Resident Assistant hiring models: which application markers indicate later success in the job?

I am a first year doctoral student in Pacific University’s PhD program in Education and Leadership. I also work in Student Life at Pacific, serving in the roles of Area Coordinator and Deputy Title IX Coordinator for the departments of Residence Life and Student Conduct. I earned my Master's at Colorado State University in 2011 and have worked in the field of Student Affairs ever since, including Academic Advising, Residence Life, and Student Government. I believe in fostering campus climates that support student learning and development both in and out of the classroom. I enjoy the food scene in Portland and I love traveling, especially visiting my family in Argentina. My partner and I have a six year old rescue golden retriever/collie named Madison who loves frisbees and the snow.

I looked at research in the hiring practices for student staff (commonly known as Resident Assistants or RAs) within Residence Life and Housing departments in higher education and the student staff members’ success on the job. I searched for articles and research around RA hiring models, efficacy of RA hiring methods, other hiring models within Student Affairs in higher education, and hiring practices outside education. I searched various peer reviewed databases and read dissertations published online. I had hoped to find more research and more recent research (much was from 1960-80s) than I did, which led me to look at practices outside higher education as well. I found research that did not include much long-term analysis. Much of the research did not find any correlation between various hiring metrics and RA success on the job. A few linked GPA and/or the interview with success on the job. Craig (2014) noted that there were too few unsuccessful RAs (those who quit or were terminated) to differentiate from the successful RAs which might also be true of other studies I found. No studies were retrospective in nature, looking at unsuccessful or low performing RAs and high performing RAs and compared their applications.

Within residential higher education institutions, departments of Residence Life and Student Housing hire student staff (commonly known as Resident Assistants or RAs). These RAs are live in the dorms, or Residence Halls, and provide peer mentorship to other undergraduates. RAs report issues of safety, including mental health crises and emergency facilities issues, and refer peers to resources on campus. Research shows
RAs hold significant positions of power and influence on the experiences of their peers, thus hiring successful RAs is imperative. Departments of Residence Life and Student Housing often spend significant amounts of time, money, and other resources in recruiting, hiring, and training RAs. With institutions asking departments to do more with less, the RA selection process is one area with significant costs and significant impact on student experiences. Departments of Residence Life rarely base their hiring models on research and evidence-based practices; even fewer assess their hiring models. How do we know that what we’re doing is working? Researching the RA hiring process could help fill part of the current gap in available research on the topic and give institutions more tools for their hiring processes.

**Review of the Literature** - Cite the full articles you have found. Share some preliminary literature in your story board. Of course once you’ve completed your literature review things will be different and you’ll have a clearer focus on the scope of your research topic.

Belch and Mueller (2003) wrote not about undergraduate student staff (resident assistants) but about RA supervisors (Resident Directors or RDs). Some of the challenges and trends could be similar. Their article describes the role of those typically most involved in the RA hiring process, perhaps leading to some insights about RA hiring. There is lots of turnover due to burnout within the Resident Director role. As people leave, are they taking with them the beginnings of change? Is this why the RA selection process hasn’t changed much in the last 20 years? Do constant newcomers not have time to innovate; they simply do what was done last year?

Berg and Stoner (2016) conducted qualitative interviews over a 2 year period. Findings included that typical selection metrics do not predict success within the first semester of hiring. The authors offered some ideas as to further research. They discussed that individual interviews were most predictive, but only slightly. They also referenced O’Boyle et al., 2011, for emotional intelligence metrics, but no research has shown it to be predictive. Only top performers from selection process were chosen to participate in study – which could be skewing the data.

Clark (2008) conducted a three year study on RA performance predictors. Many other articles did not have studies that spanned very many years so this is interesting. Factors that were studied were: GPA, ethnicity, side of campus, number of residents, academic classification of residents, gender. No conclusive, statistically significant predictors across all three years were found, though some were found in two of the three years (GPA, ethnicity, academic classification). More research is needed into why these were statistically significant and it might be worth contacting the author to look at the data.

Craig (2014) used the Widener Emotional Learning Scale (WELS) to assess emotional intelligence (created specifically for undergraduate students). This is relevant because many conference sessions I’ve seen recently talk about using Emotional Intelligence as
an assessment tool for RA hiring. Findings indicated there was no relationship between emotional intelligence, when assessed by the WELS and RA job performance. The best predictor of RA job performance was GPA in this study. This study differentiated between emotional intelligence, general intelligence, and personality. Limitations included lack of poor performing RAs. Research did not include evaluations of RAs by their residents, only by their supervisors. Further research could include resident evaluations of RAs.

Deluga and Masson looked at three personality traits commonly associated with RA effectiveness: conscientiousness, extraversion, and positive affect. Their study looked at 99 RAs, a fairly good size compared to peers. Performance ratings were given by the RAs’ residents. Conscientiousness was not related to the RA performance, but extraversion and positive affect were. This study used the Five Factor Model (FFM). It might be interesting to see how these factors show up in supervisor evaluations of RAs. Much of the RA job involves supporting residents through emotionally heavy issues and positive affect may be a contributing factor in RA retention.

Frazer (1983) may be a little dated, considering how today’s students, RAs, and Residence Life departments are likely very different from then. However, this article could give some background and history to the evolution of RA hiring. Age, GPA, and recommendations were not significant predictors in this study. Males’ personality predictors were ‘Assertive’ and ‘Community Minded’. Females’ predictors were ‘Affiliation,’ ‘Communication,’ and ‘Nurturance’. This study may be more indicative of gender bias in performance evaluation. I’m not sure this study will be very useful in today’s ResLife structures; RA roles and expectations are likely different than in the early 80s.

McDaniel, Whetzel, Schmidt, and Maurer (1994) conducted a meta-analysis outside the field of Student Affairs about hiring and validity in interviewing techniques for candidate performance/success. Findings included that Situational-based interviews were more predictive than job-related interviews, which were more predictive than psychological based interviews. Structured interviews were more predictive than unstructured interviews. Interviews had similar validity for performance and training but validity on retention was lower. This could be a good jumping off point for research outside of Higher Education. Student Affairs is not known for research in human resource acquisition, management, and retention.

Sadouskas (2011) wrote a dissertation on hiring and performance regarding the following factors: gender, class rank, RA tenure, GPA, academic major, type of residents, residential learning community, and RA evaluations. Sadouskas used IPIP-NEO (International Personality Item Pool – Neuroticism, Openness to Experience, and Extraversion) scale. Openness to experience significantly predicted overall fall RA performance, but nothing predicted spring RA performance. I could use this model to look further into Openness to Experience factor’s use for predicting RA success.
Severance (2015) looked at the performance of first-time sophomore-level RAs in comparison to first-time junior/senior-level RAs. This is interesting because it could lead to further nuanced hiring practices for students applying at different class standings. The findings concluded there were no performance criteria that predicted class standing of first-time RAs. Are first-time, sophomore-level RA candidates given a higher/lower standard to be hired compared to their junior/senior level first-time RA candidates?

**Key Takeaways** [or Synthesis] - What are you taking away from the articles reviewed that you will use to address your issue? Is there a framework or synthesis that is starting to emerge that might provide insights into what type of study this could lead to?

In reviewing the articles, I found little agreement across the different studies. Craig (2014) noted that GPA was sometimes a predictor, others found the interview process was most predictive (Berg & Stoner, 2016). Yet another cited Openness to Experience as a predictor, but only for the fall semester (Sadouskas 2011). Deluga and Masson (2000) found Positive Affect to be related to rated performance. None of the studies were retrospective and few were across multiple years. None included interviews of those low or high performing RAs. It would be interesting to look into an institutions previous hiring materials, subsequent RA performance reviews, and interviewing hiring managers for their current opinions of who were low performing and high performing RAs from years past. This could be further delved into with interviewing those low and higher performers after they’ve graduated from the institution.

**Next Steps** - Outline some possible actions moving forward, e.g., continued lit review, preliminary ideas for what you might like to do - observations, enlist colleagues in participatory action research, the timeframe for your research, outcomes you would like to happen or anticipate, etc.. If you are ready, provide a preliminary framework/theoretical model for the research process. You also could include thoughts about methodology, potential participants, data you might collect, projected timeline, etc.. As you don't yet have any conclusions to share, you might state some desired outcomes that you hope to achieve or anticipate from doing this research. You could connect this back to your framework as well, e.g., what you hope will result from the literature review, mapping, curriculum, ethnography, etc.

Next steps certainly include further literature review. Looking into research on graduate admissions practices could be another well of intersecting knowledge. **Further searching** through doctoral program websites where peers might be posting their studies of RA hiring might also yield more recent studies. **Interviewing** colleagues who design RA hiring models, make RA hiring decisions, and supervise the RAs directly (sometimes these are each different individuals) might give a richer look into the hiring and performance evaluation processes at different institutions. Interviewing RAs and their residents about what they believe make for a good RA could also lead to some different
perspectives. More broadly, conducting a systems analysis of the institution and the areas that impact RA hiring could uncover institutional cultural context informing the department’s decisions regarding RA hiring. Conducting a retrospective study would allow for multiple year evaluations without waiting for the annual RA hiring cycle. Interviewing colleagues would likely need to happen between May-September, the traditionally lighter workload months of those most involved with RA hiring. Gathering this information and analyzing it could give the field a more updated look at what is happening in RA hiring models across the nation. If trends surface, it could be useful for further study. If no trends surface, it could be interesting to later conduct a prospective study looking at a less time, money, and resource intensive RA hiring model.

References