING DESIGN: 
A NARRATIVE ANALYSIS

A thesis presented 
by 
Kimberly Joy McConnell

to 
the Graduate School of Education

In partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of 
Doctor of Education 
in the field of 
Higher Education Administration 

College of Professional Studies 
Northeastern University 
Boston, Massachusetts 
February 2018
Abstract

The Resident Assistant (RA) position is arguably the most demanding and time-intensive student leadership position on a university campus with responsibilities that include crisis management, counseling, referral, administrative tasks, teaching, leadership, community building, individual student assistance and role modeling (Blimling, 2003). The critical functions of the Resident Assistant role necessitate training with appropriate breadth and depth to prepare them for their role; “because of the importance of the RA role, high quality and effective training is imperative” (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2011, p.13).

This qualitative narrative study examined the experiences of five residence life practitioners whose experience with Resident Assistant training design ranged from 9-17 years. Participants each represented different institution types including a specialized institution of higher education, a large public institution, a small private religiously-affiliated institution, a mid-sized public institution and a gender-specific institution. Each participant was interviewed twice and data were analyzed using holistic, in vivo and evaluative coding.

The analysis produced five primary research-based themes for Resident Assistant training design with an additional twenty-five sub-themes. These primary themes included holistic approach to the training design process, training session considerations within training design, alignment of training to the unique needs of the Resident Assistants receiving the training, logistical considerations in training design and use of assessment in training design.
Holistically, these considerations provide a robust set of items that training designers can reflect on and assess in their training design process to maximize opportunities and thoroughly prepare a well-designed Resident Assistant training. Additional recommendations include future research opportunities and the suggestion that a maintained inventory of research-based findings for Resident Assistant training could provide a professional standard for the assessment and development of Resident Assistant training and a useful tool for current higher education professionals working with Resident Assistant training design.
# Table of Contents

Abstract ........................................................................................................................................... 2  

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY ................................................................. 8  
  Rationale and Significance ............................................................................................................. 10  
  Research Problem and Research Question ..................................................................................... 11  
  Definition of Key Terminology .................................................................................................... 12  
  Theoretical Framework .................................................................................................................. 12  
  Relational Theory .......................................................................................................................... 13  
  Critics of Relational Theory ......................................................................................................... 14  
  Rationale ....................................................................................................................................... 14  
  Application of Theory .................................................................................................................... 23  

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW ............................................................................... 24  
  Contextualizing Residential Programs and the Resident Assistant Role ................................. 25  
    Historical Context ....................................................................................................................... 25  
    National Context ......................................................................................................................... 29  
    Global Context ............................................................................................................................ 34  
  Resident Assistant Role and Culture ............................................................................................ 36  
  Summation ..................................................................................................................................... 40  

Training Design .............................................................................................................................. 41  
  Active Learning Training Techniques ............................................................................................. 41  
  Other Training Techniques ............................................................................................................ 44
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

Resident Assistants are traditionally undergraduate students responsible for crisis management, counseling, referral, administrative tasks, teaching, leadership, community building, individual student assistance and role modeling (Blimling, 2003). As paraprofessionals Resident Assistants must manage both their own full-time academic course load and their work as essential personnel for crisis response and retention. Resident Assistants are often first responders and decision makers for crises including severe injury or death. The critical functions of the Resident Assistant role necessitate training with appropriate breadth and depth to prepare them for their role; “because of the importance of the RA role, high quality and effective training is imperative” (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2011, p.13).

The Resident Assistant (RA) position is arguably the most emotionally-demanding and time-intensive student leadership position on a university campus. Resident Assistants are usually undergraduate students (college sophomores, juniors or seniors) who live within the residential area they supervise, for easier access by the residents they serve, and they often work unpredictable hours to meet the needs of their residents. Resident Assistants provide peer leadership, enforce university policies and state and federal law, build community, serve as referral agents in helping residents connect to each other and university resources, design and implement programs within the hall and ensure the safety of the residents residing within the residential community.

As residential programs continue to develop nationally, there are expectations for topical and legal training inclusions to prepare students for this important role. Indeed, as the Resident Assistant role evolves to become both more complex and more ambiguous (Elleven, Allen & Wircenski, 2001), effective training for this population becomes increasingly critical. Murray,
Snider and Midkiff (1999) commented on the “weighty responsibilities placed upon R.A.s” (p. 744) and in a study of training influence on job performance for Resident Assistants shared “the findings of the study suggest that even short term training interventions can bring about favorable outcomes in R.A.s’ behaviors on the job” (p. 746). With the significance and effectiveness of training for this population established, it becomes important to look at what this needed and influential training entails.

Research on training design has traditionally included training methods, training topics, training environment and assessment (Namasivayam, Conklin & Zhao, 2005). Training design is complex and to be intentional must also include trainers’ preparedness and/or skillset, the format for the delivery of information, timeframe and timing of training, and even the affective mindset of the trainees (Bell & Kozlowski, 208; Laff, 2007; Namasivayam, Conklin & Zhao, 2005; Sels, 2002; Velada, Caetano, Lyons & Kavanaugh, 2007). While topical inclusions for Resident Assistant training design have been studied for efficacy and impact, no studies were found on the practice of designing Resident Assistant training or into the considerations that could be addressed in design choices.

The evolution of job requirements and expectations for the Resident Assistant since the early 1960s has been remarkable. Early RAs dealt with intoxicated residents, roommate conflicts, noise complaints, and visitation violations. Later, the topics of alcohol abuse, drug education, social and cultural programming, physical and mental health topics, and emerging student development theories were added to staff orientations and training.
Today, the typical residence life professional staff who are charged with creating training programs, face new challenges as RAs deal with designer drugs, cutting and self-mutilation, campus crime reporting, hate speech, “students at risk,” domestic violence, and issues within electronic communities. Our Resident Assistants are also expected to have a basic understanding of college normative behavior theory, service learning, citizenship, academic support services, cultural diversity, leadership styles, “the first-year experience,” “the sophomore experience,” and “the transfer student experience” (Chitwood, 2008, p. 260-261).

With such a growing expectation of skill-level and service to the residential students they serve, Resident Assistants face an increasingly-challenging role and require a training that adequately prepares them to meet the responsibilities expected of them.

**Rationale and Significance**

This study adds to existing research and literature by examining not what is present in Resident Assistant training design, but the process and considerations involved in designing contemporary Resident Assistant training. While literature existed regarding Resident Assistant roles and culture, research on training design (not specific to Resident Assistant training) and topical inclusions of Resident Assistant training, no targeted research on the design process and decision-making for Resident Assistant training was found. The dearth of contemporary literature on Resident Assistant training justified further research into evidence-based considerations for contemporary Resident Assistant training design. This research provides
insight into the intentional choices and considerations that need to be made in Resident Assistant training design. By conducting a study into significant considerations for Resident Assistant training design, the limitations and gaps that currently exist in training design information for this population is partially addressed, and a stronger framework for understanding contemporary needs and practices for the training of Resident Assistants is provided.

**Research Problem and Research Question**

While it is easy to understand the importance of effective training for Resident Assistants, the dearth of information on what equates effective training design for Resident Assistants was problematic. Resident Assistants can be and often are first responders and decision makers at crises including serious injury and student death. With such a high level of crisis response, further research into this topic to identify research-based considerations for Resident Assistant training was seen as crucial (Elleven, Allen & Wircenski, 2001).

The Resident Assistant (RA) position is arguably the most time-intensive and emotionally-demanding student leadership position on a college or university campus (Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2011). Effective training of Resident Assistants is critical to their success (Roussel & Elleven, 2009). The purpose of this research was to gain a thorough, evidence-based and accurate understanding for Resident Assistant training design. Contemporary significant considerations for Resident Assistant training design were defined within this study as currently-used and anticipated training design practices for pre-term Resident Assistant training, which could be used by residence life practitioners who have primary responsibility for Resident
Assistant training design at their respective institutions. This study was limited to pre-service training in order to provide a specific focus and because pre-service training is likely to be the most consistent form of training across institutions. The question researched in this study was “What are the significant considerations for contemporary Resident Assistant training design?”

Definition of Key Terminology

**Resident Assistant** -- full-time undergraduate college or university student who lives on a residence hall floor with the students they are assigned to advise; interchangeable with Resident Advisor

**Residence Hall** -- on-campus housing for college and university students; to include not only traditional corridor-style double rooms with community bathrooms but all on-campus housing including on-campus suite and apartment-style housing

**Resident Assistant training** -- pre-term training; specifically the training prior to the fall semester of the academic year

Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework is the lens or viewpoint which focuses and orients a study and which, if applied appropriately, affects all aspects of the study from how the literature is analyzed, to methodology of data collection to examining results and identifying findings (Anfara & Mertz, 2006). This study utilized relational theory to concentrate the study of significant considerations for Resident Assistant training design on relational influences that drive the decision-making process of training designers. Anfara and Mertz commented that they
see “the role of theory in qualitative research as basic, central and foundational, whether consciously realized or even identified. It influences the way the researcher approaches the study and pervades all aspects of the study” (2006, p. 189). Accordingly, this study was focused and framed by relational theory, which will subsequently be explored beginning with the development of relational theory, moving into a thorough description of the theory, then reviewing critics of relational theory, and finally exploring the rationale for and application of relational theory to this study.

**Relational Theory**

Relational theory developed from the research of female psychoanalysts Melanie Klein and Karen Horney between 1920 and 1940 as shift from individualistic developmental models such as Freud’s psychosexual development model to reviewing relationships as contextualized with relation of self to environment as important in both the process and as a goal (Freedberg, 2015). Freedberg credited Horney as further evolving relational theory in finding meaning from the larger cultural and social context rather than limiting meaning to a dyadic encounter (Freedberg, 2015). This is noteworthy as it is an outgrowth of the self-relational context proposed by Klein, and the broader focus on cultural and environmental context is an essential component of contemporary relational theory.

In 1940, Harry Stack Sullivan built on the work of Klein and Horney to address the relation of self to others, finding an inextricable link between humans and the interpersonal fields surrounding them (Freedberg, 2010), which Erik Erikson also emphasized. The balance between
analysis of self and recognition of contextual influence (environment and relationships) form the foundation of relational theory. Because this study assesses considerations for contemporary Resident Assistant training design, relational perspective is substantial in focusing on the environment and environmental factors of training design in context with the Resident Assistants who are being trained. Contextual influence is also important to understanding the decision making of the trainers as they move through the decision-making process of training design.

**Critics of Relational Theory**

L’Abate made an argument for the weaknesses of relational theory, because it must “not only must be valid empirically but also must be applicable to preventative and clinical practices” (p. 781) and it must fulfill the four tenants of theory building and testing namely verifiability, applicability, fruitfulness and redundancy (L’Abate, 2009). L’Abate combined relational theory and relational-cultural theory (RCT) for his critique of the theory and notes the major shortcoming is its lack of validity. Because of the context specificity of research in relational theory, validity is difficult to determine when utilizing relational theory. Because this study assessed relational significance in training design decision-making, relational theory was a viable and appropriate selection for theoretical framework for the study.

**Rationale**

David Blustein applied relational theory specifically within the work context and noted (2010) “a number of recent initiatives have sought to shift the focus from individualistic and somewhat deterministic views of vocational behavior to more context-bound perspectives”
(Blustein, 2010, p. 3), finding a “shifting context [that] will require different conceptual and practice tools that can help individuals find support, meaning and resources to cope with uncertainty and stress” (Blustein, 2010, p.4). Blustein’s work is important for the application of relational theory to Resident Assistant training design because of the joint focus on work environment, preparedness and support. As a “logical extension of the psychology of working with its focus on the full gamut of working people, its emphasis on the psychological experience of working and its affirmation of the relational and community framework that defines the nature of working” (Blustein, 2010, p.4), the argument is that relational theory is “characterized by a dramatic shift in the figure/ground relationship of the individual and his/her context” (2010, p. 14). Perhaps most directly applicable to this study, relational theory includes such ambiguous relations as the need for peer support in unstable or unpredictable work environments (Blustein, 2010). In considerations such as the unpredictability of the Resident Assistant role (for example, crisis and emergency response) it is easy to see where the relation between people, environment and context form an important piece of how and why training is designed the way it is within each institution and department, and why relational theory frames this study effectively.

This concept of environmental and contextual influence is important when working with people, and Resident Assistant training is designed for people (specifically, Resident Assistants) to learn and gain knowledge/skill-sets that they can then apply on the job. Contextual influences for training may include considering “person in environment” as an example of the “consonance between contemporary relational theory and classical social work values” (Segal, 2013, p. 376)
to focus on where the student is with regards to preparedness and ability to participate in the training (Segal, 2013). For example, if a Resident Assistant learns that a loved one is in the hospital during training it could reasonably be assumed to have an effect on their emotional focus and ability to retain information. Similarly, a training designer may adjust the process by which they design training based on environmental circumstances that are either currently affecting the campus or that have personally impacted the training designer in the past. When attempting to identify “significant considerations” for training design, the significance of the considerations is identified within the relational context of the research process and from the perspectives and lived experiences of current practitioners.

Narrative research itself is relational. It is a relationship between the researcher and the individual narrating to cooperatively make meaning from the stories shared. Relational theory holds “individuals in the context of their environments, yet it also attends to the processes through which individuals internalize experiences of self, other, and environment—and how those internal models play out” (Segal, 2013, p. 376). Simpson, in a study on using relational theory for information technology implementation, posited that “research and practice in IS may end up being less about truth claims or philosophical revelations and, instead, ultimately about the need to create certain realities given complex, inter-disciplinary, inter-philosophical perspectives” (2014). The complex dynamics at play in determining significant considerations both from the narrator’s own perspective and from the researcher’s interpretation of the narrative both support relational theory as a theoretical framework as it provides an appropriate context for
viewing and meaning-making. Malove gave an example of the interplay of relational theory in practice from her perspective as a clinician that based on the premise of mutual influence, the clinician responds from her own relationship history in a manner that undoubtedly affects the client’s response (Aron, 1996). When the clinician can recognize and name these feelings, she provides insight into both the client’s and the clinician’s inner world (2014, p. 6).

This matches the argument made by Bond that interpersonal processes and biology work in a cycle of mutual influence in the relational model, with natural flexibility to account for modification of previous behavioral patterns or schemas (2008).

A narrative qualitative approach is by nature relational, as it develops in dialogue, shared stories and the interpretation of the shared stories between the narrator and researcher. “What is deemed of value is not universally agreed on. In fact, value has innumerable and incongruous sociocultural determinants and manifestations” (Bolholm & Corvellec, 2011, p. 178), but by working as a researcher in cooperation with each narrator, a more accurate representation will develop of what each narrator thinks are significant considerations for training design. With the foundation of a narrative theoretical framework, this study sought to explore what decisions drive the process of designing Resident Assistant training. This framework provided context for statements which might otherwise be misleading and guided the follow-up questions and additional information solicited throughout the process.
Relational theory also matches well to training design as a process. Maier and Fadel, in their 2009 study applying relational theory to engineering design, highlighted the significance of interplay between multiple dimensions of design work. For example, when designing a stacking chair the designer is looking not only at an individual chair design, but also how it stacks with another chair of the same design, as well as costs and manufacturing factors, the environment, the expectations of the overall organization, meeting established laws and regulations regarding production and sound design as well as the interplay of designer creativity and production, user desires and the artifacts (chairs) themselves.

Figure 1 illustrates this point and the complicated interplay of multiple factors and influences in the design of an artifact such as a chair (Maier & Fadel, 2009, p. 19). Relational theory provides a context for both referencing and understanding the variate levels at play in the chair design, and similarly can provide a rich context for understanding and meaning-making from the narratives shared in the interview process. Inserting training as the artifact being influenced in this study provides an example of how relational theory framed the study. It was necessary to understand the background and influences of each narrator before attempting to analyze the data collected because context not only influenced but drove the training design choices made by the
interviewees. Maier and Fadel also pointed out that “An artifact–user affordance expresses an interactive relationship between an artifact and a user where a behavior may occur between the artifact and user that neither the artifact nor the user could manifest alone” (2009, p. 22). This underscores the argument for the strong match between relational theory and a qualitative narrative approach and gives credence to the shared meaning that can be created and understood between the narrator and researcher.

Relational theory also complements a study on training design. Segal (2013) discussed the role of relational theory in social work and how “in a climate wherein funding sources often predefine outcomes and service content, a relational approach to programming might require administrators to advocate for more flexible outcome measures and service delivery methods” (p. 381). Segal further discusses how the relational approach can be institutionalized in the form of “reflective supervision, knowledge-building around intersubjectivity, and efforts to create organizational climates that minimize social distance between individuals” (2013, p. 382). Like social work, the work of a Resident Assistant is hands-on and relational, and it meets both the common and unique needs of students. Resident Assistants must also be flexible and adaptive in working with residents and how they adapt the services they provide. A Resident Assistant may hear forceful yelling and approach a situation assuming they will be confronting a policy violation only to discover residents trapped in a room with a door that is not working or a resident who has fallen and needs medical assistance; in these instances, a Resident Assistant must adapt in the moment to provide the appropriate response. Resident Assistant training
prepares Resident Assistants with protocols and procedures which, combined with critical thinking skills, can be adapted and employed to perform their job functions. As such, relational theory matches both the job responsibilities and training needs of Resident Assistants in their need to understand protocols and job performance expectations within the contexts of the environments and circumstances they might encounter.

The Resident Assistant position is a social one. As its name implies, the job of the Resident Assistant is to assist residents, and the position exists as a function of providing services to students, it is a social and relational position, which is another reason relational theory complements this study. Social life is composed of connective relationships and the symbols and practices that correspond to those relationships (Bolholm & Corvellec, 2011). Vaandering compared the dominant Western perspectives of individualistic equality with the perspective of relational equality, which is defined as “an organic living view of people and the world that is at the heart of relational restorative justice” (2014, p. 514) in a restorative justice assessment. The positive long-term impact of relational restorative justice, and working with individuals who have violated a social contract by helping them understand context and impact on others, can create long-term behavioral changes (Vaandering, 2014). Building a hall or floor community is a standard component of the Resident Assistant role, as is policy enforcement; and topical training for Resident Assistant staff covers expectations and protocols for both with flexibility for a Resident Assistant to adapt responses based on the context of their area, within the guidelines provided.
Finally, training design for Resident Assistants is inherently complex, from logistical considerations to multiple and potentially-diverse topical inclusions, as well as the users and presenters themselves coming to the training with different levels of experience and knowledge. The interplay between the training designers/presenters, the Resident Assistants, and the other considerations creates a complex web to be navigated; and relational theory provides a structure for perceiving that complexity. Maier and Fadel recommended use of relational theory for understanding design specific to engineering, but the argument can be made that the application of relational theory is transferrable to design of training for Resident Assistants as well. Maier and Fadel noted that:

such a relational theory should mirror those currently developed in mathematics, physics, computer science, and even philosophy. We develop a relational theory for design based on the concept of affordances from perceptual psychology. Affordances help to explain the entanglement between designers, users, and artifacts—relationships that are not currently handled by function based approaches to design (2009, p. 13).

Design also includes determining what should be created, assessing alternatives, the factors over which a training designer may have no choice; other theories are insufficient to encompass all areas of the design process (Maier & Fadel, 2009).

Using relational theory created context within the study for understanding the complexity and interplay of the ascertained themes. The environmental and relational focus of this theory was appropriate for making meaning and identifying the contemporary factors influencing
training design for Resident Assistants even in instances of the identified training strategies and considerations being used differently between institutions. Relational theory was used to focus the problem of practice on the context and relationships that drive training design decision-making.

Application of Theory

The primary tenet of relational theory is the relationship between subject and other (environment, relationships and people, culture, etc.). The purpose of this research study was to gain a thorough and accurate understanding of considerations for Resident Assistant training design. Utilizing relational theory as the foundational theory for this study was grounded in an environmental and relationship-oriented context to provide rationale for decision-making in training design for this critical student employment position.
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW

Resident Assistants are responsible for holistically supporting peers while living within their residential community as undergraduate students. Resident Assistants provide peer leadership, enforce university policies and state and federal laws, build community, serve as referral agents in helping residents connect to each other and to university resources, design and implement programs within the hall, and ensure the safety of the residents within the residential community. Consistent competencies or training areas addressed in Resident Assistant training include building community, role modeling, planning and executing programming, administrative tasks, disseminating information, maintaining a safe and secure physical environment, explaining and enforcing policy, peer leadership, and assessing resident needs. Other competencies include acting as a mediator and emergency/crisis responder, as a referral agent, providing personal help to residents, and keeping residents informed (Elleven, Allen & Wircenski, 2001; Roussel & Elleven, 2009; Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2011). These competencies are ubiquitous in residential programming (Roussel & Elleven, 2009) and create a comparative baseline for understanding basic training needs of Resident Assistants. As residential programs continue to develop nationally, there are more expectations for topical and legal training inclusions to prepare students for this important role. Indeed, as the Resident Assistant role becomes both more complex and more ambiguous (Elleven, Allen & Wircenski, 2001), training for this population becomes increasingly critical.

The literature studied to holistically frame this study addressed the role and culture of Resident Assistants, training design and studies specifically correlated with Resident Assistant training as they relate to research-based considerations for Resident Assistant training design. The literature focused first on the historical, national and global context of residential programs
and Resident Assistants, then addressed generalized training design, and finally assessed specific training considerations for Resident Assistant training from the literature. Through these strands, the literature review provides a foundation for understanding and contextualizing contemporary Resident Assistant training design.

**Contextualizing Residential Programs and the Resident Assistant Role**

To understand the context of contemporary residential programs and the Resident Assistant role, it is important to look at historical, national and global contexts for the development and framing of the Resident Assistant role within residential programs. The Resident Assistant position developed out of the English university tradition of co-curricular support of a university’s academic mission and this analysis provides the rationale for the continued existence and importance of this paraprofessional student leadership role in both affect and effect. Both similarities and differences exist in student housing and on-campus staffing models globally, which provides an argument for limiting this study to higher education in countries influenced by the English model for consistent reflection of significant considerations.

**Historical Context**

**Middle Ages.** On-campus living or residence halls began in the Middle Ages with “wandering students flocking to universities in Bologna, Paris and Oxford” (Blimling, 2003, p. 23). Thousands of homeless young men created problems for the small cities housing institutions of higher education, and in reaction student housing was formed (Silver, 2004). Housing was initially provided through schoolmasters offering accommodations within their own
homes, from in-town rental properties and in self-governing houses. By the mid-1400s student housing accommodations were “under the control of university authorities” (Blimling, 2003, p. 23). In fact, the terms halls and colleges came from the original student self-governing houses at Oxford and evolved into what was known as dormitories at Oxford and Cambridge. The word dormitory was in reference to the fact that these residences were merely places students to sleep, though they were included in the collegiate system that focused on “building a student’s character and intellect to develop a member of the English gentry who was both a scholar and a gentleman” (Blimling, 2003, p. 25).

**Early American higher education.** Like other countries, including Spain (Canales, 2012) American higher education was strongly influenced by English precedent in its early on-campus housing. In America, initial residence halls had a strong focus on housing students, many only 13 or 14 years of age, who were traveling from great distances to attend their college, rather than on character development. Unlike English colleges, American colleges required faculty oversight of residential living and were focused primarily on student discipline. Dueling, stabbing and stoning deaths by and of students contributed to the “infamy that sustained the collegiate way” (Blimling, 2003, p. 25) in the nineteenth century. By the turn of the century, with a greater number of colleges and universities and less stringent expectations by clerics for behavior and compulsory attendance at events, violence began to dissipate but facilities began to show wear. “Ill-kept, disheveled, rat-infested, and dilapidated are appropriate adjectives to describe college-owned student housing in the late 1800’s” (Blimling, 2003, p. 26).
The rebirth of student housing began at Yale in the early twentieth-century with an attempt to return to the English system educating on both character and intellect. Women’s colleges began to develop in the late nineteenth century; these were all residential and between 1910 to 1930 appointment began at men’s colleges of Deans of Men. The addition of Deans, in addition to the reactionary response of providing a healthier influence than fraternity housing (Duffy, 1977) helped grow the residential system.

1930s-1980s. In the 1930s the growing residential system reached a turning point and began to shift focus from providing a dormitory experience to making a home for students and becoming an integral part of campus life. During World War II the officer programs on campuses increased enrollment and served as an incentive for the building of additional residence facilities. The GI Bill continued to encourage increasing enrollment and housing demand after the war ended. The 1950s were known as a “transitionless period” (Blimling, 2003, p. 34) and buildings lost aesthetic appeal but introduced residence counselors or hall directors to serve students in the halls. The 10 years after the National Defense Education Act of 1958 saw doubled enrollments on college campuses with corresponding increased demand for housing and growing student rebellion surrounding the Vietnam War. At that time residence hall counselors and undergraduate students, serving as peer counselors or Resident Assistants (RAs), accepted as their principal roles that of counselor and advisor. They were educated in understanding the psychology problems of college
students, in drug-use intervention, suicide prevention, counseling skills, and similar psychosocial and developmental issues (Blimling, 2003, p. 37).

The 1960s also saw a large influx of black and other minority students with urgent and unique educational and housing needs (Duffy, 1977).

It was in this time frame that living-learning programs began to develop and research was developed, demonstrating the effect of peer group and peer leaders on living environment, satisfaction and academic achievement (Duffy, 1977). This initiated peer education and leadership in student services began, crediting Resident Assistants with increasing residential satisfaction, social development, academic performance and persistence and retention (Ganser & Kennedy, 2012). At this time student services as a field became professionalized and this formalized the paraprofessional Resident Assistant role. In the 1970s residence halls became popular for their affordability. In the 1980s popularity began to decline as students asserted the need for greater autonomy. It could be argued that “perhaps no aspect of institutionalized housing in the history of America has a longer or more diversified past than that of college housing” (Duffy, 1997), speaking to the significance of college housing programs and the role of Resident Assistants in adapting to the adjusting needs of collegiate students over the decades.

**Contemporary residential programs.** Moving into the twenty-first century, students began to demand more from their residence halls in regards to amenities, multiculturalism, support with student mental health issues, and prevention and intervention of incidents of violence. From 1800 when dormitories were referred to as “the secret nurseries of every vice
and the cages of unclean birds” (Duffy, 1977) to current centers of student development and learning, the transformation has been substantial. Residential programs accordingly began to offer more intentional learning curricula and communities of learning (Blimling, 2003). Resident Assistants are seen as critical in delivering these services to students. In fact, “experts who study the changing characteristics of students are finding that today’s students, often called ‘Millennials’, require additional peer support” (Ganser & Kennedy, 2012, p. 24). Between Millennial students, the growing number of publicly self-identified lesbian gay bisexual and transgender students, and an increasing number of international students attending American colleges and universities as globalization spreads, peer support for residential students is perhaps more needed than ever.

National Context

Several key factors must be addressed to understand the national context of Resident Assistants. The context for understanding the position on a national level will include traditional student housing and the growing need and use of Resident Assistants with privatized housing and community colleges. Training needs for American Resident Assistants include the ability to work with diverse accommodations or facilities, considerations around timing of employment and academic class standing, burn-out, curricular and student development responsibilities, affect and effect of self-authorship training, inclusion of traditional training topics with contemporary tools and data and finally ethical considerations with training design.
**Privatized housing.** While Resident Assistants were historically employed at four-year public and private institutions of higher education, economics has led to the development of privatized on-campus housing where Resident Assistants are still a staffing feature offered. Privatized on-campus housing companies, such as Campus Advantage and Capstone On-Campus, have been growing since the turn of the twenty-first century (Campus Advantage, 2015; Capstone On-Campus, 2015) in reaction to enrollment increases and funding challenges. These companies manage on-campus housing complexes, and while they have a focused business-approach, these companies still include Resident Assistants within the structure and amenities they provide. Resident Assistants within privatized housing may be responsible for office duties, to maintain safety and security of the complex, and for facility support and programming (Campus Advantage, 2015; Capstone On-Campus, 2015), very similar to Resident Assistants in university-run housing and residential life departments.

**Community Colleges.** Community colleges have traditionally been commuter schools, but they are a type of institution that is slowly integrating residential life programs onto their campuses, particularly in the southeast where they are popular for rural areas with a low population density, as a measure to augment student development and in some cases to offer “a true college experience” (Moeck, Hardy, Katinas & Leech, 2007, p.331). Ninety-four percent of community colleges that offer housing note the housing as a key factor for increased full-time enrollments (Bekurs, 2007). Other advantages to offering on-campus housing include increased
student diversity and access, ameliorating the “missing male” imbalance and extending academic program diversity (Moeck et al., 2007, p. 331).

In two-year community colleges where “the expertise and infrastructure for supporting student residential facilities and the programs that link them to the curriculum simply do not exist,” staff may find themselves expanding the Resident Assistant role and responsibilities to fill infrastructure or staffing gaps, necessitating substantial training for Resident Assistants as a function of success (Saffin, 2002, p. 43-44). For these institutions, the paraprofessional Resident Assistants are filling a need that otherwise would not allow for program support to students.

**Non-traditional housing.** While the “use of the word dormitory is inappropriate to describe contemporary residence halls because these facilities are now used for studying, socializing, educational programs, and other activities in addition to sleep” (Blimling, 2003, p. 24), new challenges have arisen from the diversification of on-campus living accommodation options. On any given style of campus (traditional, four-year, two-year, public, private, privatized) different living options may exist for students. These provide a training design challenge for supervisors of Resident Assistants, and require intentional tailoring.

Another consideration is the influence of physical layout and style of residential housing on student perceptions of belonging. For example, a study comparing corridor-style living to suite-style living for first-year students found that introverted students in community-style living are at risk for feeling alienated (Rodger & Johnson, 2005). Additionally, the high level of peer interaction in corridor-style living (where double rooms line either side of the corridor with
shared community bathrooms centrally located) may be detrimental compared to suite-style living because of the stress from overcrowding, and a lack of established sense of belonging in the community. In this style of residential living environment it is suggested that “activities that focus on creating a symbiotic living and learning environment where learning and academic pursuits are part of life outside the regular classroom could create a community of learners who, according to the results of this study, may be feeling left out” (Rodger & Johnson, 2005, p. 95). This establishes a training need for recognizing the differences of style of living accommodations even within the same campus.

**Staffing.** Timing is a key factor for consideration when designing Resident Assistant training, as well. With student paraprofessional staff, annual turnover tends to be high (Cardone, Turton, Olson & Baxter, 2013) and most students are only eligible to be employed as Resident Assistants for 2-3 years. With a rapid turnover in staffing, training must be designed for both new and returning staff. Terms of employment (semester, fall/spring employment, annual employment) are also considerations for training design. Class standing of current staff can also impact performance, as noted in the study by Schaller and Wagner (2007) which discussed specific challenges and stressors experienced by sophomores, exacerbated by holding the peer leadership position of Resident Assistant. Recognizing these challenges and addressing them with topical presentations and intentional follow up and support is recommended to bolster these students.
The timing of the student population is yet another concern. If the campus has a residency requirement at all, what does that entail? Whether students are required to live on campus their first year, two years, all four years (Cardone et al., 2013) will have an impact on the training needs of Resident Assistants as well. First-year students require Resident Assistants with high levels of helping skills who serve as a gateway to campus resources, connection and belonging. Upper-class Resident Assistants have a stronger focus on providing life-skills and resource access for transition out of the university setting. Training design must also teach Resident Assistants how to address the specific needs of the students of specific academic class standing.

Current Resident Assistants (RAs) live among the students they serve and are seen as being available seven days a week, 24 hours a day and so have an increased effect in their resource role for students. The nature of the Resident Assistant position requires that student paraprofessionals live in the hall or community environment with the residential students they are charged with supporting. Live-in staff are at high risk for burn-out (Belch & Mueller, 2003). This is an important concept for training design, and for topical inclusion to maximize the benefit and effectiveness of the paraprofessionals receiving the training.

Learning and development. Current national trends include living-learning curriculum, learning partnerships and self-authorship. “Beyond mere acquisition of knowledge and skills, liberal education outcomes require that students become increasingly complex in how they ‘make sense’ of knowledge, themselves and their relationships with others” (Cardone, Turton,
This movement towards self-authorship and residential curriculum use Resident Assistants in their role as peer leaders to act as a bridge in this process of self-awareness development with residential students (Cardone et al., 2013).

There is also a responsibility to work with paraprofessionals on their own leadership development and self-authorship beyond teaching them to support development and growth for their residential students. Competence is a consideration factor for training design, and emotional intelligence theory is recommended to both predict success of Resident Assistants and to gauge their training needs (Jaeger & Casion, 2006; Wu & Stemler, 2008). Training is proven to be effective for productive behaviors (Murray, Snider & Midkiff, 1999) and less effective for addressing counter-productive behaviors, which are better managed in individual conversations with the paraprofessional. Student development theories are also recommended to gauge and develop student leadership. It has been demonstrated using pre-service and in-service training that returning Resident Assistants are not statistically more developed than new candidates (Utterback, Barbieri and Solinger, 1990), but levels of leadership development and individual skills and needs may be important in assessing training needs. This context provides a foundation for understanding the importance of leadership training and competence in Resident Assistant training design.

**Global Context**

Globally, student housing and the student development component that Resident Assistants are so instrumental in implementing came from the English system. Student housing
influenced by the German universities tends to focus on recognition of family needs due to life-stage, the low economic status of most students, and the temporary nature of student housing resulting in lower quality accommodations. Norwegian student housing concerns focus on aesthetic, maintenance and special qualities (Thomsen, 2007), rather than student development. Considerations of space are a priority in Hong Kong’s urban student residences (Ng, 2005), and in Nigeria, similarly focusing on building space, territoriality and privacy in overcrowded student housing (Amole, 2005). American universities also face space and overcrowding issues, but with trained paraprofessional Resident Assistant staff are designed to better facilitate those conditions and to maximize their benefit.

At the University of Tartu in Estonia, support services are still new and housing is primarily outsourced (Herdlein, O’Hern & Kukemelk, 2006, p. 40). In Australia, on-campus residential staff are in-house professional staff members who appoint students to act as representatives to liaise between the managers and students (Paltridge, Mayson & Schapper, 2010, p. 357). At Kuwait University, a more comparable residential program to the American system exists, with cultural gender-specific needs requiring hall staff to be aware and responsive to both verbal and nonverbal gender communications (Al Kandari, 2007). In contrast to other literature reviewed, “campus residence was not shown to benefit Taiwanese college students’ leadership capacity, particularly to male students” (Wu, 2011, p. 650). This is in direct opposition to findings in Western literature, and may prove that the study of significant
considerations for Resident Assistants should be limited to Western culture or institutions that evolved from the English university tradition.

**Resident Assistant Role and Culture**

Understanding the role and culture of the Resident Assistant position is a foundation for understanding the range of training that is necessary for the position to be successful (Aamodt, 1981; Boswinkel, 1987; Denzine & Anderson, 1999; Deluga, 1991; Evans, Reason & Broido, 2001; Hetherinton & Phelps, 1989; Komives, 1991; Magolda & Abowitz, 1997). Resident Assistants are responsible for crisis and emergency response, for referral, for community development, for implementing programs within their halls, for building individual relationships that will aid in student retention, for completing administrative tasks and for working as members of a team.

“**Living-in.**” Resident Assistant burnout is common, and the live-in factor of working in a position where work hours could be instigated at any time of the day or night by a knock on your door exacerbates this burnout. While attempts to address proactive strategies for reducing stress and burnout have been addressed (Hetherinton & Phelps, 1989), it is generally accepted that the position is highly stressful because of its multi-function nature and live-in requirement. Both of these factors contribute to creating a unique culture among Resident Assistants.

**Training programs.** Resident Assistants often begin in the position by attending a 1-2 week training program. Programs can vary from 8-12 hours of work responsibility a day (including formal presentations and in-hall time to complete preparation tasks for the year).
After training is complete, staff then work in teams that meet regularly. Teams are usually designated by location (building or area of campus) that the Resident Assistants live and work in. Due to the intensity of the time spent within these Resident Assistant staff teams, RA cohesiveness becomes a cultural element with high impact on RA performance (Deluga, 1991). RA cohesiveness has been identified as having a strong correlation to high levels of job satisfaction (Deluga, 1991). The case can be made that the cohesiveness and effectiveness of the Resident team(s) becomes a functional training area of its own.

**Tribal behavior.** The Resident Assistant position is designed to assist residential students; and, as such, RAs live within the same floor or building community as the residents they serve. Magolda & Abowitz (1997) discussed the tribal behavior that forms from both the residential communities and among Resident Assistant teams. Within residential communities Resident Assistants often take primary responsibility for community building and for “creating a family-like closeness” (Magolda & Abowitz 1997, p. 280). The culture created within these familial tribes is propagated by Resident Assistants, but RAs are also members of the community. The effects of community and culture on individuals has implications for training. With such a strong culture in place for Resident Assistants, training must be designed not only to address functional work of the position but must also address culture. Resident Assistants must be trained to develop realistic procedures for how to develop positive communities. The intention of training Resident Assistants on cultural expectations (time and stress management,
community building behaviors) is to increase efficacy and productivity rather than burnout and stress (Deluga, 1991).

**Peer leadership.** Peer leadership is a unique function of the Resident Assistant role. Resident Assistants are traditionally the same age as the residential students they support, but have responsibility for upholding community standards and engaging those peers in community activities and accountability. Peer leadership has historically been a challenging aspect of the Resident Assistant position. In 1955, a study was conducted by Kidd which asked residential students to share answers to three questions: which peer they thought would make the best Resident Assistant, which peer would make the worst Resident Assistant, and the rationale for those choices (Aamodt, Keller, Crawford & Kimbrough, 1981). Kidd’s study demonstrated the influence of peer leadership with strong data to support the qualities of showing an interest in residents and fairness as indicators of a good Resident Assistant, traits that remain important today.

Of even greater importance, the indicators of a poor RA included disciplining most residents but not “friends or favorites” (Aamodt, Keller, Crawford & Kimbrough, 1981, p. 985). The Resident Assistant function of leading peers fairly becomes an important topic to address in training, as it is statistically an area that defines success or failure for Resident Assistants. The ambiguity of peer leadership necessitates training if only to help staff understand the delicate balance between being a peer leader and an employee of the institution. It has been noted that
the role of the RA in providing counseling services on a college campus is by its nature ambiguous. On one hand the RA is a peer to the students on the hall he supervises, on the other hand he is the counselor (and college “official”) with whom students deal most frequently (Boswinkel, 1987, p. 55).

Understanding what it means to be a peer leader and how to balance holding students accountable while maintaining relationships is a key function of the Resident Assistant position. At the same time, balance is a highly individualized concept that each individual Resident Assistant must achieve for themselves, so training staff on the balance of peer leadership is challenging.

**Accountability.** The Resident Assistant role is highly impacted by the supervision and accountability. A study on the relationship between Hall Directors’ leadership and Resident Assistant outcomes addressed supportive leadership and the benefit to supervisees and found from motivation for the job to trust and confidence, that Resident Assistants require support from their supervisors through mentoring and coaching to function effectively in the role (Komives, 1991b).

**Role preparedness.** The role of the Resident Assistant is inherently affected by the emotional intelligence, interpersonal skills and efficacy that individuals bring to the role (Boswinkel, 1987; Denzin & Anderson, 1999; Jaeger & Caison, 2006). Recognizing that a student staff team will be comprised of individuals with varying levels of natural skills, talent or understanding, designing an effective training to foster and grow these characteristics in Resident
Assistants is a challenge. Emotional intelligence has significance in predicting outstanding Resident Assistants (Jaeger & Caison, 2006) and positive self-efficacy has an impact on success in the role of Resident Assistant (Denzine & Anderson, 1999).

Training is designed to provide foundational knowledge and understanding of a position or to provide necessary skills for success in a position. Understanding both the functional role of the Resident Assistant and the cultural role of the Resident Assistant is necessary to create an effective training. By comprehensively assessing both the functional role and the cultural role of the position, training can be designed to most effectively (but not perfectly) meet the training needs of the population.

**Summation**

From a holistic global perspective, the study of significant considerations for Resident Assistant training design is not meaningful. As universities developed from the German higher education model, value was not placed on residential housing as an essential co-curricular need, and globally Resident Assistants are not consistently present or necessarily needed. Accordingly, this study of significant considerations for Resident Assistant training design was limited to higher education evolved from the English tradition. While several themes, training needs and personnel needs are visible in other countries or models, their inconsistency would not benefit the study of significant considerations.

Resident Assistants should be studied within the appropriate context. The Resident Assistant role with discipline, safety, facility upkeep and co-curricular support has now existed
in the United States for over 50 years, and the tradition behind staffing for those roles is centuries old for the U.S. In summary, these strands of literature provide an understanding of the Resident Assistant role within higher education specifically in the United States of America to contextualize this study and provide a lens for understanding and making meaning of evidence-based considerations in Resident Assistant training design.

**Training Design**

Training design is a complex process that includes context, environment and the individuals involved (trainers, trainees). Successfully navigating these components is where Resident Assistant training design can recognize and respond to the unique needs and factors that play into designing training for this population and how the training information is retained. Training of Resident Assistants typically occurs at pre-service events prior to the beginning of each academic term, at in-service training mid-term, and through individualized supervision.

**Active Learning Training Techniques**

Historically, design and implementation of Resident Assistant training focused on learners as passive recipients in training, emphasizing “the importance of tightly structuring the learning environment, so as to limit trainees’ control, and of providing step-by-step instruction on the complete task and its concepts, rules, and strategies” (Bell & Kozlowski, 2008, p. 296). Recently, however, learner-centered approaches, where learners are actively engaged in the process, have become popular in training design, focusing on experiential and active-learning approaches to sharing the motivational, cognitive and emotional learning processes that
encourage self-regulated learning (Bell & Kozlowski, 2008). The rise of e-learning and self-directed learning as forms of active learning are growing in popularity and are notable for shifting responsibility for learning content to the learners.

**Scenario Training.** The benefit of active learning is that it allows for tailored training for learners and has been recognized as improving content mastery (Bell & Kozlowsky, 2008). For Resident Assistant training, a popular inclusion has been scenario training, where Resident Assistants face a variety of policy violations they might encounter and role play solutions in a safe environment where they can stop if overwhelmed, ask questions, and debrief afterward. This scenario training is often referred to as “Behind Closed Doors.” Unsurprisingly, Bell and Kozlowski’s study on active-learning approaches found exploratory learning with error-encouragement, such as scenario training, to result in higher levels of learning transfer and that “active learning approaches, although not necessarily associated with better outcomes during training, produce superior transfer relative to more traditional, proceduralized instruction” (2008, p. 311).

In typical scenario training, Resident Assistants rehearse addressing policy violations or responding to crisis or emergency response situations in a controlled environment. Scenario training allows for practice of common stressful situations Resident Assistants might encounter and allows them to rehearse their learned skills in an environment where they can stop and ask for help or guidance. It allows Resident Assistants the opportunity to pause the scene being acted out and restart it when they are comfortable. It provides a setting where professional staff
are already present for debriefing and discussion to both help Resident Assistants process the training and to help the Resident Assistants gain confidence in their skills and abilities with confrontation and policy enforcement. This type of training, sometimes referred to as problem-based learning “has the ability to help students build problem-solving, decision-making, collaboration and self-directed learning skills” (Werth, 2011 p. 327).

By its design, active learning allows learners to explore, frame their training, and have emotional control over the learning (Bell & Kozlowski, 2008). This can be particularly impactful in training on topics that can be highly stressful, such as emergency or crisis response. Active learning as a tool has developed beyond simply practicing skills for comfort gain to instead “systematically influence and support the cognitive, motivational, and emotional processes that characterize how people focus their attention, direct their effort, and manage their affect during learning” (Bell & Kozlowski, 2008, p. 297). Bell and Kozlowski’s 2008 study addressed the ineffectiveness and inflexibility of traditional training approaches in dynamic environments and scenario training provides an opportunity for Resident Assistants to practice and learn skills in an interactive environment similar to what they might experience while performing their role functions.

**Active learning.** Addressing different learning styles is an important component of training design, and active learning (like scenario training) helps learners contextualize, reflect on or practice the training they are receiving. Active learning can take many forms including lecture-discussion, lecture-modeling and lecture-role playing as instructional techniques and can
be particularly helpful in teaching the less tangible human relations skills and micro-counseling skills in Resident Assistant training (Perkins & Atkinson, 1973). Active-learning and learner-centered design are two of the most recommended training styles for retention of information (Bell & Kozlowski, 2008; Bowers, Baker & Salas, 1994). Active learning can help establish task importance, and it allows individuals to rehearse the necessary skills in a controlled environment with opportunity for feedback. Rehearsal can be particularly effective to assess cooperative work such as how teams perform together during stressful situations, identifying and rehearsing the necessary response skills as a training tool (Bowers, Baker & Salas, 1994). This clearly correlates to traditional Resident Assistant scenario training, where student staff rehearse crisis and emergency response procedures. Understanding and effectively utilizing active learning training techniques is a substantial component for consideration in evaluating training design decision making and efficacy.

**Other Training Techniques**

Multiple specific techniques that could be analyzed in training include case-based, lecture, feedback, games, interaction, point of care, problem-based, self-directed, and team-based techniques (Bluestone, Johnson, Fullteron, Carr, Alderman & BonTempo, 2013). Each technique has advantages and disadvantages when working with groups. A variety of techniques is likely to be the most engaging and effective for the greatest population. Other aspects of training include use of media, technology and mobile learning, and print presentation of information. Both utilization of active learning techniques and avoiding passive transfer of
information via reading or lecture has been recommended by experts in favor of simulation, activities and case studies to engage learners (Bowers, Baker & Salas, 1994; Bluestone et al., 2013). “The future educational research agenda must include well-constructed evaluations of effective [learning transfer], cost-effective and culturally appropriate combinations of technique, setting, frequency and media” (Bluestone et al., 2008, p. 24). The challenge with training design includes the number of variables and the time and cost associated with designing effective training. Experiential exercises done with Resident Advisors in suicide prevention training, for example, demonstrate the efficacy of the active learning and experiential model but come with time constraints, as the practice portion of the learning takes substantially more time than a lecture-format presentation of the material would take (Pasco, Wallack, Sarton & Dayton, 2012).

Thus it is important to define training effectiveness descriptively and seek to find examples of training components responsible for skills development (Waldhoetter, Modjeski & Curran, 1989). More importantly, the aim of training is not just transfer of learning content but the ability of the learner to apply learning in a flexible and accurate manner “rather than forcing students into an inflexible program. If the consequences of training design go unheeded, the cost will result in less efficient training and less proficient operators” (Waldhoetter, Modjeski & Curran, 1989, p. 987).

**Training Transfer**

Training transfer, the ability to retain and apply learned content, is an important component to consider. Forty percent of learners transfer training content immediately after
training but the percentage of training transfer drops to 25% after six months and to 15% in a year (Bhatti, Ali, Isa & Battour, 2014). “In short, organizations are not getting the desired results from their investment in training activities. Researchers need to address this problem” (Bhatti et al., 2014, p. 51). A consideration for trainers to improve transfer of learning for trainees is to “explain how the trainee can transfer the learned skills at the workplace and make sure the content of the training is similar to the actual job” (Bhatti et al., 2014, p. 51). Learner readiness and peer support are complements of training design and transfer of learning. While readiness can be difficult to gauge, including peer support components in training design for Resident Assistants is rather universally accepted as a training component, as is supervisor support. This is a recommendation because “when trainees see that the content of the training is similar to the work they do, they react more positively toward the training activities and their performance self-efficacy level increases” (Bhatti et al., 2014, p. 75). Including clear connections between training content and how it can and should be applied in the position is thus another important component of training design assessed in this study.

The importance of effective training on job performance has been highlighted in research which “has demonstrated that training efforts are unlikely to result in positive changes in job performance unless the newly trained competencies are transferred to the work environment” (Velada, Caetano, Michel, Lyons & Kavanaugh 2007, p. 283). Training design factors that influence training transfer include “instructional techniques and learning principles; self-management and relapse prevention strategies and goal setting” (Velada et al., 2007, p. 284).
Like Bhatti et al. (2014), Velada et al. (2007) highlighted the connection between learning and job application as critical to training transfer.

**Trainer Preparedness**

Trainer effectiveness is an aspect of training design that is often overlooked. For training to be effective, trainers must have effective communication and facilitation skills and professionalism (Arvind & Haque, 2008). Effective communication is understandably an important aspect of training. The nature of training is to provide trainees with content, knowledge or skills they did not previously possess or to instill confidence and comfort with the knowledge, content or skills. An effective trainer should be able to share the necessary content in a style that allows the learner to retain the information. Training facilitators are effective when they are truly able to facilitate the active learning of their trainees; the relevance of the training is impactful on learning and a powerful skill-set for a trainer to employ. Trainers must balance their role as facilitators and adjust to their trainees’ needs in order to empower the necessary learning (Arvind & Haque, 2008).

The importance of trainer efficacy on training design is by no means a new concept. In the 1960s the Girl Scout foundation instituted a new national curriculum that failed largely because the trainers had not themselves been trained on how to effectively teach the new curriculum content (Stone, 1984). Research shows that experts will design training based on the paradigm or learning framework that has been most effective for them, so it was also important
to assess why the training designers selected the design paradigm they did (Visscher-Voerman & Gustafson, 2004).

**Content and Format Balance**

The struggle to maintain balance between quality versus quantity in presentation of training content is understandable. It is important to provide enough content balanced with a high quality of content to maximize learning. At the same time, learners have different needs, and those needs create a delicate juggling act to find an equilibrium. While training can be completed individually, the term “Resident Assistant training” is used to refer to the intensive one-two week group pre-training of Resident Assistants prior to the start of the academic term. The balance between quantity of training (including time and resources invested) and quality of training (including intentional design and cohesion) on the learning achieved must be addressed with an eye to quality and “more is not necessarily better” (Sels, 2002, p. 1292).

The format of training design can be very diverse. “RA training tends to be multifaceted and depends upon factors such as time and degree of intensity, topics needing to be covered, RA maturity and experiences, and residence life mission and staff attributes” (Roussel & Elleven, 2009, p.395). Examples of formats training could take include academic courses, training returning Resident Assistants differently than new Resident Assistants, pre-service training and in-service training (Bowman & Bowman, 1995; Roussel & Elleven, 2009).

Resident Assistant training has many components, all of which can either contribute to or detract from the process. Among those components are the core competencies or content,
specialization, and rationale for institution-specific topical information, assessment and format for delivery of information.

**Technology**

Because most Resident Assistants are traditional-aged college students who have grown up with a higher accessibility to technology than previous generations, their expectations for incorporation of technology for training engagement and presentations is also higher. It is not quantity of technology incorporation that is desired, it is quality. Online learning has been compared in a metaphor to fast food, emphasizing how online learning is quick and convenient, but not necessarily nutritious (Laff, 2007).

**Training delivery.** Technology provides many opportunities for training delivery. Resident Assistants could conduct pre-training via an online course from home and preclude the need for a department to organize the logistics of an early arrival to campus. During a traditional group pre-training, technology could be used to provide free polling services from students’ cell phones or to share an online schedule that can be instantaneously updated. With technology, presentations can be visually active and aesthetically pleasing as new technology programs are introduced. At the same time, technology can also be distracting. If students are allowed to have computers or cell phones out, engagement in the presentation can be challenging. With a phone in hand, a student could easily be distracted by incoming text messages or could be lost to the lure of a web-search for something off-topic (Anderson, 2001).
**Consequences of technology.** Imagine a college student referred to counseling for negative changes in mood, sleep-work schedule issues, increased class absences, conflict with family, and poor academic performance, who after being asked direct questions, admits to spending over 2000 hours in the previous semester interacting in an online program and further admits that technology had become the main form of interpersonal communication (Anderson, 2001). A student at this stage of technology dependency might find “difficulty withdrawing from it, even at the expense of his academic preparation” (Anderson, 2001, p. 21).

Unfortunately, there is a real and increasing “likelihood that college students may become dependent on or overuse the internet,” according to Anderson, who noted a study that demonstrated:

students had difficulty identifying the negative consequences of excessive Internet use, just as they did with problems resulting from binge drinking on campus. Some campuses have reported an increase in academic failure that can be directly linked to excessive Internet use. Excessive use is also related to difficulty in maintaining real-life interpersonal relationships, developing sleep problems, and reducing everyday activities (2001, p.22).

With technology so prevalent, particularly on college campuses, developing strategies to utilize technology effectively to meet students where they are and to train student staff like Resident Assistants on recognition of internet dependence becomes critical for training design. One recommendation is to provide “continuous computer based training” (Buckley, Beu,
Novicevic & Sigerstad, 2001, p. 84) in a nod to the generational familiarity and expertise with technology. Negative factors associated with increased internet use include online gambling, excessive shopping and incurring debt, social isolation and pornography exchange. Residence Life staff then both navigate, educate and enforce policy connected to internet related problems (Anderson, 2001).

**Social Media.** Social media and the role it plays in education is a topic of debate. “Historically, the learning community has stayed away from informal learning and social learning, and that is where most of the learning is taking place,” according to ASTD CEO Tony Bingham (Ketter, 2010, p. 37). With organizations and individuals frequently turning to social media like Facebook, Twitter and blogs, there exist missed opportunities to utilize and engage learners through technology. “An even more important reason to venture into the world of mobile learning is that newer workers in the workforce, the Millennials, are demanding it” (Ketter, 2010, p. 39). With an increased demand for tailored and personalized learning, using technology in training design is correspondingly expected.

**Online training.** One way that some have incorporated technology is through online Resident Assistant training. Some institutions have implemented online training modules which Resident Assistants complete prior to their pre-term training. These online modules can be designed to either complement or replace material that would otherwise be covered in a traditional manner during the pre-term training, and comes with the benefit of freeing up time needed in the pre-term training and meeting student preference to complete modules at their own
pace (Kaliher, 2010). However challenges remain for engagement and construction of online training. For example, a Resident Assistant who completed an online training commented:

I think it was effective but it needs to be backed up with the face-to-face time with the actual lecture when you can have feedback right then and there. Because we have a very situational job. We’re dealing with interpersonal relations…. Not every situation is going to fit into X and Y (Kaliher, 2010, p. 99).

One way to maximize the benefits and minimize the challenges associated with online training is to include strong and intentional theory selection in designing online training programs, with clearly articulated outcomes, awareness of timing, interactivity, length and feedback, choice of software design, attention paid to multi-media principles, adaptive learning techniques, and a built-in learning outcome assessment component all considered in the design phases (Kaliher, 2010). Kaliher (2010) further commented on how technology savvy and comfortable Millen
tival students are with technology. As this continues with future generations, it is clear that technology is going to be increasingly demanded by the students being trained as Resident Assistants, and so technology must be a training design consideration.

**Assessment**

It is important to recognize the impact of assessment on training design. Effective training can produce individuals who can recall and practice the knowledge or skills addressed even after the training is complete. Resident Assistant training has been shown to have demonstrative positive effects on job performance and work practices (Murray, Snider &
Midkiff, 1999). On the other hand, training does not necessarily eliminate negative behaviors, and supervisor intervention is recommended for addressing counterproductive behaviors in Resident Assistants (Murray, Snider & Midkiff, 1999).

Summation

Research on training design has traditionally included training methods, training topics, training environment and assessment (Namasivayam, Conklin & Zhao, 2005). Training design is complex and to be intentional must also include trainers’ preparedness and/or skillset, the format for the delivery of information, timeframe and timing of training, and even the affective mindset of the trainees (Bell & Kozlowski, 208; Laff, 2007; Namasivayam, Conklin & Zhao, 2005; Sels, 2002; Velada, Caetano, Lyons & Kavanaugh, 2007). Understanding the potential influences for training design is a critical function that must be considered when identifying significant considerations for Resident Assistant training design. Training technique selection, trainer effectiveness, the balance to best address both quality and quantity, the need to incorporate technology in a meaningful way are all important considerations for training design. Understanding the importance of these aspects of training design establishes a baseline for the study of contemporary practices for Resident Assistant training design.

Resident Assistant Training Topical Considerations

Training design for Resident Assistants must account for both delivery of the content necessary to perform the job effectively and the population characteristics of the group. Resident Assistants are influential to the satisfaction level with the college experience for first-year
students (Blimling, 2003). Consistent competencies or training areas addressed in Resident Assistant training include role modeling, building community, planning and executing programming, administrative tasks, explaining and enforcing policy, disseminating information, maintaining a safe and secure physical environment, peer leadership, assessing residents-in-need. The Resident Assistant role includes acting as a referral agent, mediator and emergency/crisis responder, providing personal help to residents, facilitating groups, and keeping residents informed (Elleven, Allen & Wircenski, 2001; Roussel & Elleven, 2009; Taub & Servaty-Seib, 2011). These competencies are needed regardless of institution (Roussel & Elleven, 2009).

Training on these competency areas is required; it is:

- acknowledged that performance of the prescribed duties of the [Resident Assistant] position demands extensive training on such topics as: R.A. roles and responsibilities, campus resources, history and philosophy of residential education, student development theory, human diversity, counseling and communication skills, conflict resolution, educational programming, leadership and group dynamics, study skills, time and stress management, and various social concerns (Murray, Snider & Midkiff, 1999).

While there is clearly strong evidence to support the most common or required topical components of Resident Assistant training, the literature does not contain evidence of research-based considerations for training design.

Aside from the competency topics, there are other training topics that bear addressing. Studies have been conducted on other and more specialized aspects of Resident Assistant
training including training on the topics of interpersonal skills, as suicide interventionists and training on social justice (Bailey & Butcher, 1983; Grosz, 1999; King, 2012). Interpersonal skills may be a topic consideration for a college or university with an immature staff or a staff who have historically had interpersonal conflicts. Suicide intervention would be a topic most institutions briefly address within a crisis or emergency response training, but might develop into its own training topic at an institution that has experienced a recent suicide or students with suicidal ideations. Similarly, social justice training could be implemented either in place of or in addition to traditional human diversity training for a staff or a campus that needs to address privilege or equality. There are innumerable other topics an institution might need to address in their Resident Assistant training beyond the core competencies to address institution specific concerns or issues.

Emergency Response and Crisis Training

Emergency and crisis response is a critical component of a Resident Assistant’s job (Boswinkel, 1987). Resident Assistants are live-in staff, so they are generally the staff resource most easily accessible to students in an emergency. Considerations for training design for Resident Assistants, as a result, include emergency response, awareness of mental health concerns, and how to refer in severe situations like suicidal ideations; considerations include how to respond to rumors or reality of a student death.

Emergency response. Emergency response could cover many situations for a Resident Assistant, from responding to a student injury or death to a fire, riot, natural event disaster like a
hurricane or tornado, emotional crisis, or act of violence. The recommended training components for emergency response include understanding appropriate response roles and expectations and reviewing the six steps for a successful command system for emergency response which necessitates “a planned, organized structure, definitive chain of command, unity of command, standardization of terminology, facilities/resources management [and] communications and information management” (Journal of American College Health, 2011, p. 439). Effective communication can lead to timely support; and, unfortunately, time is often critical in emergency response. Many emergencies leave a psychological impact on those involved; for example, the roommate of a student who attempted suicide may experience their own resulting trauma. Clearly defined roles, well-defined emergency protocols, and practice of emergency situations and drills as practical exercises to reinforce learning are among training inclusions recommended for Resident Assistant training (Grosz, 1990; Bell & Kozlowski, 2008).

Resident Assistants are uniquely positioned in their role as peer leaders for providing emergency response. Peer leadership is important in helping with emergency response and with incidents including drug and alcohol use or abuse and sexual assaults (Hunter, 2004). More than 32,000 students are active as peer educators on college campuses, “providing a much greater reach into the campus population than traditional methods of delivery allow” (Hunter, 2004, p. 42). Peers are uniquely situated for teachable moments and for their ability to straddle two worlds. Because Resident Assistants are peer educators, they require training that “at a minimum should include information on the following core items: social norming theory,
listening skills, confrontation skills, referral skills, programming strategies, information on role modelling and ethics, stress and time management, and marketing skills” (Hunter, 2004, p. 44). Intentionally framing key topical components, such as emergency response, in assessing training design is clearly needed, as are targeted approaches appropriate to the specific topics being addressed.

**Suicide and Mental Health.** Many Resident Assistants will never have to face a suicide or severe mental health concern in working with residential students; but, as “students across the nation are coming to colleges and universities with increasingly complex mental health issues, including histories of psychological and psychiatric conditions that may be associated with elevated risk for suicide” (Cimini, Rivero, Bernier, Stanley, Murray, Anderson, Wright & Bapat, 2014, p. 92), training for these potential crises must not be slighted. With suicide as the third most prevalent cause of death for traditional college-aged students, QPR (Question, Persuade, Refer) training is well recognized as an effective gatekeeper training program for individuals like Resident Assistants, particularly when including an experiential exercise component (Cimini et al., 2014). Mental health gatekeeper training that has the following characteristics is recommended:

- Population-specific
- Small-group
- Single-session
- Interactive
to increase knowledge retention and comfort in implementing skills and knowledge learned (Cimini et al., 2014). Corroborating this need is the rise in non-suicidal self-injury (known as NSSI) in the college population” (Whitlock, Eells, Cummings & Purington, 2009, p. 173). One suggestion for addressing the rise is training specific to self-injury. NSSI has been expressed primarily by females, so there is also a concern that males at risk for NSSI could be overlooked by residence life staff, based on the type of injury and predominance of female NSSI. This warrants “additional research on the detection, intervention, treatment and prevention of self-injury on college campuses” (Whitlock et al., 2009, p. 183).

For suicide prevention, Resident Assistants are all too often the first line of defense and, accordingly, they need to be well educated about suicide. For example, it is important to recognize “the verbal, behavioral and affective warning signs with which the suicidal student may present” (Westefeld, Button, Haley, Kettman, Macconnell, Sanil & Tallman, 2006, p. 936). Residency and size of student population have also been central considerations for determining what suicide prevention program will be most effective for a campus, with students at larger schools being likely to experience depression and academic stress, versus students at a commuter school experiencing financial woes that trigger depression (Westefeld et al., 2006). With a recognition that training topics may be universal, but their implementation may require an institution-specific tailored approach, assessing significant considerations becomes challenging.
With new and evolving types of emergency response that Resident Assistants could be asked to respond to, creating and implementing a training that is both comprehensive and flexible to unique situations and new trends is an important challenge.

**Student Death.** Student death is perhaps the most feared and dreaded crisis response situation a Resident Assistant may face. While death can occur in many fashions, the rising suicide rate for college students (Westefeld et al., 2006) reinforces the need to effectively train Resident Assistants on response to student death and related situations. Student death situations could include rumor of death, attempt at suicide, or an actual student death on or off-campus of a student or of someone known to a student; and all of those situations require support for the students that Resident Assistants as first responders and accessible leaders may be called upon to provide.

“Resident Assistants (RAs) are ideally situated to observe and respond to bereaved students … interact with resident students in their on-campus homes and are most likely to observe changes in functioning such as withdrawal, insomnia, and risky behaviors” (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008, p. 51). Grief is a natural process, unique for individuals, and grieving does not often follow a linear progress. When it is paired with the college environment, it can lead to increased disenfranchisement and can create ripple effects of grieving or emotional response in peers (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008). Resident Assistants require training that allows bereaved students to grieve at their own pace, and that recognizes their own limitations in offering support and experience for working through grief and bereavement. Observation and inquiry skills,
active listening, validating statements, tangible support, and referral as trainable skills that should be developed for leaders, such as Resident Assistants who work with bereaved students (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008).

**Inclusivity, Community Building and Training on Other “Soft Skills”**

One of the most difficult areas to train individuals on are “soft skills” like empathy and communication; however, these skills are essential to the Resident Assistant role. The title Resident Assistant implies the primary function of the role, to assist residential students in the co-curricular residential environment of higher education. Training on human relations skills such communication, community building, empathic listening, mediation, and recognition of and response to differences (gender, sexual, racial, socioeconomic, generational) build essential soft-skills for Resident Assistants (Quirk, 1976).

**Communication and Empathy.** With the increasing severity of concerns facing college students as discussed above in the emergency response segment of this literature review, along with an increasingly diverse study body, communication and empathy become essential skills for Resident Assistants to develop and employ in their work. Problem-solving and referral training are key skills, “supporting the premise that student service personnel can be instrumental in addressing the well-being of students” due to the constant accessibility of live-in staff to residential students and as personnel who are “in positions to identify, at a very early stage, students who are dealing with issues such as homesickness, depression, substance abuse, eating disorders or other indicators of mental or emotional dysfunction” (Rawls, Johnson & Bartels,
Often Resident Assistants will need to evaluate or assess students who are not showing overt signs of crisis, but for whom a preventive referral is necessary. “Student affairs professionals have endless opportunities to support, help and offer suggestions to students on a daily basis; their visibility and openness often makes them viewed as accessible and approachable to students with a wide range of problems and concerns” (Reynolds, 2011, p. 362). Resident Assistants share this visibility and accessibility and likewise require training to support the function they are asked to provide.

**Mediation.** Mediation is a soft-skill often connected to community building training for Resident Assistants. In any community, it is likely some confrontation will arise, whether it is an argument between two residents about the cleanliness of their room or a dispute between hall mates about noise when someone else is trying to sleep. Students with poor roommate relationships often not only view their residential experience as unsatisfactory but can experience poor emotional adjustment in the transition to college, and that can in turn influence a student’s performance with academics (Marek, Wanzer & Knapp, 2009).

Mediation training can be analogized to a foreign language with the comparison that it requires practice, repetition and preparation. While quality mediation training is necessary to produce skilled mediators, there is a lack of data about what composes adequate mediation training (Hedeen, Raines & Barton, 2010). Resident Assistants should be practicing recognition of poor communication skills between roommates, as well as how to effectively dialogue with residents in a mediation to allow residents or roommates to find a mutually-amenable solution.
Resident Assistants are also expected to role model mediation and communication as a skills residents could employ in the future. Because similarities between residents, whether in personality, interest, or even demographic background, do not statistically correlate to a positive roommate relationship (Marek, Wanzer & Knapp, 2009), mediation could be needed by residential students for a wide array of circumstances and at a variety of conflict intensity levels.

**Racial, Generational and Gender Influences.** Differences that are racial, generational, and gender-related affect communication and mediation effectiveness in both subtle and overt ways. In one research study, for example, European Americans were found to be likely to seek third-party help and specifically were found to be likely to seek help if their roommate was a different race than them; the racial identity of the Resident Assistant did not have an effect. Also, participants in that study who had stronger ethnic identification were more likely to internalize negative attributes about their roommates (Bresnahan, Guan, Shearman & Donohue, 2009).

In contrast, Harper, Davis, Jones, McGowan, Ingram & Platt (2011) conducted a study which did demonstrate racial prejudice among residence life staff towards black male Resident Assistants. The black male Resident Assistants surveyed commented on insulting stereotypes, judgments and comments made by fellow Resident Assistants and by those supervising Resident Assistants that interviewees supposed were “directly related to faulty stereotypes and race-laden doubts” (Harper et al., p. 188). The study also found residents exhibited racist behaviors against the identified Resident Assistants. Participants shared how at times stereotypes assisted them in
incident confrontation or in connecting to resident interests, but the “onlyness” (p. 190) and otherness of difference created a negative disconnect (Harper et al., 2011). Training Resident Assistants on inclusivity will benefit the communication and mediation they posit with residents and which they model for residents to use with other individuals.

Generational awareness is another aspect of difference worth exploring in assessing training design. Current students represent a globalized generation who want the opportunity to express initiative, who value indirect control and “grounded and measurable behavioral guidelines; clearly defined expectations for specific outcomes; clear standards of performance; and perhaps most important, the freedom to operate with relative autonomy if they prove they have earned that right” (Buckley, Beu, Novicevic and Sigerstad, 2001, p. 82). Regardless of manager preference, with the live-in nature of the Resident Assistant role, they are guaranteed a level of autonomy and independence, so training Resident Assistants to operate ethically in such an environment is another important soft skill.

The nature of adult learners is another consideration because adult learners have a need to understand why they should learn something. Adults desire to be self-directing, they wish for their experiences to have value and learning transfer increases when adult learners can connect their own experiences to the training content (Heeden et al., 2010). As young adults, Resident Assistants could benefit from clear expectations and connections between content and practice.

Hedeen, Raines and Barton (2010) state that strategies for better meeting the needs of adult learners in training include:
- employing active learning strategies
- using stories and examples
- engaging multiple senses
- encouraging student ownership in learning via collaboration and sharing
- allowing for more informal and flexible structures
- supplying free time for balance
- avoiding traditional lecture style content teaching

Gender is another difference consideration for communication and diversity training for Resident Assistant staff. For example, Komives conducted several studies around gender and Resident Assistants and found no statistical difference in supervisor satisfaction by Resident Assistants regardless of gender (1991a). Both male and female hall directors were found to have different self-reported understandings of why they were transformational leaders, however; females suggested relational styles as the contributing factor and males suggested power-direct styles as contributing (Komives, 1991b). This supports stereotypical gender views of females as collaborative and relational and males as practicing power and competition. Outside of self-perceptions, both groups were found to achieve transformational relationships through relational styles. The data support predictions of empowerment and inspiration as important leadership skills demonstrated by Resident Assistant supervisors (Komives, 1991b, p. 163). How then does training reflect these expectations within the paradigm of stereotypical gender views? While both of Komives’ studies are now outdated, gender differential is still prevalent in society; and
consideration of gender differences remains an important component for communication and inclusivity in Resident Assistant training.

**Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual and Transgender (LGBT) Students.** Training on LGBT issues as an aspect of difference is increasingly prevalent on college campuses, even private religiously-affiliated institutions. Love (1988) provided the example of cultural barriers facing LGBT students at a Catholic College, framing it from the perspective that:

all colleges and universities exist within a societal culture that is homophonic and heterosexist, and so all institutions struggle in some way with issues related to sexual orientation. Religiously affiliated institutions are perceived to be even less friendly places for lesbian, gay, and bisexual people (p. 299-300).

That being said, even religiously-affiliated schools can have great variance, and there lies a challenge for assessing considerations for effective training design. If different institutions have different needs and different expectations, how can significant considerations be identified? Perhaps by including the institutional difference in addition to traditional ways of looking at difference and inclusivity, evidence-based considerations can be assessed from a comprehensive framework that allows for variance and unique perspectives, viewpoints, traditions and understanding.

Discrimination via gender-exclusive practices and policies is still prevalent (Beemyn, 2005) and “colleges and universities that seek to be supportive of transgender students must consider how they are often physically and socially structured in ways that enforce a binary
gender system” (p. 78). This can be reinforced in same sex or same gender residence hall assignments in community style halls (with shared bathroom facilities). “Bathroom safety is one of the biggest sources of anxiety for many gender-variant students” (Beemyn, 2005, p. 81).

While Resident Assistants may not have the authority to change hall or bathroom accommodations, they can provide safe spaces for students to share and to discuss their feelings and concerns. Training Resident Assistants on how to create a safe community for all students is a critical component of training. Conversely, training on how to confront students who are harassing, discriminating or making a community an unsafe space is also a necessary training component for Resident Assistants.

There is an expectation that residence life staff including Resident Assistants show support, stop harassment, actively confront homophobic acts and show “their support by providing information on lesbian, gay, and bisexual topics” (Evans & Broido, 2009, p. 29-30). Halls staffed with Resident Assistants who identify as gender-variant or allies and academically-oriented halls like honors halls were viewed as more accepting of lesbian and bisexual students (Evans & Broido, 2009). Conversely, halls with large numbers of sorority women, athletes or first-year students were viewed as more hostile. Clearly, training on lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender students is needed in Resident Assistant training but needs may vary even within residence hall community type on the same university campus. Evans & Broido’s study recommended that Resident Assistants be trained in four areas: supporting individual LGBT
students, creating an accepting environment, offering LGBT information or programming to other students, and confronting homophobic remarks (2009).

**Traditional Topics**

Training must address the issues that have faced residential college students since on-campus housing began in the 1800s – topics such as homesickness or alcohol use. The use of alcohol by first-year college students in their second semester doubles for males living in Greek housing vs. males living in on-campus housing. Sorority women who live outside of campus housing are also shown to have statistically higher alcohol consumption (Page & O’Hegarty, 2008). This can be attributed to social norm perception and social networks, specifically the “living groups and close friends” (Page & O’Hegarty, 2008, p. 29), as well as to staffing models. While Resident Assistants are frequently used in on-campus housing, they are infrequently used in Greek housing. Having a trained peer leader supporting students with personal issues and addressing discipline issues can facilitate positive behaviors and reduce negative behaviors. Skill building practices and activities for Resident Assistant training related to alcohol and drug confrontations were advised (Thombs et al., 2014).

A danger with training design for Resident Assistants is providing content and structure necessary for the position versus indoctrination or cultist challenges to personal conscience (Kissel, 2009). With increasing multiculturalism, diversity topics are of growing importance for the training of Resident Assistants. These paraprofessionals must be equipped to best support a wide range of students’ needs and cultural backgrounds, but preparation should be focused on
procedures and expectations rather than as an attempt to change or sway personal values. Training design should be ethically sound, and a review of evidence-based considerations would be incomplete without addressing ethical topic inclusion and presentation (Kissel, 2009).

**Summation**

Due to the severity and seriousness of the emergencies and crises that may be encountered, emergency and crisis response training is perhaps the most essential training component for Resident Assistants. At the same time, historical peer needs for communication and support remain, and the call for specific training for working with diverse populations and individual needs grows.

While current published research exists of case studies and examples of crisis response training for Resident Assistants, the practical design considerations of this type of training have not been addressed adequately in the literature. For example, what time or space considerations, campus or community partnerships or politics, level of trainer preparedness, or student need for engagement are considered when developing training to maximize its effectiveness?

**Conclusion**

Peer-reviewed literature exists on the topic of Resident Assistant training design, but most of it is tailored to specific topical areas, is outdated, or addresses general training design not specific to Resident Assistants. This literature review addressed emergency response, crisis response, training on working with mental health issues and student death, technology considerations, inclusivity, community building through soft-skill development, mediation, and
difference awareness and support (racial, generational, gender and sexual). It is clear that gaps remain within existing literature, both in content and in understanding of how training topics or practices can best be employed for Resident Assistant training. The literature provides a substantial framework for contextualizing the proposed study in terms of the historical development of the position and its current context in the United States of America with regards to culture and role expectations, as well as reviewing the significance of training design considerations, including style and method and finally by reviewing the topical considerations for inclusion in designing Resident Assistant training. Together these strands of literature provide a framework and baseline for studying the influences and factors that are important in Resident Assistant training design.
CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of this narrative study was to identify contemporary significant considerations for Resident Assistant training design by interviewing residence life practitioners whose primary job function is to design Resident Assistant training at their institutions. The study was conducted using a qualitative open-ended interview methodology to understand each interviewee’s context, including environmental and cultural influences, to determine what considerations are influencing and driving Resident Assistant training design. The research study found institution-specific considerations necessary to be taken into account with training design; the qualitative research design allowed for meaningful contextual exploration of training design rationale. This study provides a framework for understanding trends and considerations that drive contemporary Resident Assistant training design. It explored considerations for the design of contemporary Resident Assistant training in the United States through the lens of the professionals who design training.

Central Research Question

The central research question for this study was “what are the significant considerations for Resident Assistant training design?” The participants who were interviewed for this study were all active practitioners with at least five years of experience working with the design process for Resident Assistant training. Exploring the narratives of how they design training with a focus on important influences and factors that direct the order, timing, location and presenters for training, as well as topical inclusions, provided insight into best practices for the development and design process of Resident Assistant training for current practitioners.
A storied focus and subsequent tour questions (Rubin & Rubin, 2012) best enabled the researcher to understand why professionals make the training design decisions they do for Resident Assistants.

**Qualitative Research Approach**

**Constructivist/Interpretivist Paradigm**

The constructivist or interpretivist paradigm embraces researchers’ connection to the research being conducted and embraces an understanding of positionality with regard to values and bias. Butin argued that it could be considered a direct counter to the positivist paradigms, half a century later (2010). In this paradigm, researchers work to gather stories, unlike the numerical results sought by the post-positivist paradigm. Constructivists recognize that “reality is constructed in the mind of the individual” (Ponterotto, 2005, p.129) and argue that the interaction between researcher and participants has a beneficial impact on the research in that findings and/or meaning identified from the research are co-created. As Ponterotto pointed out, constructivism can be traced back to Kant’s *Critique of Pure Reason* in the message that the researcher cannot be wholly separated from their research; this was further developed by Dilthey who distinguished constructivism from positivism with the focus on making meaning (2005). Post-positivists argue for an objective reality where truth is objective, the unit of analysis is numerical and the goal is to uncover best practice outcomes through identifying the right variables. Constructivists argue for a socially-constructed subjective reality where truth is
constructed and can vary through diverse perspectives, where the key outcome is story and analysis occurs in making meaning of the story by looking for patterns of meaning (Butin, 2010).

This study on Resident Assistant training design focused on understanding the subjective influences and decisions of designers in the development of Resident Assistant training, and aligned with the constructivist theoretical perspective as it sought to determine the subjective reality of participants through stories and identifying patterns to find meaning. Performing a study into important considerations for Resident Assistant training design through the constructivist paradigm allowed participants to share in constructing the definition of research-based considerations for training.

The study found that institution-specific considerations must be taken into account with training design. The qualitative research design of this study allowed for meaningful contextual exploration of training design rationale. It highlighted trends and described how training designers adapt to current student needs and institutional needs.

Within the constructivist/interpretivist paradigm, a narrative inquiry approach was used to assess first-person accounts of the training design process for Resident Assistants and to examine the training design decisions made within the context of the interviewee’s environment and experience. “Narrative is an important genre of spoken action and representation in everyday life, and in many specialized contexts” (Bolivar & Domingo, 2006, p. 1). The narrative methodology for qualitative studies developed from a long tradition of oral history. Bolivar and Domingo (2006) noted that “the growth and popularity achieved by narrative inquiry into life
stories and biographies may be a response to our current postmodern moment: in a world that has become chaotic and disorganized, there seems refuge only in the self (p. 5). With the continued development of oral history, the methodological contributions have become more consistent and show awareness of working in a common framework (Bolivar & Domingo, 2006). Thus, focus on lived stories and experiences (Bolivar & Domingo, 2006; Chan, 2005; Connelly & Clandinin, 1990) is the focus of the narrative methodology and has gained “legitimacy in educational research” (Ollerenshaw & Creswell, 2002, p. 329).

“Clandinin and Connelly’s (2000) concept of narrative is based on a three-dimensional narrative inquiry space informed by Dewey’s (1938) experiential theory. It consists of temporal, personal-social and place dimensions” (Chan, 2005, p.44), and accordingly, everything previously experienced influences new experiences and perceptions of a current experience. The narrative inquiry process operates on “the basic principle of narrative psychology …that individuals understand themselves through the medium of language, through talking and writing” and that through these processes reality is constructed and understood (Smith & Sparkes, 2006, p. 170). The context of language is important, as is the contextual relation to others (Bolivar & Domingo, 2006). This matches the application of relational theory to the topic of training design decision-making within the context of residential programs. Both the participants in their narratives and the researcher in the narrative analysis construct reality within the context of their own understanding and experiences.

Scholarly Debate Around Narrative Approach
There are several areas of debate around the narrative approach. Trainer and Graue (2014) commented on the importance of transparency in a narrative approach to provide legitimacy in the methodology, commenting on holistic transparency, present in methodological transparency, interpretive transparency and narrative transparency. This transparency can include being forthcoming about the role of theory throughout a study and the use of foundational research. “In this genre, theory connects research findings to earlier scholarship, resulting in explanations verifiable by examining empirical evidence (Anfara & Mertz, 2006)” (Trainor & Graue, 2014, p. 270).

Other methodological issues include “the blurring of the researcher and participant’s relationship and its intersubjectivity, the process of a researcher’s reflexivity and reflection, the value of ambiguity” (Chan, 2005, p.45). Chan further commented on a reflection she had conducted of her own study and indicated that the tension she encountered “stemmed from my need to honour my participants’ experience, my recognition of the value of our ongoing negotiated relationships, and my formalistic desire to find a place for theory in narrative inquiry” (Chan, 2005, p.53). These issues and tensions were important considerations for the narrative approach of this study.

In narrative inquiry, it is important that the researcher listen first to the practitioner’s story, and that it is the practitioner who first tells his or her story. This does not mean that the researcher is silenced in the process of narrative inquiry. It does mean that the practitioner, who has long been silenced in the research relationship, is given the time and
space to tell her or his story so that it too gains the authority and validity that the research story has long had (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p.4).

“Narrative ethics is inextricably entwined with epistemological issues—namely, issues of narrative ownership and the multiplicity of narrative meaning” (Smythe & Murray, 2000, p. 311); this includes free and informed consent, privacy and confidentiality, protection from harm, avoiding conflict of interest, avoiding deception and providing thorough information and debriefing (Smythe & Murray, 2000).

An interesting component of the debate around narrative approach is the ethics of doing justice as a researcher to the narratives/stories told and to narrative ownership. As a researcher, it was necessary to structure the interview protocols and questions ethically and to incorporate participant review.

**Divergent Thoughts About Narrative Approach**

“Narrative methodology is increasingly caught in an ideological deadlock set in terms of a false choice between meaning (an unconditional respect for the voice of experience) and truth (the scientific validation of stories), which has led to an increasing dismissal of analysis in narrative research” (Essers, 2012, p. 332). There are several disadvantages to using a narrative methodology, these include the implied “sacrifice of facts’ (Essers, 2012, p. 333), the “ploys of spin-doctors” rewriting organizational practice (p. 334), and the “overly complacent, uncritical attitude among narrative researchers” (p. 335).
Similarly, eight tensions were identified by Smith and Sparkes (2006) in narrative research including: the relation between “narrative and self or identities” (p. 173), the issue of unity (p. 174), coherence (p. 176), “those that at some point become (tacitly) entangled in a sense of (neo)realism and those that problematize this position and commit to relativism” (p. 178), the tension of interiority and the “nature of self in narrative analyses of self” (p. 180), ontological influence on narrative construction, approaches to storytelling, and the researcher’s preference to adopt a standpoint that either thinks about or thinks with stories.

A further danger to avoid in the narrative methodology is “‘the Hollywood plot,’ the plot where everything works out well in the end” (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990, p. 10) and recognizing the limitations of the research and staying true to the data that were revealed in the narrative interviews.

However, qualitative research and the narrative methodology have been increasingly accepted for their validity (Connelly & Clandinin, 1990). With a well-developed and intentional approach to methodology and research, the narrative approach can be an excellent research method, particularly for understanding ‘why’ and ‘how’ of a research topic (Trainor & Grauem, 2014).

**Procedures**

The study began with proposal defense and approval of the study by Northeastern University’s Institutional Review Board (IRB). Following the approval of the study, the quota sampling recruitment began.
Participant Selection

The participants in this study were selected by identifying current practitioners who were recruited using quota sampling. The initial goal was to identify between four and six practitioners, five were successfully recruited and participated fully in the study. The recruitment process began by first identifying full-time professional Residence Life staff members in mid-level positions (Director positions at a smaller institution, Assistant or Associate Directors at larger institutions) who appeared from recommendations and/or online staff descriptions to have primary responsibility for Resident Assistant training design/implementation at their institution. Experience in designing training was a criterion for this study because the identified level of experience with Resident Assistant training design allowed the interviewees to narrate more than one experience in designing Resident Assistant training and to speak with authority. By interviewing professional staff members who have supervised Resident Assistants and have had a role in training design or implementation over at least five years, the participant sampling was composed of individuals who were and have been directly impacted by training and additionally have a broader understanding of training and a theoretical background for meaning-making. Professional staff with at least five years of full-time professional experience were selected for their experience base including more experience at training sessions, more experience evaluating training sessions, more experience and understanding of the impact of training efficacy on performance and a strong understanding of theory. All of these factors were
beneficial in creating comprehensive responses as the researcher asked participants to share rationale for why they design their Resident Assistant training as they do.

The participant sample was collected using a purposive quota sampling. Participants were selected with intentional consideration of specific characteristics and pre-selected criteria (Family Health International, n.d). Specifically, they were selected for their experience and familiarity with the process of designing Resident Assistant training and for their representation of different university types. In the instance that the purposive quota sampling yielded more than the proposed candidate sampling size, a contingency plan was in place to narrow candidate eligibility. This more targeted criteria would have included selecting candidates first on the criteria of diverse institution type and by highest experience level. It was not necessary to use these additional criteria, as it proved difficult to identify current residence life practitioners with 5 or more years of experience with Resident Assistant training design; and once identification of 5 practitioners occurred (which fortunately fell within the criteria of representing different institution types), the active recruitment concluded. It was determined that the sampling range of four to six (and final participant number of five) was appropriate and allowed for thorough inquiry into the training design experiences of each of the participants and additionally still provided multiple perspectives on the process of training design for Resident Assistants.

The researcher used professional connections within student affairs in the United States for recommendations of initial contacts, including those within the Florida Housing Officers organization, and extensively used an internet search to identify staff members who appeared to
have a substantial role in training design. Four of the five participants were respondents from the initial search and the fifth participant was recruited through snowball sampling, recommended by another participant. Twenty-five individuals were originally identified and contacted; with only eight responding to initial communication, and with three not responding after receiving the study criteria and unsigned consent form. Initial identification was conducted with an eye toward creating diversity in institution type within the study.

Diverse institution type was a criterion in this study because the study had a relatively small sample size, and selecting interviewees with experiences in designing training at different institution types allowed for generalized analysis of data. Accordingly, an attempt was made to locate practitioners at diverse institutional types (large institution, small institution, private institution, public institution, religiously-affiliated institution and historically Black college/university). The five participants collectively represented the following institution types: private/religious, mid-sized public, large public, gender-specific and small/specialized institutions of higher education, across five states and four regions (southern, new-England, mid-Atlantic, and Midwest).

An internet search for historically black college/university (HBCU) participants yielded four potential candidates, none of whom responded to communication. Additionally, the researcher contacted two peers currently working in Residence Life programs at HBCUs for additional recommendations, which wielded only one additional nomination. When that nominated participant was contacted, they shared that they did not meet the criteria for the study,
because they only had three years of experience working with training design; they did not have any recommendations of other potential participants to contact. Though it had not been intended in the design, all the participants in the study represented institutions on the eastern side of the United States.

These two established criteria (participant experience with training design and institution type) were identified in the initial appointment between the researcher and the interview candidate. Age, gender, ethnicity/race, socio-economic level, literacy, level, and health were not criteria for inclusion or exclusion. No other exclusion criteria applied.

**Recruitment and Consent Procedures**

The researcher sent an initial introductory email to reach out to potential participants. The introductory conversations generally outlined the purpose and benefits of the study and logistics of participation; the researcher requested those willing to discuss further possible participation in the study or who had recommendations to respond. From those email responses, appointments were set up to discuss further logistics of participation in the study and to review the unsigned content documents with the potential participants. The use of pseudonyms within the study was explained, as well as how participant information would be used and protected in the study. It was made clear in the appointment discussions as well as in the unsigned consent documents that no compensation would be provided for participation in the study. During the appointments, potential participants had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss concerns.
related to participation in the study, and it was re-emphasized that all participation in the study would be voluntary.

This process led to eight viable participants, with only one responding candidate in the process not meeting criteria, seventeen not responding at all, and three initially responding but later indicating lack of interest/time to participate in the study and withdrawing as candidates before the interview stage commenced. The researcher completed the recruitment process until the quota of four to six interested and available participants were identified. The final five participants agreed to the consent document and to participating in the study.

**Participant Interviews**

The researcher sent an introductory email and followed-up with a phone call appointment to speak with the potential participants. The introductory conversations outlined the purpose and benefits of the study and logistics of participation. The pseudonym process within the study was also explained, as well as how participant information would be used and shared within the study. It was made clear that no compensation would be provided for participation in the study. Potential participants had the opportunity to ask questions and discuss concerns related to participation in the study, though it should be noted that none of the candidates had any concerns to express, and the only questions were regarding timeline. Participants were provided a copy of the unsigned consent form for the study and it was additionally emphasized verbally that all participation in the study was voluntary.
Individuals who were interested in participating in the study and who met the identified criteria were provided with a copy of the unsigned consent form. Once the participants were identified, the interviewer scheduled the first set of interviews. Initial interviews were scheduled and focused on the narratives of the participants regarding how they design Resident Assistant training. At the beginning of each participant’s initial interviews, the participants were asked to confirm they had read the unsigned consent form and agreed to it before the interview questions began. Each participant was interviewed twice in semi-structured interviews. The first interview focused on the shared narrative by the participant of their Resident Assistant training design process, and the second interview allowed for follow-up questions on topics raised by the initial set of interviews. Because participants were selected from a range of institutional types, a geographic spread of physical locations occurred (with participants representing five different states and the interviewer in a sixth different state), as such interviews were conducted via Go-to-Meeting with teleconference as a back-up for if and when technology glitches occurred. This interview format allowed for the convenience of conversation without travel. The Go-to-Meetings worked fully in seven of the total interviews conducted (and partially in an eighth) which allowed the interviewer to observe non-verbal cues in addition to the narrative being shared; the other two full and one partial interview were conducted by telephone.

The semi-structured interview format allowed for general consistency in questioning and focus across interviews while allowing the narrative of each participant to lead the conversation. Additionally, it allowed the interviewer to adapt during interviews with follow-up questions.
These topical interviews focused on significant considerations for training design and the factors that most influence the design process. As Rubin and Rubin indicated,

the goal of topical interviews is to work out a coherent answer to a research question by piecing together what a variety of people with different information and distinct perspectives tell you. The researcher listens to the interviewees and then sorts, weighs, balances, and analyzes what he or she has heard, creating a narrative and explanation of what has occurred (2012, p. 32).

Weaknesses of the semi-structured topical interview include that it is by nature not a perfectly consistent approach and that much of the direction of the interview is led by the participant, which could lead to off-topic tangents to the overall topic. Because there were multiple rounds of interviews with each of the five participants, the scheduling and transcription/analysis of interview transcripts were also time-intensive.

Data were gathered using a narrative analysis approach and examined the descriptions as told in story form by the participants. The focus was on how the participants made meaning of the process of training design, and how they interpreted the important considerations for training design.

When interviewing, we often ask for narratives or stories and recognize that when we are told a story, it is often more important to look for secondary messages, such as moral values or cultural beliefs, than it is to track down whether the story is literally true (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 29).
As such, the interview was focused not solely on the training design process or content but on the significant considerations that drive the decision-making in training design. The sample size of five participants allowed for representation of diverse institution types/cultures/training design influences but also demonstrated similar influences and factors across the diverse components which are important in training design. The sample size was large enough to allow for variety within the participants’ experiences but small enough to allow for the in-depth qualitative interviews needed to allow for detailed information, examples and experiences. A smaller sample size was also appropriate with the open-ended questions of the narrative approach. It allowed the interviewer to “change wording or skip questions if they don’t make sense at the time, or make up new questions on the spot to follow up on new insights …[the interviewer] can pose a separate set of questions to different interviewees” (Rubin & Rubin, 2012, p. 29).

Secondary interviews were used both for collection of additional information and to fill gaps or explore areas loosely addressed in the initial interview. Secondary interviews were scheduled with a designated two hour time frame, and the participants again were asked to share their narrative experiences related to the topics found from the initial coding.

Data Analysis

Following the initial interviews, the researcher transcribed interviews and, using the MAXQDA software, began coding for themes and subtopics to explore in the subsequent interview(s). From the coding, additional questions were developed and provided to the
participants. Second interviews were then transcribed and coded. The combined data from the two sets of interviews and coding were analyzed together using the process described below.

The data analysis for this study began with transcription and secure storage of the interview content (data). Identification markers were replaced with the assigned pseudonyms preferred by the participants. The coding process used was holistic or “macro-level coding” (Saldana, 2016, p.166) with additional pattern coding to identify larger themes or codes within the interview.

In the initial holistic coding, the researcher reviewed the transcripts for common phrases, terms or explanations for the participant’s descriptions of what drove their training design decisions. The initial items repeated between different narratives, or patterns, were broadly marked. For example, had this been a pattern coding of furniture, the initial identification would be of “chairs” not of “red chairs” or “plastic chairs.” The identified overarching themes across narratives were used to develop the secondary interview questions, which delved deeper into topics already addressed and explored new considerations for training design raised by the participants in their initial interviews. This allowed the researcher and initial coding to develop the tour questions for the secondary interviews. The secondary interviews thoroughly explored to what extent those considerations drove decision making and the impact of those decisions on training design. The initial coding process allowed for both broad context of initial data and assisted in the identification of areas where additional data were necessitated.
As further interviews were conducted, they were likewise transcribed and securely stored with pseudonyms. Both the initial data and additional data were collectively reviewed using In Vivo coding as secondary coding when possible to capture the participant’s own language and voice (Miles, Huberman & Saldana, 2014). This level of coding included identifying patterns or considerations repeated between narratives in the words of the narrators. In this phase of the coding process, the researcher intentionally focused on understanding what the narrator was sharing and intentionally not juxtaposing the researcher’s own assumptions into the coding process. Using an “in vivo” coding technique allowed for several categorical phrasing choices (for example “select scaffolding” or “self-care”; but terms were not used perfectly consistently across all interviews; even when sharing examples that fell within those categories named using terms of another interviewee. While the “in vivo” coding was not able to be consistently applied across all interviews and phrase choices, it did allow for authentic representation of the narrators’ experiences while still identifying trends in the considerations driving each narrator’s training design process and determining whether commonalities existed in those considerations between narrators. Saldana (2016) suggested In Vivo coding “is not necessarily a specific method that should be used as the sole coding approach to data” (p.111); in some places the In Vivo coding may be a perfect summation of an idea and in other places it may prove too unwieldy.

After the second stage of coding was completed, the researcher again holistically reviewed the transcriptions and coding to determine if additional data collection (interviews) were necessary. The researcher reviewed the in vivo coding for frequency of inclusion across narratives and for participant-described significance across narratives. This included some evaluation coding. Saldana
(2016) pointed out that “evaluation coding applies (primarily) non-quantitative codes to qualitative data that assign judgments about the merit, worth, or significance of programs or policy” (p. 140). The researcher then evaluated the data and “patterned observations or participant responses of attributes and details that assess quality” (Saldana, 2016, p. 141).

The process of coding and interpreting the data to note significant considerations from the narratives of the interviewees demonstrated the individuality of training design between institution types and revealed common practices or items that influence the training design process. After all the coding was completed, the researcher reviewed identified codes/themes for frequency of appearance and consistency of inclusion in participant interviews. These codes/themes served as the findings that determined whether significant considerations for Resident Assistant training design existed and what they were.

In the analysis phase of finding identification, the researcher first detected recurrent patterns (patterns that emerged consistently across multiple interviews and/or patterns that were consistently influential within a specific interview). The researcher also evaluated themes that occurred less frequently but were supported with substantive examples and rationale, which in turn supported the identification of the theme as a noteworthy finding. These infrequent findings were both context-specific and indicative of an emerging trend and their lack of frequency did not preclude their consideration as important for training design. This aligns with the theoretical framework of relational theory, which recognizes the consequence of context and environmental considerations in evaluating and identifying findings.
The researcher’s interview notes and observations formed a “discourse analysis” of cadential patterns, observed verbal and non-verbal contextualization cues such as pitch, intonation, sequence of spoken words, emphasis, and intensity and will also be used in assessing the considerations that drive training decisions (Creswell, 2013; Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). Between the thematic analysis and discourse analysis, the researcher took a multi-level approach to analyze and identify the comprehensive list of factors that the participants described as influencing or driving the design process of Resident Assistant training.

**Ethical Considerations**

Secure storage of documents and protection of participant confidentiality was a prominent concern for this study. As such, original interview files were recorded as MP3 files on the researcher’s private password-protected cellular phone and were further securely stored on the researcher’s private password-protected computer. All transcriptions and other original documents were labeled with the pseudonym selected by the participant and were stored on the same computer and backed up on a password protected external disk drive. An identifying list of participant identities was stored on the researcher’s personal password protected computer in a separate folder. Digital data will be kept on the researcher’s personal computer for five years and securely and permanently deleted when the five-year timeframe has expired. Any secondary use of data from the proposed study will not occur without specific approval from the Northeastern Institutional Review Board.

**Trustworthiness**
This study followed established qualitative investigation research methods including recruitment of participants unknown to the researcher, a voluntary participation process, application of intentional “tactics to help ensure honesty in informants” (p. 66), iterative questioning, multiple cycles of interviews, establishing the “background, qualifications and experience of the investigator” (p. 68), member checks as established within the dissertation review and defense process and a study built on the foundation of a well-documented literature review, which includes peer-reviewed published studies on the topic (Shenton, 2004). Member checks were conducted by providing study participants with copies of the transcribed interviews for the opportunity to correct any discrepancies or inaccuracies; only one participant had a correction and it was the name of a specific previous employment.

Beyond credibility, this study followed guidelines recommended by Shenton (2004) and established transferability in the “provision of background data to establish context of [the] study and [a] detailed description of [the] phenomenon in question to allow comparisons to be made” (p. 73), established dependability through the use of an established coding software program and transparent coding process, as well as through the use of a detailed methodological description (p. 73), and through inclusion in the study of methodological shortcomings and their effects.

**Researcher Positionality**

The summer before I entered college, while working as a camp counselor, a close friend pulled me aside and recommended that I look into the Resident Assistant position when I got to college because she saw my passion for educating others in a holistic live-in environment. Upon
beginning college I got involved with residence life in a variety of volunteer positions that quickly led to being hired as a Resident Assistant, from where I rapidly advanced to the role of Resident Assistant supervisor and then professional residence life staff. I am now in my fourteenth concurrent year of working professionally in residence life, and have worked with design and/or implementation of Resident Assistant training in every one of those years at four different institutions of higher education. As I have advanced professionally I no longer directly supervise Resident Assistants, but I still see the impact of training on their performance. The topic of Resident Assistant training is one I am passionate about and interested in, and as Machi and McEvoy (2012 commented, “curiosity is the heart of all research” (p. 14). As a residence life practitioner, I believe Resident Assistant training design will benefit from further research and attention.

Key Aspects of Positionality Related to the Study

I am an educator. My Bachelor’s Degree is in secondary education; and applying the lesson plan development, classroom management skills and assessment learned in my undergraduate courses uniquely frame my understanding of training design and implementation for college students. When I work with training design I am intentional about space, presentation, learning styles, curriculum and assessment. When I began at my current institution, training design was the first assignment I was given. I was concerned when I reviewed previous resources and learned that the department had heavily relied on a “wing-it” approach to training
in both design and implementation and have since witnessed the dramatic progression of quality with the advent of intentional educational focus when working with training.

I am a practitioner. I have experienced the inconsistency of training between different institutions and witnessed training both intentionally tailored and haphazardly implemented. I have witnessed presenters with varied experience in designing or implementing training sessions succeed and fail, and have reflected on those in comparison to the content of my undergraduate education courses. I am ultimately responsible for training and supervision of all student staff within our department. I train our trainers and supervise our supervisors. As a practitioner, my understanding of training is built on the success and failures I have experienced or seen played out during my years as a professional and paraprofessional. I have strong opinions because of those experiences, which define my positionality with regards to researching training design. For example, I have a strong bias against traditional lecture-style presentation of material that in practice is strongly kinesthetic (incident response, community building). I needed to be conscious of this and worked to acknowledge different perspectives without judgment throughout my work with this study (Carlton Parsons, 2008).

I am values-driven and value work-ethic and innovation. Carlton Parsons (2008) noted the impact of past experiences on perceptions, and I have been strongly influenced by my father who both preached and practiced work-ethic and integrity. His work dedication was such that several promotions he received resulted in multiple individuals being hired to replace the position he had previously filled. I strive to emulate his work-ethic by innovating the work I do
so that programs I work with are left more effective and successful because of the work I’ve
done to improve them. In working with training, this occurs in the intentional reflection, review
and adjustments I make in training design for every pre-service and in-service training conducted
by our department. I view training design as dynamic and evolving and practice innovation to
maximize efficacy. While I am interested in defining significant considerations for training
design, I am not interested in boxing or limiting the possibilities of training. Rather, this study is
intended to identify research-based considerations for aspects of design and implementation that
trainers can use to tailor and elevate the training on their campus with national consistency but
still distinguishable and unique to their own program.

I am privileged and work in a privileged environment. I work with students who have
chosen to pursue higher education where it is not mandated, as was their previous education. I
work with students who can afford to pursue higher education both financially and in time
commitment. I am privileged to live and work in the United States where residential programs
are considered valuable within higher education. I have been privileged to work at institutions
where technology is easily accessible and in student affairs where collaboration with other
departments is common. I am privileged to work in residence life where student housing fees
often support residential programming, staffing, and training and remove financial challenges
that might otherwise exist. Privilege frames how I view training.

**Addressing Bias from Positionality** It cannot be assumed that all those who design or
implement Resident Assistant training design understand curriculum development or classroom
management techniques. Rather, the opposite is more likely to be true. While I understand training through the lens of an educator, I had to intentionally develop research questions that allowed interviewees to answer from their own perspectives. I believe my position as an educator benefitted me in analyzing and theme construction from the narratives shared by the interviewees, yet I had to be intentional about not allowing educational bias to overwrite or influence those responses.

It cannot be assumed that a failed training initiative is a totalistic failure. I had to put my own positive and negative experiences as a practitioner aside to hear why initiatives in others’ programs succeeded or failed. My personal attachment to the practice of Resident Assistant training design “provides the passion and dedication necessary for conducting good research” (Machi & McEvoy, 2012, p. 19); however, it also marks me as potentially biased and opinionated. As I identified themes and differences between interviews, I needed to allow the research to develop the story of important considerations rather than using it to fill in a pre-written storyline from own experiences in this qualitative study.

It was necessary that I respect, acknowledge and work to understand values that differ from my own in this study. By remaining objective and intentionally reflecting on my values both as separate from and similar to the research gathered, I gained a more comprehensive perspective of the study materials. By opening to differing viewpoints, I avoided “a presumed social homogeneity” (Fennell & Arnot, 2008, p. 525) and was able to view and appreciate the differences and impacts of varied values in training design and implementation.
Finally, it was necessary that I acknowledge the privilege differential in higher education. I needed to account for financial support, administrative support, supervisory support, time available to the trainer for the design and implementation of training, quantity and quality of space available for training, time available to train and evaluate the trainers, time and methods for assessment and assessment review. Size of training groups for efficacy is another privilege I’ve experienced working at smaller institutions. In this study, it was important that I carefully reflect on how the privileges I’ve experienced both designing and implementing training have affected my perception of what constitutes effective training. Having done that, I still needed to make sure those did not limit the data gathered in my research nor distort their meaning (Roberts, 2010).

**Limitations**

With a small sample size, there are inherent limitations to the study. Specifically, a diverse population was chosen to interview in an attempt to see what training design considerations exist for Resident Assistant training design in North America, but it is not possible that any one particular participant could speak collectively for all similar residential programs. For example, an interviewee from a community college could not be assumed to represent the training design experiences of all Resident Assistant training designs at community colleges. Another limitation of this study was the lack of literature on the topic, which supposed the need for this study with a limitation of support from peer-reviewed literature. A third limitation was that participants were selected for their responsibilities and experience as Resident
Assistant training designers and for their experience at a unique institution type, which did not account for differences based off the diversity of the participants themselves. Finally, this study was limited to a very specific training area, that of Resident Assistants, and may not be transferrable to other populations/training design in higher education or outside of higher education.
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS

This narrative study delved into the experiences of five residence life practitioners and sought to identify the practitioners’ considerations that drove the training design choices for Resident Assistant pre-term training. This chapter explores the results of the interviews conducted according to the methodology established in chapter three. This chapter includes an overview of the participants, a presentation of the consistent, common and frequent themes that developed across the interviews of what constitute significant considerations for Resident Assistant training design. Specific examples shared from the narrative interviews are included to provide a comprehensive overview of the training considerations taken into account by the study participants as they annually develop pre-term Resident Assistant training.

**Participant Demographics**

The five participants of this narrative study included three women and two men in five different states and four regions (southwest, mid-Atlantic, Midwest & New England). All participants exceeded the minimum criteria of having 5 years of experience with training design. The participants’ range of experience with Resident Assistant training design was 9-17 years, with an average of 12.2 years’ experience (see Table 1).

Table 1

*Description of Participants*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Years of Experience with Resident Assistant Training Design as self-disclosed by the participant</th>
<th>Institution Type and Years at Institution</th>
<th>#RAs at Institution</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mark</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Specialized Institution of Higher Education</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Joanne</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>Large Public (over 20,000 undergraduate students)</td>
<td>390</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Jake</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>Small Private; Religiously Affiliated</td>
<td>21</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>---</td>
<td>-------</td>
<td>-----------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>-----</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Duke</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>Mid-Sized Public (10-20,000 undergraduate students)</td>
<td>203</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dixie</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>Small Private; Gender Specific</td>
<td>28</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At the time of the initial interview Mark had 10 years of experience in Resident Assistant training design and had been working at his current institution (a specialized institution of higher education) for three years. Mark previously worked at three public state institutions and a private gender specific institution, with involvement in training design ranging from serving as a committee member, presenter and having primary responsibility for training design.

As of her initial interview, Joanne had worked with Resident Assistant training design for 15 years and worked in housing her entire professional career. She had experience working in housing in five states across the United States at institutions of various sizes prior to her current role.

Jake, at the time of his initial interview, had been working in his current position (with primary responsibility for training design) for nine years at a small, private religiously-affiliated institution with a strong social justice focus stemming from the religious ties.

Duke, at the time of her interview, had primary responsibility for Resident Assistant training for 17 years, with indirect training experience prior to that. She also oversaw a selection and training committee as part of her role at a mid-sized public institution.

Dixie, at her initial interview, was in her third year working at a gender-specific small private institution, but by her second interview had transitioned to a role at a larger state institution. Dixie’s second interview was held prior to experiencing a pre-term training at the
new institution; leaving the gender-specific institution as her most recent frame of reference for training design. Dixie had experience with Resident Assistant training design from various aspects at four other institutions of higher education, as well.

**Identified Themes**

Five major themes and twenty-five sub-themes were expressed in the lived experience of the participants to be essential components of Resident Assistant training design and will be explored in greater depth throughout Chapter Four (see Table 2).

Table 2

*Significant Considerations for Training Design*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Significant Considerations for Training Design</strong></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Holistic Approach to the Training Design Process</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Influence of Training Designer Preference on Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Literature and Theory-Driven Decision Making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Utilization of Planning Teams for Training Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Select Scaffolding in Design Construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Training Session Considerations within Training Design</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Topical Inclusions for Training Sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Use of Varied Training Session Types in Training Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>o <em>Purpose and Utilization of Joint Training</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Balancing Training Through Breaks and Self-Care Strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Focus on Serving Residential Student Needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Designing Training to be Fun and/or Engaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Employing Theming in Training Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Alignment of Training to the Unique Needs of Resident Assistants</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Accounting for Individual Needs in Training Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Differentiated Training Considerations for New vs. Returning Resident Assistants</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Considerations for Learning Styles in Resident Assistant Training Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Designing for Training Transfer and Application</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Logistical Considerations in Training Design

- Maximizing and Navigating Politics
- Traditional or Mandated Training Inclusions
- Training Designer Power to Effect Change
- Innovation vs. Inheritance in Training Design
- Preparing for and Utilizing Presenters
- Managing Time Constraints
- Utilization of Pre and Post Training Opportunities
- Budgetary Constraint Considerations in Training Design
- Environmental Constraints and Influences in Training Design
- Size of Institution Influences in Training Design

Use of Assessment in Training Design

Holistic Approach to the Training Design Process

Holistic approach to training design developed as a significant theme within the narratives of this study. It included recognition of the influence of training designer preference on the design process, the use of literature and theory to drive decision-making, utilizing planning teams for training design and select scaffolding in design construction.

Influence of Training Designer Preference on Design. The training design process begins with the presenter determining what approach is preferred. Jake, for example, indicated that he approaches training using a storyboard because the visual representation helps him piece training together.

Several of the participants mentioned that they either think big and then develop specifics or start specific and then move to broad as a holistic approach to their training design process. Advantages to starting broad included laying a foundation that can be built upon in more detail. Mark commented that his student staff have struggled with this approach. He identified their
reaction to that approach as a reflection of their K-12 training, which he noted has taught them to be check-list and task-oriented – once a topic is introduced, they want the corresponding specifics immediately. Accordingly, advantages to starting with specifics are that students are able to receive a checklist of items to do or processes to follow. However, it can then be difficult to help them understand the value of the broad foundation and purpose, leaving them task-oriented and lacking connection to the rationale.

Using “existing bones” was another common holistic approach to training – adapting from a previous training schedule rather than building from scratch. Dixie noted:

I think mostly we're thinking about, "What did we do last year? How can we make it better? And what didn't work last year and what really worked last year?" Sometimes what really worked last year ... Or what didn't work this past year was the thing that really worked the year before and so we have to think about what was different about the staff that we hired this year and why was that not? We do think a lot about that, too.

The philosophy of how those interviewed approached training design was varied. Jake remarked, “What works for me might not work for someone else, but let me try it for a year and go from there.” Duke similarly noted that even failures can be opportunities for future training design. Mark commented that he views training with an “ongoing notion of improvement/rebirth/new energy.” An analogous philosophy was “approaching topical coverage it's not just something that's going to have its own little box that you can put it away in, but those things cross over into other aspects, just like they do in life” (Duke).
Preferences and philosophy impact the choices made by training designers. Holistic training design choices made by training designers included logistics, prioritization, and room for flexibility/adaptability should anything unexpected occur and disrupt the original training plan. Choices shared by participants in this study included ensuring variety in all components of training, not front-loading to the extent that Resident Assistants are stressed or anxious, balancing function versus passion versus personality, and providing repetition as additional opportunities to grab onto and retain content. Other choices were with regard to free time (Jake commented that his supervisor has used the phrase “idle hands are the devil’s playground”), matching training design to the role, utilizing the energy and excitement of others in planning and creating chunks in training so it is not visually overwhelming when viewing the training schedule -- as Duke noted, “so there's also sort of this mental feel that it's not going on forever.”

Liability and response to liability pressures influence presenter design preferences as does their personal alignment to department expectations, response to trends and innovations, and industry changes (uniform changes affecting higher education or residential programming). Uniquely, one of the interviewees mentioned that fear of student staff and student staff’s fear of change drove decision making and how training design decisions were approached for that institution. Finally, the participants described influences from outside resources (talking to peers in the field, ideas discussed at conferences, and sharing of ideas within the higher education industry) on their preferences for training design and training design choices.
Other philosophies and preferences that drove the approach to training design were Jake’s focus on team-building as a foundation, Duke’s balance of trying to teach in creative ways but also supporting the Resident Assistants as they’re learning new concepts and skills, and Joanne’s passion for the residential experience and the importance of the work. Dixie desired to help Resident Assistants learn to love the role like she has, and Mark found the purpose of training and the priority was “to get people feeling prepared and competent to do their job and excited to do the job.” Preference also influence the training designer’s choices as to what belongs in training versus what can be covered later.

**Literature and Theory-Driven Decision Making.** Both literature and theory drove decision making for the participants interviewed. Some of the concepts referenced within the interviews were general (framing an understanding of community development, social justice, inclusion, leadership style values, human resources) and some were specific.

Bloom’s Taxonomy was one of the specific theories described as important in framing design and understanding the complexities of learning that should be occurring in a well-designed training. Another was the social change model of leadership development, which Dixie described as utilized in her department’s programming model and as a foundational training piece.

Both Duke and Mark referenced Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs in regard to framing training design to meet physiological, safety and social belonging needs in the training design before expecting Resident Assistants to gain confidence in the role and move into the stage of
self-actualization. Maslow’s Hierarchy is why some schools scaffolded move-in and settling into their assigned Resident Assistant room prior to training, and then began their training with expectations and team-building. Kohlberg and Gilligan’s theories of moral development were other specific references made by Joanne about training Resident Assistants to understand and meet student needs.

Staying current with trends in the field through peer-reviewed literature and industry publications as a useful way to frame training design was also discussed in the interview narratives. For example, Dixie referenced the Chronicle of Higher Education or Inside Higher Ed (two popular higher education publications):

there was an article about how we just expect a lot more out of RAs because the stakes are so much higher in terms of retention; and it was talking about the [RA] strike at Scripps [College] and how when in the nineties or maybe even the early 2000s it was just like busting a party and pouring out some beer and walking around. There were not as many serious mental health issues happening in the residence halls as there are now. How we have to either take that off of them or train them better or figure out some sort of in-between.

Ongoing training is another way practitioners stay current and frame a contemporary understanding of Resident Assistant training design. Duke referenced attending a human resources workshop to keep from becoming stagnant; she looked for workshops and training to
attend to stay current and push herself in terms of professional development as a training
designer.

**Utilization of Planning Teams for Training Design.** The participants of this study
were in role primarily responsible for training design; however, all of them included others in the
training design process. These additional individuals formed, to varying extents, planning teams
for training design. Planning teams included primarily peers and direct subordinates. One
interviewee had a formal planning committee comprised of stakeholders from all levels to
provide input in training design. The participants recognized their influence as the primary
training designer and final decision maker, but also their preference for other voices, diversity
and originality of thought. Duke intentionally recruits members for her training committee who
will challenge the process and question the intentionality and application of training design
choices, so that collectively the most effective future training can then develop. Involving others
in a formal or informal planning team allowed for greater depth in an effort not to short-cut or
short-change the Resident Assistants receiving the training.

Interviewees also mentioned balancing training design with their other responsibilities, so
having a planning team (however formal or informal) allows for shared division of task
completion. Jake described the value he feels in having autonomy with training design and so
he, in turn, wants to provide that to those who help him with training design. Mark indicated
that, speaking of a planning team member as well, “this new generation of professionals is going
to have amazing ideas on how to operationalize [training] even better than I could for the student
population. So really, letting her have that organic growth in that process.” Balance within the planning team is another consideration, making sure that between the primary training designer and the additional planning team members that there are creative thinkers, people who see the big picture, but also those who are strong with logistics and who are going to get things accomplished.

**Select Scaffolding in Design Construction.** Select scaffolding was a term used by Dixie and scaffolding by Joanne to describe the process of intentionally ordering training sessions for content that builds on other content. For example, one scaffold in training would include beginning with policies as a topical coverage, then behavior management, and then learning how to refer students to campus resources (such as the counseling center); it included scenario training, where the skills learned in those sessions are practiced with a scenario where a student is threatening to harm themselves and others. Another example from Joanne was beginning training with teambuilding as a staff, followed by reviewing departmental and job expectations, and then covering the programming or interaction model used. This provided experience on the importance of connections and understanding of why the department values programming/interactions. The order of the training matters, because it is important to build the skills upon each other and learn all of the skills before being asked to apply them.

This process of ordering information can also include scaffolding with regards to importance, not just topic. For example, if a new topic or presenter is mandated to be included, what else can be eliminated or reduced to accommodate the new topic? Seriousness and
emotional impact of information must also be considered with scaffolding. For example, Mark pointed out that beginning with Title IX training created tension and stress for the student staff and was “way too intense.” Most of the participants begin with team-builders to scaffold relationships with other Resident Assistants and develop a level of comfort before moving into intense training topics. The time of day during which sessions are held must also be scaffolded; as Dixie pointed out, waiting until four in the afternoon to cover emergency procedures, when trainees are already information-fatigued, would not be a good practice.

Scaffolding is important in debriefing and for presenters to intentionally connect training topics back to previous training. Dixie’s example of this was saying to student staff, “Remember on Thursday when we talked about X, Y, Z. Well, this is where that fits in, and it's really important.” It is also about helping staff understand that training topics are not inherently autonomous. While diversity or social justice may be covered in one or two sessions, the content from those topics will weave through many other pieces of the job, and that training will be designed to help student staff understand the connections. The integration and repetition of training content are important design choices to emphasize this. Scaffolding also expands holistically into the Resident Assistant position because trainers must consider what topics must be front-loaded into the fall pre-term training and what topics can be covered later in the year in ongoing development.

Training Session Considerations within Training Design
Another overarching theme developed from the participant narratives was specific to training session considerations in the training design process. This included topical inclusions for training sessions, the use of varied training session types in the design process, considerations for joint training purpose and utilization, balancing training through breaks and self-care strategies, focusing on serving residential student needs, designing training to be fun and engaging and considering employment of theming in Resident Assistant training design.

**Topical Inclusions for Training Sessions.** Topical inclusions were the training topics described by the interviewees in this study. Topics fell generally within thirteen topical categories and were sometimes referenced generally and sometimes in great detail in the narrative.

One of the primary topical inclusions was safety and security. Topics within this category included policies and how to confront/enforce policy violations, emergency procedures, teaching Resident Assistants how to work with mental health concerns, gatekeeper training & suicide prevention, how to work with students in distress, behavior management, on-call or duty responsibilities, CPR and finally, scenario training (often referred to as “Behind Closed Doors” where Resident Assistants are given the opportunity to practice confrontation and care skills with feedback and reflection).

Diversity and social justice were repeatedly-referenced topical inclusions. This category included references to primary sexual/gender and cultural diversity, but also focused intentionally on inclusion topics as well as referencing resources/referral sites and guest speakers...
to highlight resources available on campus or in the community to refer students to and/or use as future resources themselves.

Teambuilding was another topical inclusion, and the participants had diverse examples of how this topic could be addressed, which included ropes courses (high and low), off-site trips to local attractions, recognition activities, roll calls, activities designed to teach staff how to work together effectively, staff dinners, hall staff time/meetings, ice-breakers, a spirit stick, and a closing celebration.

A fourth topical category included topics focusing on resident/student needs. Participants mentioned retention, interpersonal relationships, wellness series, academic success, preparation for working with specific residential populations and their needs (for example, first-year students), the needs of students from international countries with political/natural disaster/other cultural student needs and general student development theory training.

A final major topical category was that of reflection/introspection. Training was designed to include processing time, review of content missed or misunderstood in previous years, intentional breaks and downtime, training sessions on self-care and wellness, setting boundaries, time management, and even holding an alumni RA panel for former staff to come back and share their experiences with current staff.

Less repetitious topics across interviews included identity training (for example, assessments such as Strengths Finder, the Meyers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), and values exercises), time for in-hall tasks (preparing the building, creating door decorations, and bulletin
boards, completing room condition reports (RCRs), checking keys), and expectations setting (reviewing contract or role, department values, formal university or departmental welcome from president/department head). Community service was a topical inclusion at one institution within training. Two participants mentioned administrative training (confidentiality, paperwork). Community development through training on community engagement, roommate mediations, floor meetings, and the residential curriculum model or programming model was mentioned in several interviews. Learning objectives (skills and knowledge) was a topical inclusion for training design addressed in several interviews.

Lastly, legal considerations were a topical inclusion consistently mentioned across interviews with specific references to Title IX/sexual misconduct training. For example, Mark noted that Title IX training is now a policy and standard safety topical inclusion.

Joanne also shared that “

everything is more liability based and more legal based, I think that is constantly in the back of your hear. And I think that we’re going to move more towards that. I think you know, no one –and I mean I understand in the current administration, no one know what Title IX’s going to look like, different than it did with Obama, but no one wants to be on OCR’s list, right?

Legal considerations thus form a final important topical inclusion to consider in training design.

**Use of Varied Training Session Types in Training Design.** Training session type was another consideration raised in the training design process. Interviewees agreed that using a
variety of presentation styles made training more engaging and effective for Resident Assistants. For example, Jake takes staff on “retreat away from campus to camp”. Most of the presenters used breakout or conference style sessions (where Resident Assistants choose their own sessions, which may vary from individual to individual), round robin sessions (where groups are split up and rotate around until they’ve hit the content of each presenter), and traditional lecture format or PowerPoint presentation. Duke commented “you can’t anymore just stick a PowerPoint up and walk through it.” Other presentation styles discussed by participants included reverse presentations (where Resident Assistants are given the content and teach themselves and then develop a presentation to teach the other Resident Assistants), play learning (for example a game format), and experiential presentations (role modeled experiences or scenario training like the popular “Behind Closed Doors”), Pecha Kucha (a Japanese presentation style where 20 slides are shown for 20 seconds each), personal reflection sessions, and service learning opportunities. Additional presentation styles included formats such as a Resident Assistant class, in-hall time, or using technology in online training modules or as polling software to drive discussion.

_Purpose and Utilization of Joint Training._ Joint training was the most elaborated session type within the participant narratives in this study. Duke, Mark, and Dixie all held joint training sessions with other student leaders. Duke mentioned a joint leadership training the night before first year students move into the residence halls and that

for the most part it's orientation staff and our staff and then anybody else who's around; if the recreation staff are here or the multicultural staff are here, they'll invite all of them.
The Greek fraternity and sorority life are invited. So if you're a student leader and you're available, you're invited to that quick presentation … that can be as many as like 8 or 900 people.

Other student leaders invited to joint trainings with Resident Assistants included the Student Government Association and/or campus activities board. Topical inclusions for those joint training sessions included leadership or success speakers, diversity or social justice training, or just fun interactive sessions at the pool or with a cookout or games. Jake added that this year his staff members participated in joint training with Resident Assistants across the country through the ACUHO-I discussion boards included as part of the required online course Resident Assistants must complete before they return to campus for the fall pre-term training. Joint training was designed to help Resident Assistants understand the connection of their role to other campus leadership roles and for the training planners to have the opportunity to pool resources for events.

**Balancing Training Through Breaks and Self-Care.** Breaks and self-care were another recurrent theme from the interviews. Interestingly enough multiple interviewees (Jake, Mark and Dixie) referenced the same hour ranges in comparing how training hours have been adjusted to allow for better balance and self-care; specifically, that Resident Assistant training formerly ran from 8 am until 9 pm, and now runs from 9 or 10 am to 4 or 5 pm. The shorter days were chosen to provide a healthier balance and better stave off the exhaustion. Jake commented “for me, I used to keep them until seven, eight o’clock. And now it’s done by five. Every day.”
Breaks and self-care were incorporated in other ways in the structure of training design by the interviewees, as well. This occurred in breaks intentionally built into the schedule for Resident Assistants to run errands or rest, days off built into the training schedule for the same, and allowing students dedicated time to move in and settle in before training began to allow better restfulness during the training time itself. Participants also shared that they have become intentional about building dedicated time into the training schedule in order to complete in-halls tasks and preparations to open the halls for the fall term (as opposed to expecting it to be completed in the late evenings after designated training hours were over). Intentionally allowing the evenings to be free for true down-time or social activities with other staff members were examples of how balance was incorporated into training design. Other strategies included: building in debriefing time at the end of each day to provide a tangible closure to training to the day, training sessions focused on teaching self-care/wellness behaviors and practices, and adjusting the schedule in the moment when students are seen “hitting the wall” (Jake). Dixie commented that

We try to build that kind of stuff in as some self-care time, some time for them to be together and especially like if you're new and you're like, "I really have no idea what I'm supposed to be doing," at least you can go there and be with other people and watch what they're doing kind of thing, if you feel embarrassed to ask … And we did talk about self-care and burn out, but we really talked about that more in terms of going into the
semester and having people ask too much of you because, again, I think that's something that really our students struggle with a lot.

Even in the presentations themselves, strategies were employed to add balance. Examples included recognizing that students are not able to sit and focus for long periods of time, changing locations to mix things up, balancing heavy topics with lighter activities in a given training day, using conference style to break things up and give the Resident Assistants a choice, varying presenters, and, of course, modeling self-care as presenters/trainers.

**Focus on Serving Residential Student Needs.** Designing training not only for the Resident Assistants, but also to reflect their work with resident students and the needs of those students, was another training design consideration for the participants. Examples of topical training specific to preparing Resident Assistants to work with students on their floors included: student-population specific training (training them to work with first-year students, or upper-class students, or with adult/family housing), working with students who might be different from them in terms of culture, gender, sexual orientation, race, religion, and how to help students navigate those differences amongst each other (in roommate mediations, for example).

Institutional student culture was brought up in several of the interviews, delving into the specific behaviors frequently observed of students at the institution that are not common across all institution types. For example, Mark commented on designing training at a specialized institution of higher education:
[Our students] are notorious for being very awkward and because they spend 10 hours a day for the last 12 years in the practice room. We have to have a lot more conversations and training about how do you work with awkward students, how do you work with students on the spectrum, how do you work with students who were homeschooled? These are all real influences that we have to consider in terms of creating helping capacity within our student leaders.

Similarly, Dixie shared:

We have a four-year housing requirement so when we have staff that are in the residence halls that are mostly seniors, talking about like, "You might have had an argument with this person your first year and you're still mad at them but they're on your floor so you got to be kind." We have to do a lot more of that kind of piece. Again, I don't know if that's a gender thing. It's probably an intersection of gender and the size of the institution, I mean.

Training Resident Assistants on how to work with students’ institution-specific needs as well as how to set boundaries for themselves when working with needy students was another specialized training consideration addressed in the narratives.

Finally, Dixie, Mark and Duke all commented on the growing number of students coming to college with diagnosed mental health conditions and the additional training that has developed and been implemented nationwide in recent years to respond to this need.
**Designing Training to be Fun and/or Engaging.** In the initial interviews, all participants agreed that designing training with an eye to the fun and/or engagement of the Resident Assistants was necessary because fun and engaging sessions and activities are what keep the Resident Assistants motivated and focused during training and lead to better retention of information included in the training. Duke commented:

> We can throw all the knowledge and information and skill training at them, but if it's not fun then they're not gonna care. They're not gonna use it. So it has to also have a fun side to it. They gotta be engaged and motivated.

Examples of fun and engagement in training design included: competitions, online polling, and interactive or practical application activities within sessions. When asked what criteria she would use to judge a training session as effective, Joanne said “not falling asleep, not being on their phones, raising their hands, talking, not hearing things which I've heard more than once of ‘this is stupid’… there's energy, you know people are laughing, people are participating.”

Another aspect of fun was the focus on fun and engagement activities via team building which was addressed above under topical considerations. Even the creation of a returner track for Resident Assistant training, which will be discussed in a later theme, was mentioned because it raised the excitement of the staff, kept the training fresh for them, and kept them engaged in the training.

Training designed to be fun and engaging was also described as having larger impact and positive effect on retention of Resident Assistant staff and marketing. For example, the use of
themed training shirts was seen as fun, but also used as an advertising tool for the department or institution for Dixie.

Conversely, some mandatory fun events in the evenings like pool time or game nights had not been well received, with individuals preferring evenings free to themselves. Another consideration for fun/engagement inclusion in training design – what level is appropriate and when does it become unwanted/unwarranted. The balance and intentionality of fun/engagement activities are what are important to the training design process.

**Employing Theming in Training Design.** Theming was another consideration for training design addressed by the study’s participants, with some mixed viewpoints. Dixie experienced inconsistent use of themes where the theme was tied to an activity or two in training, but which was not used by all presenters or in all sessions. In her experiences, theming was not intentionally used. She also saw themes carried into the Resident Assistant selection process and team building to help build morale and excitement for the role/team.

Duke experienced some forced RA training themes that were ineffective, but she was very excited about the planning stages of an upcoming development. She noted:

I think we've been going at it backwards for years, so we quit doing it [theming] and then this year the theme just sort of burst forth on its own as we were figuring out what we needed to focus on for training. So I think what I want to try and do moving forward is focus on the training piece first and see if there's something that does just kind of rear its
beautiful little head and show that this would be a great theme and figure out how we could do that.

The focus on the intentionality of the theme (beyond being fun) was Duke’s focus, and she discussed the upcoming theme and the innovations tied to it that were designed to make training engaging and interactive.

Jake did not find using themes to be meaningful or intentional and he developed a “disdain” for them. He noted “For me at least, because it's like I think of things I'm like, oh, this is great, this is awesome, and then it just kind of goes on a t-shirt, handed out, and then doesn't really make it on anywhere else. So I mean how many times can you do constructing and community building?”

Mark commented “I think it really depends on the population that you're trying to serve and what is the ultimate goal around what the theme is. That's how I approach it as to whether or not I use a theme.” He found that:

it really is around what is the capacity to build community amongst the staff, so having one unifying theme at [redacted] probably wasn't going to be as beneficial because there were so many separate areas and people participating. Whereas at [redacted] there were seventy- RAs. We could really get behind one theme.

Joanne experienced a theme reflecting the tenets of the institution where the theme was repeated in every session, which was effective and which emphasized departmental goals and objectives. But commenting on theming more generally, she said:
I think if it's done well, it's super great. I do not like, and this is just my personal preference, I do not like kid's stuff, because I think it sends the message that our RAs and our students are children and they're not. We want them to be adults so don't do that. It should be like a prom theme kind of thing, you know like under the sea.

She noted that students liked one theme that was nautically based where even titles were re-phrased to reflect the theme during training (captain, crew), but she found it ”dorky.”

**Alignment of Training to the Unique Needs of Resident Assistants**

Aligning training to the unique needs of Resident Assistants was another significant consideration for training design shared in the narratives of the training designers. This included accounting for individuals’ needs in the training design process, differentiated training considerations for new versus returning Resident Assistants, considerations for learning styles and designing for training transfer and application of content to the Resident Assistant role.

Dixie said

Sometimes we'd find out about their collective personalities and then we're like, "We need to make some changes to some sessions that are coming up real quick. Let's gather after hours tonight and make sure we can get that done so it doesn't take away from what we're actually trying to teach them.

And Duke reiterated the same sentiment stating “our students are different every year, our issues are different every year. What we did for training three years ago doesn't look like the training we're planning right now.” Aligning training to the specific Resident Assistants who will be
participating in the training being designed is thus another important consideration in training design.

**Accounting for Individual Needs in Training Design.** Individual needs for Resident Assistants in training design were referenced repeatedly across all interviews. Considerations for individual needs included designing training to gap-fill general knowledge content for Resident Assistants who did not have experience in a specific area, for example, working with diverse populations. The changing demands made of Resident Assistants was another example of this. Dixie commented that

in the nineties or maybe even the early 2000s it was just like busting a party and pouring out some beer and walking around. There weren't as many serious mental health issues happening in the residence halls as there are now. How we have to either take that off of them or train them better or figure out some sort of in-between.

The serious mental health issues of current students have shifted the training needs to gap-fill individual’s experience levels with specific content and practice for the role of being a Resident Assistant.

Demographics were another level of Resident Assistant needs to be considered in training design. Demographics could include whether the trainees would be new or returning staff members, their class standing (sophomore versus junior or senior student), as well as recognizing and responding to the unique needs of students from under-represented or marginalized cultures
and anticipating how the predicted demographics of the Resident Assistants being trained could best be represented in the training design. Joanne shared that:

In their K-12, they've been talking about this stuff the whole time. They've been talking about difference. They've been talking about social identity. They've been talking about those things. That was like a requirement of the high school. So when they came to college, it was like yeah, we've been talking about that stuff for years. They can start at a different place developmentally and how that related to the position and how that related to the students on their floors, differently than it would for a population of students who did not have the same kind of requirements.

Her comment demonstrates that geographic demographics influence individual preparedness for training and the level of training they require to be prepared to fill the Resident Assistant role.

Considerations for the needs of Resident Assistants included personality factors. Personality factors played into training design in activities focused on self-reflection and understanding their own identity, in strengths assessment, in emotional intelligence training, and even in assessing their competitiveness (and whether a training session framed as a competition would be engaging or disruptive). For example, Jake shared:

For me my students are very comfortable on telling me, "Okay that didn't work, that was horrible. Like why are we doing this?" But they're also awesome in saying, "That was great, can we do this again?" So just that instant feedback, and then being able to, for our own purposes kind of look at how we viewed it as a staff … and being able to just have a
healthy discussion and being like, "Okay, well, did you like that, did you not like that? What could we have done differently?" And then just doing it on the fly. If you have all these things planned, and you see them you know struggling halfway through the day just being able to say, "Okay, well, we're not going to go to the next place." Then they're like, "Oh my god, thank you." Or they're like, "No, no, no, let's go." You know, just being able to gauge that interest.

Duke also commented that:

Our students are different every year, our issues are different every year. What we did for training three years ago doesn't look like the training we're planning right now, ‘cause the issues are different, the job changes a little bit, the focus changes; so I think similar sort of planning process, but it's never the same thing twice.

Resident Assistants’ needs were also explored in the narratives concerning readiness. Several of the participants noted that students were less resilient and less able to handle stress (when viewed holistically as a group) than in previous years, and their ability to retain knowledge (absorption) and translate learning to action was not as strong. Joanne commented that sometimes “you have student staff who get down into the weeds about things. So they take up the time asking a million questions, as opposed to understanding the general philosophy of whatever topical area that they're trying to be trained on.” She recommended meeting the students where they are developmentally, and understanding that the current population of students may need to ask more questions and receive more guidance than in previous years.
Readiness should also be considered from the perspective of parental support needs, recognizing that many college students are coming from a K-12 system that actively sought parental support in making sure tasks were being completed. Duke discussed K-12 parental expectations, sharing that “there's a lot of teachers expecting parental involvement and expecting parents to stay on top of grades and assignments and things like that.” Duke also commented:

our students are coming to us sort of expecting to be spoon-fed … so trying to get students to be more comfortable thinking critically, making some decisions on their own, based on whatever we've trained them as far as procedures or your resources and being able to think critically and make some decisions about what you want to do in this particular situation, takes them outside of their comfort zone. And that can be really difficult for them emotionally. There's a balance there; being able to teach differently, but also support them as they're trying to learn something completely brand new and a new way of doing it. So that makes it a little bit tougher to be able to just jump out there and move forward, because you've got 250 students who all are used to different things as well.

The shift to independence for students and student staff members like Resident Assistants can accordingly be a greater stretch than it might have been in previous years, and critical thinking skills may be less developed because students have had less autonomy in their primary education than they experience in college.
Recognizing that institution-specific student needs (particular to the demographics/student population and culture at that institution) may exist and that previous (even recent) experience at another institution may not translate was another component of Resident Assistant experience/needs shared in the interviews. Dixie mentioned that at a previous institution “roll calls” were a popular training inclusion, but at the gender-specific institution where she worked, it “wasn’t as big of a deal.”

Individual needs could also include events outside of training that affect students, such as the death of a loved one, a troubling home life, special pre-existing relationships the Resident Assistant might have with their residents (such as big/little mentoring relationships or the emotional after-effect of a conflict from a previous year). Individual needs could include outside commitments, such as interviews for internships or conflicting athletic responsibilities. Resident Assistants could also come with registered disabilities (disclosed or undisclosed), unique allergies, or service animals. Recognizing the impact of training dates on the Resident Assistants’ earning potential at their summer jobs or environmental readiness to adjust from a summer schedule to a structured and time-specific training schedule were considerations the participants shared.

Finally, the narratives emphasized the significance of the focus on Resident Assistant needs in the training design process. Duke shared that “long-term I just want to make sure that I’m not short-cutting or short-changing our students, ‘cause it’s not fair to them, it’s not fair to our program.” Jake, during a discussion about diversity training, commented that “I might see
something, but that might be just me in my bias lens, but they might be like, oh, it's not an issue,” so Jake works to look at training through the student lens. This could include keeping up with cutting-edge trends to best meet RA student training needs or recognizing why students chose this role and what is motivating them throughout the training.

Differentiated Training Considerations for New vs. Returning Staff. The concept of differentiating training design components based on the level of the Resident Assistants’ experience in the role was discussed by all participants. This differentiation included providing returning Resident Assistants with a designated role as a facilitator or peer expert, the opportunity to present to their peers, with special sessions designed to match their unique experience as returners or leadership sessions on what it means to be a coach, leader, or to mentor other RAs. The positive and negative considerations for inclusion or exclusion as presented by the interviewees are addressed in this section.

Benefits of providing separate training for returning Resident Assistants include providing them with the opportunity to gain presentation experience and the opportunity for peer leadership; it demonstrates the value the department places on their unique role as experienced returning staff. At some institutions, being a returning Resident Assistant meant arriving later for training (thus not being required to cover the introductory/ basic job responsibilities covered only with the new staff before returners joined the training). Duke commented that the idea being that when [new Resident Assistants] come in, they're coming in to an excited, new staff with that brand new energy. So if I'm a returner who's coming back
going, "Yeah, same old thing, I can just kind of coast through," I'm not going to do that, because I'm going to walk into this energy. This is my ideal picture that I have in my head.

Separate training for new and returning staff also allows for the returning Resident Assistants to feel valued and to understand that they are growing and developing from their experiences without having to repeat all of the same content as in previous year(s).

The biggest challenge of differentiating Resident Assistant training was that it created a divide in the staff. Several training designs offered conference style sessions specifically in order to allow tracked training for returning versus new Resident Assistants. One challenge to that approach was that the content each track was learning had the potential to be valuable to everyone. Not making it a consistent training creates a gap in potential learning for some learners.

**Consideration for Learning Styles in Resident Assistant Training Design.** Learning styles was an interesting theme that arose across interviews. Four of the five interviewees discussed designing training to match Resident Assistant learning styles. Considerations for learning styles included that current Resident Assistants are more technology driven than previous generations, so finding ways to allow them to utilize technology (for example, Kahoot, the game-based learning platform) helps engage them.

Dixie wondered if learning styles are “a function of K-12 education as it currently stands or … a function of our society?” with technology, and Duke discussed adding PechaKucha
presentations to better match attention span and interest of individuals. All but Mark discussed using a variety of visual, auditory, experiential/kinesthetic styles intentionally to meet individual needs. Another discussion point was the need to allow for reflection and processing time to meet the learning style needs of trainees.

**Designing for Training Transfer and Application.** Helping Resident Assistants make meaning of the training content and apply it is also important. Helping students actualize the theory and content is something all the participants discussed. Some of the examples included teaching Resident Assistants to reflect on their own social identity and values and how those can influence how each individual confronts policy violations or mediated roommate conflicts, asking intentional questions about how they would apply the information they’ve gained, and practicing skills through activities like scenario training “Behind Closed Doors.”

Some of this is just allowing time for discussion and critical thinking, but the training design might include opportunities for staff members to think about how they can best connect with residents and whether that is through programming, floor meetings or individual contact, and about the leadership skills they personally bring to the table in how they approach the job. Mark talked about the importance of training staff to:

Be able to explain this policy or why we have this policy to our students … we had gone over the policies the day before as to what we want them to know, but they had to state the policy. Then they have to be able to generate an answer in order to say, why do we have a specific alcohol policy, or why can't they have a dog if the director of residence
life has a dog? Or whatever the situation may be, so that they're able to really create those cognitive connections and generate those thought processes.

Duke also discussed providing multiple opportunities to interact with the content, because “the more opportunities they have, the more people are going to eventually grab on to it.” Case studies, facilitated discussions and built-in reflection times were all examples of how this was accomplished.

Several of the participants mentioned the increasing tendency of contemporary Resident Assistants to request specific guidelines for every scenario, but the nature of the job is that Resident Assistants must use policies and procedural frameworks and apply critical thinking skills. Activities that build Resident Assistant confidence in themselves and allow them the opportunity to practice critical thinking and put learning into action are essential. Dixie described one scenario from her previous trainings where there was no violation, just a resident present in the room, and that:

It was interesting to see how many people went into it like assuming something was wrong and how many people just sat and had a conversation with the person and so then we can have that conversation about like, "Do you assume that you're only going to be talking to residents when there's a problem or do you recognize that like you need to make individual, personal connections with folks?"

Other examples in training included: service project participation to help Resident Assistants make the connection of their work to the larger community; the purpose/theory behind
programming or residential curriculum models; customer service skills and how those connect to serving students; and simply being able to comprehend the bigger picture of the importance of the Resident Assistant role and the impact RAs can have as student staff.

**Logistical Considerations in Training Design**

Logistical considerations developed as the fourth primary theme from the participants’ narratives. Considerations for logistics in training design included how training designers maximized and navigated politics related to Resident Assistant training design, traditional and mandated training inclusions, the power of the training designer to effect change, innovation versus inheritance in the design process, and how to effectively utilize presenters. Further logistical considerations included managing time constraints, utilizing pre- and post-training opportunities to supplement the core Resident Assistant training, factors of budgetary constraints, the influence of environmental constraints on training design, and the impact of institution size on training design.

**Maximizing and Navigating Politics.** Politics were a logistical consideration consistently raised by the participants across the interviews. Political considerations included departmental, organizational (college or university level), state, and national/international, as well as response tactics in the design process.

On the departmental level, political considerations included the need to obtain buy-in for the training design from multiple levels, including both those who will be working with the
training directly (in any capacity) and approvals from the supervisors at the immediate levels above the training designer. For example, Joanne shared:

I'm not trying to be flippant when I say this. It is what it is. That's just part of the deal. Like if you live in housing long enough and [have] done training long enough, you know that that's just part of how stuff happens and priorities shift and who's in leadership shifts. And if that's what they say we have to do, then I'll do it, what they say.

It is also important at the departmental level to recognize who has the final decision making power, and who the stakeholders are whose consideration and input is required and/or valuable. As Dixie commented, these stakeholders drive the question of “why do we have to do it that way.”

University or departmental politics can also influence stakeholders and presenters in training design. For example, politics might influence who is selected to be a presenter and the extent to which they’re invited back even if proven ineffective, the power specific presenters have to drive when training sessions occur or how long they last as well as the power to make last-minute changes and disrupt existing training schedules/other scheduled presentations. Duke shared about a former senior administrator for whom “it was not unusual for his office to call even the day of his presentation and something has come up, there's a change in schedule, so we're trying to shift things around that day.”

Even logistical considerations such as meal times can come from political factors; two presenters commented on late lunches/early dinners resulting in students being offered meals at
times when they’re not hungry, but not being able to adapt to student needs because of the institutional politics involved. Institutional politics can also drive the amount of time dedicated to sessions (ex: diversity training taking two hours versus two and a half dedicated days) or required inclusions such as how many times in a year Resident Assistants are required to receive Title IX training.

On the state and federal level, politics also influence training design. This can come from laws, regulations or funding, and specific examples shared by the participants included legislation/funding driving what retention data the institution was responsible for providing, which in turn affected how Resident Assistants were trained to support retention differently, as well as state legislation mandating that Resident Assistants receive eight hours of mental health first aid training, and a state’s house bill which impacted inclusivity language allowed by institutions. Participants commented on the increasing legalistic concerns related to the RA position coming from risk management and liability issues and how that cascades down from legislation into training design practice. Concern for students impacted by national politics, policies, and legislation was raised as a training design consideration both for the Resident Assistants themselves and in how Resident Assistants are training to support their students (particularly international students).

Political considerations for training design concluded with comments on how the participants responded to politics in their design process. Joanne commented,
I work at a highly political institution. Highly political, and things that in my mind probably it would just be givens in terms of what you do for a res life training are not, they're just not givens. A lot of it is justification for why we do things or why we need things to be.

By having strong justifications, she was better able to design a training that was intentional to Resident Assistant needs. Having a positive attitude was another strategy for facing the frustrations and disruption that politics could cause, particularly with last-minute scheduling changes. In those instances, the training designers have alternatives in place and adapt quickly to accept the political decisions while still advocating for the training inclusions important to create an effective training.

**Traditional or Mandated Training Inclusions.** Every college/university also had traditional topical inclusions that were required to be incorporated into their training design and mandated inclusions that were required to be incorporated into their training design. Dixie shared an institution specific example and described it “is the anchor, and then we in res life kind of put our things in around it.” The traditional training inclusions reflect the culture and values of the particular institution and/or stakeholders at that institution, such as off-campus team-building trips, state of the college, or activities specifically aligned to institutional values/priorities. Mandated training inclusions involved primarily Title IX and the role of Resident Assistants as mandated reporters, with compliance training and training related to Clery Act topics. State mandated requirements also fell into this category, such as mental health first aid training. Some
institutions further mandated training per institutional preference, such as requiring CPR training or requiring the fire marshal to have presentation time for liability and safety reasons.

**Training Designer Power to Effect Change.** Four of the five participants expressed that at their current institution they have substantial power to enact change; they talked about freedom, trust, adaptability, creativity, innovation, keeping it fresh, autonomy, and supervisor support. There were some accompanying stories of previous experiences at different institutions where that same ability to change was not present and which drove the appreciation for their current role as training designers. Joanne described the importance of the power to change, from the perspective of a training designer without the ability to enact much change. She said:

I don't feel like anything is actually controlled by me. I think people have small critiques from year to year, and that upper leadership just says yeah, we need to cover all these things, but here are the things you need to cover. You can't sway too far from that and maybe you'll add a little bit of information. The ones I should know, or a completely new information or session, because we have to talk about this situation that came up the whole year, and then we are just going to do the same thing. I don't feel like … we might be able to change things in terms of delivery but not a lot besides that.

Her frustration with the inability to enact change came from multiple sources – the stakeholders included the leadership team above her, the hall staff working below her, and even the Resident Assistant staff themselves being resistant to change and having the power to dictate training design decisions. Joanne explained that this had not been her experience at other institutions, but
also highlighted the influence of the power (or lack of) that training designers utilize to make changes in their annual process of designing fall pre-term training.

**Innovation vs. Inheritance in Training Design.** Another consideration for training design mentioned by all participants was the balance of innovation versus inherited training design structures. Using the existing or inherited structure from an institution is often a practicality, dictated by timing (beginning a job after training was planned for a year/in such approximation that time would not allow for major changes) or supported by its effectiveness for that particular institution/department/student staff. In general, the participants do not completely overhaul and innovate a training on an annual basis, but rather focus on specific topical or structural training design components that would benefit from innovation, as assessed formally or informally.

Most of the participants recommended observing and learning the values and culture of the specific institution/department/student staff before implementing changes in order to allow intentional understanding to drive training design decisions. At the same time, even when comfortably established and experienced with training design at an institution, there is a value in assessing design choices and being willing to challenge the norm and elevate training design choices to create effective training for Resident Assistants. As Dixie said, “just because we did that in the early 2000s doesn't mean it was right or good and so we have to be thoughtful about that,” and Duke similarly talked about looking for “more creative ways to share some of the
information that they've shared in the past” and questioning “why we're doing what we're doing and is [it] the right thing to do or is it because we've always done it?”

Some of the innovations shared in the narratives included moving training schedules to an online/social media format (Guidebook), interactive note-taking guides that prompt Resident Assistants to complete notes as they follow topical presentations, sessions that challenge Resident Assistants to be able to rationalize the decisions and approaches being used as they apply training (example: policies/confrontation) and experiential sessions beyond the “Behind Closed Doors” scenario training. Other innovations included developing tracked training for specific student staff (Residents Assistants working with first-year vs upper-class or adult-learner populations).

**Preparing for and Utilizing Presenters.** Considerations for effectively utilizing presenters began with identifying appropriate presenters. Several of the participants mentioned Residence Life staff as presenters or returning student staff presenters, but all focused primarily on outside presenters (campus or community partners). One participant referenced an outside speaker hired to present as an engagement tool specific to expertise/content. When selecting presenters, the interviewees considered function, passion, and personality as well as expertise on the topic.

Outside presenters were used to break up any monotony of having topics covered by the same existing stable of in-house presenters or as a mandated or traditional inclusion, with recognition for the fact that the in-house trainers work with the training topics daily and are
familiar with the needs of the Resident Assistants. Dixie commented on outside presenters providing “fresh blood,” and Mark referenced using them as “other avenues to relate information and make it more experiential so they're not just hearing us talk at them the entire time.”

Some campus partners actively request time in front of the Resident Assistants and for political reasons or significance of their role/support to Resident Assistants must be included, while others must be told no (often involving complex maneuvering and political play on behalf of the training designer). As Joanne stated “who is in front of the RAs is a really big deal. Who gets time.” From the five participants within this study, the inclusions of presenters varied from institution to institution.

The participants discussed the impact of the preparation level of the presenters and presenters’ ability to present effectively. They commented on how they respond to wild-card presenters. How much time they want and how they plan to cover content are considerations for presenter selection as the presenters themselves can be a primary factor for how training is scaffolded. Several participants discussed strategies for managing presenters, including providing learning objectives, providing restrictions, and selecting placement within the training schedule. Dixie provided a strong example of this when she described a campus partner presenter, saying:

So we've kind of learned like, "Oh, so we need to put her like right before lunch or where there is something where we have to go to that next so we can cut her off because,
otherwise, she'll run into the" ... We just have a session that a [Residential Coordinator] is leading.

By placing this session before a meal rather than before another presenter, the students were less likely to lure the easily distracted presenter off-topic, and the session goals were accomplished within the appropriate time-frame.

Another consideration around presenters centered on the availability of campus partner presenters and the challenges of fitting in presenters who have busy schedules – whether upper university administration or department heads or simply campus partners overloaded with their own fall preparation tasks. The impact of vacation schedules on presenter availability was mentioned, as was that most presenters are only willing to present during their already established work hours, which limits when presenters can be scheduled within training.

**Managing Time Constraints.** Time constraints was another theme that emerged from the interviews. All interviewees experienced time constraints in various ways. Time constraints included length of overall training (number of days – which varied from six to fourteen), length of days (number of hours in a day dedicated to training), and length of topical sessions/content within days and breaks (to appropriately manage trainee fatigue). Time constraints addressed topics that could not fit (because of time) into the pre-term training design and/or which could not fit at another time of the year and so needed to be covered pre-term.

Time constraints included restrictions placed by outside factors (for example, the limited hours a dining service provider was open, time needed for movement between sessions or
locations and even state legislation regarding the maximum number of hours student staff can work in a week). Time constraints were a factor for how participants planned for Resident Assistant absences from training and what sessions could be condensed and covered later to allow for the absence, as well as allowing time for Resident Assistants to unpack, buy books and do other annual tasks to prepare for the academic year.

*How much time it takes* was a repeated consideration of the interviewees as they described how they plug in what sessions and where. Multiple participants described designing training with built-in flex time and activities as they anticipated sessions running shorter or longer than how they were built into/designated in the schedule. Expecting certain presenters to run overtime was also recurrent in the interviews.

Time constraints were a consideration for how items can be scaffolded and what items are included in training (versus being held for a later training opportunity) as well as the depth that could be allotted to training topics. Duke stated that “there’s never enough time. You could train people for a month and somehow you never have enough time”.

**Utilization of Pre/Post Training Opportunities.** While this study was limited to fall pre-term training design, the narratives described the connection of all training types to the success of Resident Assistants and accordingly referenced pre- and post-training tools used in conjunction with fall pre-term training. These included: a mandated Resident Assistant class, a common reading, staff meetings, in-term or in-service training, a training held after hiring but still in the term prior to employment (sometimes a kick-off focused on team-building, sometimes
with actual content such as Title IX training), online training (such as the Association of College and University Housing Officers, International (ACUHO-I) RA 101 Course), brown bag conversations, area developmental programs/training and leadership training. All of these are used to either prepare, complement or reinforce the fall pre-term training, and were considerations in the training design process for the interviewees. As Duke noted “we can give them what they need in training, in August training, but then we can't just stop there. They need a little bit more once they get past there.”

**Budgetary Constraint Considerations in Training Design.** Budgetary constraints were raised by four of the five interviewees who noted that planning training includes the necessity of budgetary considerations. All institutions had funds earmarked for Resident Assistant training (though sometimes in budget lines that also included programming or other departmental requirements). Budget was reflected in the discussion in regards to types of activities offered during training (for example, off-campus trips became cost-prohibitive for Dixie). Costs included meals, training supplies and prizes or session incentives, and even printing of handouts or trainings schedules (or the cost to post them online or through a program like Guidebook). One participant at a larger institution noted that meals specifically dominated the budget used for training and that by potentially reducing the length of training they could save a considerable amount of budget that could then be used towards other things.

Other budgetary considerations that affected the training design process were considering necessity and impact, and making sure that enough of the budget remained in a shared line item
to fund programming and other department requirements. Budget expenditures, Jake noted, should be utilized effectively and need to meet supervisor preferences. Dixie worked at an institution that had grant funding to provide additional budget support, and Jake had items donated in past years as another way to supplement budget.

**Environmental Constraints and Influences in Training Design.** Environmental constraints and influences was another major theme from the interviews. These included constraints with regards to meetings, spaces such as building renovations taking traditionally used rooms off-line, style of room needed (moveable furniture, number of chairs/tables that can fit, auditorium or specific build-style for best line of sight) and size of space to accommodate the number of Residents Assistants. Dixie mentioned even considering indoors versus outdoors for activity based sessions, “so the following year we did sort of a low ropes led by us, but indoors because our RAs like to be indoors in the air conditioning in July, you know.” The distance between training locations/proximity to each other was another constraint, as were competition on campus for reserved spaces, need to reserve up to a year early, and who has control over the space. Only one interviewee had control themselves over approvals for training spaces.

Beyond campus constraints, participants described environmental influences including the rural or urban location of the institution with regards to safety and safety concerns, community resources commonly used by students and accessible for inclusion within the designed training. The travel distance of Resident Assistants returning to campus early for pre-term training was also commented on as an influence in determining training dates. Other
environmental influences were weather (hurricanes, heat requiring reserved training spaces to have air conditioning) and facility issues such as Joanne’s experience where “I had one one year where the fire alarms that wouldn't stop going off. We spent a lot of the training outside. It's like what are you going to do?” necessitating adaptation and re-structure of the original design plan to compensate.

**Size of Institution Influences in Training Design.** The interviewees for this study represented varying institution sizes and Resident Assistant staff sizes. Naturally, size became a commentary in the narrative thread. In regards to small schools, Mark commented “I think that's one of the benefits of being a small school. You kind of just get to do your own thing. You get to share what you're doing with other people and people might say, ‘Hey, can you consider this?’ But it's never been dictated to me as to what needs to be in there, what doesn't.” However, at smaller institutions resources can be lacking. Smaller institutions also face the challenge of multi-tasking and needing to both run training and recruit presenters while simultaneously performing other annual preparation responsibilities.

Comments made about larger schools and how size impacts training design included that larger schools by nature often necessitate breakout or round-robin training sessions (to allow smaller groups to engage Resident Assistants in learning). Breaking the staff into small training groups makes it difficult for staff to get to know team members and build rapport and trust; and it can put a strain on presenters, having to address each breakout group separately. Further, it can
be difficult to manage central messaging or communication with larger staffs, a consideration for training design.

Mark made a comment that highlights the influence of size on training design:

I think a lot of people think that RA training is RA training is RA training, but I don't agree with that. I think that you have different needs, you have different skill sets, you have different ways that you have to structure things in the way that can be absorbed by a smaller staff vs. larger staff.

Use of Assessment in Training Design

Assessment, both informal and formal, consistently drove the training design processes of the interviewees. Assessment included a variety of formats from formal surveys to focus groups with different stakeholders or cross-sections of stakeholders, self-assessment as the training designer and facilitator/observer, anecdotal and immediate feedback from Resident Assistants, exit surveys, feedback checks at the end of the day in staff teams, short 1-2 minute reflection papers, and period “pulse checks” to see how engaged students were in sessions and session efficacy. Duke shared

we do send a survey out to hall directors and RA's to find out just some basics about you know what did they find the most beneficial, what was the least beneficial, what do they still need to know, questions they have, what they're looking forward to. Just some real basic things, right after training. We keep that one kinda short now, because we could ask a whole lot of questions about every single session, but that doesn't usually help guide us later on. So
we're really just trying to get some initial impressions. So we collect that information. We may use some of it right away, if we see there's a lot of questions about one particular area maybe we need to do a little additional workshop or in-service or something.

Post-training assessments asked RA's to share what was most and least beneficial, what questions they still had after training, solicited their feedback about potential changes, solicited their recommendations for future trainings and/or what they felt was missing from the concluded training. Jake tries “to do a focus group of a cross-section of returners and new individuals and seeing how training was and what's going on and they kind of develop and flesh out how they thought training was this year.” Some post-training assessments verified content retention against the established session learning outcomes. Assessment during the training design process included assessing potential learning outcomes: How long is needed to cover what information, why are we doing it this way, and is there a better way?

Assessment design ranged from detailed questions about individual sessions to general impressions, and assessments were used for both immediate training follow-up (in staff meetings, developmental meetings, individual follow-up with a supervisor or via in-service training) and for future fall pre-term training design.

Summary

This chapter explored the themes identified in the analysis of narratives from five residence life professionals experienced in Resident Assistant training design. The findings
included insight into the demographics of the participants, including their experience and the varied institution types at which they experienced training design.

Findings developed in the narratives included five primary themes and twenty five sub-themes, demonstrating the complex factors that drive and influence the training design process. The final chapter of this dissertation provides a discussion of the findings and implications for further research into contemporary Resident Assistant training design practices.
CHAPTER FIVE: FINDINGS

The purpose of this study was to answer the question “What are the significant considerations for contemporary Resident Assistant training design?” This qualitative study used multiple interviews with five experienced Resident Assistant training designers from diverse institution types to address that question.

Contemporary significant considerations for Resident Assistant training design was defined for this study as currently-used and anticipated training design practices for pre-term Resident Assistant training, and the study was limited to pre-service training in order to provide a specific focus and because of its use as a consistent form of training across institutions.

This chapter includes a discussion of the study findings evaluated in relation to the literature reviewed and the theoretical framework. The chapter also provides a discussion of the limitations of the study and recommendations for future research.

**Discussion of Findings**

The identification of significant considerations for Resident Assistant training was challenging because of the different approaches and philosophies of the participants themselves, as well as how intertwined the findings were with each other. Within the coding and analysis, the researcher found each of the five primary and twenty-five sub-themes explored in chapter four to be justified as separate inclusions by the narrative examples of the interviewees. Collectively, the themes serve as a framework for understanding the lived experiences of veteran training designers in their training design processes and become evidence-based contemporary considerations that could help training designers take an intentional and thorough approach to Resident Assistant training.
This research study used relational theory as the theoretical framework, and the relational theory concepts of environmental and contextual influence threaded throughout the study from the relationship of researcher and study participants to the narratives and interpretations that led to theme identification (Blustein, 2010; Boholm & Corvellec, 2011; Maier & Fadel, 2009; Segal, 2013). Relational theory was used to explore and analyze the narratives and training design decisions made at different institution types by individuals with differing personal experiences and preferences. The contextual identity of the themes highlighted the appropriateness of relational theory as the theoretical framework for this study, as relational theory addresses the relation of self to others and finds inextricable connections between humans and the interpersonal fields surrounding them (Freedberg, 2010). The primary theme of aligning training to the unique needs of Resident Assistants is an example of this.

The existing peer-reviewed literature on the topic of Resident Assistant design was dated and was largely specific to coverage of topics on training design, demonstrating clear gaps in content and understanding of the evidence-based considerations when designing Resident Assistant training. The lack of literature on global practices on Resident Assistant training did substantiate limiting the study to North America (rather than a global focus) and also established the importance of training design considerations in the design process. Relational theory was helpful in the literature review for studying the influence of the environmental and contextual factors in existing literature as well as the gaps, to develop the study’s overarching question (Blustein, 2010; Maier & Fadel, 2009). Additionally, both the literature and framework had an
impact on the development of the interview questions and in the identification of the findings that emerged from analysis of the narrative interviews.

**Thematic Findings**

Holistic approach to the training design process was the first thematic finding of the study. Self-awareness and knowledge of one’s own preferences and philosophies as a training designer was a principal consideration revealed in this study related to holistic approach to training design. Training designers need to remain aware of their own biases and preferences and how those affect the efficacy of training design. Training approach in the narratives was shown to be heavily influenced by previous experiences of the trainers, and, there is a “crucial need to analyze the training design at an early date, using experienced personnel …to find out what should be involved in the training program” (Walkoetter, Modjeski & Curran, 1989, p. 979-980), emphasizing the significance of understanding trainer influences and assessing them in relation to the training design.

General theoretical frameworks, specific theory application and the influence of current literature are all factors that can influence the process for training designers. Current literature can drive innovation; scaffolding and topical inclusion within training and theory can help training designers both understand and adapt to student needs (Murray, Snider & Midkiff, 1999; Roussel & Elleven, 2009).

Planning teams are utilized by training designers to fill the role of sounding board, support mechanism and advocate for both the training designer and the Resident Assistants for
whom the training is being designed. Additional voices provide diversity of thought and can strengthen the intentionality of training as well as the extent to which training is successfully tailored to the Resident Assistants, with training designers and facilitators holding a critical role in adjusting the trainee’s needs to achieve the desired learning outcomes (Arvind & Haque, 2008). Planning teams also provide shared division of labor in the planning and implementation of training and are a consideration for training designers as to what form of planning team will best accomplish the development of a strong training.

Scaffolding can help Resident Assistants connect content and concepts to each other and inherently build into practical application of content on the job. An example of this would be the Campus Connect gatekeeper training where training participants first receive didactic training and then experiential training where they practice the skills and complete exercises related to the didactic content (Pasco, Wallack, Satin & Dayton, 2012). Both topical scaffolding and scaffolding by importance (as determined by the institution/department and/or training designer) are considerations to deliberate upon in the training design process.

Training session considerations within training design was the second thematic finding and included topical inclusions. These were fairly standard around safety and security or emergency response (Whitlock et al., 2009; Hunter, 2004; Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2008), diversity and social justice, teambuilding and cohesiveness (Deluga, 1991), resident/student needs (Bailey & Butcher, 1983; Grosz, 1999; King, 2012), reflection/introspection, administrative tasks, community development/interpersonal skills (Elleven, Allen & Wircenski, 2001; Marek, Wanzer
& Knapp, 2009) and legal considerations, with some outliers reflecting institution or community-specific values such as community service. Many of these topics are the same as those addressed in the literature review dating as far back as 1973; however, the legal considerations, specifically those related to gender equity law (Title IX) and mandated reporter training, are more recent topical additions. This indicates the need for topical inclusions as a significant consideration in training design.

Roussel and Elleven (2009) found RA training to be multifaceted; and the interviews within this study demonstrated there is not a “one size fits all” for the use of different training session types when designing a Resident Assistant training, but that variety (in whatever form that takes) is necessary in order to achieve engagement during training. Effective training designers consider the advantages and disadvantages of training session types in conjunction with environmental constraints, presenter selection, topical selection, timing and the trainees themselves to determine what training session types would be most effective. This includes considering new and evolving training session styles such as developing online engagement tools or non-traditional presentation.

As a specific training session type, joint training may or may not be appropriate for a specific institution or department, but is another consideration in the training design process, particularly when assessed through the lens of how important the peer stakeholder group is on training transfer (Bhatti et al., 2014). Sharing a training with other student leaders may better
prepare Resident Assistants to understand their role connected to broader university function and resources.

The study participants emphasized the importance of breaks and self-care in training design. Intentionally incorporating time, activities, or training related to self-care helps Resident Assistants transition from their summer habits back into focused learning, helps them practice the skills they’ll use with self-care and balance throughout the year to avoid burn out (Belch & Mueller, 2003), and allows them space to process and rest during long content-heavy training days. The study participants reflected on how training days are now shorter than when the interviewees first began working with training design, reflecting the most important way that self-care and balance have been included in training design.

While training itself is focused on the Resident Assistants, it would be an omission to overlook the skills necessary to help Resident Assistants successfully perform their role. Key in the role of a Resident Assistant is assisting the residential students in their community, and meeting the unique needs of those residential students (Duffy, 1977), needs that increasingly necessitate peer support (Ganser & Kennedy, 2012). A well-designed training intentionally reflects the needs of contemporary college students, the needs of the students at the specific institution, and the diversity within student populations.

Fun and engagement are useful inclusions in Resident Assistant training both as a motivational tool, team-building tool and for better retention of content knowledge (Bell &
Kozlowski, 2008). The balance and intentionality of fun and engagement-focused sessions in Resident Assistant training is a focus for decision-making regarding inclusion in training design.

The most prevalent finding was the importance of identifying and meeting Resident Assistant needs in training design. Noteworthy in the narratives was the concept that needs vary not only institutionally (reflecting student culture), but also in the Resident Assistants’ formative experiences (for example, their K-12 education). Resident Assistant needs related to differences in culture, age, religion, able-ness, personality, and home life. Even collegiate class standing can be an area of difference and dissimilar needs between Resident Assistants (Schaller & Wanger, 2007). The narratives demonstrated that even experienced training designers imperfectly assess and identify student needs prior to training, and that constant adaptation to student needs is necessary during training as the Resident Assistants themselves reveal (through self-disclosure or in observation by training designers while the training is implemented) their experiences and needs. Additionally, learner-centered training design leads to ease in transfer of learning to practice (Bell & Kozlowski, 2008). The importance of relationship between subject and other that is so critical in relational theory was evident in this finding. Training designers’ consideration for the needs of the Resident Assistants in training may be colloquially assumed as a standard inclusion in training design, but from this study it is found to be the cornerstone of Resident Assistant training design.

Considering the learning styles of Resident Assistants when designing training for them was another meaningful consideration for the participants. To what extent should the training
reflect visual, auditory or experiential/kinesthetic methods to best meet the needs of students? To what extent is technology and timing considered to match the learning styles of Resident Assistants? To what extent is adaptive response and autonomous learning built into the training design to support learners with different needs? Similarly, the emotional intelligence and efficacy that Resident Assistants bring to the role (Denzine & Anderson, 1999; Jaeger, 2006) affect their needs and preparedness for training. Considering the learning styles of Resident Assistants will allow the training designer to intentionally and effectively design sessions aligned to the appropriate learning styles for their staff.

Of utmost importance is the intention of training, to provide Resident Assistants with the information necessary to be successful in their role as defined by the expectations/procedures of the institution and department. To do this, training designers intentionally reflect on how training not only provides content but also helps Resident Assistants successfully implement the content after the formal training period has ended. Scenario training or “Behind Closed Doors” is a common inclusion of active learning that allows for tailored learning, improved content mastery and problem-solving and self-directed learning skills (Bell & Kozlowski, 2008; Werth, 2011). As the narratives of this study indicated, seasoned training designers recognized that application of content is a critical inclusion in the training and the training design process. The best application of content will be institution and population specific and requires ongoing assessment to appropriately reflect the intentionality of the training design in helping student staff process and apply the content covered in training. “A fully fledged training cycle [includes]
a professional approach [that] assumes a preliminary route (training needs analysis, training design), a training route and a subsequent route (transfer and evaluation)” (Sels, 2002, p. 1295). Designing training so that all portions of the training cycle match the expectations and characteristics of the organization correlates to the quality of the training (Sels, 2002).

**Logistical Considerations for Training Design**

One of the logistics a training designer maximizes and navigates is politics. Political considerations span departmental, organizational, state and national/international arenas and response tactics for training design. Accordingly, new training designers or training designers new to an institution may consider and ask intentional questions about stakeholders, policies, expectations and legalities before beginning the training design process because the answers to those questions have the potential to influence any and all training design decisions. With increasing globalization and legislative shifts and changing demographics in the United States”, these political considerations are substantial (Ganser & Kennedy, 2012, p. 24).

Elleven, Allen and Wircenski (2001) found that only two Resident Assistant training competencies were statistically different between private and public institutions (private institutions identified the extracurricular organization leader role and clerical work of the Resident Assistant as more significant than public institutions did). Whether institution-specific or broader industry standards, thoughtful reflection and analysis on the existence of and rationale for traditional and mandated inclusions provides another layer of intentionality in Resident Assistant training design.
Function, passion, personality & expertise were the driving considerations for determining presenters for Resident Assistant training. Another important consideration in training design is reflection on those qualities and how they affect the efficacy of potential presenters (Arvind & Haque, 2008). Observation and/or assessment of presenters can be a determining factor in both the how and who of presenter selection.

Time constraints were a practical consideration found woven through the narratives of participants in this study. They were also demonstrated in other studies on Resident Assistant training design, for example, in the study conducted by Pasco, Wallack, Sarton & Dayton (2012) on suicide prevention training. Time constraints included constraints on the number of days, length of days and length of topical sessions. Some time constraints are pre-existing, some are mandated, and some are specific to a year or to individual needs. In any case, timing was clearly seen as a consideration training designers must incorporate into the design of Resident Assistant training. Because so many of the time constraints existed beyond the control of the training designer narrators (including predetermined number of days allotted for training, legislated restriction of hours, hours other services needed for training are available), approaching training design with timing as a significant consideration becomes a requirement for training designers when building a training schedule.

Training design and implementation do not occur in a vacuum and Resident Assistant training is inextricably connected to both what comes before and what follows. It is important that training designers intentionally consider both pre and post-training opportunities in the
design process, as they are inseparably linked. Training that can be covered before or after the fall pre-term training can either eliminate, reduce or repeat for emphasis the content deemed necessary to be covered in the fall pre-term training. Kahliher (2010) recommended online training as one method for accomplishing this, and online training as a practice or consideration for future training design was valued as a complement to existing training. This can take many forms, as the interviewees demonstrated, including not only online resources but also on-going annual in-service training, training in regular staff meetings or individually with their supervisors.

Blimling (2003) commented that the “first responsibility of the director of residence life or housing is to be a good money manager” (p. 56). Accordingly, budgetary constraints are another practical consideration that influences and drives training design. Reflecting on budget availability or existing fiscal constraints and creatively using existing resources to best achieve the training design goals within the practicalities of fiscal responsibility allows training designers to maximize their fiscal resources. “As higher education continues to experience calls for greater accountability, [and] shrinking budgets” (Ganser & Kennedy, 2012), necessity and anticipated scope of impact drive budgetary constraints in training design.

Finally, intentional reflection on the size of their institution and the resources/support/challenges that exist specific to institution size is key for training designers. To what extent are different training tools and styles appropriate dependent on institution size?
Size matters, even staff size, as “it may not be economically or logistically feasible to offer different training to a smaller percentage of staff” (Elleven, Allen & Wircenski, 2001, p. 613). A smaller institution may not be able to hold simultaneous sessions (round robin or conference style), and a larger institution may support only limited large-group sessions where content is covered concurrently with all trainees.

**Use of Assessment in Training Design**

Assessment allows a training designer to better understand what did or did not work in previous trainings, to better inform the design of future trainings. The type of assessment and how the assessment can best be administered is something to reflect on anew with each new training design. Assessment that solicits feedback can guide future processes.

**Implications and Applications to the Profession**

Training design is contextual, relational and environmentally influenced. A relational perspective on training design provides training designers with a focus for which to personalize and conceptualize specific and intentional learning objectives and expectations for training. Training design that is purposeful, and designed to match the established objectives and expectations of the institution, department and training designers themselves is another consideration.

Understanding contemporary considerations driving the training design process as narrated by experienced training designers in diverse institution types provides a broad
framework for gauging a range of factors with the potential to improve the intentionality if not practice of Resident Assistant training design.

The five primary and twenty-five additional identified evidence-based findings, or themes, for training design together may provide a resource that training designers can use to comprehensively and holistically assess their annual fall pre-term Resident Assistant training. Examination and application of these evidence-based considerations to the training design process will allow for increased intentionality and purpose.

Whether comparing, assessing or weighing the findings identified in this study to or in the training design process, application of these findings could result in a more robust and intentional training design. These considerations could prove particularly useful for professionals new to Resident Assistant training design, professionals designing training at a new institution, and/or for professionals whose training design process has become stagnant or lost intentionality.

**Transferrable Applications**

While the findings of this study were limited to training designed specifically for Resident Assistants, the findings could be transferrable to other training populations. Holistically, the findings could be applied to other collegiate populations including but not limited to orientation leaders, student government members or leaders of clubs or organizations on campus that require substantial training.

**Implications for Future Research**
The study limitations of sample size and the institutional types represented and not represented in this study both led to recommendations for further research. Future research studies could focus on a specific institution type and assess the training design within a larger study participant population for that designated institution type. The narratives of participants within this study demonstrated that institution size was a driving influence in the training design process. Further research could explore what components of institution size most affect training design. For example, size or the unique culture of an institution type could demonstrate environmental/space influences, in the nature of the politics affecting the design process, in the funding available, in assessment expectations, or in other areas not yet identified.

Studies into training design for institutions not represented within this study (for example, historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) or community colleges) would also be opportunities for future research. Similarly, HBCUs or community colleges might have unique perspectives and inclusions for training design that were not addressed in this study.

This study was intentionally limited to North America, so another area for future research would be to explore Resident Assistant training design outside of North America and/or to target region-specific training design. For example, while this study had no geographic limitations within North America, the process of participant recruitment resulted in participants predominantly from the East Coast of the United States. This study included participants from a variety of states and regions; a targeted study might explore region or state-specific training considerations not included in this broader study. Conversely, a broader study with greater
representation from all states or regions of North America could further substantiate or add to the findings of this study.

The literature review in Chapter Two extensively addressed differences in higher education student residential programs globally, which supported the limitation of this study to North American higher education, but it could be beneficial to also conduct training design research for a global study of Resident Assistant training design and/or to study other countries specifically with regards to Resident Assistant training design.

This research study was conducted to assess contemporary evidence-based considerations for training design, partially in response to the lack of current peer-reviewed literature on the subject. Future research could include periodic ongoing research to maintain a contemporary inventory of evidence-based considerations for training design. As the study participants shared within this study, self-care and balance in training design and legal considerations (specifically Title IX training and mandated state training on emergency and crisis response procedures) are relatively new inclusions as significant considerations for training design; if not topically, then in regards to the extent to which they are now a focus in training. All five of the study participants referenced new considerations (new from a reference point of their own training design experience) that were not initial considerations for their training design process. Continual assessment will be necessary to further develop and maintain an accurate inventory of evidence-based considerations.
This research study also limited the participant pool by requiring at least five years’ experience with Resident Assistant Training design as a requirement for inclusion in the study. Another area of future research would be to target training designers with variable levels of experience with training design and to compare the considerations used between novices and expert training designers. All the study participants within this study referenced growth in their own abilities as training designers, with specific examples related to positive or negative experiences that resulted in the choices they subsequently made with design. Research into whether consistent variables exist between novice and expert training designers could be helpful in guiding relevant professional organizations as they develop training and educational resources to support Resident Assistant training designers.

**Summary and Conclusion**

Resident Assistants, as paraprofessional student staff members, occupy a critical function at colleges and universities while managing a full academic course load. The nature of the role includes serving as essential personnel for student development, student behavior, crisis and emergency response; consequently, training to prepare Resident Assistants is serious and intensive. As Taub and Servaty-Seib (2011) pointed out, an effective high-quality training is imperative due to the importance of the role expectations of Resident Assistants. This qualitative, narrative research study analyzed the training design experiences of five experienced Resident Assistant training designers to identify the significant considerations that influence and drive the training design process.
The establishment of an inventory of considerations that affect training design would allow practitioners to more intentionally and effectively design Resident Assistant training. The research-based considerations identified may serve as a resource for new practitioners, practitioners new to an institution and even to experienced practitioners whose training could be lacking focus and efficacy. The significant considerations identified in this research study include: holistic approach to the training design process, training session considerations within training design, alignment of training to the unique needs of trainees, logistical considerations in training design and use of assessment in training design, with an additional twenty five sub-themes (see Table 3). Holistically, these empirically-based considerations provide a robust set of items that training designers can reflect on and apply in their training design process.

Table 3

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Primary Thematic Findings</th>
<th>Secondary Thematic Findings</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Holistic Approach to the Training Design Process</strong></td>
<td>Influence of Training Designer Preference on Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Literature and Theory-Driven Decision Making</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Utilization of Planning Teams for Training Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Select Scaffolding in Design Construction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Training Session Considerations within Training Design</strong></td>
<td>Topical Inclusions for Training Sessions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Use of Varied Training Session Types in Training Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td><strong>Purpose and Utilization of Joint Training</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Balancing Training Through Breaks and Self-Care Strategies</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Focus on Serving Residential Student Needs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Designing Training to be Fun and/or Engaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Employing Theming in Training Design</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Accounting for Individual Needs in Training Design</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The findings of this study support contextual and relational training design and development, and while they reflect components of the literature reviewed in Chapter Two, they also reveal considerations for training design not found in recent peer-reviewed literature.

While not every insight from the interviewees’ collective narrative might be applicable to practitioners developing a pre-term training for Resident Assistants at their institution, the identified findings provide a robust compilation of considerations. These considerations, if reflected on intentionally during the training design process, could lead to the development of effective training for student leaders and increased intentionality in the training design decisions made.

Further recommendations include ongoing research to maintain contemporary considerations and exploration of Resident Training design with a focus on the expertise of the
training designers themselves. Further research would allow for renewal and currency of significant considerations as well as targeted contextual and relational exploration of the considerations. A maintained inventory of research-based considerations for Resident Assistant training could provide a professional standard for the assessment and development of Resident Assistant training and a useful tool for current higher education professionals who work with Resident Assistant training design.
References


Boswinkel, J. (1987). The college resident assistant (RA) and the fine art of referral for psychotherapy. *Journal of College Student Psychotherapy, 1*(1), 53-62.


development”. *Social Thought, 3*(2), 89-102.


*Journal of Organizational Change Management, 25*(2), 332-351.


Family Health International. (n.d.). *Qualitative research methods: A data collector’s field guide.*
Retrieved from http://www.ccs.neu.edu/course/is4800sp12/resources/qualmethods.pdf


Servaty-Seib, H. L. & Taub, D. J. (2008). Training faculty members and resident assistants to respond to bereaved students. *New Directions for Student Services, 121*, 51-62.


APPENDIX

Ice-breaking Questions

1. Please start by sharing a little about yourself and how long you’ve been working with Resident Assistant training.

2. What is your favorite Resident Assistant training memory?

Initial Tour Questions

1. We’re going to move into some more in-depth questions now. Can you begin by guiding me through the process of how you designed your most recent [Fall pre-term] Resident Assistant training; step-by-step?
   a. To what extent do you have flexibility or “free reign” to add new, delete, re-design, adapt?

2. What is most important to you when you are designing Resident Assistant training?

3. What are you thinking about when you initially begin to plan Resident Assistant training?

4. Can you share any examples of times a well-organized training schedule has been disrupted?

5. What outside influences most drive the design process when you’re developing a Resident Assistant training schedule?
   i. When you react to those outside influences, do you find yourself maximizing upon, navigating or circumventing those influences and why?
   ii. How do you maximize upon, navigate or circumvent these influences?

6. How was this most recent design experience similar to or different from the previous year?
7. Reflecting over your years of designing training, what do you feel has most changed about how you design Resident Assistant training from when you first began working with training design?
   a. How?
   b. Why?
8. Do you anticipate any upcoming changes in how you approach future training design?
   a. If so, why?
9. What advice would you give to a newly-appointed Resident Assistant training design professional?
   b. Why?

Secondary Interview Questions

Secondary interview questions were determined based on data collected in the initial interviews. After initial coding and review of data using the MaxQDA software, second interviews occurred to follow-up on components of participant training design experiences which may not have been discussed or which may benefit from elaboration. For example, use of theory to guide training design was a topic introduced in one of the initial interviews, but not by every interviewee. In the secondary interview, the researcher then asked tour questions to further explore logistical influences for all participants to expound upon, driven by concepts and themes raised by the participants themselves. Those questions were:

1. What would you say are the most unique qualities of your student population?
a. What are your students’ strengths/weaknesses as observed by staff of the institution?

2. Does your institution’s specific student culture influence training design?
   a. How or why not?

3. Do you think your institution’s location influences training design?
   a. Why/why not?

4. Practically –are there any theories (not limited to student affairs) that specifically drive the training design process?
   a. If so, how?

5. How do you determine order of events when putting a Resident Assistant training together?
   a. Do you have a personal formula or preference for which topics fall where in a training schedule?

6. Are there any topics you intentionally “hold back” on training staff on, and wait until in-term training to cover?
   a. Why/why not?
      i. If so, what does that look like?

7. What makes a training event “successfully fun” during training?
   a. Example(s)?
8. With consideration for both materials inherited from your new institution and materials from previous institution(s) … when you first began working at your current institution how did those impact your design process as a new professional at that institution?

9. Do you believe that how Resident Assistants learned prior to coming to college/the influence of their primary education affects how they are best able to be trained when they come to you?
   a. Why/why not?
   b. If so, how?

10. Please share an example of a time when you questioned why something had been done and/or was expected to be done a certain way (with regards to Resident Assistant training design)?

11. Please share an example of a time you tried something with Resident Assistant training that failed.

12. To what extent do others contribute to your training design?

13. To what extent do others contribute to your training implementation?
   a. How do you plan for that?

14. Do you use “breakout” training sessions (where the larger group gets split into smaller groups to cover the same content)?
   a. Why or why not?
   b. To what extent?
15. Do you use “conference style” training sessions (where the larger group can choose which individual sessions to attend/what material they want to delve further into)?
   a. Why or why not?
   b. To what extent?
   c. If you do, are there any special “rules” or training design for how staff select which sessions to attend?
   d. If you do, who presents and why?

16. Do you use “theming” with your Resident Assistant training design?
   a. Why or why not?
   b. To what extent?

17. Do you use “repetition” with your Resident Assistant training design?
   a. Why or why not?
   b. To what extent?
   c. If so, what does it look like in the design process?
      i. What does it look like in practice?

18. Describe your training in terms of days and hours – how long/involved is your training?

19. Do you do anything special for new versus returning RA’s?

20. Has compliance training affected your training design process?
   a. Why/why not?
21. If you’ve ever had Resident Assistants burn-out/hit information overload during training, how did you address that?
   a. If it did happen, have you done anything in proactive training design to address?
      i. Why/why not?

22. What would you describe as your most effective training session(s)?
   a. Why?

23. To what extent do logistical considerations influence your training design?
   a. Reservable spaces on campus
   b. Time chunks in training schedule
   c. Budget
   d. Meal restraints

24. You’ve worked significantly with Resident Assistant training design –what factors kept/keep you engaged in the process? For example, role function versus interest, etc.

25. Do campus politics influence your training design?
   a. How/how has that been avoided?

26. Do you do any “pre” pre-term training to prepare staff for August training?

27. Is there anything else you’d like to share about your process and/or experience designing Resident Assistant training?