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A Qualitative Study to Examine the Relationships of First-Year Student Residents and
Their Resident Peer Assistants at a Four Year Private University

by

Janet Goodman

A THESIS

Presented to the Faculty of
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A Qualitative Study to Examine the Relationships of First-Year Student Residents and
Their Resident Peer Assistants at a Four Year Private University

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University of Nebraska, 2013

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This research study investigated the characteristics of a positive resident to resident peer assistant relationship. At Nebraska Wesleyan University, resident peer assistants “are trained students dedicated to giving their peers personal and academic guidance” (Nebraska Wesleyan University, 2011, sect. Peer Assistants). Peer Assistants work to “organize social and educational programming on their floors and in their buildings. They coordinate social activities and enforce community standards, university policies and state laws” (Nebraska Wesleyan University, 2011, sect. Peer Assistants). Two Residential Education Coordinators at Nebraska Wesleyan University recommended residents they believed had a highly interactive relationship with their resident peer assistants for interviews for this study. Students interviewed were asked about the relationship they had with their resident Peer Assistants, the programs sponsored by the resident Peer Assistants, and the expectations they had of their resident Peer Assistants. The study was conducted with the intention of implementing similar positive interactions in future resident peer assistant hiring, training, and programming requirements.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Most existing information about the traditional first-year higher education experience focuses on either living-learning communities or residence hall designs (Enochs & Roland, 2006; Ratliff, 2008; Rodger & Johnson, 2005). Currently there is not much information available about the first-year resident student to resident Peer Assistant relationship. The purpose of this study is to explore the impact of the resident Peer Assistant on their resident's first-year student experience.

When students begin their first year at Nebraska Wesleyan University, most live in the residence halls. For many, this is their first time living away from home for an extended period of time. The Peer Assistant living on their floor is one of the first people the student will meet when moving in. The relationship built by the Peer Assistant with the student can have a huge impact on that student's higher education experience. Knowing what actions are taken by the Peer Assistant to make the student feel welcome and what characteristics the Peer Assistant possesses to make the student more comfortable are important pieces of information. This information can help residence life professional staff when they are hiring new Peer Assistants, training the new and returning Peer Assistants, and setting the Peer Assistant requirements for the year.

When Peer Assistants work with their residents to create a sense of community, the residents are more likely to feel that they belong. With a feeling of belonging comes a sense of person-environment congruence. According to Strange and Banning, the "person-environment congruence is hypothesized to contribute to satisfaction and stability through selective reinforcement" (2001. p. 53). Peer Assistants reinforce floor

residents' sense of community through programming. One of the goals of this research design is to find out if there is a theme of programs which does a better job of building a sense of community. The fact that residents live on the same floor "serves to orient the community and to create a sense of a home place, a space where artifacts of material culture are maintained and the company of members enjoyed" (Strange & Banning, 2001, p. 165). This "proximity establishes the ground from which the community's agenda," set by the Peer Assistants or residence life professionals for the Peer Assistants, "can grow" (p. 165).

Purpose Statement

This research study was conducted to examine what actions are taken by resident Peer Assistants to create a positive relationship between Peer Assistants and their first-year residents. The researcher looked at the interactions between the Peer Assistant and residents as well as the residents' perception of these interactions. The study also looked into the influence of the Peer Assistant on their residents' values, as well as the choice by each resident interviewed for where to live the following year.

Context of the Problem

The first-year residential student faces many new experiences. A large portion of the new experience is a new living environment. The Peer Assistant, as one of the first points of contact for a new student, is the person the first-year student is told will help them navigate the challenges in the residence hall, and to a degree on campus, throughout the year. This study examines what the Peer Assistant does through actions and words to create a relationship between themselves and their first-year residents on the floor to create a positive experience for the first-year student. Support offered by the Peer

Assistant may make a significant difference on the experience. Once characteristics and actions taken by Peer Assistants to create the positive experience can be recognized, they can be replicated by other Peer Assistants, spreading the positive experiences across campus.

Problem Statement

The purpose of this research paper will be to examine what a Peer Assistant does through actions and words to create a positive relationship between themselves and their first-year residents on the residence hall floor. Moving to a higher education institution is usually the first time a student will live outside the realm of their parent's control. Students will face many new situations which may be challenging. Support offered by the resident student advisor may make a significant difference on the first-year residential student experience. This research study looks into what actions might be taken by a resident student advisor to create a positive experience for the first-year resident student with the goal of creating programs to train resident student advisors. In this way the positive cycle for student experiences and relationships with their resident student advisors may be implemented.

Research Question

The grand tour question for this research was: What influence do the interactions of a Peer Assistant with their first-year resident students have on the residents' first year college experience?

Sub-questions

1. What are the opportunities first-year residents have to interact with their Peer Assistant?

2. How do first-year residents describe their interaction with their Peer Assistant?
3. What roles does the Peer Assistant fill in the residents' first-year experience?
4. What influence does the Peer Assistant have on their first-year residents' future living arrangements?

Definitions

Peer Assistant (PA)—The Nebraska Wesleyan University description was:

Peer assistants are trained students dedicated to giving their peers personal and academic guidance. PAs organize social and educational programming on their floors and in their buildings. They coordinate social activities and enforce community standards, university policies and state laws. (Nebraska Wesleyan University, 2011, sect. Peer Assistants, para. 3)

These students were

selected through a rigorous application and interview process. The group interview allows staff to observe PA candidates' group communication, leadership, and problem-solving skills. The process ensures that the student staff remains qualified to be the support system that residential students need and deserve. (Nebraska Wesleyan University, 2011, sect. Peer Assistants, para. 4)

Residence Hall—“A college or university building containing living quarters for students” (WordNet, n.d.). These buildings are “densely populated buildings featuring students sharing rooms with one or two others, rooms leading off one long, central corridor” (Rodger & Johnson, 2005, p. 86).

Positive relationship—A supportive relationship, initiated by the Peer Assistant which allows their resident to feel comfortable in the new environment, secure in confiding in the resident student advisor, and supported both emotionally and academically.

Delimitations

Delimitations are used to narrow the study's scope "based on demographic characteristics" (McMillan, 2008, p. 112). The objective of this study was accomplished through answering an overall research question and the four sub questions listed in this document. Participants in this study responded to interview questions which were used by the researcher to create themes which answered the research questions. A qualitative research approach was used to investigate the relationship between the Peer Assistant and their residents for many reasons. Qualitative research allows for a personal interaction between the researcher and the participant. In this way the participant can explain their experiences and their interpretation of the experiences (Merriam, 1998).

Participants for this research study were nominated by their Residential Education Coordinator. They were purposefully selected with the confidence that they could provide the best data for the study (McMillan, 2008). To qualify for the research, the first-year resident student had to be a 19 or 20 year old the Residential Education Coordinator perceived as having had a highly interactive relationship with their resident Peer Assistant. Recommended participants were contacted based on their resident Peer Assistant. Interviewees each had a different resident Peer Assistant. They were e-mailed a request to be interviewed. Based on their responses, interviews were set up for a later time. The goal was to find 6 residents to participate in the interviews. Perception of a high resident Peer Assistant to first-year resident student interaction was important in students participating in an attempt to gather the most data.

Limitations

Creswell defined limitations as “potential weaknesses or problems in . . . research that are identified by the researcher” (2012, p. 623). Since the focus of this study was to learn about the positive first-year student resident to resident Peer Assistant relationships at Nebraska Wesleyan University, the sample interviewed reflected only highly interactive relationships. This study excluded relationships between first-year residents and their Peer Assistants where there was little interaction. Therefore, the students interviewed for this research did not represent the entire student population at Nebraska Wesleyan University.

Choosing to conduct the research at Nebraska Wesleyan University also limited the study. The researcher can only assume that the results of the study are reflective of higher education institutions with similar demographics including first-year resident student to resident Peer Assistant ratios.

Conclusion

When starting college, first-year students are exposed to a new environment and many new experiences. Their Peer Assistant was one of the first resources provided by the college to help the student through their transition. This research was conducted to find out what influence the interactions between the resident Peer Assistant and their first-year resident students had on the resident’s first-year experience. Chapter 2 reviews the current literature pertaining to a college student’s experiences. This includes the benefits found in on-campus living, the community feelings, and the emotions felt by the students during this time. This chapter also looks into the influence resident Peer Assistant programming and community building can have on the first year experience.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Purpose Statement

This research study was conducted to examine what actions are taken by resident Peer Assistants to create a positive relationship between Peer Assistants and their first-year residents. The researcher looked at the interactions between the Peer Assistant and residents as well as the residents' perception of these interactions. The study also looked into the influence of the Peer Assistant on their residents' values, as well as the choice by each resident interviewed for where to live the following year.

Introduction

First-year residential students entering a higher education institution are embarking on a new way of life. By entering a residence hall, they are joining a new community of peers. Residence halls provide the students with "scaled-down environments that enable 'newcomers to find an early physical, social, and academic anchor during the transition to college life'" (Benjamin, Earnest, Gruenewald, & Arthur, 2007, p. 18). The communities the first-year residential student is becoming a part of will differ. There are traditional communities, with no defined parameters, and living learning communities where members are rooted in academic pursuits or a shared interest, for example, gaming. First-year students living in the residence halls will have different experiences throughout the year and their higher education career depending on the building they live in, the classes they take, and the activities in which they become a part. For many of these students, this time "will be the first time they have lived away from home, and sharing housing with unknown people can be daunting" (Wilcox, Winn,

& Fyvie-Gauld, 2005, p. 714). They will all have a shared experience through interacting with a resident Peer Assistant. The experiences they have with this person will vary, and not all will be positive. Some of the relationships formed between the resident Peer Assistant and their first-year student residents will make a difference in the residents' educational career.

The transition into a higher education institution can be difficult for students. They are leaving behind friends and family and forging a new path for themselves. Palmer, O'Kane, and Owens (2009) completed a study examining the transition students go through to feel at home in their new environment. Their study consisted of three stages: the first was a "paper dialogue approach" designed by Tee and Liang (2005) where the students wrote a list. Second they used "Flanagan's (1954) critical incident technique." For the third stage they used a "reflective whiteboard exercise" (pp. 42-43). The 18 participants moved back and forth between interviews and writing or drawing pictures for the study. Part of their study found that students who miss first year activities, including the experience of living in the residence halls, may feel excluded and alienated from their peers (p. 50). Students usually began to feel comfortable in the residential halls at different points throughout their first-year experience. Some instantly bonded with their roommates while others learned how to live together with their roommate and some people change roommates to live with a person with whom they felt more compatible. Resident Peer Assistants were available throughout these transitions to help their residents learn how to live with someone new.

Peer Assistants are part of the microsystem described by Bronfenbrenner in his Ecological Theory. This system includes "interpersonal relations experienced by the

developing persons in a given face-to-face setting with particular physical, social, and symbolic features that invite, permit, or inhibit engagement in sustained, progressively more complex interaction with, and activity in, the immediate environment” (Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, & Renn, 2010, p. 163). The Peer Assistants have the opportunity to encourage the engagement of the residents in their hall to create the more complex immediate environment.

Students in higher education spend a great deal of time “outside the classroom, what they do often involves programs and activities coordinated by student affairs professionals” (Benjamin et al., 2007, p. 13). When these students participate by engaging in the out of class programs, they receive many benefits (Benjamin et al., 2007, p. 15). Within the first few weeks of starting school, Peer Assistants use programs and everyday interactions with the new students to help the students work through adjustment to college. They help them with things like finding their classrooms, changing classes by consulting with their academic advisors, and getting used to the everyday challenges college may present (Benjamin et al., 2007, p. 16). Peer Assistants and other student affairs professionals plan “a variety of common activities . . . to provide information to students so that they can make the kinds of choices that will lead to their success” (p. 16). Some students start their education career in a learning community. Pascarella, Terenzini, and Blimling (1994) as noted in Benjamin et al. (2007) suggested “that residential living during college is consistently one of the most important determinants of student involvement or integration into the systems of an institution” (p. 18).

Research on the importance of integration into an institution often focuses on the benefits of on campus living (e.g., Enochs & Roland, 2006; LaNasa, Olson, & Alleman,

2007; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) found that although living on or off campus may not influence “knowledge acquisition or general cognitive growth,” on campus living “appears to foster change indirectly, by maximizing the opportunities for social, cultural, and extracurricular engagement” (p. 603). Students who do not form connections through the transitional adjustment to their higher education institution are more likely to drop out, emphasizing the importance of their integration (Enochs & Roland, 2006). LaNasa et al. (2007) concluded from their study based on NSSE results from a Midwest university that residence halls did influence campus life and attention needs to be focused “on the programs, structures, and staff that will support residents once they are on-campus” (p. 964).

When students feel they are a part of the community, they are more likely to benefit from their residential life experience. A Likert scale survey was given to 3,159 students living in either a traditional or suite-style residence hall in a study conducted by Rodger and Johnson (2005). They found that for groups “of relatively quiet students with low activity levels, providing opportunities to get to know others with similar interests and motivation would result in improved outcomes” (p. 95). Peer Assistants can develop programs, especially in the beginning of the year for first-year students, that contain “activities that focus on creating a symbiotic living and learning environment where learning and academic pursuits are part of life outside the regular classroom [which] could create a community of learners who . . . may be feeling left out” (p. 95). This inclusion may help students to feel more bonded to their higher education institution, and therefore more likely to remain through graduation (Enochs & Roland, 2006, p. 64).

Programs presented by resident Peer Assistants can also help educate the incoming first-year students on strategies for co-existing with the others around them. When situations arise in the residence hall, the resident Peer Assistants' strategies for handling the situation can affect the other residents. When resident Peer Assistants take "a 'don't ask, don't tell' approach" with situations, such as alcohol abuse, their residents might "not believe that RAs [or Peer Assistants] have the ability or desire to prevent" the situations (Boekeloo, Bush, & Novik, 2009, pp. 624-625). This breach of trust can create a negative atmosphere in the residence hall (p. 625).

One of the goals in a residence life experience is to create "many opportunities for new students to become involved and engaged" (Benjamin et al., 2007, p. 19) in the higher education institution's community. Enochs and Roland (2006) stated "that relationships and making meaningful connections are important for students to adjust to the college environment" (p. 64). When students are not comfortable in their environment, they are more likely to drop out of the institution. Residence halls can "be an ideal place . . . to have activities for freshmen . . . [to] help create a sense of connection to the university" (Enochs & Roland, 2006, p. 64). Studies have shown "that it is important for freshmen to have, and maintain relationships with others in order to have high levels of mental health" (p. 69). Peer Assistants can help the students to build these relationships initially, setting them up for a better chance at a successful higher education career.

Students attending college in the beginning often feel lonely. (e.g., Enochs & Roland, 2006; Eshbaugh, 2008; Palmer et al., 2009) Though surrounded by peers in the residence hall, these students are "living away from their families (usually for the first

time), and their previous social support network is not present” (Eshbaugh, 2008, p. 26). A quantitative study conducted by Eshbaugh (2008) studied loneliness experienced by male and female college students living in the residence halls. The findings suggested that different approaches should be used by Peer Assistants and other residence life staff when trying to help females and male residents cope with feeling lonely and working on strategies to overcome these feelings. Eshbaugh (2008) recommended that “housing professionals should take opportunities to informally encourage residents to seek social support and should also work to design programs that are proactive in preventing loneliness by allowing students to gain and maintain socially supportive networks” (p. 32). Setting goals for programs, such as creating a better community, can be helpful for Peer Assistants in their relationships with their students.

The relationships among students, which can be greatly assisted by the resident Peer Assistants, can be essential to whether or not a student decides to stay at their higher education institution (Thomas, 2002). “The importance of friends and social networks whilst participating in HE [higher education] can perhaps be understood by recourse to the concept of ‘social capital’, which is said to be important in communities for overcoming social exclusion” (p. 435). Through programming and one-on-one interaction with their residents, Peer Assistants can work to assist students in forming these necessary relationships with their peers. Living within the residence halls for their first year can be very important for students. Students who miss out on this opportunity “are more likely to feel marginalized from their peers, and thus that they occupy a lower position” (p. 436). When students do live in the residence hall, their resident Peer Assistants need to work to make sure all students feel like they belong.

“Research suggests that engagement should increase based on an increase in ‘maximized opportunities’” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), and in this case even more so when coupled with an institutional emphasis on fostering purposeful activities and campus life” (LaNasa et al., 2007, p. 943). Students who feel engaged and a part of their college or university are less likely to withdraw from the institution. When students leave the higher education institution prior to graduation, the school loses a lot of money through the tuition and fees the student does not pay, as well as the money that would have come in through alumni donations, so colleges want to minimize the number of students leaving (Kiser & Price, 2008). One recommendation by Kiser and Price (2008) to increase student retention was to develop retention programs for first-year student classes as well as programs created for meeting the needs of different student groups. If the programs are effective, they “will help integrate all students, regardless of race, into the college or university setting” (p. 435). Peer Assistants can create these programs for their residents in order to help students understand diversity and make all the students feel welcome.

A Peer Assistant’s training is an important time to instill the value of programming into these student leaders. “Designing a custom programming model that outlines educational outcomes is of great assistance in the recruitment, selection, training, and evaluation phases of the RA staffing process” (St. Onge, Nestor, Peter, & Robertson, 2003, p. 48). When residence life professionals know what characteristics students best relate to, they can search for those characteristics when hiring.

Conclusion

A resident Peer Assistant, or someone in a similar position, is one of the initial people a first-year student will encounter and they will be an influence on the student throughout the year. The position of a resident Peer Assistant carries a great deal of responsibility. This literature review presented examples of when these students will interact with their resident Peer Assistants and how the interactions assisted the first-year residential student in transitioning into an institution of higher education. The next chapter reviews the route taken to gather the information for this study from six students' first-year residential experiences and the interactions with their resident Peer Assistants which created the experiences.

Chapter 3

Methodology

Purpose Statement

This research study was conducted to examine what actions are taken by resident Peer Assistants to create a positive relationship between Peer Assistants and their first-year residents. The researcher looked at the interactions between the Peer Assistant and residents as well as the residents' perception of these interactions. The study also looked into the influence of the Peer Assistant on their residents' values, as well as the choice by each resident interviewed for where to live the following year.

Research Questions

The grand tour question for this research was: What influence do the interactions of a Peer Assistant with their first-year resident students have on the residents' first year college experience?

Sub-questions

1. What are the opportunities first-year residents have to interact with their Peer Assistant?
2. How do first-year residents describe their interaction with their Peer Assistant?
3. What roles does the Peer Assistant fill in the residents' first-year experience?
4. What influence does the Peer Assistant have on their first-year residents' future living arrangements?

Design of the Study

This is a qualitative study of the positive relationship of Peer Assistants and their residents. Creswell (2012) suggested using qualitative research when available literature “yields[s] little information about the phenomenon of study” (p. 16), in this case, the relationship of the peer assistant and residents. More about these experiences can be learned “from participants through exploration” (Creswell, 2012, p. 16), especially by using one-on-one interviews. These one-on-one interviews are, according to Creswell, “ideal for interviewing participants who are not hesitant to speak, who are articulate, and who can share ideas comfortably” (p. 218). Participants were selected through purposeful sampling where individuals and sites were intentionally selected to “understand the central phenomenon” (p. 206). More specifically, homogeneous sampling was used where the participants were residents purposefully selected “based on membership in a subgroup that has defining characteristics” (p. 208) Interviews were used instead of surveys so that interviewees could answer in their own words and then expand upon the answers. One-on-one interviews also allowed for follow up questions in order to fully understand the residents’ experiences with their Peer Assistant.

Students recommended by their Residential Education Coordinators and selected for participation lived in Pioneer, Johnson, and Plainsman Halls. These are traditional, community style residence halls on Nebraska Wesleyan University’s campus. Participants met with the researcher to answer questions regarding their experiences with their resident Peer Assistants and the influence the resident Peer Assistants had on the students’ development. Answers to the questions were transcribed and coded by the researcher for analysis.

Institutional Review Board Approval

To work with human subjects, first the Collaborative Institutional Training Initiative (CITI) was completed. Next came applying for approval from the University of Nebraska – Lincoln’s Institutional Review Board (IRB) (Appendix A). After receiving conditional approval from UNL’s IRB, approval to interview subjects from Nebraska Wesleyan University was granted by Brandi Sestak, Director of Residential Education at Nebraska Wesleyan University (Appendix B). UNL then granted full approval. Once full approval was granted, Residential Education Coordinators at Nebraska Wesleyan University were contacted, asking for participant recommendations (Appendix D). Students recommended were then contacted (Appendix E) and asked to participate after they had the opportunity to review the informed consent form (Appendix C). This form was reviewed with each participant and signed prior to the interview. Participants were asked to provide a pseudonym by which they would be referred to anonymously.

Research Site

This study was conducted at Nebraska Wesleyan University. Nebraska Wesleyan provides students “a liberal arts education in a Christian environment” (Nebraska Wesleyan University, n.d.a., sect. About NWU, para. 1) The school “is considered one of the strongest institutions of its kind in the Midwest, and has been continuously accredited since 1914.” (Nebraska Wesleyan University, n.d.a., sect. About NWU, para. 1) There are “approximately 1,600 full-time, undergraduate students” attending the university (Nebraska Wesleyan University, n.d.b, sect. About NWU, para. 1). Nebraska Wesleyan University offers a selection of “106 majors, minors and pre-professional programs” (Nebraska Wesleyan University, n.d.b., sect. About NWU, para. 2).

Participants in the study were interviewed in the Cochrane-Woods Library on either the second or third floor. These locations were selected based on their convenience for the students participating to reach as well as the quiet environment they provided for the interview to be conducted. A quiet environment was necessary for clear audio recordings and for an uninterrupted interview.

Population and Sample

The research was conducted through interviews with six first-year student residents living in Pioneer, Johnson, and Plainsman Halls. These halls are traditional style residence halls at Nebraska Wesleyan University. Six students, two male and four female, were selected for interviews based on recommendations from their Residential Education Coordinators. These Residential Education Coordinators recommended students whom they felt had established positive, highly interactive relationships with their Peer Assistants. Participants were not selected due to race, ethnicity or economic status and also were not denied participation due to these factors. The use of convenience sampling through recommendations, selecting “participants because they are willing and available to be studied” (Creswell, 2012, p. 145) means that the selected participants may not have been “representative of the population” (p. 145). The criteria used for selecting the students were that they were in their first-year, at least 19 years of age, living in a traditional hall, with what appeared to be a good relationship with their Peer Assistant.

These criteria were used by Residential Education Coordinators to respond to the e-mail request for names (Appendix E) by sending the names of 28 students. These students were contacted by an e-mail (Appendix D) which included a copy of the informed consent form (Appendix C) and 14 responded. Of the responses, 7 declined to

participate and 7 agreed to be interviewed; however, one participant did not schedule an interview. Students who arranged to be interviewed were again contacted with an e-mail to confirm and remind them of the agreed to date, time, and location (Appendix F).

Interviews were conducted in the Cochrane-Woods Library located on Nebraska Wesleyan University's campus.

In order to maintain participants' confidentiality, pseudonyms were selected by the students (see Table 1).

Table 1

Participants

| Interview | Pseudonym |
|-----------|-----------|
| 1 | Peter |
| 2 | Jordan |
| 3 | Haley |
| 4 | Steve |
| 5 | Danielle |
| 6 | Jennifer |

The student participants were interviewed in April of their first year of college. This was done so that the information provided based on the students' experiences through their first year was fresh in their minds.

Interviews

An interview protocol was used to collect data for the research. This protocol was designed by the researcher and reviewed by both peers, through a class at the University

of Nebraska – Lincoln, and professionals, two professors at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln. The oral interviews were conducted in face-to-face meetings of the primary investigator and the participant. Interview questions are listed in Appendix H. These interview questions were designed to answer the research questions listed in Chapter 1.

Data Collection Procedures

Permission to conduct the research was first requested from University of Nebraska – Lincoln’s Institutional Review Board. Their approval was granted pending consent by Nebraska Wesleyan University’s Residential Education Director. Once permission was granted by the director at Nebraska Wesleyan University, University of Nebraska – Lincoln’s Institutional Review Board certified the study.

The researcher then contacted Residential Education Coordinators living and working in either Plainsman Hall or the Johnson/Pioneer Complex at Nebraska Wesleyan University asking for first-year research study participant recommendations. These students were sent e-mails asking them to participate in a 45 minute interview. Once students replied to these e-mails, times were established for the researcher to interview the participant. An interview protocol was used to collect data for the research. This protocol was designed by the researcher and reviewed by both peers and professionals. The oral interviews were conducted in face-to-face meetings of the primary investigator and the participant. They took place in a quiet area in Cochrane-Woods Library on Nebraska Wesleyan University’s campus. The meetings took approximately 45 minutes. Interviews were audio recorded and transcripts were created. Interview questions are listed in Appendix H. The interview questions were designed to answer the research

questions listed previously. The transcriptions were sent to the participants for review and possible corrections. After a week, the data were coded and analyzed (Appendix I).

Data Analysis

Interview material was transcribed by the primary researcher. The data were reviewed first for overall themes and then coded (Appendix I) and analyzed for these themes that emerged throughout the interviews. Participating students were allowed to choose their own pseudonym by which they were identified. The interviews were recorded for transcription. Notes on the interview, such as observations of the participant's body language, were taken on the copy of the interview questions brought to the interview. This made for an easy reference when thinking back over the interview. The interviews were transcribed and the transcriptions were sent to the first-year student participants. Information from the interviews was sorted based on the sub-question to which the data related (Merriam, 1998). Similar experiences by the participants were grouped together and used to provide answers to the questions posed by the researcher (Appendix H). The results of this study are analyzed and categorized in Chapter 4.

Data Validation

The interview protocol used by the researcher was approved by both peers from an Introduction to Research class at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln and professionals, professors at the University of Nebraska - Lincoln in the field of Student Affairs. After the interviews were completed, the recordings were transcribed. The transcribed interviews were returned to the student for validation through member checks (Merriam, 1998). Both transcriptions of the interviews and notes on responses and body language were used.

Researcher Reflexivity

The six interviews were conducted by the researcher for this study. The researcher held a position of a resident Student Advisor, which is a position that is similar to a Peer Assistant, during their undergraduate career. Because the researcher lived the experiences being explored, data could be skewed. The researcher's previous experience may introduce some bias in the analysis because of previous knowledge of the general goals that a resident Peer Assistant would seek to achieve. The researcher made an effort to remain unbiased throughout this study.

Conclusion

The steps taken in this study were explained in this chapter. Approval from both the University of Nebraska – Lincoln IRB and the Director of Residential Education at Nebraska Wesleyan University was required when starting the study. Participants were then requested from the Residential Education Coordinators at Nebraska Wesleyan University. These participants were contacted and interviews were arranged. The interviews were conducted using a researcher developed interview protocol where responses were intended to answer the research questions and sub-questions. Analysis of the responses is discussed in Chapter 4 – Findings.

Chapter 4

Findings

Purpose Statement

This research study was conducted to examine what actions are taken by resident Peer Assistants to create a positive relationship between Peer Assistants and their first-year residents. The researcher looked at the interactions between the Peer Assistant and residents as well as the residents' perception of these interactions. The study also looked into the influence of the Peer Assistant on their residents' values, as well as the choice by each resident interviewed for where to live the following year.

Description of Participants

The 6 participants of this study attended Nebraska Wesleyan University, were first-year students, and at least 19 years of age. They were recommended by their Residential Education Coordinators as students believed to have a high interaction level with their Peer Advisor. Two males and four females were interviewed for this research. All students were at least 19 years old. Each student selected a pseudonym in order to protect their identity.

Peter is a male student from a town of around 1,500 people in north-east Nebraska living in the Pioneer side of the Johnson/Pioneer Complex. These buildings are connected "via a large basement lounge with small kitchen, pool table, ping pong table, study lounge with couches and TV" (Nebraska Wesleyan University, 2012b, sect. Description, para. 1). This hall houses "first year students only" (2012b, sect. Restrictions, para. 1) and is "coeducational by floor" (2012b, sect. Restrictions, para. 2).

Jordan is a female student from a town of less than one thousand in east-central Nebraska. She lives in Plainsman Hall, a “first year students only” (Nebraska Wesleyan University, 2012c, sect. Restrictions, para. 1) building which is “coeducational by floor” (2012c, sec. Restrictions, para. 2). The hall’s “basement lounge has a small kitchen, study desks, and a pool table” (2012c, sect. Description, para. 1).

Haley is a female from a city in eastern Nebraska living in the Johnson portion of the Pioneer/Johnson Complex. Johnson is “an all-female residence facility” (Nebraska Wesleyan University, 2012a, sect. Description, para. 1). The hall houses both first-year and upperclass students and provides the residents with a community lounge, study lounge, and full kitchen (2012a, sect. Other Facilities).

Steve is a male student from a city of over 10,000 in the southeastern corner of Nebraska. He lives in the Pioneer portion of the Pioneer/Johnson Complex. Pioneer houses “first year students only” and is “coeducational by floor” (Nebraska Wesleyan University, 2012b, sect. Restrictions). Pioneer “joins with Johnson Hall via a large basement lounge with small kitchen, . . . [and] study lounge” (2012b, sect. Description, para. 1).

Danielle is a female student from a southwestern Nebraska city with a population of almost 25,000. She lives in the Johnson portion of the Pioneer/Johnson Complex.

Jennifer is a female student from a western Nebraska town of under 10,000. She lives in the Johnson portion of the Pioneer/Johnson Complex.

Research Questions

The grand tour question for this research was: What influence do the interactions of a Peer Assistant with their first-year resident students have on the residents' first year college experience?

Sub-questions

1. What are the opportunities first-year residents have to interact with their Peer Assistant?
2. How do first-year residents describe their interaction with their Peer Assistant?
3. What roles does the Peer Assistant fill in the residents' first-year experience?
4. What influence does the Peer Assistant have on their first-year residents' future living arrangements?

Overview of Themes and Subthemes

After conducting the interviews with the six first-year research participants about their interactions with their Peer Assistants, four themes and ten subthemes became apparent which are displayed in Table 2. The subthemes "Programs are important," "Peer Assistants are visible," and "Meeting for the first time" all fell under the theme of "Chances to Interact." This theme answered the research sub-question "What are the opportunities first-year residents have to interact with their Peer Assistant?" The sub-question "How do first-year residents describe their interaction with their Peer Assistant?" was answered by the theme "Interacting with my Peer Assistant" which describes the impressions the interviewees had of their Peer Assistant after the interactions. This theme was broken down into the subthemes of "They are fun" and

“My friend.” “Roles of the Peer Assistant” investigated the ideas of what a Peer Assistant should be according to their residents to answer the sub-question, “What roles does the Peer Assistant fill in the residents’ first-year experience?” This theme was broken down into “Authority,” “Counselor,” “Role model,” and “Community builder.”

Table 2

Themes and Subthemes

| Sub-question | Theme | Subtheme |
|---|---------------------------------------|--|
| 1. What are the opportunities first-year residents have to interact with their Peer Assistant? | 1. Chances to Interact | a. Programs are important b. Peer Assistants are visible c. Meeting for the first time |
| 2. How do first-year residents describe their interaction with their Peer Assistant? | 2. Interacting with my Peer Assistant | a. They are fun b. The Peer Assistant is my friend |
| 3. What roles does the Peer Assistant fill in the residents’ first-year experience? | 3. What a Peer Assistant Should Be | a. Authority figure b. Counselor c. Role model d. Community builder |
| 4. What influence does the Peer Assistant have on their first-year residents’ future living arrangements? | 4. Moving Forward | a. Considering a Peer Assistant Position b. Staying with friends |

The final sub-question, “What influence does the Peer Assistant have on their first-year residents’ future living arrangements?” was reviewed in “Moving Forward” which described the participants’ plans for the next year. “I want to be like you” and “Staying with friends” make up the subthemes of this final theme.

Themes and Subthemes

Theme: Chances to interact. Participants in this study were selected for their perceived higher levels of interactions with their Peer Assistants. These students participated in a variety of activities across campus and on average thought they spent two to four hours awake in their hall everyday throughout the week, most of the time being in their room. While in their rooms, the first-year students frequently spent time with friends talking, playing video games, and watching television or movies.

Students mostly saw their resident Peer Assistants when they met in the hallways of their buildings. These interactions happened at least once or twice a week. Steve, Haley and Jordan saw their Peer Assistants every day. The theme “Chances to Interact” broke down into three subthemes of “Programs are important,” “Peer Assistants are visible,” and “Meeting for the first time.” These subthemes described the opportunities first-year students had to interact with their resident Peer Assistants and the feedback the students had from those interactions.

Subtheme: Programs are important. When the first-year students were asked “What do you believe could have been done by your Peer Assistant to improve your first-year experience?” the answer overwhelmingly involved programming. Programming was defined by the interviewees as either floor meetings or activities coordinated by their Peer Assistants. Most of the first-year students had attended at least one program organized by their Peer Assistant. The first-year students wished that more programs had been hosted by their Peer Assistant or that the student had attended more of the programs offered.

Danielle commented that “more programs or . . . more floor bonding could have been done that we [the floor community] could have been closer which would have been nice.” She said that when there were programs, she “always was gone or was busy” in the end going to the programs “didn’t work out.” The floor meetings that Danielle attended often had a game component coordinated by the Peer Assistant which was “kind of fun and . . . kind of nice.” The meetings were described as enjoyable by Danielle because they “get all the girls . . . out of their rooms and get us all together . . . [to] just hang out and talk.”

Steve did not think that his Peer Assistant had “actually initialized” any programs though his Peer Assistant “showed up” at the “waffle and pancake feeds” the Pioneer Peer Assistants hosted. At the beginning of the school year, the Peer Assistant had gone “around and sent out e-mails encouraging people to go to all this stuff that was happening . . . and . . . to go to all the NSO [New Student Orientation] stuff.” However, Steve wished that his Peer Assistant “could have organized something just for . . . third floor, just so everyone on the floor could interact a bit more.”

Peter enjoyed the programming his Peer Assistant did for the floor and wished instead that his Peer Assistant planned for “more intermingling between the halls instead of just having a floor or two . . . where we’re kind of broken off from the rest of the group.” Peter explained that his floor was close, but he wished for more opportunities to get to know residents from all the other floors in the building. The one or two programs that Peter did attend he enjoyed and felt they were “rewarding.” During the program he described, Peter did not interact much with just his Peer Assistant, but participated in a

group activity. After the activity, Peter felt “that I knew her [the Peer Assistant] better, [and] that I knew everybody else on the floor better, too.”

Jordan enjoyed going to programs put on by the Plainsman Peer Assistants as a team. The most popular program was “Midnight French Toast” which had been organized three times the first semester and once the second semester. During the programs she was unable to interact with her Peer Assistant because “they’re busy making the French toast, but after that they’re done and we all just kind of sat around and talked.” These experiences for Jordan were enjoyable because she “got to know more people in the residence hall” and was able to “gain a better understanding of some people.”

Haley “tried to go to every single one [program] cause not a lot of girls go.” Her wish for a better first-year experience was that her Peer Assistant would “get more of the girls to come to the programs.” Haley suggested this be accomplished by “knocking on doors and getting all of the girls to come.” Most of the programs hosted by Haley’s Peer Assistant were “movie nights and then just the random ‘oh here’s some information.’” During the movies Haley did not interact much with her Peer Assistant, but after one movie night, the Peer Assistant had a discussion about “the effects that [the movie] had on us watching.” Haley felt she pulled a lot out of that program because she “got to hear a lot of . . . different views that people had about” the movie.

Jennifer attended one floor meeting held by her Peer Assistant at the beginning of the school year. She said she “personally should have attended more floor meetings” to create a better first-year experience for herself.

Overall, the experiences of attending a program were positive for the first-year student residents. The students desired more of the opportunities for interactions with others either on their floor or throughout the building that programming provided. Most of the participants in the study said that the amount of programming or lack of programming done was the only thing they would have changed about their first-year residence hall experience.

Subtheme: Peer assistants are visible. Three of the first-year participants saw their resident Peer Assistant at least one time a day if not more. The other three participants saw their resident Peer Assistants three or four times a week. All the participants enjoyed the opportunities to interact with their resident Peer Assistants, even if it was for a brief moment of an exchange of greetings.

Jennifer did not see her Peer Assistant very often because of location. Jennifer said seeing her resident Peer Assistant was “hard . . . because she’s bottom floor and then we’re first floor.” Jennifer saw her resident Peer Assistant more when the resident Peer Assistant “works the main area or . . . around campus.” Jennifer believed her resident Peer Assistant was available because “every time [Jennifer] needed her she’s been really accessible.”

Danielle also had only a few interactions with her Peer Assistant every week. Interactions with her Peer Assistant lasted longer when they ran into each other in the residence hall. There the Peer Assistant would “stop and talk to me and . . . ask how classes are going and everything.” Danielle felt these conversations were the Peer Assistant’s way of checking in to “make sure everything’s going really good.” Overall,

Danielle said that her Peer Assistant “hasn’t really been inaccessible (sic) any time that I’ve . . . really needed her.”

Peter said that he saw his Peer Assistant more often during the first semester of school. He thought this was because “she’s just busy all the time,” but he believed that if he “wanted to I’m sure I could get a hold of her and talk with her fairly easily.” The small talk between Peter and his Peer Assistant covered their mutual interests in music and theater.

Jordan saw both of her Peer Assistants more often; at what she estimated to be “maybe four to eight” times a day because of “how busy I am and how much I’m in the hall.” Most of the hall interactions Jordan had with her Peer Assistants were brief with longer conversations happening “probably twice a week.” During the longer interactions they talked about “how [Jordan’s] day was,” as well as “homework” and “little things like that.” Jordan considered her Peer Assistants to be inaccessible when “they’re working on homework” or “off campus . . . doing other stuff.”

Steve started seeing his Peer Assistant more often the second semester when they started to have a class together. The other times he saw his Peer Assistant throughout the semester the Peer Assistant was “doing his PA duties.” Conversations with his Peer Assistant mostly focused on talking “about the class we have together . . . just how we think we did on the last test or quiz and just how we think we’re doing in that class.” Steve said that “early on we got paired up a lot in class for like group discussions” and he thought he “may have studied with [the Peer Assistant] once.” The Peer Assistant was “not overly prominent on the floor” according to Steve.

Haley said she saw her Peer Assistant “a few times” a day “just . . . passing by . . . throughout campus or . . . in the hall.” Haley thought that she and her Peer Assistant saw each other “for . . . ten or fifteen minutes every day at least.” This was made easier because of the Peer Assistant’s open door policy so that “if you’re walking past you’ll just be like ‘oh hey.’” They occasionally met passing through campus, in the residence halls, or in the cafeteria. Haley’s Peer Assistant would also “come over to [Haley’s] room” or Haley would “go over to her room . . . [to] just sit and hang out.”

Interactions between Peer Assistants and their first-year residents happened anywhere from daily to weekly. The interactions occurred all over campus, from the classroom to the cafeteria, to the residence halls. Recalling interactions with their Peer Assistants brought smiles to the first-year students’ faces.

Subtheme: Meeting for the first time. All but one of the participants remembered the first interactions they had with their Peer Assistants. Most of these interactions occurred on move-in day or within the first week of the first-year student’s arrival to campus. The interactions were remembered by the participants with smiles and laughter.

Haley’s Peer Assistant had connected with Haley over the summer, sending “out a letter to . . . all the girls on her floor” as a “get to know you kind of letter.” Haley had also gone to high school with her Peer Assistant and they remembered each other. Haley said that when she arrived, she was “amazed that [she] actually knew someone” and happy that she “was going to be living on the same floor with” the Peer Assistant because Haley “didn’t know . . . anyone else” at the school. The first interaction with her Peer Assistant made Haley feel “welcomed. It was . . . really nice to . . . know someone.”

Jordan's first interaction occurred when she was moving in. Her Peer Assistants stopped by one at a time to say hi and "asked [Jordan] if [she] needed any help." Later her Peer Assistants stopped by together and the three of them ended up sitting and talking for awhile which made Jordan feel "like they actually cared." The Peer Assistants asked Jordan how she was doing, if she "had any questions" and "other little things like about [her] family, just . . . little things like that just to get to know [her] more." Jordan said her Peer Assistants were "really friendly and it was kind of nice to know they were there."

Peter had a couple memorable moments with his Peer Assistant on his first day at Nebraska Wesleyan University. His first memory was when "she [the Peer Assistant] had a meeting and we all talked with her." He remembered the Peer Assistant asking "what our favorite cereal was" and Peter felt that the meeting led to a tight floor community. Peter's other memory of his Peer Assistant from that day was when she stopped by while he was moving in. Peter had brought with him to college a lofting kit that had "been in the family for awhile." Lofting kits provided by the college cost around two hundred dollars to rent according to Peter, so he was happy to be saving money. When his Peer Assistant stopped by, she said that a lofting kit from home was "not regulation and [he] shouldn't do that" and that he needed "to get rid of that one." However, he "never did that" and he thought his Peer Assistant "looks the other way" which made him happy to save the money.

Steve remembered his first interaction with his Peer Assistant happening later during his first week at college. Steve and a friend were sitting in Steve's room while New Student Orientation activities were happening. The Peer Assistant told Steve that it was "alright to skip the NSO activities, but [Steve would] have to go to" his LAS class

the next day “or else it’ll count as skipping.” Steve thought the Peer Assistant “was just trying to do his job.”

Danielle thought that her first interaction with her Peer Assistant “was probably . . . a floor meeting or . . . she might have come in our room when we were moving in.” Jennifer was unable to remember her first Peer Assistant interaction at all. Meeting the Peer Assistants for the first time was usually a memorable experience for the first-year student participants. Several of the stories told about the meetings caused the participant to laugh as they said something about their Peer Assistant. Not all meetings were unforgettable, but the ones that were provided a pleasant memory for the first-year student.

Theme: Interacting with my peer assistant. Participants in this research study all appeared to enjoy interacting with their Peer Assistants. They did not believe that the Peer Assistants challenged them much, but the conversations had with the Peer Assistants helped the first-year students to think of them often as friends. Peter talked the most about interactions on his floor among his peers. He said that his Peer Assistant would join the conversations at times and provide “some really good insights.” Steve occasionally felt challenged by his Peer Assistant in classroom discussions, but not in the residence halls.

Subtheme: They are fun. Jordan said that after interacting with one of her Peer Assistants she would “leave happy and full of laughter.” Jordan said that even when she was upset, the Peer Assistant was able to “make a joke” which would make Jordan laugh. Jordan enjoyed “sitting in her [Peer Assistant’s] room playing X-box.” The Peer assistant was described by Jordan as “really funny and witty and she somehow can make you

laugh just by saying something she doesn't even mean to say.” When she interacted with her other Peer Assistant, one Jordan described as “really funny . . . gives good advice . . . knows a lot . . . and she's a really hard worker” Jordan said “we tend to joke with each other, like we have banter.” Jordan claimed her best experience with that Peer Assistant was “sitting in her room and talking with her.”

Danielle described her Peer Assistant as “really, really nice . . . very approachable . . . really friendly and just a nice person.” Her Peer Assistant was there for her if she needed anything and was “a really sweet person.” Danielle said she went to her Peer Assistant after missing floor meetings or when Danielle was concerned about the classes she was taking and the Peer Assistant would answer questions and encourage Danielle saying “I know it's busy, but you'll get through.” Danielle enjoyed the floor meetings and described them as some of the best experiences she had had with her Peer Assistant. The meetings were selected because during the meetings “the games that we . . . played were . . . fun” because that was a time “to get all the girls . . . out of their rooms and . . . get together and just hang out and talk.”

Peter also enjoyed when his Peer Assistant provided opportunities for him to spend time with others when she planned group activities. His favorite memory though was when he and a friend were flipping posters in their hall and his Peer Assistant joked with him about the situation. Peter felt this story represented how his Peer Assistant “lets us do a lot more than a lot of other PAs might let us do.” He felt his interactions with the Peer Assistant were often “short, but fulfilling.”

Haley told a story of a night her friend and her Peer Assistant came to visit. The three of them “had a girl's night and it was really nice” spending the time together

avoiding homework. Haley portrayed the night as “fun just to hang out and everything, to just be really relaxed and no worries or anything.” Haley expressed that this was a special experience because of the “talking and being personal with each other.” She described her Peer Assistant as “always happy . . . down to earth . . . [and] very understanding.”

Steve’s best experience with his Peer Assistant was also based on conversations. He enjoyed the group discussions from the class the two had together because Steve believed the Peer Assistant was “a really smart guy.” This was important to Steve who said “I just like to know that the person in charge of my floor is an intelligent person.”

Interactions had by the first-year students with their Peer Assistants were enjoyable experiences. The student participants often recalled times where fun was had by sitting and talking with the Peer Assistant. Recalling these exchanges brought smiles to the faces of the first-year students.

Subtheme: The peer assistant is my friend. When describing their Peer Assistants at first, most of the first-year students described them as friendly acquaintances. After reflecting on their experiences throughout their first year, the participants switched their answers to their Peer Assistant was a friend.

Haley described her relationship with her Peer Assistant as a friendship from the start of the interview. Haley believed that her Peer Assistant was “a good friend” because that “makes it easier just to talk and . . . see each other.” Her Peer Assistant was “always there, and . . . always happy.”

Danielle thought at first that her relationship with her Peer Assistant was “a little more than acquaintances.” She felt that she could go to her Peer Assistant if she had “any

questions” or to “say hi to her and talk to her about little stuff.” After reflecting on the year’s experiences, Danielle said that she would consider her Peer Assistant to be a friend, though the Peer Assistant “wouldn’t be the first person that I approach . . . to talk about . . . a boy or something like that . . . I [Danielle] do feel like I could talk to her if I had a major problem.”

Peter thought that he and his Peer Assistant were “acquaintances that are on good terms . . . just because she’s busy and I’m busy so we don’t get to interact as much.” He said the biggest challenge to them being friends was that his Peer Assistant “does have to be the person that . . . tells us what to do on occasion.”

Jordan also said that she was close acquaintances with her Peer Assistants because she had not had the “chance to just sit and get closer and stuff” to them. However, Jordan reflected that her Peer Assistants knew when she was upset and that they could tell “when something hasn’t gone right” Jordan felt she could “go up and talk to them and they’re not going to . . . judge me or anything.”

Jennifer said that her Peer Assistant was a friend because she could talk to her if she needed to and because the Peer Assistant was “always friendly.” Jennifer knew if she “was ever in a pickle . . . [the Peer Assistant] would help me out.” She thought that her Peer Assistant was “a really nice person” because they “could sit down and have a conversation.”

At first during the interview the first-year students considered their Peer Assistants to be just friendly acquaintances. After answering several questions about their first year experiences and the roles the Peer Assistants played in those experiences,

the first-year students redefined their relationship with their Peer Assistant as a friendship.

Theme: What a peer assistant should be. A Peer Assistant is a student with many roles to play. They are there to celebrate the happy times with students and there to provide a comforting shoulder when a student is upset. Peer Assistants help to build a community in the residence hall and keep order in the hall, making sure that all the students are following the rules. The first-year students were asked roles they believed a Peer Assistant fulfilled and their answers fit into four subthemes, “Authority figure,” “Counselor,” “Role model,” and “Community builder.”

Subtheme: Authority figure. The availability of a Peer Assistant to keep the noise level of the hall down appeared to be very important to the first-year students. Several made comments about the Peer Assistants job being to ask other students to quiet down if the volume level was disruptive. None of the students interviewed admitted to having been asked by their Peer Assistant to quiet down.

Steve saw his Peer Assistant as “a governing agent” there to “make sure all the residence halls are civil to an extent.” Steve said that his Peer Assistant would “let us all have fun but he [the Peer Assistant] knows that there’s a line to draw that we shouldn’t cross.” By keeping this order, “everyone’s lifestyle or study habits” could be accommodated.

Peter thought that his Peer Assistant did “a good job of being authoritative in the way that she addresses” the residents of the floor. He believed that “the only time . . . the PAs should step in is if they [students] are disturbing other people.” If the students are not “upsetting anyone else then they should be free to do whatever they feel.” Peter was

impressed with his Peer Assistant's ability to step up and take control when tornado sirens had gone off near campus. "She took it very seriously and [he] appreciated that" although "some people said she could have been a little bit smoother in the way that she did it" but Peter liked "the way she was ready to go right away."

A Peer Assistant is "someone to keep . . . things under control" according to Danielle, though her Peer Assistant had not needed to take this role often due to the calm nature of Johnson Hall. One situation Danielle recalled was when a student on the floor below was blasting music. Danielle was able to go to her Peer Assistant who in turn asked the student to turn the music down. Danielle thought that having the Peer Assistant available to help "was just really nice" and that having a Peer Assistant "able to handle those . . . awkward situations" made the situations better.

Peer Assistants were viewed as an authority figure to the first-year student residents mainly in regards to volume levels in the halls and in student rooms. The students who addressed this aspect of the Peer Assistant role all felt that their resident Peer Assistants were doing well in enforcing the policy of quiet hours.

Subtheme: Counselor. Jordan said that the role of a Peer Assistant was "to maintain order in the residence hall . . . to keep conflicts low, to assess situations, and to be mediators in arguments." She thought that the Peer Assistant role was almost like a "guidance counselor . . . there to help us through tough times and school stuff." Jordan said that her Peer Assistants have "helped me through a lot . . . if they see me look a little upset they'll ask me what's going on." Some of Jordan's best experiences with one of her Peer Assistants were when "things get really hard . . . I can go in there [the Peer Assistant's room] and talk to her and she can give me advice and she cares."

Danielle viewed her Peer Assistant as a counselor, there to “make sure . . . things are going well with the roommate and that there aren’t any problems.” The Peer Assistant was “someone there . . . that’s approachable that you can go and talk to if you really did have a problem.” This theme came up again in Danielle’s interview when asked for final comments. Danielle said that “the openness and approachability is the biggest part of being a Peer Assistant.”

Haley also thought of her Peer Assistant as “always available, if you ever need her, she is always there for you and she is very good at giving advice.” After working with her Peer Assistant, Haley thought she had “become more open . . . with [her] roommate” and the Peer Assistant had helped them to form “a better relationship.” Haley also received advice from her Peer Assistant on “networking across campus” as well as “what’s out there on campus” because the Peer Assistant has “been here for two years.”

Peer Assistants met with their first-year student’s one on one at the beginning of the semester to discuss roommate agreements. The Peer Assistants continued to be available to the students for mediation needs as well as to talk about anything else the first-year resident wanted to discuss. Topics the first-year student participants said they covered with their Peer Assistant ranged from assistance with self harm issues to advice for the next school year.

Subtheme: Role model. The advice that Haley received from her Peer Assistant led her to view her as a role model. When Haley “was thinking about joining Alpha Gamma Delta,” the same sorority her Peer Assistant was in, she discussed the costs and time commitments with her Peer Assistant. Haley thought that the duties that made up

the Peer Assistant position were “to be available . . . to know their campus . . . to be a leader and not be shy . . . be outgoing . . . and friendly.”

Peter described his Peer Assistant as “a good role model in that she does everything on campus that you can do” and he saw “a little bit of hope that . . . [he could] do it too.” Peter said his Peer Assistant “shows morals and values in how she behaves” in that she places great value on finishing homework and practicing for recitals. Her advice to Peter when he was planning out a semester was “if you think you can do it, you can do it;” advice which he said “really helped out a lot.”

Jordan thought that dedication to academics made her Peer Assistant a role model saying “school is really important to her and that’s a good role model quality.” Jordan also took note of her Peer Assistant’s behavior when the Peer Assistant was working through a roommate conflict. Jordan was friends with one of the people involved and she said that the person acted childishly. Jordan was impressed by the Peer Assistant’s ability to be “non-judgmental” and the way the Peer Assistant treated the resident the same both before and after the incident. Jordan said that she had decided not to apply to be a Peer Assistant because she would “want to be like [her Peer Assistants] . . . be able to be available and . . . be with my residents” but that the next year Jordan would not have the time.

Jennifer believed that being a Peer Assistant meant “being a good role model . . . being the leader . . . providing a positive environment . . . [and] representing herself as a good student.” She described her Peer Assistant as a person who was “very nice and outgoing,” someone who “would help you out.” The Peer Assistant “has the halls

decorated and . . . they're informational.” In the hall, Jennifer thought that the Peer Assistant was there “to keep the peace” and to be “a good role model themselves.”

The Peer Assistants discussed in the interviews with first-year student's focused a great deal on education. First-year students mentioned the dedication the Peer Assistants displayed in their study habits. The first-year student participants also observed the other activities that their Peer Assistants were involved in, from sports, to the level of involvement in the residence halls, to being members of the Greek community.

Subtheme: Community builder. The main responsibility of a Peer Assistant according to Peter, was “to facilitate . . . growth and that feeling of community within the people” on the floor. He believed that his Peer Assistant had done well in creating the community and said that “we have a very tight floor,” one that he “heard from other people . . . [that] they come to our floor just to talk and stuff.” His Peer Assistant “does these group building activities every once in a while . . . and those are all good.” One of the activities Peter described happened at the beginning of the second semester where he was able to “learn a bit about [the] hall and the people on it.” He thought it was “interesting because we've been living that whole first semester and we thought we knew each other pretty well and then we had the activity where . . . you saw a different light.” Through the work that she did on the floor, Peter saw his Peer Assistant as “a facilitator of growth as a community on the floor.”

Steve said that Peer Assistants are there to “make it livable for everyone.” To assist with community building, Steve's Peer Assistant would encourage their floor to go to events saying the students would “see a lot of people there and interact with a lot of

people.” In the end Steve thought that his Peer Assistant had “done a good job of managing my floor and getting people out to do things.”

Jordan had two Peer Assistants. She reflected on how their behavior towards each other set the tone for the floor of the residence hall. Jordan said that “to see our PAs getting along and hanging out for all hours of the night . . . just goes to show . . . how connected they are which . . . makes us [the residents] want to connect with other people in our residence hall.” Attending programs hosted by her Peer Assistants helped Jordan to get “to know more people in the residence hall . . . to hear about them and know names and be able to say hi to people in the residence hall.” Jordan believed her Peer Assistants taught her “to be open more . . . because they were open with” her.

Danielle believed her Peer Assistants’ first responsibilities in the year were to “get all the girls out and have them meet and know everyone on the floor . . . so that everyone feels comfortable on the floor and . . . throughout the year.” The Peer Assistant was described as a “catalyst to get it going of everyone meeting people.” Danielle’s Peer Assistant “was big into people at the beginning of the year, just getting everyone out and . . . feeling comfortable with everyone.” The effort the Peer Assistant put into building the floor community at the beginning of the year paid off for Danielle when she felt she could “say hi to” the people on her floor and the exchange was “not super awkward.” Feeling comfortable on the floor around the other students Danielle believed, “helped prevent . . . any future problems.”

First-year student participants discussed several ways that their Peer Assistants built the floor community. Examples ranged from the programming that the Peer Assistants were involved with and the floor meetings that were viewed as part of the

programming to the steps taken by the Peer Assistants to make sure that everyone on the floor felt comfortable in the community.

Theme: Moving forward. The interviews were conducted in April, as the school year was drawing to a close. First-year student participants were making plans for the places they were going to live the next year. Although all the interviewees said they had considered applying to be a Peer Assistant, only one applied for the position.

Subtheme: Considering a peer assistant position. Haley planned to become a Peer Assistant for Johnson Hall the next year. She said she wanted to become a Peer Assistant because she “wanted to be that person that people went to.” Haley was also looking forward to the financial benefit of being a Peer Assistant because at Nebraska Wesleyan University “they pay for your room and board.” Talking with her Peer Assistant helped Haley believe she could handle the job responsibilities of being a Peer Assistant as well as “participating in other activities across campus.” Haley said she “wanted to be there for people.”

Jordan believed that being there for residents was very important and that her “availability to the residents” was the reason she chose not to apply. Jordan said she would not want residents “to miss that experience of having an actual PA there” because she would be busy with classes.

Peter also said that he decided not to apply for a Peer Assistant position because of the time commitment. He said that he “didn’t want to take on that load having seen what happened to” his Peer Assistant. Peter added that he was in a sport as well as activities similar to his Peer Assistant. Peter implied that he might apply for a Peer

Assistant position if he gave up one of his other activities. Jennifer felt as well that she was too busy to be a Peer Assistant.

Steve said that age was a factor in his consideration to submit a Peer Assistant application. He said he “might think about doing it junior or senior year when I’d be a little bit older than everyone . . . in the dorm.” He felt that “it’d be a better experience to be a little bit older” because the residents would “give you more respect because you have the title of junior or senior to your name, and you have more experience with everything.” Steve’s thoughts were summed up in his statement “authority comes a little bit with age.”

Danielle also thought that age was an important factor in applying to be a Peer Assistant. She thought “it would be kinda hard if I was the same age or even younger” than some of the residents. Danielle considered one of the biggest challenges for a Peer Assistant to be “if you had to go in and confront a problem . . . I don’t know how comfortable I would be going into . . . an older boy’s room telling them to be quiet.” Danielle thought “that being older definitely plays a part in” the decision to become a Peer Assistant.

Each first-year student participant said that they had considered applying to be a Peer Assistant at some point in the school year. Only one decided to apply for the position and she was looking forward to following in her Peer Assistant’s footsteps the next school year. The rest of the participants said that they may consider applying for a Peer Assistant position in the future, but did not feel the position would be a good job for them their sophomore year of college.

Subtheme: Staying with friends. Danielle's other reason for not applying to be a Peer Assistant was that she would "rather live with . . . three other girls" and "be where all the other sophomores are" in "the suites." Jordan also talked about looking forward to living in the suites, the place where "all freshmen want to get into." Jordan said that "if you get a chance to be in the suites, you want it, you take it, there's no ifs, ands, or buts about it." She planned on living with her current roommate the next year as well as a mutual friend of theirs.

Peter had similar plans stating that "second year most of us [first-year students] go into the suites and I'll be one of the ones who do that." He had considered the option of either moving into a house with members of the sports team he was involved with or moving into Greek housing, but ultimately Peter went with the suites because he "didn't want to lose some of the friends that I had" in the residence hall. Peter planned on "rooming with a couple of those guys" and "some of the other people" from his current floor "got into the room right across from us." He was looking forward to continuing "on with a great floor experience."

Jennifer planned on a similar experience choosing to live in the suites "to be around our friends." She intended to live with her "roommate now and our two neighbors." Steve planned on moving into the suites with "three guys that I interacted with the most on the team."

Friends played a large role in the first-year student's experiences and most of the students wanted to stay with their friends for the next school year. Many of the interview participants were planning to live with people from their first-year residence hall floor the second year of their higher education career.

Conclusion

The first-year student participants came from a variety of backgrounds and buildings. Throughout the year they had some similar experiences with their Peer Assistants and all the students looked upon their Peer Assistants with fondness and respect. Chapter 5 summarizes the results of the research, a discussion of the findings, looks at what the research results mean for Residence Life in the field of Student Affairs, and ends with recommendations for further research in this area.

Chapter 5

Discussion

Purpose Statement

This research study was conducted to examine what actions are taken by resident Peer Assistants to create a positive relationship between Peer Assistants and their first-year residents. The researcher looked at the interactions between the Peer Assistant and residents as well as the residents' perception of these interactions. The study also looked into the influence of the Peer Assistant on their residents' values, as well as the choice by each resident interviewed for where to live the following year.

Research Question

The grand tour question for this research was: What influence do the interactions of a Peer Assistant with their first-year resident students have on the residents' first year college experience?

Sub-questions

1. What are the opportunities first-year residents have to interact with their Peer Assistant?
2. How do first-year residents describe their interaction with their Peer Assistant?
3. What roles does the Peer Assistant fill in the residents' first-year experience?
4. What influence does the Peer Assistant have on their first-year residents' future living arrangements?

Summary of Findings

Sub-Question 1: What are the opportunities first-year residents have to interact with their Peer Assistant?

Theme: Chances to interact. As first-year students moved into the residence halls they had chances to meet their Peer Assistants. For many students, this was their first interaction with someone that would become their friend throughout the school year. The Peer Assistants hosted programs throughout the school year that were attended by the first-year students. These were chances to interact that the students enjoyed and four of the student participants wished there were more.

Subtheme: Programs are important. First-year resident student participants enjoyed the opportunities to interact with their resident Peer Assistants at programs organized by the resident Peer Assistants. The first-year resident student participants also appreciated the chances to meet other first-year residents that programs made available.

Subtheme: Peer assistants are visible. First-year student participants saw their resident Peer Assistants on a variety of occasions in both the residence hall setting and across campus. One student participant discussed meeting her resident Peer Assistant for meals in the cafeteria while another student talked about running into their resident Peer Assistant on the sidewalk on the way to and from classes. The frequent unplanned meetings with their resident Peer Assistants allowed the first-year students to talk and discuss any needs the student had throughout the year.

Subtheme: Meeting for the first time. Five of the first-year student participants were able to recall their first interactions with their Peer Assistant. As the students talked about the interaction, they smiled and occasionally laughed as they recalled the occasion.

Sub-question 2: How do first-year residents describe their interaction with their Peer Assistant?

Theme: Interacting with my peer assistant. Most of the interactions the students had with their Peer Assistants happened in the hallways throughout the year on almost a daily occurrence. The students found the interactions to be very enjoyable and the Peer Assistants were considered to be friends of many of the first-year students. First-year students described how their interactions throughout the semester showed how the relationships between Peer Assistant and student had grown over the year.

Subtheme: They are fun. The word “fun” was used in stories and statements about the Peer Assistants by every first-year student participant. First-year student participants enjoyed the interactions they had with their Peer Assistants throughout the year.

Subtheme: The peer assistant is my friend. After the reflection opportunity provided by the interview questions, five of the six first-year student participants saw that the relationship they had developed with their Peer Assistant was best described as a friendship.

Sub-question 3: What roles does the Peer Assistant fill in the residents' first-year experience?

Theme: What a peer assistant should be. Peer Assistants take on a variety of roles throughout the semester. The first-year student participants saw the Peer Assistants in their halls as authority figures, counselors, role models, and community builders. Throughout the different interactions the students had with their Peer Assistants the different roles the Peer Assistants had showed.

Subtheme: Authority figure. Peer Assistants were viewed as an authority figure in the residence hall, there to keep noise to an appropriate level. First-year student participants believed that as a general Peer Assistant duty, Peer Assistants were there to make sure that other students followed the rules. Resident Peer Assistants were also described by two first-year student participants as a resource when the first-year students were locked out of their rooms.

Subtheme: Counselor. The first-year student participants did not have many problems throughout their year, but they saw their Peer Assistants as someone to go to if they did need something. The first-year student participants saw the Peer Assistants as mediators for roommate conflicts.

Subtheme: Role model. All first-year student participants spoke with respect for their Peer Assistants. They saw the Peer Assistants as upstanding members of the Nebraska Wesleyan University community. Several of the first-year students commented that they saw their Peer Assistant's involvement in the higher education institution as an example they wished to follow.

Subtheme: Community builder. First-year student participants understood the importance of a strong community and they thought that the resident Peer Assistant was there to build that community.

Sub-question 4: What influence does the Peer Assistant have on their first-year residents' future living arrangements?

Theme: Moving Forward. As the first-year students' school year came to a conclusion, the students were making arrangements for the next year. The first-year student participants saw the possibility of a Peer Assistant position in the future, though

only one student was taking the leadership position for the next school year. The rest of the students wanted to continue living with friends in their residence halls the next year.

Subtheme: Considering a Peer Assistant position. Most of the first-year student participants believed they were not ready to take on a Peer Assistant position for their second year of higher education. However, all of them saw the possibility of applying to be a Peer Assistant their third or fourth year.

Subtheme: Staying with friends. The main reason five of the first-year student participants decided to wait in applying for a resident Peer Assistant position was that they wanted to live with their friends for another year.

Discussion

This research study provided insight to the relationship between a Peer Assistant and their first-year student residents. Previous research focused on Peer Assistant positions as well as first-year student experiences. This research, completed through interviews with the first-year resident student participants, provided a focused look at the first-year experience and one of the important people in a first-year student's experience, their resident Peer Assistant.

Research Question 1: What are the opportunities first-year residents have to interact with their Peer Assistant? Resident Peer Assistants live in the same buildings as the first-year residents that participated in the research study. First-year resident students were able to run into their resident Peer Assistants on at least a weekly basis. Most of the Peer Assistants had an open door policy where they would keep the door to their room open almost any time they were awake in their room. A few of the resident

Peer Assistants had something hanging outside their door, letting people know where they were.

None of the first-year research participants felt that their Peer Assistants were inaccessible. They said that if the Peer Assistant was doing homework, they may be inaccessible, but the Peer Assistant would help as soon as they were asked to do something by the first-year student. Two of the first-year student participants had reached out to their Peer Assistants when the student was locked out of their room. The student participants said that their Peer Assistants were quick to help with these situations and were very nice when letting the first-year student participant back into their room.

Peer Advisors are also students, creating the opportunity for their first-year students to run into them across campus. First-year student participants told of encountering their Peer Assistants in the classroom, in the cafeteria, and on the sidewalks across campus. One of the first-year student participants was in the same sorority as her resident Peer Assistant, creating yet another opportunity for the two to interact on a regular basis.

Research Question 2: How do first-year residents describe their interaction with their Peer Assistant? First-year students found their interactions with their resident Peer Assistants to be fun, informative and helpful depending on the occasion. Many of the stories told by the first-year student participants were told with smile and laughter as they reflected on the experiences. The participants described the floor meetings held by the Peer Assistants as both informative and helpful. First-year student participants said that when they could not attend floor or hall meetings, they were able to contact their Peer Assistants to receive the information from the meetings.

Regular interactions with the Peer Assistants, hanging out with them in the residential rooms, stopping by the room to say hello, or talking to them in the hallway was described by the first-year student participants as a lot of fun. Each participant had at least one story of a time they had had an enjoyable experience interacting with their Peer Assistant. Five of the first-year student participants described their resident Peer Assistants as their friends. The friendly interactions described by the student participants involved activities like spending time together in either the first-year student participant or the resident Peer Assistant's room, talking about classes and life outside of school, and the first-year student participant opening up to their resident Peer Assistant about the problems they were having.

The first-year student participants talked about the friendly conversations they had with their resident Peer Assistant one on one or in a small group. However, four of the first-year student participants said that more programming by their resident Peer Assistant would have improved their first-year experience. Another first-year participant said that she wished she had attended more of the programs and meetings offered by her Peer Assistant, but the first-year student acknowledged that the lack of participation was her fault and not the resident Peer Assistants.

Research Question 3: What roles does the Peer Assistant fill in the residents' first-year experience? All of the first-year student participants gave examples of a variety of roles they believed the Peer Assistant filled in their first-year experience. Most of the participants saw the Peer Assistants as role models for themselves and students across campus. Many of the first-year student participants described their Peer Assistants as being very involved in campus activities. As a first-year, first time college student, the

participants looked up to the Peer Assistants with respect and admiration. Several of the participants were involved in activities either similar to or the same activities where their Peer Assistants were involved.

Peer Assistants were also described as the authority figure on the floor, there to keep order and make sure that the living environment was enjoyable for everyone in the community. First-year student participants respected their Peer Assistants, and were able to see them as a friend. Peer Assistants were viewed as a resource to the first-year students, there to help if the student was locked out of the room, talking about what classes to take, or deciding what to do the next school year.

Most importantly, the first-year students wanted their Peer Assistants to be a community builder. This was expressed in the student's comments about changes they would have made to their first year. Several of the participants wished their Peer Assistants had provided more opportunities for the first-year students to get to know other students either on their floor or throughout their building. The first-year students overall were happy with the people they had gotten to know through programs provided by their Peer Assistants, and felt that the Peer Assistants had provided a good community.

Research Question 4: What influence does the Peer Assistant have on their first-year residents' future living arrangements? The Peer Assistants did not affect their first-year residents' future living arrangements. Many of the first-year students planned to live with friends they had met in their residence hall for the second year of their educational career. The first-year student participants said that their Peer Assistants did not have an influence on their choice of friends to live with the next year.

Five first-year student participants discussed their thoughts on applying for a resident Peer Assistant position for their second year. Three of the first-year student participants talked about how their experiences with their resident Peer Assistants had influenced their decision not to apply. One of these students thought that he would have more authority if he was a Peer Assistant his junior or senior year. He felt the title of junior or senior would carry more weight with freshmen than the title of sophomore. The other two students thought that they would be too busy to do a good job as a resident Peer Assistant. One stated that she did not feel she could be as available as her Peer Assistants had been to her. The other first-year participant said that his Peer Assistant had been very busy throughout the school year and after watching her, he did not want a similar experience.

One first-year student applied and was accepted to be a Peer Assistant for the next year. For her, her Peer Assistant was a role model, setting an example the first-year student aspired to imitate. The first-year student was even living in the same hall the next academic year, though her placement in the same residence hall was a coincidence.

Implications

Results of this study showed the important role a resident Peer Assistant has for their first-year resident students. Transitioning to a higher education institution for the first time can be an intimidating time in a person's life. Having a resident Peer Assistant in the hall to guide the student through the first year is important. The first-year students who participated in the study discussed a variety of ways their Peer Assistant had impacted their higher education experience.

The key finding of this study was the role programming played in the first-year students' experience. Nearly all of the participants thought that an increase in the number of programs held by their Peer Assistant, either building wide or for their floor alone, would have improved their first-year experience. Programs give the students a chance to interact in a safe environment. First-year student participants from Nebraska Wesleyan University living in Plainsman Hall or the Johnson/Pioneer Complex live in a room with one other individual. According to Strange and Banning, "students need places to call their own, where a sense of ownership, personalization, security, and identity offer a base from which to venture out and seek engagement and involvement with others" (2001, pp. 145-146). Having programs in the residence halls, near the student rooms allows the students to expand their home base, continuing to be in an environment they find comfortable. Acknowledging of the importance of programming is that programming should be a focus of Peer Assistant training. Letting the Peer Assistants know the role their programming plays in the experiences of their first-year students gives the programs more value. Informing the Peer Assistants that an increase in programs is seen as an opportunity to improve the first-year student experience may provide the Peer Assistants with a feeling of importance in their residence hall roles.

The importance of programming in the residence halls can also be demonstrated by the accountability placed on the resident Peer Assistants by the Residence Life department at a higher education institution. Emphasis on the number and quality of programs can be accomplished during a Peer Assistants annual or bi-annual evaluation process. Quality of the program can be assessed by surveys presented to the residents of

a hall asking questions about the programs the resident Peer Assistants have presented to them.

Peer Assistants are students placed in a prime position to build a strong community. They are viewed as role models in the residence hall community as well as across campus. The first-year student participants looked to their Peer Assistants for examples of organizations that were available to join and advice on classes. Encouraging Peer Assistants to view themselves as role models on campus is important to the perception of the position.

Future Research

This study delved into the impact a resident Peer Assistant has on their first-year students. Research in Student Affairs has focused on Peer Assistant roles, for example: the hiring process of Resident Advisors, as well as the effect of a living environment on a first-year student, for example: living in a traditional hall versus a suite style building. Repeating this study at a different institution with a larger pool of participants would be beneficial.

This research only focused on the first-year students' experiences. A qualitative study interviewing the resident Peer Assistants of first-year students to gauge what they believe their impact is on the student would enhance the Residence Life knowledge base. In addition to the Peer Assistants of first-year students being interviewed, their first-year residents could be interviewed as well to reflect where the perceptions of the Peer Assistants of first-year students and their residents match or differ.

A final recommendation for future research would be to start with a cohort of first-year student residents and follow them through their higher education experience.

Each year they lived on campus, they would be interviewed about their experiences with their resident Peer Advisor. If any of the participants become a resident Peer Advisor, data would be collected from their side of the topic.

Conclusion

This research study was conducted to discover the impact of a resident Peer Assistant on their first-year student residents from the student's point of view. Responses from the first-year student participants in this study showed that the Peer Assistants had a positive impact on the first-year student's college experience. The first-year students' quickly met and got to know their Peer Assistant through the Peer Assistants dropping by their room the first day or going to the first floor meeting. The students were often unsure about starting college, their first major experience away from home, but the Peer Assistants were there to reassure the students and encourage them to try new things. As the year progressed, the first-year student participants met other first-year students on the floor as the Peer Assistants worked to build a community in the building through programming.

Peer Assistants played a variety of roles in the eyes of the first-year student participants. Their work in building the community in the residence halls as well as on their floors was recognized by the first-year students. The Peer Assistants were also viewed as role models, holding a position that many of the students considered applying for later in their educational career. They were also described as role models for the amount of involvement on campus the Peer Assistants had as well as for the dedication they possessed for their educational pursuits. The interactions between the first-year

student and their resident Peer Assistant displayed the importance of the roles played by the Peer Assistants and their influence on the first-year students' experiences in college.

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Appendix A

IRB Approval Letter



April 3, 2012

Janet Goodman
Department of Educational Administration
1014 Boswell Ave Crete, NE 68333

Richard Hoover
Department of Educational Administration
119 TEAC, UNL, 68588-0360

IRB Number: 20120412550 EX
Project ID: 12550
Project Title: Residence Hall Peer Assistant - Resident Relationships: A Qualitative Study

Dear Janet:

This letter is to officially notify you of the certification of exemption of your project by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for the Protection of Human Subjects. It is the Board's opinion that you have provided adequate safeguards for the rights and welfare of the participants in this study based on the information provided. Your proposal is in compliance with this institution's Federal Wide Assurance 00002258 and the DHHS Regulations for the Protection of Human Subjects (45 CFR 46) and has been classified as Exempt Category 2.

You are authorized to implement this study as of the Date of Exemption Determination: 04/03/2012.

1. The approved informed consent form has been uploaded to NUgrant (file with - Approved.pdf in the file name). Please use this form to distribute to participants. If you need to make changes to the informed consent form, please submit the revised form to the IRB for review and approval prior to using it.

We wish to remind you that the principal investigator is responsible for reporting to this Board any of the following events within 48 hours of the event:

* Any serious event (including on-site and off-site adverse events, injuries, side effects, deaths, or other problems) which in the opinion of the local investigator was unanticipated, involved risk to subjects or others, and was possibly related to the research procedures;

- * Any serious accidental or unintentional change to the IRB-approved protocol that involves risk or has the potential to recur;
- * Any publication in the literature, safety monitoring report, interim result or other finding that indicates an unexpected change to the risk/benefit ratio of the research;
- * Any breach in confidentiality or compromise in data privacy related to the subject or others; or
- * Any complaint of a subject that indicates an unanticipated risk or that cannot be resolved by the research staff.

This project should be conducted in full accordance with all applicable sections of the IRB Guidelines and you should notify the IRB immediately of any proposed changes that may affect the exempt status of your research project. You should report any unanticipated problems involving risks to the participants or others to the Board.

If you have any questions, please contact the IRB office at 472-6965.

Sincerely,

Becky R. Freeman, CIP
for the IRB



Appendix B

Institutional Approval Letter



NEBRASKA
WESLEYAN
UNIVERSITY



March 20, 2012

Institutional Review Board
University of Nebraska – Lincoln
312 N. 14th St., Ste 209
Lincoln, NE 68588

To Whom It May Concern:

I have reviewed the proposed research relating to Janet Goodman's Master's thesis and I give full permission for her to conduct this research at Nebraska Wesleyan University.

If for any reason you need to contact me, I can be reached via e-mail at bstak@nebrwesleyan.edu.

Regards,

Brandi Sestak
Director of Residential Education
Nebraska Wesleyan University

5000 SAINT PAUL AVENUE
LINCOLN, NEBRASKA 68504-2794
CAMPUS LINE 402.466.2371
TOLL FREE 800.541.3818
FACSIMILE 402.465.2179
www.nebrwesleyan.edu

Appendix C

Informed Consent Form

INFORMED CONSENT FORM

Identification of Project:

Nebraska Wesleyan University Residence Peer Assistants
Influence on First-Year Residents



Purpose of the Research:

This is a research project that will explore the influence a residence hall Peer Assistants at Nebraska Wesleyan University has on the living experience of their traditional first year residents. Residents selected for participation will be 19 years of age or older. The students selected for participation in this study are living on campus in a residence hall.

Procedures:

Participation in this study will require approximately 45 minutes of your time. The researcher would like to conduct an interview with you discussing your experiences in the residence hall. The interview will be audio taped with your permission. Recordings will be transcribed and the transcriptions will be sent to the participant for review.

Risks and/or Discomforts:

There are no known risks or discomforts associated with this research. In the event of problems resulting from participation in the study, counseling is available at the Career & Counseling Center, telephone (402) 465-2224.

Benefits:

Participants will have the opportunity to reflect on their relationships in the residence halls. The information gained from this study may help to provide better first year experiences for students living in the residence halls.

Confidentiality:

Any information obtained during this study which could identify the participant will be kept strictly confidential. The data will be stored in a locked safe in the investigator's apartment and will only be seen by the investigators during the study and for one year after the study is completed. The information obtained in this study may be published in research journals or used in a presentation at a professional meeting. The audiotapes will be erased after participants have had time for transcription verification. In order to protect participant's anonymity they will be asked to pick a pseudonym.

Compensation:

Participants will also receive a \$10.00 gift card to Walmart after completing the interview.

Opportunity to Ask Questions:

You may ask questions concerning this research and have those questions before agreeing to participation in or during the study. Or you may call the investigator for any research related questions at (402) 515-2559 or the secondary investigator at (402) 472-3058.



You may also contact the University of Nebraska-Lincoln Institutional Review Board at (402) 472-6965 for any questions that you may have regarding your rights as a research participant.

Freedom to Withdraw:

Participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse to participate or withdraw at any time without harming your relationship with the researchers, Nebraska Wesleyan University, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln, or in any other way receive a penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

Consent, Right to Receive a Copy:

You are voluntarily making a decision whether or not to participate in this research study. Your signature certifies that you have decided to participate having read and understood the information presented. You will be given a copy of this consent form to keep.

_____ Initial if you agree to be audio taped during the interview.

Signature of Participant:

Signature of Research Participant

Date

Name and Phone number of investigator(s)

Janet Goodman, Principal Investigator
Dr. Richard Hoover, Secondary Investigator

Office: (402) 472-3058
Office: (402) 472-3058

Appendix D

Participant Recruitment Email to Residential Education Coordinators

E-mail correspondence with the Residential Education Coordinator asking for resident interviewee recommendations.

Hi (Name),

I am a graduate student at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln in the department of Education Administration. I am conducting a research project analyzing the relationship between Peer Assistants and their residents and would like to ask you to recommend female and male first-year residents, ages 19 and over, that you perceive as having highly interactive relationships with their Peer Assistants. The requirements for the study would simply be a 45 minute interview at their convenience. Residents will not be informed of your recommendation and may not be chosen for the study. Attached is an Informed Consent Form, which will explain the details of this research.

If you are willing to assist me with this research project, please send me the first and last names of your recommended residents as well as their e-mail addresses by (Date). If you have any questions or concerns please feel free to contact me via e-mail, jpgoodman6@gmail.com, or by phone (402) 515-2559.

Thank you very much for your time and consideration.

Best Regards,

Janet Goodman

Appendix E

Recruitment Email

E-mail requesting student participation in the research study.

Hi (Name),

I am a graduate student at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in the department of Education Administration. I am conducting a research project and would like you to be a participant. This research project is designed to explore the influence a Peer Assistant has on your first-year experience. Participation in this study will require you to join me for a 45 minute interview at a date and time from (Date-Date) that is convenient for you. As a thank you for your time and help, you will be given a \$10.00 gift card to Wal-Mart after completion of the interview.

Enclosed is an Informed Consent Form, which will explain the details of this research including your rights and confidentiality. If you agree to participate, please respond to this e-mail with the date and time that works best for you. If you have any questions at any time, please feel free to contact me, or my advisor, at the telephone numbers or e-mail addresses listed below.

Thank you,

Janet Goodman

Dr. Richard Hoover

Primary Investigator

Secondary Investigator and Advisor

(402) 515-2559

(402) 472-3058

Appendix F

Confirmation Email

Confirmation e-mail sent to students agreeing to participate.

If the time works:

Hi (Name),

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. I will meet you in (Building & Number) floor lounge at (time) on (date). If you have any questions, concerns, or if for any reason the time and date no longer work for you, please let me know as soon as possible. I can be reached at (402) 515-2559 or jpgoodman6@gmail.com.

Thank you again and I look forward to meeting with you.

Best Regards,

Janet Goodman

Primary Investigator

(402) 515-2559

If the time does not work:

Dear (Name),

Thank you for agreeing to participate in this research study. (Date) and (time) have already been selected by another participant. Is there any other time I can meet with you (Date)? I'm sorry for the inconvenience and I hope we can find a time that works. If you have any questions or concerns about participating please feel free to contact me at (402) 515-2559 or jpgoodman6@gmail.com.

Thank you again and I look forward to meeting with you.

Best Regards,

Janet Goodman

Primary Investigator

(402) 515-2559

Appendix G

Reminder Email

E-mail reminding student of participation date and time.

Hi (Name),

This is a reminder that you have agreed to participate in a research study on (date) at (time) in (location). If you have any questions or concerns with participating or if there are any conflicts with this meeting time, please let me know as soon as possible. I can be reached at (402) 515-2559 or jpgoodman6@gmail.com. I look forward to meeting with you.

Thank you,

Janet Goodman

Primary Investigator

(402) 515-2559

Appendix H

Interview Protocol

Goodman Interview Protocol

1. During a typical week, how much time do you spend in your residence hall?
 - Probe 1: Besides sleeping there, how much time do you spend prior, during, or after classes?
 - Probe 2: How much time do you spend in your room?
 - Probe 3: How much time do you spend in the common areas of your hall?
2. What do you do while in the hall?
 - Probe 1: What are you doing with friends?
 - Probe 2: What are you doing by yourself?
3. What do you like to do for fun in the residence hall?
4. How often do you see your Peer Assistant (PA)?
 - Probe 1: How often each week?
 - Probe 2: How often each day?
5. How often do you interact with them for more than five minutes?
 - Probe 1: If your PA is not accessible, what are they doing that creates the feeling of inaccessibility for you?
 - Probe 2: When you see your PA, do you say hi or is there a longer interaction?
 - Probe 3: What do you talk about with your PA?
6. Does the PA keep his or her room door open or closed when present on the floor?
7. How would you define your relationship with your PA?
 - Probe 1: Do you feel you are close or acquaintances on good terms?
 - Probe 2: Why do you feel this defines your relationship?

8. What are your PA's best qualities?

9. Do you remember your first interaction with your PA?

Probe 1: Tell me about the interaction.

Probe 2: How did it make you feel?

10. What was the best experience you've had with your PA?

Probe 1: What made that experience special?

11. Have you had any negative interactions with your PA?

Probe 1: If yes, tell me more about the interaction.

12. Has your PA helped you through a conflict/crisis?

Probe 1: What was the nature of the conflict/crisis?

13. Overall, how would you describe your interactions with your PA?

Probe 1: Are they fun, informative, or helpful?

14. Have you attended any programs that were initiated by your PA?

Probe 1: If the answer is "yes":

Probe 1: What programs did you attend?

Probe 2: Please describe your interaction with the PA during the program.

Probe 3: Would you describe the program as a positive experience?

Probe 1: Why or why not?

Probe 2: If the answer is "no":

Probe 1: Why not?

15. What roles do you believe the PA is fulfilling?

Probe 1: Would you consider them a friend?

Probe 1: Why or why not?

Probe 2: Do they challenge you in what you're thinking and doing?

Probe 1: How do you feel about these challenges?

16. What do you think are the duties or responsibilities of your PA?

17. How do these duties/responsibilities impact your floor community?

18. How do the PA's duties impact your living experience?

19. Do you believe the PA has had a positive influence on your experience in the residence hall?

Probe 1: If the answer is "yes":

Probe 1: What have they done?

Probe 2: If the answer is "no":

Probe 1: What is missing from your interactions?

20. What do you believe could have been done by your PA to improve your first-year residence hall experience?

21. Where are you planning to live next year?

Probe 1: What brought you to this choice?

Probe 2: Did your relationship with your PA influence this decision in any way?

22. With your experience in the residence hall, have you considered applying to be a PA?

Probe 1: If the answer is "yes":

Probe 1: Why?

Probe 2: If the answer is "no":

Probe 1: Why not?

23. Is there anything else you'd like to comment on or any information you think would add to the study?

Appendix I

List of Codes

Theme: Chances to interact

Subtheme: Programs are important

more programs
 more floor bonding
 we could have been closer
 would have been nice
 kind of fun
 kind of nice
 get all the girls
 out of their rooms
 get us all together
 just hang out and talk
 sent out e-mails encouraging people to go
 all this stuff that was happening
 go to all the NSO stuff
 could have organized something
 everyone on the floor could interact a bit more
 more intermingling between the halls
 we're kind of broken off from the rest of the group
 rewarding
 I knew her better
 I knew everybody else on the floor better
 we all just kind of sat around and talked
 got to know more people in the residence hall
 gain a better understanding of some people
 tried to go to every single one
 get more girls to come to the programs
 knocking on doors and getting all of the girls to come
 movie nights
 just the random oh here's some information
 effects that it had on us watching
 got to hear a lot
 different views people had
 personally should have attended more floor meetings

Subtheme: Peer Assistants are visible

she's bottom floor and then we're first floor
 works the main area
 around campus
 every time I've needed her she's been really accessible
 stop and talk to me
 ask how classes are going and everything
 making sure everything's going really good
 hasn't really been unaccessible (sic) any time
 she's just busy all the time

I'm sure I could get a hold of her
 talk with her fairly easily
 how busy I am
 how much I'm in the hall
 probably twice a week
 they're working on homework
 sometimes it's just hi and sometimes it's longer
 little things like that
 doing his PA duties
 about the class we have together
 how we think we did on the last test or quiz
 how we think we're doing in that class
 early on we got paired up a lot in class
 group discussions
 may have studied with him once
 not overly prominent on the floor
 a few times
 passing by
 throughout campus
 in the hall
 ten or fifteen minutes every day at least
 walking past you'll just be like oh hey
 come over to my room
 I'll go over to her room
 I'll just sit
 hang out

Subtheme: Meeting for the first time

she actually sent out a letter
 all the girls on her floor
 a get to know you kind of letter
 was really nice
 amazed that I actually knew someone
 I was going to be living on the same floor with her
 I didn't know . . . anyone else
 pretty good
 welcomed
 really nice
 know someone
 beginning of the semester
 moved in
 they said hi
 asked me if I needed any help
 like they actually cared
 other little things
 any questions

other little things
 about my family
 little things like that just to get to know me more
 really friendly
 it was kind of nice to know they were there
 she had a meeting
 we all talked with her
 what our favorite cereal was
 we are a very tight floor
 looks the other way
 has this trust thing
 makes me happy
 it's alright to skip the NSO activities
 you have to go to your LAS tomorrow
 trying to do his job
 a floor meeting
 she might have come in our room when we were moving in

Theme: Interacting with my Peer Assistant

some really good insights

Subtheme: They are fun

leave happy
 full of laughter
 make a joke
 sitting in her room playing X-box
 really funny
 witty
 can make you laugh
 really funny
 gives good advice
 knows a lot
 she's a really hard worker
 we tend to joke with each other
 we have banter
 sitting in her room and talking with her
 really, really nice
 very approachable
 really friendly
 just a nice person
 a really sweet person
 I know it's busy, but you'll get through
 the games that we . . . played were . . . fun
 to get all the girls
 out of their rooms

get together
 hang out and talk
 lets us do a lot more than a lot of other PAs
 short, but fulfilling
 had a girl's night
 it was really nice
 fun just to hang out
 to just be really relaxed
 no worries or anything
 talking and being personal with each other
 always happy
 down to earth
 very understanding
 a really smart guy
 the person in charge of my friend is an intelligent person

Subtheme: The Peer Assistant is my friend

a good friend
 easier just to talk
 see each other
 always there
 always happy
 a little more than acquaintances
 any questions
 say hi to her
 talk to her about little stuff
 wouldn't be the first person that I approach
 I do feel like I could talk to her if I had a major problem
 acquaintances that are on good terms
 just because she's busy and I'm busy
 we don't get to interact as much
 tells us what to do on occasion
 chance to just sit
 get closer and stuff
 when something hasn't gone right
 go up and talk to them
 they're not going to . . . judge me or anything
 always friendly
 she would help me out
 a really nice person
 could sit down and have a conversation

Theme: What a Peer Assistant should be

Subtheme: Authority figure

a governing agent
 make sure all the residence halls are civil to an extent
 let us all have fun
 he knows that there's a line to draw that we shouldn't cross
 good job of being authoritative in the way that she addresses
 the PAs should step in if they are disturbing other people
 they should be free to do whatever they feel
 she took it very seriously
 appreciated that
 some people said that she could have been a little bit smoother
 she was ready to go right away
 someone to keep . . . things under control
 was just really nice
 able to handle those . . . awkward situations
 to maintain order in the residence hall
 keep conflicts low

Subtheme: Counselor

assesses situations
 be mediators in arguments
 guidance counselor
 there to help us through tough times and school stuff
 helped me through a lot
 if they see me look a little upset they'll ask me what's going on
 things get really hard
 I can go in there and talk to her
 she can give me advice
 she cares
 make sure . . . things are going well with the roommate
 that there aren't any problems
 someone there
 approachable
 you can go and talk to if you really did have a problem
 openness and approachability is the biggest part of being a Peer Assistant
 always available
 if you ever need her, she is always there for you
 she is very good at giving advice
 become more open
 a better relationship
 networking across campus
 what's out there on campus
 been here for two years

Subtheme: Role model

was thinking about joining Alpha Gamma Delta
 to be available
 to know their campus
 to be a leader
 not be shy
 be outgoing
 friendly
 a good role model
 she does everything on campus that you can do
 a little bit of home
 I can do it too
 shows morals and values in how she behaves
 if you think you can do it, you can do it
 really helped out a lot
 school is really important to her
 that's a good role model quality
 non-judgmental
 want to be like her
 be able to be available
 be with my residents
 being a good role model
 being the leader
 providing a positive environment
 representing herself as a good student
 very nice
 outgoing
 would help you out
 has the halls decorated
 they're informational
 to keep the peace
 a good role model themselves

Subtheme: Community builder

to facilitate
 growth
 that feeling of community within the people
 we have a very tight floor
 heard from other people
 they come to our floor just to talk
 does these group building activities every once in a while
 those are all good
 learn a bit about our hall and the people on it
 interesting because we've been living that whole first semester
 thought we knew each other pretty well
 then we had the activity

you saw a different light
 a facilitator of growth as a community on the floor
 make it livable for everyone
 see a lot of people there
 interact with a lot of people
 done a good job of managing my floor
 getting people out to do things
 to see our PAs getting along
 hanging out for all hours of the night
 how connected they are
 makes us want to connect with other people in our residence hall
 to know more people in the residence hall
 to hear about them
 know names
 able to say hi to people in the residence hall
 to be open more
 they were open with her
 get all the girls out
 have them meet
 know everyone on the floor
 everyone feels comfortable on the floor
 throughout the year
 catalyst to get it going
 everyone meeting people
 big into people at the beginning of the year
 getting everyone out
 feeling comfortable with everyone
 say hi
 not super awkward
 helped prevent . . . any future problems

Theme: Moving forward

Subtheme: Considering a Peer Assistant position

wanted to be that person that people went to
 they pay for your room and board
 participating in other activities across campus
 wanted to be there for people
 availability to the residents
 to miss that experience of having an actual PA there
 didn't want to take on that load having seen what happened
 might think about doing it junior or senior year
 when I'd be a little bit older than everyone
 in the dorm
 it'd be a better experience to be a little bit older

give you more respect because you have the title of junior or senior to your name
you have more experience with everything
authority comes a little bit with age
it would be kinda hard if I was the same age or even younger
if you had to go in and confront a problem
I don't know how comfortable I would be
telling them to be quiet
being older definitely plays a part

Subtheme: Staying with friends

rather live with . . . three other girls
be where all the other sophomores are
the suites
all freshmen want to get into
if you get a chance to be in the suites, you want it, you take it, there's no ifs, ands, or buts
about it
second year most of us go into the suites
I'll be one of the ones who do that
didn't want to lose some of the friends that I had
rooming with a couple of those guys
some of the other people
got into the room right across from us
on with a great floor experience
to be around our friends
roommate now and two neighbors
three guys that I interacted with the most on the team