UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING A PEER ADVISOR IN THE FRESHMAN INTEREST GROUPS PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI

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by
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UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI

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and hereby certify that, in their opinion, it is worthy of acceptance.

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DEDICATION

First I need to thank my wife, Tammy. Without her love, support, and encouragement there is no way I could have finished this process. The times she put the kids to bed by herself, took care of everything in the house, and listened to my frustrations are too many to count. This dissertation and degree are as much because of the work she has done as anything I have contributed. There is no way to fully state how blessed I am to have you in my life!

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ABSTRACT

The Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs) program at the University of Missouri is a first-year experience program where groups of approximately 20 students live together in a residence hall and are co-enrolled in four courses. By combining residential and academic initiatives the program helps approximately 2,000 first-year students transition from high school to the university each year. The FIGs program employs more than 100 undergraduate Peer Advisors (PAs) to assist students in this transition. The PA position is unique in higher education because it combines responsibilities similar to traditional resident assistants along with the responsibility of teaching a university course for college credit. Adding to the complexity of this position is that the students with whom the PAs live are also their students in the classroom. While previous studies have looked at the impact similar transition programs have had on participants, few look at the impact these programs have on the student staff who work in them. Additionally, no study has been found that explores the combined experience of working as both a resident assistant and an undergraduate teaching assistant with the same group of students.

In this phenomenological study, I interviewed 15 PAs and asked them to share their experience of working in the position. Through analysis of interview transcripts four themes about the PA experience emerged: managing multiple relationships, setting priorities and making sacrifices, challenges engaging residents, and the PAs’ reflection of the outcomes of their experience. This study concludes that the overall essence of being a PA is about balance: balancing relationships, roles, and responsibilities. The way the PAs handle the balance of these areas provides insight into their experience that may be
useful in understanding other student leadership positions which involve overlapping roles and responsibilities.
Chapter 1

OVERVIEW

The Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs) program at the University of Missouri (MU) helps more than 1,500 students transition from high school into the university each year. Beckett (2006) and Purdie II (2007) have shown that the program is associated with higher GPA’s, increased percentage of persistence to the sophomore year, and higher rates of graduation among students who participated in a FIG compared to their peers who did not. More than 100 faculty and staff members serve as Cofacilitators in the program every year. Kennedy (2006) found that faculty participated in the FIGs program because they enjoyed the interaction they had with students and felt they were having a positive impact on the students’ lives. Additionally, there are more than 100 undergraduate students who serve as Peer Advisors (PAs) in the program; acting as mentors to the students in the residence halls and helping teach a college adjustment course. No research has been done on the experience of these students or what they get out of their involvement in the program. My study focuses on their stories to gain insight into the experience of being a PA in the FIGs program at MU.

Astin’s (1984) theory regarding student involvement in college will be used as the framework to understand how the experience of being a PA affects the outcomes students have related to their overall college experience. Astin’s involvement theory suggests that growth in students occurs as a result of their active participation in the campus community. Examples of this involvement include the students’ peer groups, working on campus, and interaction with faculty. Each of these are incorporated into the experience
of being a PA. They interact regularly with other PAs through staff and community meetings, being a PA is considered an on-campus job, and as part of their role they interact regularly with faculty and staff in a number of academic and student affairs offices on campus. Because Astin’s (1984, 1993) involvement theory states that environmental factors such as those listed above impact students’ development it can be useful to understand how environmental factors related to being a PA affects their experience in the position and in college overall.

Setting, Definitions, and Context

This study took place at MU and involved the PAs who work in the FIGs program. The FIGs program at MU began in the Fall semester of 1995 as a response to decreasing rates of first-year to sophomore student persistence (Residential Life - University of Missouri, n.d.-b). Each of the more than 100 FIGs are based on a central theme; while these themes are often related to a specific major the themes can also be more general in nature such as for undeclared students or students interested in service learning.

Organization of FIGs

Each FIG is limited to 20 students, with the typical range being 12 to 18 students. These first-year students live together in the same residence hall on campus and are co-enrolled in four courses. Three of the courses are normal sections of classes offered at MU; co-enrolling the students gives them a cohort to study with and keep each other accountable for attending class. The fourth course is a one credit hour course referred to as the FIG proseminar. While covering traditional adjustment topics such as study skills
and time management, the FIG proseminar also features discussions specific to the topic of the FIG. For instance, a FIG related to business would have discussions related to careers in business, degree program requirements, and speakers focused on different areas of business. A FIG focused on service learning could include topics related to community service opportunities on campus and ways to stay involved with community service after graduation. Two topics are mandatory for all FIG sections to cover, ethics and diversity. However the way these topics are addressed will vary from FIG to FIG depending on the overall focus of the group. The FIG proseminar is co-taught by the PA and a Cofacilitator. Because participants of the FIG program are simultaneously residence in their residence halls and students in courses, such as the FIG proseminar, they will be referred to as students and residents interchangeably throughout this study.

**Peer Advisors**

Peer Advisors are students at the university who are sophomores or above, have a cumulative GPA of 3.000 or higher, and have lived in the residence halls for at least one semester (Residential Life - University of Missouri, n.d.-c). The PAs live in the residence halls with the students in the FIG, coordinate social and academic programming in the residence halls, help ensure community standards regarding student conduct, and assist in teaching the proseminar with a Cofacilitator, often taking a lead role in putting together the content of the course (Residential Life - University of Missouri, n.d.-c). Peer Advisors serve in a role similar to that of Resident Assistants at many other institutions, with the addition of co-teaching the one-hour proseminar.
**Cofacilitators**

The Cofacilitators are a faculty or staff member on campus, typically tied in some way to the theme of the FIG. Their purpose is to act as a resource to the first-year students in the FIG and connect them with an academic unit or office on campus related to the FIG’s theme. Cofacilitators are also a resource to the PAs, helping them structure the proseminal and connecting them with resources that may help with presentations or providing other information for the proseminal.

**Student Coordinators**

Peer Advisors attend a number of staff meetings with other student staff. One such meeting is led by the FIG Student Coordinators. The Student Coordinators are upper level students who have previously been a PA for at least one year. They are selected by the coordinator of the FIGs program to lead a group of 25 to 30 PAs. Approximately 5 PAs meet at a time with their Student Coordinator on a regularly scheduled basis; weekly or biweekly. During these meetings the PAs and Student Coordinators discuss the lesson plans for the proseminal, how things are going in their residence hall, and other aspects of the FIGs program such as working with their Cofacilitator. The Student Coordinator meetings are not organized strictly by focus area of the FIGs, but more often arranged by convenience around the student staff members’ schedules.

**Residence Hall Coordinators and Staff Meetings**

Another meeting PAs regularly attend are with the other staff members in their residence hall. The staff meetings contribute to the overall environment in which the PAs
experience their position and may have an influence on how they describe this phenomenon. These staff meetings are organized by a professional Residence Hall Coordinator. The Residence Hall Coordinators are also the primary supervisor of the PAs.

**Community Advisors**

In addition to the PAs the staff meetings are also attended by Community Assistants who are another student staff member position in the residence halls. The Community Advisors perform functions similar to traditional Resident Assistants. The main difference between the role of the Community Advisors and the PAs is that the Community Advisors do not teach a FIG proseminar course, or any other course as part of their position, and do not have as regular contact with faculty and other academic staff as the PAs do with their Cofacilitator.

**Context**

It is important to understand the context in which the students are experiencing being a PA. There are many different individuals they interact with in addition to the students in their FIG. The PAs meet with the students in their FIG during the proseminar and also in the residence halls, but they also have a number of different meetings with fellow students and professional members of the university community. These interactions with their FIG students, meetings, and exposure to other individuals on campus all may play a part in the experience of being a PA.
Problem Statement

In chapter 2, I review the literature related to residential learning communities, resident assistants, and undergraduate teaching assistants. The literature regarding resident assistants and undergraduate teaching assistants applies to the experience of the PAs as their experience is set both in the residence hall and in classroom instruction. To date, I have not been able to find studies that have looked at the experience of undergraduate students serving in a position that combines both sets of responsibilities; that of a resident assistant and an undergraduate teaching assistant. This study hopes to fill that gap by examining the experience of PAs; undergraduate students who serve in a role that combines responsibilities with students in a residence hall and in a classroom.

In addition to looking at the PA position specifically, this study can give greater insight into the experience and expectations of a residential student position. Arvidson (2003) concludes her review of the evolving responsibilities of the resident assistant position by stating that further qualitative research should be done to explore how their role and responsibilities continue to change into the twenty-first century. This study is also an answer to that call. Understanding the experience of PAs provides an example of the expectations and roles of residential student staff. As Arvidson notes, further understanding of these residential positions can enable administrators to continue providing programs and services that are valuable to all students.

Purpose/Research Question

The purpose of this study is to understand the experience of being a PA in the FIGs program at the University of Missouri. As stated earlier, the outcomes of participating in the FIGs program for first-year students have been studied as has the
involvement of faculty in the program. However the experience of the PAs has not been studied. Because more than 100 PAs currently participate in the program every year, understanding these students’ experience can be helpful in better understanding the complete contribution of the FIGs program to the undergraduate students who are involved; both as participants and leaders. This knowledge can be used to help justify the resources spent on the program. Gaining a better understanding of the PAs’ experience may also help administrators be more intentional in supporting the positive experiences the PAs mention and reevaluate the areas of concern that the PAs describe. Specifically, the research question for this study is what is the phenomenon of being a PA in the FIGs program at the University of Missouri?

**Theoretical Framework**

Astin’s (1984) involvement theory serves as the theoretical framework to understand this experience. Astin’s theory states that growth and development occur in an individual through the involvement they have during their time in college. Five postulates are listed by Astin (1984) to clarify his theory:

1. “Involvement refers to the investment of physical and psychological energy in various objects” (Astin, 1984, p. 298). An object can be defined generally as a student’s overall experience or as a specific activity such as being a PA.
2. “Regardless of its object, involvement occurs along a continuum” (Astin, 1984, p. 298). Each student has a different level of involvement in the activities in which they participate. Additionally an individual student may be more involved in some activities and less in others.
3. “Involvement has both quantitative and qualitative features” (Astin, 1984, p. 298). A student can be involved in a specific number of activities, the quantitative feature. The student can also have different levels of seriousness to which they approach the activity, the qualitative.

4. “The amount of student learning and personal development associated with any educational program is directly proportional to the quality and quantity of student involvement in that program” (Astin, 1984, p. 298).

5. “The effectiveness of any educational policy or practice is directly related to the capacity of that policy or practice to increase student involvement” (Astin, 1984, p. 298).

Astin’s theory is concerned with the factors that lead to students’ development more than the level of development itself. In order for learning and development to occur in a student, they need to be actively engaged in their environment (Evans, Forney, & Guido-DiBrito, 1998).

In a later writing, Astin (1993) identifies specific activities that positively impact a student’s development. Three of those activities specifically related to the experience of being a PA are interaction with peers, employment on campus, and interactions with faculty. Through meetings with other PAs, staff meetings, and training sessions the PAs interact with similar students throughout their experience. Additionally the PA position is considered an on-campus job. Finally, in working with the Cofacilitator of their FIG they have regular interaction with faculty and staff members on campus in addition to the interactions with the residence hall coordinator in their building.
Astin’s (1984) theory of involvement is a fitting framework for understanding the phenomenon and outcomes of being a PA as it suggests students’ environments and experiences influence their overall development in college. The experience of being a PA, and the campus involvement it leads to, is one environment on the college campus that affects a student’s development. Astin’s theory will be discussed in greater detail in chapter 2.

Research Design

A qualitative research design was used to understand the experience of being a PA. Specifically, a transcendental phenomenological approach was used. A phenomenological study attempts to describe the shared, lived experiences of several individuals (Creswell, 2007); in this case the experience of being a PA in the Freshman Interest Groups program at the University of Missouri. The purpose of a phenomenological study “is to reduce individual experiences with a phenomenon to a description of the universal essence” (Creswell, 2007, p. 58). The description of the phenomena, and its essence, includes both “what” the participants experience and “how” they experienced it (Moustakas, 1994).

This phenomenological study is considered transcendental because I focused on the description of the experience as stated by the PAs (Creswell, 2007); arriving at the essence of the experience from the description that they provide. This is opposed to a hermeneutical phenomenology in which the essence is derived from how the researcher interprets the experience as told by the participant (Creswell, 2007). Because the focus of the study is to understand the PAs’ experience as they describe it in their own words (Moustakas, 1994) a transcendental phenomenological design is the best fit.
Semi-structured interviews of the PAs were used to learn about their experience (Seidman, 2006). Recordings of the interviews were then transcribed. After all interviews had been completed each transcript was read and key statements were noted (Moustakas, 1994). Analysis of the statements further distilled the PAs’ description of their experience into structural elements, “what” they experienced, and textural elements, “how” they experienced being a PA. Structural elements include the job responsibilities of the position, responsibilities they have as a student, relationships that were part of their position, and other requirements prescribed by the FIGs program or the Department of Residential life. Textural elements focus on how the PAs reacted and approached the structural elements. The textural elements of the PA experience included how they approached responsibilities of their position while also having responsibilities as a student and how they managed the multiple relationships they had through their position. Finally these elements, taken from the PAs’ description, were used to arrive at the essence (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994) of what it is to be a PA in the FIGs Program at MU.

**Significance**

This study is significant to higher education administrators who work with residential programs, transition programs, peer educators, and other student staff. As noted earlier, studies have shown that the FIGs program is associated with positive impacts on the first-year students and faculty members involved. However no studies have been done looking at the experience of the PAs at MU, a group of students who have responsibilities in both teaching a class along with developing community and discipline in the residence halls. Better understanding their experience may lead
administrators to be more proactive in exposing PAs to the parts of their experience they describe as most beneficial and review areas the PAs say need improvement. Additionally, looking at the experience of the PAs at MU adds to the literature on students who work as paraprofessionals in residential life in addition to the literature related to the experience of undergraduate students who assist in teaching college courses.

The literature related to resident assistants and undergraduate teaching assistants both show that students in these positions often express an interest in teaching, either as a distinct career or finding ways to incorporate teaching into their chosen career. Examining the experience of the PAs may give insight into why these activities lead to an increased interest in teaching and if similar experiences could be used to increase students’ interested in teaching.

Finally this study examines how the combination of these two experiences affects the overall experience of undergraduate students; a gap in the current literature. As stated earlier other studies have looked at the outcomes related to being a resident assistant and of being an undergraduate teaching assistant, but these experiences have been looked at independently. The PA position combines these two experiences, students who work in residence halls and in the classroom.

**Overview**

Chapter 2 provides a review of the literature related to this study. The review begins with a look at residential learning community programs in higher education that seek to integrate students’ academic and on-campus residential experiences (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). The FIGs program fits into the definition of a residential learning
community, and studies specific to the FIGs program at MU are also reviewed. Because the PA experience includes their time both in the classroom and in the residence hall, research related to undergraduate educators (peer leaders and undergraduate teaching assistants) and resident assistants are also examined. Finally, Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement and critiques of the theory are discussed.

The methodology and design of this study are explained in chapter 3. This chapter includes specific information on phenomenological research as well as how data were collected and analyzed. Trustworthiness in qualitative research and how this study fills those requirements are discussed.

Chapter 4 begins with an overview of the participants in this study. The majority of the chapter is then devoted to introducing and discussing the four themes that emerged through analysis of the data. Quotes from participants will be used to support the analysis and provide readers with greater insight into the experience of being a PA.

In chapter 5, I describe the structural and textural elements provided by participants to arrive at the overall essence (Moustakas, 1994) of being a PA. This is followed by a discussion of recommendations for practice related specifically to the FIGs program at MU and to similar residential learning programs overall. The chapter concludes with a discussion of future research implications, again focusing on recommendations specific to the FIGs program and the overall body of literature related to such programs.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, I begin by reviewing the literature related to residential learning communities and why the Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs) program at the University of Missouri (MU) fits this description. Next, I explore the research done specifically on the MU FIGs program. The FIG Peer Advisors (PAs) serve in a role that is similar to traditional resident assistants within their residence halls, so literature related to the resident assistant experience and outcomes are also examined. Additionally, PAs help teach a college course for their students, focused on college adjustment and other topics related to the theme of their FIG. Because of this teaching experience, research related to undergraduate teaching assistants and peer leaders is also reviewed. Finally, I explore the literature related to Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement, which serves as the theoretical framework for this study.

Research on Residential Learning Communities

A number of terms have been used for programs that combine the shared living experience of residential life with the shared academic experience of students. Some often used terms are living learning programs (Brower & Inkelas, 2010), living learning communities (Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Nesheim et al., 2007; Wawrzynski, Jessup-Anger, Stolz, Helman, & Beaulieu, 2009), and residential learning communities (“The Residential Learning Communities International Clearinghouse,” 2013). For the purpose of this study I will use the term residential learning communities to refer to these programs that combine residential and academic experiences of students.
Residential learning communities have become increasingly popular across the country (Beckett, 2006). According to the Residential Learning Communities International Clearinghouse (2013) more than 180 residential learning communities exist today. With the large number of residential learning communities, finding a common definition is often difficult (Beckett, 2006). Two definitions in the current literature, however, seem to provide a good picture of what residential learning communities are. First, Brower and Inkelas (2010) say that residential learning communities are "residential housing programs that incorporate academically based themes and build community through common learning" (p. 36). The other definition that provides a good picture of such programs comes from the Residential Learning Communities International Clearinghouse (2013), which defines residential learning communities as "a residential education unit in a college or university that is organized on the basis of an academic theme or approach and is intended to integrate academic learning and community living" (sec. Definition). For the purpose of my study, I will rely on the definition provided by the Residential Learning Communities International Clearinghouse (2013), as it gives emphasis to the intentional use of such programs to integrate the classroom experience of learning into the environment of campus residence halls.

**Influence on Students**

The majority of the research related to residential learning communities is focused on the outcomes of the programs as they relate to the student participants; this section looks at those outcomes. First, I review the literature related to how residential learning communities can help student transition from high school to college. I then review the
literature related to residential learning communities and retention. Next, I discuss the literature related to how residential learning communities can help with student engagement related to their civic concerns and academic areas. Literature related to how residential learning communities create seamless learning environments for students is also discussed. Finally, I review the literature related to students’ academic development and achievement as it relates to participating in a residential learning communities. The outcomes, student transition, retention, engagement, seamless learning environment, and academic development are typical goals of residential learning communities. Examining the literature related to these outcomes of residential learning communities gives further insight into the FIGs program at MU and what the program hopes to achieve.

**Transition to college.** An overarching outcome of residential learning communities is helping students successfully transition from high school to college (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Inkelas, Vogt, Longerbeam, Owen, & Johnson, 2006; Nesheim et al., 2007). According to Brower and Inkelas’s (2010) overview of residential learning communities, students said they felt being involved in a residential learning community helped them make a smoother transition academically and socially to their institution than students who had not participated in a residential learning community. The students in a study by Nesheim et al. (2007) stated that being in a residential learning community helped them increase their knowledge of institutional process and resources available to them and also felt more confident in their ability to successfully navigate through the institution. Overall, participating in a residential learning community facilitated the ease and comfort of students transitioning from high school to college.
**Retention.** Studies have also shown that residential learning communities are positively associated with retention (Inkelas et al., 2006; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Nesheim et al., 2007; Stassen, 2003). Nesheim (2007) found that this impact was especially important during the first few weeks of a student’s first year in college, lending support to the idea that residential learning communities aid in the transition from high school to college. Students who participate in a residential learning community are also up to 34% less likely to leave their institution after their first year (Stassen, 2003). This association holds even when controlling for entering characteristics such as high school GPA and standardized test scores (Stassen, 2003). These studies demonstrate that residential learning communities can have a positive impact on retaining students at their institution. However, it is important to note these studies do not create a causal link, only highlight a correlational effect of involvement in residential learning communities and retention.

**Engagement.** Through easing the transition to college, students become more engaged in their institution. One way this engagement is demonstrated is through community involvement in the institution. Studies have found increased involvement in civic engagement among students who were currently in and who had previously participated in residential learning communities (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Nesheim et al., 2007). Specifically, residential learning community participants increased their awareness and involvement in community service and service learning opportunities, activism on campus, and civic opportunities available in the community in which they lived (Nesheim et al., 2007). This increased awareness and involvement also led to increased discussions regarding social and cultural issues among peers in a residential
learning community compared to students who were not in a residential learning community (Inkelas et al., 2006). Increased commitment to civic engagement remained for students at least three years after their participation in a residential learning community (Brower & Inkelas, 2010).

Students who participated in a residential learning community were also more comfortable with cultural, racial, and intellectual diversity within their social group (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Inkelas et al., 2006; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Nesheim et al., 2007). Students in residential learning communities were more likely to specifically express an appreciation of racial and cultural diversity (Inkelas et al., 2006) and describe their residential learning community as being socially supportive and tolerant (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). The participants also demonstrated a greater awareness to the feelings, thoughts, and experiences of others (Nesheim et al., 2007). However, Brower and Inkelas (2010) concluded that students who participated in a residential learning community did not demonstrate more appreciation of difference in peers than students who were not part of a residential learning community. Additionally, none of these studies specifically asked minority students what their impression of the residential learning community environment was in relation to appreciation and awareness of diversity.

The idea of engagement also carries over to the students' approach to their academics. Pike, Kuh and McCormick (2008) stated that being involved in a residential learning community is "directly associated with higher levels of student engagement" (p. 14). In turn, academic engagement is related to higher gains in learning (Pike et al., 2008). Additionally Nesheim et al. (2007) found that students in residential learning
communities spent more time studying and using academic resources at their institution than those students not in a residential learning community. Stassen (2003) expanded on these findings concluding that students in residential learning communities not only spent more time studying but were also more engaged in group projects, had more positive academic behaviors, and were able to integrate multiple ideas in their course assignments when compared to peers who were not in residential learning communities. Increased student engagement also carried over to interactions with their peers. In addition to being more likely to study with their peers than students who did not participate in a residential learning community (Brower & Inkelas, 2010), conversations with peers were more likely to include academically related topics and career related issues (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Inkelas et al., 2006; Stassen, 2003). Students who had participated in a residential learning community were also more likely to serve as a mentor to other students (Brower & Inkelas, 2010).

**Seamless environment.** Lenning and Ebbers (1999) stated that residential learning communities have the ability to bridge the gap between the academic and social experiences of students at college. Students referred to this as creating a seamless academic environment where learning was encouraged both in and out of the formal classroom (Wawrzynski et al., 2009). This feeling of seamlessness influenced how students applied what they learned in their classes to other classes (Brower & Inkelas, 2010), learning outside the classroom, and the environment in which they lived (Nesheim et al., 2007; Wawrzynski et al., 2009). Students noted that residential learning communities promoted a culture focused on the importance of academics, challenging students to keep up with their peers and focusing on individual academic success.
They were also more likely to look for opportunities to apply the knowledge they learned in one area or class to other academic, social, and civic areas in which they were involved (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). Learning was not seen as something that only occurred formally in the classroom, but through discussions and interactions that occurred outside the classroom as well (Wawrzynski et al., 2009). The cultural environment in which the students lived in was also influenced. Students described how their residential learning community conveyed an overall scholarly feeling to both the physical structure and social norms of their community. Additionally, this scholarly feeling carried on from year-to-year because of the norms that were developed (Wawrzynski et al., 2009).

Not only did students report academically, socially, and culturally integrated experiences through their residential learning community, but the seamless community also carried over to the interaction residential learning community students had with their faculty. These interactions were described by students as "meaningful and fulfilling" (Wawrzynski et al., 2009, p. 150). Nesheim et al.’s (2007) study found that students who participated in a residential learning community had more interactions with their faculty both in the classroom and outside the classroom than those who did not participate in a residential learning community. The students in Brower and Inkelas’s (2010) study had increased interactions with faculty members related specifically to course material. However, another study showed that while students who participated in a residential learning community were statistically more likely to have a mentoring relationship with a faculty member, they were not more likely to have discussions with faculty focused on academic areas than those who were not in a residential learning community (Inkelas et
al., 2006). Additionally, Stassen (2003) found no significant difference in faculty interaction between students who did or did not participate in a residential learning community. Overall, the majority of studies found there was a feeling of relatedness between the community and academic focus of the residential learning community among students, staff, and faculty who worked with the community.

**Academic development.** Participation in a residential learning community may also have a direct impact on students' academic development and achievement. Multiple studies have shown that students who participate in a residential learning community have more developed critical thinking skills when compared to their peers (Brower & Inkelas, 2010; Inkelas et al., 2006; Lenning & Ebbers, 1999; Nesheim et al., 2007). Increased critical thinking allows students to more easily make connections between curricular and co-curricular experiences and to apply the cognitive knowledge they have acquired into their actions, decisions, and discussions (Nesheim et al., 2007). Students who participated in a residential learning community were also more likely to use supporting evidence when making a statement on class projects and when posing questions in class (Nesheim et al., 2007). Some studies have also shown that students who participated in residential learning communities have a higher grade point average (GPA) than students who did not participate, especially during the first year of college (Stassen, 2003). Students who participated in a residential learning community also felt more responsibility for their learning (Nesheim et al., 2007) and felt more confident in their overall academic abilities, even 3 years after participating in a residential learning community (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). However, when taking student characteristics such as gender, race, and enrollment status into account Pike et al. (2008) concluded that
participating in a residential learning community was not directly related to gains in learning and development, stating that “participating in a learning community has little direct effect on learning outcomes” (p. 14). Pike et al. (2008) go on to state though that participation in a residential learning community is related to increased student engagement, which was related to gains in learning. This relationship between engagement and gains in learning reflects back to Astin’s (1984) involvement theory and the importance of students being engaged in their environment.

**Impact on Faculty**

Students are not the only participants in a residential learning community, faculty typically play a role in these communities. A similar, although limited, body of research explores the impact participating in a residential learning community has on faculty. Kennedy (2006) asked faculty why they participated in residential learning communities and found that they are involved because they enjoyed interacting with students and felt they had a positive impact on students’ college experience. In addition to helping students adjust to college, Lenning and Ebbers (1999) found that faculty also benefited from diminished isolation, a shared purpose and cooperation between faculty, and being part of a program that aided in integration of curriculum beyond the classroom.

**Freshman Interest Groups at the University of Missouri**

The FIGs program at MU fits the definitions of a residential learning community discussed earlier. The students in the FIGs live together in the same residence hall, often on the same floor. They are enrolled in four common courses together, giving them a shared academic experience. This academic experience often filters back into their
residence halls through informal discussions or more formal programming. Finally, the FIGs are organized by academic majors or related themes. Similar to the greater body of literature on residential learning communities, the FIGs program has been shown to help students in their transition from high school to college. An educator who worked with the FIGs program described it as “making the big store small” (Nesheim et al., 2007, p. 441), helping the large campus feel smaller to incoming students by giving them a cohort group with whom they can connect. A student participant in that same study echoed this sentiment by saying the FIGs program helped him feel “not just like a number, but cared about” (Nesheim et al., 2007, p. 441). Students who participated in FIGs were more likely to form study groups, even with students outside of their FIG group (Nesheim et al., 2007). Specific to academic performance, students enrolled in FIGs had a statistically higher GPA during their first semester compared to first year students who did not participate in a FIG, even when controlling for entering and environmental characteristics (Purdie II, 2007).

Regarding persistence, Pike Schroeder, and Berry (1997) found that the FIGs program “did not directly improve students’ persistence rates after controlling for other factors” (p. 618). It is also noted that the FIG participation was self-selected which may have introduced other differences between the FIG and non-FIG participants not accounted for in the study. However this study was conducted during the program’s first year; it is possible that in this short amount of time the program may not have been established enough to have a positive impact on student retention. A later study found that participating in a FIG was associated with an increase in a student’s odds of persistence to the sophomore year (Purdie II, 2007). Pike et al. (1997) did note that
through increased exposure with faculty the FIG’s program did indirectly enhance persistence for participants. Finally, participation in a FIG was a statistically significant predictor of overall degree attainment, degree attainment in 4 years, and degree attainment for at risk students (Beckett, 2006).

One area of the FIGs program at MU and in the broader literature that has not received much attention is that of the PAs; undergraduate students who lead the FIGs in the residence halls and co-teach a one-credit hour college adjustment course (Residential Life - University of Missouri, n.d.-c). The next two sections in this literature review will examine previous studies focused on residential life paraprofessionals (resident assistants) and on undergraduates who gain experience teaching and tutoring their peers. My study hopes to fill the gap in the understanding of the FIGs program by asking the PAs to share their experience and examining where common themes are in their description. This study also examines how the combined responsibilities of being a residential life paraprofessional and undergraduate instructor contribute to the overall experience of the PAs. This information will give greater insight into these combined experiences and may be beneficial to other administrators who work with residential learning programs.

**Research on Resident Assistants**

Resident assistants are key student employees in many residential life departments. The resident assistants play a number of roles in the residence hall (Blimling, 2011). They act as campus administrators: preparing reports of occupancy on their floor, checking on the physical condition of rooms, and attending regular staff meetings. They serve as institutional representatives: setting an example by adhering to
university policies and holding other students in their residence hall accountable for adhering to policies; explaining the rationale for the institution’s policies to other students; and assisting with emergencies that arise in the residence halls, such as fire alarms or individual student safety concerns. Resident assistants are also responsible for the overall environment in their portion of a residence hall, helping students show mutual respect for each other, appreciating diversity and encouraging that appreciation among the residents in their community, and promoting an overall sense of community among their residents (Blimling, 2011). These undergraduates have a large and varied amount of responsibilities in their position. The following section will look at a number of the studies related to the experience and outcomes of serving as a resident assistant.

**Importance of Supervision**

In a number of studies, resident assistants list their level of direct supervision as a major factor in their overall experience (Benjamin, 2004; Blanton & Husmann, 2006; Deluga & Winters, 1990). Resident assistants often describe a lack of supervision and leadership from their direct supervisor (Deluga & Winters, 1990). In this leadership vacuum, the resident assistants themselves often fill the role of leading others on their team, holding other resident assistants accountable, and taking on responsibility for the overall community in which they are working (Blanton & Husmann, 2006). Where strong direct supervision does exist, resident assistants say they appreciate the support they receive from their supervisors as well as the role modeling they observe on how to lead, hold peers accountable, and work toward development of their community (Blanton & Husmann, 2006). However, even when good supervision is present, resident assistants
said that they would have appreciated more feedback from their supervisor on how they are doing in their position and with their responsibilities (Benjamin, 2004).

**Challenges and Benefits of the Position**

When asked to reflect on their experience, resident assistants stated that one of the greatest benefits they received was learning more about themselves (Blanton & Husmann, 2006; Schaller & Wagner, 2007). Because of the large amount of responsibility placed on them by both their residents and the supervisors/administrators at their institution, resident assistants said they felt their maturity developed more than that of their peers (Blanton & Husmann, 2006). The resident assistants also stated that they developed a greater sense of confidence in themselves and their skills.

As mentioned earlier, resident assistants play a large number of roles in their residence halls and on campus. One role resident assistants play is focused on the development of community within their residence halls. Arvidson’s (2003) review of the literature associated with the evolution of the resident assistant position noted that during the 1960s the role of resident assistants transitioned from being a disciplinarian to community builder. To build community, resident assistants coordinate social and academic activities within the residence halls, often referred to as programming. While resident assistants and their supervisors invest a great deal of time and effort in programming, do resident assistants and residents really expect and value these activities? Of 14 priorities of the resident assistant position, resident assistants ranked “provide social programs,” “provide academic assistance,” and “provide educational programs” as three of their bottom four priorities (Conlogue, 1993). When students in the residence halls were asked to rank the 14 more important items, they ranked the same three items as
the least important (Sargent, 2010). In both studies (Conlogue, 1993; Sargent, 2010) residents and resident assistants ranked responding to crisis and emergencies as the most important priority followed by being able to refer residents with questions or problems to the appropriate campus resource, reflecting values on “as needed” services rather than planned out programming.

Creating educational programs can be a challenge for resident assistants. Resident assistants often feel as if they need to be the content expert of topics being presented (Blakely, 2011). This feeling of doing it all themselves can lead to programs that are assessed as being unsuccessful (Blimling, 1999) either in attendance or execution. The perceived lack of importance (Conlogue, 1993) and perceived pressure of preparing and presenting the information themselves (Blimling, 1999) has led to programs that are often “poorly attended, executed, or both” (Blakely, 2011, p. 38). Even when programming is well planned there are a number of challenges resident assistants have to overcome in getting their residents to attend. The programming presented by resident assistants is competing for students’ time and attention with other social activities, academic requirements, television (or streaming of media), the internet, video games, and other activities (Blimling, 2015). Adding to this difficulty is the fact that the information of many of the topics covered by educational programming such as wellness, professional development, and academic study skills are available online for students to explore and view at their convenience (Blimling, 2015).

It appears that “traditional models of educational programming have a place in (residence halls), but some of these approaches are no longer robust enough to capture the interest of students and engage them in a meaningful way” (Blimling, 2015, p. 233).
Residential students are in class all week, hearing from an instructor at the front of the room. This style of programming, which is traditionally used in resident assistant planned programs, does not connect with students. This suggests that resident assistants should look for ways to involve and engage students in the programming (Blimling, 2015). Blakely (2011) recommends programs that are more “in and out” and do not rely on a set time but allow students to either stop by in person or access information online at their convenience. This type of programming is also supported by the surveys noted earlier, that ranked resident and resident assistant priorities, focusing the priorities on as needed issues (Conlogue, 1993; Sargent, 2010).

Roles, like programming, are in addition to their primary role of being a college student and the academic responsibilities and social opportunities associated with that status. Many resident assistants discussed the difficulty they found in balancing their many roles and responsibilities (Blanton & Husmann, 2006). For example, some resident assistants stated it was difficult to form social relationships with their residents because they were often seen as being disciplinarians on their floor, or at the very least watching students to make sure they were not doing things that would violate residence hall or institutional policy (Schaller & Wagner, 2007). However, other resident assistants found their role helped them balance their social life and meet new friends. These resident assistants talked about the friendships developed between the other resident assistants with whom they worked. They also talked about the opportunities to develop friendships with their residents (Blanton & Husmann, 2006). Whether it helped or made it more difficult, balancing a social life, their roles as a resident assistant and friend, is a major consideration of being a resident assistant.
Finding balance may be especially stressful for resident assistants who are still deciding their major. These resident assistants, especially during their sophomore year, described the process of deciding on a major as a large distraction from their responsibilities of their position (Schaller & Wagner, 2007).

Resident assistants also described the skills they developed through their experience and the influence of their position on their career choice. Time management was often cited as an important skill resident assistants developed in their position (Schaller & Wagner, 2007). Resident assistants also said they developed skills related to advising and counseling (Lillis & Schuh, 1982; Schaller & Wagner, 2007). For female resident assistants the development of skills in advising and counseling led them into professions where these skills were primary requirements and used in their day-to-day responsibilities. Male resident assistants were less likely to pursue careers focused on advising and counseling, but looked for ways to incorporate these skills into their chosen professions (Lillis & Schuh, 1982).

Length of Service

Finally there is some disagreement on whether the skills resident assistants develop were dependent on the number of years they worked in their positions. Utterback, Barbieri, Fox, and Solinger (1990) found that there was no statistical difference in the developmental level between experienced resident assistants and those in their first year regarding the development of their own sense of purpose, development of social relationships, and in their sense of autonomy. However, Utterback et al. (1990) note that there is a possibility the positive effects of being a resident assistant may be more longitudinal in nature and may not present themselves until several years after the
experience itself. Lillis and Shuh (1982) loosely support this notion. They surveyed resident assistants up to 25 years after they had served in their positions and found that the development of skills related to counseling and advising were higher for resident assistants who had multiple years of experience than for those who were a resident assistant only 1 year.

Research on Undergraduate Teaching Assistants and Peer Leaders

Undergraduate teaching assistants work with a full-time, professional instructors to co-teach a class for undergraduate students (Fingerson & Culley, 2001; Schalk, McGinnis, Harring, Hendrickson, & Smith, 2009; Weidert, Wendorf, Gurung, & Filz, 2012). Peer leaders are undergraduate students who help lead small groups associated with peer-led team learning. Peer-led team learning differs from peer tutoring and study groups by intentionally linking trained peer leaders with small group work that is incorporated into the overall structure of the course (Gafney & Varma-Nelson, 2007; Johnson & Loui, 2009). These two groups of undergraduate students take an active role in presenting academic material to peer undergraduates. I reviewed the literature on these two areas to provide important scholarly context to the overall experiences of the PAs that is not explored in the research on resident assistants.

Outcomes of Being a Peer Leader or Undergraduate Teaching Assistant

Students who served as peer leaders and undergraduate teaching assistants reported many outcomes as a result of their position. Most commonly reported were outcomes related to a better understanding of the material they were presenting and instructor expectations (Fingerson & Culley, 2001; Johnson & Loui, 2009; Micari,
Streitwieser, & Light, 2005; Schalk et al., 2009; Voyles, Kowalchuk, Nicklow, & Ricks, 2011; Weidert et al., 2012), improving communication and public speaking skills (Borgon, Verity, & Teter, 2013; Fingerson & Culley, 2001; Schalk et al., 2009), increased self-understanding (Gill, Richardson, & Parker, 2008; Johnson & Loui, 2009; Weidert et al., 2012), increased understanding of others (Fingerson & Culley, 2001; Schalk et al., 2009; Weidert et al., 2012), overall career preparation (Fingerson & Culley, 2001; Schalk et al., 2009; Swartz, 1996; Weidert et al., 2012), and for some specifically exploring and preparing for careers in teaching (Adams & Krockover, 1997; Borgon et al., 2013; Fingerson & Culley, 2001; Gafney & Varma-Nelson, 2007; Gill et al., 2008; Johnson & Loui, 2009; Schalk et al., 2009; Weidert et al., 2012). The following sections will review the literature related to these topics.

**Understanding of material and expectations.** One benefit the undergraduate teaching assistants and peer leaders reported is a better understanding of the material they presented (Fingerson & Culley, 2001; Johnson & Loui, 2009; Schalk et al., 2009; Voyles et al., 2011; Weidert et al., 2012). For example, in a study focused on peer leaders working with engineering students, the peer leaders reported that by helping younger students learn new concepts, they were better able to learn the concepts themselves and were able to integrate the knowledge into their own learning (Voyles et al., 2011). Presenting academic information to other undergraduates helped peer leaders and undergraduate teaching assistants gain more confidence in the subject and improved their overall understanding of the subject being taught (Fingerson & Culley, 2001; Schalk et al., 2009; Weidert et al., 2012). Students also became more aware of their own misconceptions related to the subject and were able to correct these mistakes in their
understanding (Schalk et al., 2009). Furthermore, being an undergraduate teaching assistant resulted in the same benefits as being an undergraduate research assistant; students developed more inquisitive research skills and began to “think like a scientist” (Schalk et al., 2009, p. 40).

Students who served as a peer leader or undergraduate teaching assistant also reported the experience gave them increased insight into the expectations of their instructors. They reported having an increased understanding of their instructors’ overall experience and time demands (Fingerson & Culley, 2001; Micari et al., 2005). The students also reported that they had a better understanding of what the instructors in all their courses were looking for on tests and class assignments (Fingerson & Culley, 2001).

**Improved communication and presentation skills.** Working as an undergraduate teaching assistant also helped students develop communication and public speaking skills, skills many of them said would be helpful in their future career (Fingerson & Culley, 2001). In a study by Borgon, Verity, and Teter (2013), 19% of undergraduate teaching assistants said the experience improved their confidence in public speaking and presenting, while 70% said teaching and presenting were the most valuable experiences they received from their position.

**Increased self-understanding.** Peer leaders and undergraduate teaching assistants also report increased understanding of themselves due to their position. Students in these positions reported overall increased self-confidence (Schalk et al., 2009) and more self-confidence when leading a group of their peers (Johnson & Loui, 2009). One student said that her experience as an undergraduate teaching assistant
helped her feel more comfortable talking with students who she normally would not have felt obligated to talk (Gill et al., 2008).

**Increased awareness of others.** In addition to learning about themselves, being a peer leader or undergraduate teaching assistant helped students learn more about others. Students with these experiences stated that they gained more confidence in their ability to work with other people (Schalk et al., 2009; Weidert et al., 2012). Learning more about different learning skills and learning styles of their students (Fingerson & Culley, 2001) was one area undergraduate teaching assistants said they gained a deeper understanding into other students. Undergraduate teaching assistants also said the experience gave them more insight into how students behaved (Weidert et al., 2012) and different learning styles of undergraduate students (Fingerson & Culley, 2001).

**Career preparation.** Being a peer leader or undergraduate teaching assistant also had an impact on preparing the students for their future careers. For some, it was as simple as being a resume builder (Fingerson & Culley, 2001) and a leadership experience they hoped would set themselves apart from other candidates. Other former undergraduate teaching assistants stated that the experience helped prepare them for graduate school where they would serve as graduate teaching assistants (Fingerson & Culley, 2001; Swartz, 1996). The experience also helped some students develop skills and knowledge they thought would be helpful in their future career, such as research skills, and helped them form clearer career aspirations (Schalk et al., 2009).

**Exploration of teaching careers.** For a number of students, their experience led them to an increased interest in teaching (Gafney & Varma-Nelson, 2007), or at least made them more interested in exploring teaching careers (Solomon & Crowe, 2001). By
being a peer leader or undergraduate teaching assistant, students were able to imagine themselves in the role of being a full-time teacher (Swartz, 1996). These students were able to explore teaching in a real world setting to see if it fit their interests, passions, and abilities (Johnson & Loui, 2009). Additionally the time that peer leaders and undergraduate teaching assistants spent with full-time faculty may also have contributed to this interest. For example, Fingerson and Culley (2001) found that full-time instructors were able to mentor undergraduate teaching assistants at a level difficult to find in other settings at large universities. Newcomb and Bagwell (1997) echoed how important this increased level of individual attention from faculty members is when they said that “the desire to become professors was fostered by the opportunity to gain a quality, closely supervised teaching experience” (p. 93).

Adams and Krockover (1997) found that the experience of being an undergraduate teaching assistant not only led students to be more interested in teaching professions, it helped ease their transition into becoming teachers. In fact, those who had been undergraduate teaching assistants and then went into teaching urged their undergraduate institutions to find ways to expose them to teaching earlier in their undergraduate experience (Adams & Krockover, 1997). Gaining experience teaching is one of the major reasons students signed up to be an undergraduate teaching assistant (Borgon et al., 2013). Additionally, 70% of undergraduate teaching assistants said having an opportunity to teach and 51% said interacting with students were the most valuable experiences they received from their position (Borgon et al., 2013). Being an undergraduate teaching assistant gave students an opportunity to practice their teaching skills (Fingerson & Culley, 2001; Gill et al., 2008; Schalk et al., 2009). The experience
also gave undergraduate teaching assistants an opportunity to acknowledge their own limitations, a skill they said helped them in their current peer teaching roles and in later professional teaching roles (Johnson & Loui, 2009). Finally, medical doctors who had been undergraduate teaching assistants had a feeling of entitlement to teach others, even as young doctors, and had confidence to seek out teaching opportunities (Gill et al., 2008). Not all studies found an increased level of interest in teaching as a result of being a peer leader or an undergraduate teaching assistant. Weidert et al.’s (2012) study found that getting a more realistic view of teaching made the undergraduate teaching assistants less likely to pursue the field as a career. Even if undergraduate teaching assistants did not go into teaching as a profession, they often looked for ways to incorporate their teaching experience into their chosen field; similar to the one of the outcomes of being a resident assistant mentioned earlier (Lillis & Schuh, 1982).

**Conceptual Framework: Student Involvement Theory**

Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement will be used as the conceptual framework for this study. After reviewing various student involvement theories he desired to bring “order into the chaos” (Astin, 1984, p. 297) of the literature that he found frequently looked at different variables when evaluating student development. He came to the conclusion that the more involvement students have in college, the greater amount of learning and personal development will occur. Involvement is defined as both the quantity and quality of psychological and physical energy a student invests into the college experience (Astin, 1984).

Astin (1993) further developed this theory using data from the Cooperative Institutional Research Program (CIRP). Between 1996, when CIRP first collected data,
until 1993, when Astin’s theory was first published, more than 500,000 students and 1,300 institutions of all types have participated. Because of the wide range of questions and the large amount of longitudinal data Astin was able to analyze how college affects students’ development in college. With this additional analysis Astin developed the input-environment-outcome (I-E-O) model. According to Astin the “purpose of the model is to assess the impact of various environmental experiences by determining whether students grow or change differently under varying environmental conditions” (Astin, 1993, p. 7). The model assesses students’ development (outcomes) by first considering what experiences and characteristics they brought with them to college (input) before examining what experiences in college (environment) led to that development.

Figure 1. Astin’s I-E-O model (Astin & Antonio, 2012). A, B, and C, represent the relationship between the three components of the model.

Astin (1984) states that the quality and quantity of involvement experiences students’ have in college impacts how great the difference between input and outcomes are related to development.

Being a PA in the FIGs program at MU is a form of student involvement in college making Astin’s (1984) theory an appropriate theoretical reference with which to understand the PA experience. The PAs serve in a number of roles on campus: employee, student, mentor, disciplinarian, and instructor to name a few. Through their position they interact with other undergraduate students, faculty, and professional staff on campus. Astin’s theory states that it is these types of experiences that contribute to the overall environment in which the PAs develop. Their experience takes place primarily in two settings within the university setting: the residence halls and in the classroom. These settings too can contribute to the experience of being a PA and contribute to the environmental factors explored through Astin’s theory. This focus on environmental factors and how they relate to outcomes, the PAs’ reflection on their experience in this study, makes Astin’s theory on student involvement an appropriate theoretical framework for this study.

Astin (1993) examines specific environmental experiences in depth in What Matters in College: Four Critical Years Revisited. In the following section I will explore three of these environmental experiences that I feel pertain most with the experience of being a PA: starting with peer groups, followed by on-campus work, and finally interaction with faculty.
Peer Groups

In the conclusion to his text, Astin (1993) makes the argument that a peer group is the most important environmental influence of college on student development. He notes that the peer group can shape students’ values, beliefs, and aspirations. The peer group can help establish the norms and expectations for members of a group. This can be especially influential in the area of major. By associating with other students of the same major, students learn the norms and expectations of that peer group. Students may find it difficult to change majors because it may be met with disapproval from the peer group.

Because the FIGs are typically based around a similar interest, most often academically related, this peer influence may play a large role in the experience of being a PA. By helping the first-year students learn the norms and expectations of a major, it is reasonable to think they are reinforcing this affinity to the major themselves. Additionally there are often multiple FIGs tied to academic areas that have a large number of first-year students enrolled in them such as business, engineering, journalism, and health professions (Residential Life - University of Missouri, n.d.-b). Because there are multiple FIGs related to an academic area, there are multiple PAs hired to work with these FIGs who have similar academic interests. The interactions with their fellow PAs may be influential in their experience as well.

On-Campus Work

Having a part-time on-campus job also has a positive effect for college students (Astin, 1984, 1993), especially when compared to working full time and working part-time off campus, both of which have negative effects on student success in college. Specifically, a part-time on-campus job was positively related to earning a bachelor’s
degree and all areas of self-reported cognitive and affective growth. Additionally students who worked part-time on-campus were more likely to take leadership roles, such as being elected to student office and tutoring other students (Astin, 1993). Astin (1993) concludes that these positive effects come from students being more immersed into the college environment and interacting more frequently with other students, faculty, and staff as part of their positions.

Being a PA is considered an on-campus part-time job. The PAs are told to anticipate working 20 hours per week, are required to live in the residence halls, and co-teach a one credit hour course all on campus (Residential Life - University of Missouri, n.d.-c). Because of this, it is reasonable to think that the overall experience of working on campus will influence the PAs’ overall college experience, consistent with Astin’s research.

Interaction with Faculty

According to Astin (1984) “frequent interaction with faculty is more strongly related to satisfaction with college than any other type of involvement or, indeed, any other student or institutional characteristic” (p. 304). In addition to college satisfaction, interaction with faculty was also positively related to students’ major choice and even on choosing teaching in college as a career (Astin, 1993). Interaction with faculty can also have important positive implications on overall student development (Astin, 1993).

As described in Chapter 1, part of the responsibility of the PAs is to teach the FIG proseminar with a faculty or staff member. Because of this, it is not uncommon for PAs to meet with a faculty member regularly outside of a classroom setting, often to plan the FIG proseminar. Based on Astin’s (1984, 1993) research it is reasonable to assume that
these interactions with faculty will play an influential role in students’ overall college experience and is one of the environmental factors that strongly influence outcomes.

**Critique of Astin**

Astin’s (1984, 1993) Theory of Involvement has been the focus of much research, but there is little critique of the theory. Pascarella and Terenzini (2005) pose the broad question of whether Astin’s concept is truly a theory by definition. They argue that “Astin offers a general dynamic, a principle, rather than any detailed, systemic description of the behaviors or phenomena being predicted, the variables presumed to influence involvement, the precise nature of the process by which growth or change occurs” (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005, p. 54). Because Astin’s involvement theory does not predict students’ development, only addresses factors that may affect development, it does not meet the definition of a theory; it is almost too broad to be considered a true theory.

More recently Renn and Reason (2013) question how well Astin’s theory applies to students more than 20 years after it was written. First, they note how enrollment patterns have changed over the past decades with students stopping-out, taking courses at multiple universities, and students who transfer back-and-forth between multiple institutions. They also note that researchers using Astin’s theory must find ways to adapt it to an increasingly diverse student body, which was not considered 20 years ago.

While these critiques are important, Astin’s (1984) theory remains useful in this study. Because this will be a phenomenological study, the broadness of the theory can actually be helpful. Knowing that something happens to students while they are in college, a broad conceptualization of environment will allow me to explore multiple
themes in the PAs’ stories; I will not be limited to a set of assumed environments. While some specific environments and types of involvement have been detailed and listed earlier, Astin never poses that this is an exhaustive list of environmental factors that influence outcomes. Rather they are simply the ones he focused on in his research. It is likely that other environmental factors will present themselves in the themes that emerge.

The phenomenological method of research, which will be discussed in Chapter 3, can also be used to address Renn and Reason’s (2013) concerns. Because I am to approach the research with an open mind, and to the extent possible bracket outside factors and experiences (Creswell, 2007; Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994), I can include environmental factors related to student enrollment, diversity, and other issues. I do not need to worry about excluding them because they do not fit with Astin’s prior work. In short, these critiques of Astin’s (Astin, 1984, 1993) theory, its breadth and lack of specificity, can actually be helpful in understanding the experience of being a PA because they do not limit what can be explored as environments that can be explored to understand the outcome of the PA experiences as reflected on by the PAs.

**Conclusion**

Residential Learning Communities are important tools colleges and universities can use to help incoming students transition into the institution. They can also help in creating seamless learning environments, incorporating academic subjects across classes and connecting formal and informal learning experiences. One such residential learning community is the FIGs program at MU. The FIGs utilize student staff members, PAs, to help deliver the program to student participants. The PAs fill a role similar to both traditional resident assistants in the residence halls and undergraduate teaching assistants
through their experience co-teaching a college course. While studies have examined the impact the FIGs program has on first-year students and why faculty get involved in FIGs, the role and experience of the PAs has not been examined. This study will fill that gap.

Astin’s (1984) theory of student involvement will serve as the theoretical framework for this study. The involvement theory focuses more on the factors that lead to students’ development than on the level of development itself. The theory also suggests that that students’ environments and their experiences influence their overall development in college. By looking at the experience of being a PA and the associated environmental factors such as working with peers and faculty, Astin’s theory can provide insight into how this experience affects the development of PAs in the FIGs program at the University of Missouri.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY AND RESEARCH DESIGN

The purpose of this study is to examine the experience of being a Peer Advisor (PA) in the Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs) program at the University of Missouri (MU). Because the purpose of this study was to examine the specific experience of being a PA, a phenomenological approach (Moustakas, 1994) was used. The specific question for this research study is what is the phenomenon of being a PA in the FIGs program at the University of Missouri? This chapter will go into further detail of this methodology and the research design.

Methodological Approach

Specifically, a transcendental phenomenological approach was used as the framework for this study. Creswell (2007) describes a phenomenological study as one that “describes the meaning for several individuals of their lived experiences of a concept or phenomenon” (p. 57). For this study, the participants all had the shared experience of being PAs in the FIGs program at the University of Missouri. A transcendental approach to phenomenology is focused on the description of the experience according to the participants, as opposed to a hermeneutical phenomenological study in which the focus is on the interpretations of the researcher (Creswell, 2007).

For this study, the PAs themselves provided the description of their experiences and the interpretation is focused on their descriptions; the analysis did not come from my experience or knowledge of the FIGs program. If this were a hermeneutical
phenomenological study, my interpretation would have been directly related to each of the statements the PAs made, not in looking at their statements collectively.

An example of the differences between a hermeneutical and transcendental approach is evidenced in the theme of setting priorities and making sacrifices as it related to the commitment required of the PA position versus the Community Advisor position. In a hermeneutical approach, my past experience with the FIGs program would influence my interpretation of these statements to say that the PAs in the study did not fully understand the Community Advisor responsibilities and how the positions were balanced from an administrative point of view. Using a transcendental approach, the PAs’ experiences were taken at their word. I analyzed the data as presented by the PAs, that they described their responsibilities and commitments as being greater in scope and time than those of the Community Advisors. The experiences, as they described it, were the data used, not my interpretation of what they were saying.

In this method, to the extent possible, I removed myself, my predispositions, and my assumptions from the analysis of the data. This was done through bracketing (Giorgi, 2009; Moustakas, 1994). Moustakas (1994) states that in bracketing “the focus of the research is placed in brackets, everything else is set aside so that the entire research process is rooted solely on the topic in question” (p. 97). Giorgi (2009) clarifies this definition by stating that bracketing involves setting aside past knowledge of the phenomenon being studied and focusing solely on the experience at hand. In my epoche, I will go into more depth of my past and current involvement with the FIGs program, which includes previously serving as the coordinator of the program for over 4 years. While I will not, cannot, forget my past experiences with the program and PAs, I was
conscious of not allowing my past experience to be engaged when analyzing the data in this study (Giorgi, 2009). In essence, my past experience was separated out, or bracketed, from my data collection and analysis of data. The analysis of the PAs’ experience for this study only came from the data that I collected as part of this current research, not from my past experience with the FIGs program or work with PAs.

An example of bracketing in my analysis occurred during the emergence of the theme related to setting priorities, specifically in the area related to the differences in requirements of the PA and Community Advisor position. My past experiences as the Coordinator of the FIGs program, which will be discussed in the epoche, would cause me to argue how the positions are more equitable than the PAs may understand. Using bracketing, this past knowledge and experience is excluded from the analysis. I take the PAs’ experience in relation to their perception of their responsibilities in comparison to other student staff positions as the PAs state it. It is their stated experience that is the data analyzed, no my past experiences or opinion.

The purpose of a phenomenological study was to reduce the experiences of the individuals into a universal essence that describes the common experience of the participants (Creswell, 2007). As previously stated, my results came from the descriptions of the participants, not my interpretation of their statements. This transcendental phenomenological method allowed me to learn directly from the PAs how they experienced their positions and what roles they played in their development and to identify common themes among the interviews. This approach allowed me to talk with individual PAs to learn about their experience in their own words. From their description of the PA experience, I was able to identify themes, provide a structural and textural
description of the experience, and finally arrive at the essence of being a PA in the FIGs program at the University of Missouri.

**Researcher Positionality/Epoch**

I worked as the coordinator of the FIGs program at MU for a little over 4 years. It was during this time that I became interested in the experience of the PAs. During weekly meetings with the co-directors of the program, we often discussed the benefits first-year participants received from being in the program; most recently studied by Beckett (2006) and Purdie II (2007). We also discussed the role of the Cofacilitators and any benefit that they may receive; Kennedy (2006) has explored the reason faculty members participate in the FIGs. But as we continued to discuss the benefits of the program, I heard anecdotal evidence from many of the PAs with whom I talked about the benefits they were gaining from their experience working with the program.

As part of the 15th anniversary of the program, we sent a questionnaire to past PAs asking them about their experience with the program. As the responses came in, two things stuck out to me. First, I was surprised by the number of past PAs who had gone on for advanced degrees; specifically of note were the number who had gone on to earn a MD or PhD degree. Second, I was surprised by the number of respondents who said their PA experience had a major influence on their overall academic career and on their professional career. It is because of these responses and the literature discussed in chapter 2 that I am interested in how the combined responsibilities of being a resident assistant and an undergraduate teaching assistant impact student development in the PAs as it relates to Astin’s (1984) theory.
My involvement with the FIGs program has changed. In 2010, I left the program to take another position on campus. Because of this time away from the program, none of the PAs with whom I worked were still part of the program and therefore were not participants. No longer being involved in the leadership of the program should minimize concerns related to dual relationships. This time away from leadership of the program also aided in bracketing; the program has changed and evolved during the years between when I last worked with the program and this study. I have, however, served as a Cofacilitator for a FIG this year; the PA whom I worked with was not included in this study. While I support the FIGs program and believe it provides many benefits to the students involved and campus overall, I approached the interviews and analysis with a fresh and open mind to the extent possible (Moustakas, 1994).

Participants

Participants in this study were PAs in the FIGs program at the University of Missouri. The PAs serve many of the same functions within residence halls as traditional resident assistants: programming activities for residents, holding residents accountable for university policies, and helping the residents develop a relationship with the other members of their community (Blimling, 2011). Similar to resident assistants, the PAs live in the residence hall with the students with whom they work.

In addition to these traditional resident assistant roles, the PAs also co-teach a one-credit hour course, referred to as the FIG proseminar, similar to the experience of undergraduate teaching assistants. The proseminar is also co-taught by a faculty or staff member at the university referred to as a Cofacilitator. The PA and Cofacilitator work together to create the syllabus for the course, deliver course information, and grade
course material. While the instructor of record on the course is the Cofacilitator, my experience has been that the PA takes just as large a role, if not larger, in creating and teaching the class.

The focus of the proseminar is divided between college adjustment issues, such as note taking, study skills, and registration, and topics central to the topic of the FIG. For instance a FIG focused on students majoring in journalism might include sections on careers in journalism or experiences within the School of Journalism that students may want to explore. For a FIG focusing on study abroad, the course may address different study abroad opportunities offered at MU, how to make room for a study abroad in a student’s overall academic plan, and what paperwork a student may need to complete to study abroad. The course is graded on a satisfactory/unsatisfactory basis.

To be a PA, students must have lived in the university’s residence halls for at least one semester and have a 3.0 GPA (Residential Life - University of Missouri, n.d.-c), they did not have to participate in a FIG while living in the residence halls. While PAs are typically selected to work with a FIG with which they have a similar academic fit, this is not required. The PAs are chosen by the Residence Hall Coordinator for the building in which they will work, in consultation with the coordinator of the FIGs program.

Access and Sampling Procedures

Prior to this study, I had discussed with the coordinator and co-directors of the FIGs program my interest in looking at the experience of the PAs. They expressed interest in this study and provided a formal letter of support. Approval from the campus Institutional Review Board (IRB) was also sought and approved for this study.
In early March 2014, two emails, an initial email (Appendix A) and a follow up, were sent to the 105 students who served as PAs during the 2013/2014 academic year. The email invited them to participate in the study. From those first two emails 8 students responded that they would like to be included. An additional email was sent to the Area Coordinators and Residence Hall Coordinators asking them to mention the study to their staff members. This resulted in an additional 11 individual indicating that they would like to participate. The demographic sheet (Appendix B) was sent to the 19 students who indicated an interest in participating. Replies were received from 18 of the 19 students and arrangements were made to meet for a discussion regarding their experience as a PA; the one who did not reply with the demographic sheet was sent two follow-up emails to which the student did not reply.

Of the 18 students who scheduled a discussion one cancelled and did not reschedule. Another PA did not show up for the scheduled discussion time and was unable to reschedule because of conflicts related to the end of the semester. In the end, 16 PAs were interviewed regarding their experience as a PA in the FIGs program. One of the interviews was not used in this study because the participant was hired late in the Fall semester and did not teach the proseminar, one of the defining components of being a PA. In total, the interviews with 15 PAs are used in this study.

While some (Moustakas, 1994; Seidman, 2006) do not outline a specific number of participants to include in a phenomenological study, Crewsell (2007) recommends five to 15 participants. Seidman suggests two criteria for identifying “enough” participants, sufficiency and saturation of information. The criteria of sufficiency is met when the number of participants reflects the overall range of individuals that make up the total
population experiencing the phenomenon being studied (Seidman, 2006). Saturation is met when the interviewer begins to hear the same information from multiple participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Seidman, 2006). Saturation was achieved in this study as participants shared similar stories and experiences. During the final few interviews, information shared varied only slightly from the information provided by previous participants. Seidman (2006) also suggests that while sufficiency and saturation are useful criteria, “practical exigencies of time, money, and other resources also play a role, especially in doctoral research” (p. 55). In light these arguments, 15 participants satisfies the participation requirements for a phenomenological study.

Data Collection

Because transcendental phenomenology is focused on the experience of the participants, the PAs in this case, it was important to use their stories as the data for analysis (Moustakas, 1994). According to Seidman (2006), “if the researcher’s goal, however, is to understand the meaning people involved in education make of their experience, then interviewing provides a necessary, if not always completely sufficient, avenue of inquiry” (p. 26). Because of this, the PAs were individually interviewed to learn about their experience and hear their stories of working in the FIG program.

A variation of Seidman’s (2006) interview approach was used in this study. Seidman (2006) recommends three separate interviews; the first focused on the participant’s life history, the second focused on details specific to the phenomenon being studied, and the third focused on the participant’s reflection of the meaning of the phenomenon. Seidman (2006) does, however, allow for variation “as long as a structure is maintained that allows the participant to reconstruct and reflect upon their experience
within the context of their lives” (p. 36), providing examples of when interview foci were combined. In this study, I conducted a single interview with each participant. The main reason for reducing the number of interviews to one was to encourage greater participation, as less of a time commitment was needed from the participants. My fear was that full-time students who are typically heavily involved on campus would not be willing to participate in a study that could require three interviews of up to 90 minutes each. While only having one interview may have led to not collecting as much rich data as three interviews, I believe collecting data from 15 individuals still gave a rich description of the PA experience. As with the number of participants recommended, Seidman (2006) states that the concerns of “time, money, and other resources” (p. 55) play a role in varying from his method, “especially in doctoral research” (p. 55).

I asked open-ended questions of each participant during their interview. Each interview began by asking the participant to tell me about themselves, providing information about the participant’s life history. This was followed by asking them to tell me about their experience as a PA, with the goal of having participants reconstruct their experience regarding the topic of being a PA (Seidman, 2006). Additional questions were based on clarification or further probing of items the PAs mentioned regarding their experience. As the conversation was winding down, I asked the PAs to reflect back on their experience and asked if they thought it would affect their future, and to expand on that if needed. These questions followed the foci Seidman (2006) identified in his three interview method: focus on their experience before being a PA, the experience itself of being a PA, and reflection on how the experience may affect their future. A copy of the research protocol is included in Appendix D.
The average interview length was 53 minutes, ranging from 40 to 70 minutes. While this is less than Seidman’s (2006) recommended length of 90 minutes, the end of the interview was dictated by the participants, not by me. After I had completed my probing questions each participant was asked if there was anything else they would like to share, in most cases the initial asking of this question led to them sharing more information. Again when all my probing and clarifying questions had been asked, I asked the students if there was any additional information they would like to share, the interview was not concluded until they answered no to this question. Each interview was recorded with participant consent. All participants agreed to recording of their interviews, however one participant requested multiple times that the recording be stopped and then restarted.

These recorded interviews and subsequent transcriptions provided the data used to gain a greater understanding of the PA experience. The interviews provided an opportunity for the participants to share their experience in their own words. Because the data provided came from the participants, and was shared in their own words, this method of data collection meets the requirements of a transcendental phenomenology (Moustakas, 1994).

**Data Analysis Procedure**

After all interviews were completed, recordings were transcribed and entered into the *NVivo 10* software package for coding and analysis. Analysis did not begin until all interviews were conducted in an attempt to minimize one participant’s interview from influencing and imposing meaning on another participant’s interview and the way I approached subsequent interviews (Seidman, 2006). This was done to prevent the
content and analysis of previous interviews from influencing follow-up questions of participants in following interviews. If analysis of an interview had been done before all interviews were complete, it is possible that the emergent themes would direct how subsequent interviews were conducted.

The data were analyzed according to the method outlined by Moustakas (1994). First, I read through the interview text and developed a list of significant statements from each interview. These statements are expressions from each participant of how they experienced being a PA (Creswell, 2007). The process of listing these statements is referred to as horizontalization (Moustakas, 1994). The horizon metaphor indicates that at this early stage of the analysis there is no arrival point, just as when you approach a point in the distance, the horizon of the sky continues to expand. This is helpful at this point in the analysis process because it infers that all experiences listed have equal value, there is no final destination one is trying to achieve in this analysis; significant statements continue to emerge. This step does not conclude until all transcripts have been analyzed for significant statements.

After this initial analysis the statements were clustered into themes, I grouped statements together that discussed similar components of the overall experience (Creswell, 2007; Moustakas, 1994). These themes, or clusters of meaning, began to help define the overall experience being studied by grouping statements together to create a shared expression of the experience. This process helped in focusing the multiple statements into themes common across the PAs’ descriptions.

From analysis of these themes, I established a textural description of the phenomenon, a description focused on what the participants experienced (Creswell, 2007;
Moustakas, 1994). From there, I described how the experience happened, and the context in which it occurred. This is referred to as the structural description of the phenomenon. Finally, I developed a description of the phenomenon using both the textural and structural descriptions. This statement, the essence, “represents the culminating aspect of a phenomenological study” (Creswell, 2007, p. 159).

**Trustworthiness**

As in any study, the issue of trustworthiness is important. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that the issue of trustworthiness comes down to a simple question; “How can an inquirer persuade his or her audiences (including self) that the findings of an inquiry are worth paying attention to, worth taking account of?” (p. 290). They identify four areas that can help to establish trustworthiness in a qualitative study: credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability.

**Credibility**

Credibility refers to the confidence that can be placed in a study’s findings (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest a number of techniques to establish a study’s credibility; peer debriefing and member checking were utilized in this study.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) defined peer debriefing as discussing with a disinterested peer the phenomenon being studied and the study itself in an attempt to understand aspects of the experience that may not come through explicitly. Analytical probing by a disinterested peer helped to uncover biases I have as well as assumptions made about the PA experience on my part (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). For this study I
discussed the interviews and analysis with one of my advisors who served as a peer who is not directly involved with the study or with the FIGs program; although, she, too, is familiar with the program because she is a member of the campus community and has served as a Cofacilitator. These discussions helped to identify aspects of the study or the PAs’ experience that were not as evident to me in my initial analysis of the data. This process enhanced trustworthiness, as it provided an opportunity for me to receive ongoing critique of my analysis, checking for biases and encouraging me to explore the data more deeply.

Member checking was also used to establish credibility. Lincoln and Guba (1985) stated that member checking is the most critical component used to establish credibility as it gives them a final check on the accuracy of what they shared and a check on my interpretation. Each participant was sent a copy of the transcript of their interview to check for accuracy and completeness. Additionally, participants were sent an initial list of themes that emerged from the initial analysis of all transcripts. This process allowed participants an opportunity to provide additional information and challenge any perceived incorrect interpretations (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

I received responses from five individuals. Most wanted confirmation that identifying information from their transcript, such as specific names of individuals or locations not be used; these data were removed. Others noted that some of the themes were not part of their discussion. I clarified with them that the list of themes was developed from all 15 interviews and may not have emerged from their description of being a PA. There were no additional concerns after that clarification.
Transferability

Transferability refers to how well another reader can use the results of one study to understand a similar experience in a different situation. Because the context and location of the phenomenon is key to a phenomenological study, it is impossible to have complete transferability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). However, a thick description of the phenomenon can be used to give readers enough information to determine how well the study can be used as a comparison for their situation (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). A thick description provides enough detail about a phenomenon or experience so that the reader can begin to assess how applicable the data and phenomenon being described can be attributed to their own situation. In contrast, a thin description would be a superficial description of the account, lacking specific details and descriptors. In this study, I provided thick description of the context of the PA experience and liberal use of quotations from the PAs themselves to provide readers enough data to allow them to make an informed judgment on the transferability of this study to their own inquiry (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Dependability

Lincoln and Guba (1985) argued that there cannot be credibility without dependability; yet dependability can often be difficult to establish in qualitative research. One method Lincoln and Guba explore is overlapping methods, or replicating the study; but they argue this method establishes validity, but not reliability. Lincoln and Guba also dismissed stepwise replication, repeating steps of the study in parallel with the primary study, because the nature of qualitative interviewing makes this extremely difficult as follow up questions tend to vary in each interview. Therefore, the criteria to establish
dependability is left to an external body to conduct an inquiry audit, based on the metaphor of a fiscal audit (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

In this study, my doctoral committee served as the body to conduct an audit of my research. As part of this process an audit trail was created, which allowed an opportunity for my committee, or another outside body, to challenge the process and findings of this study (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The audit trail consisted of maintaining the raw data, notes related to the reduction and analysis of data, and notes on the process of analyzing the data. These notes can then be reviewed by an external body, such as my doctoral advisors, to see if proper procedures and thought processes were used (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). These notes are part of a reflexive journal that consist of a daily schedule of the logistics of the study; a personal diary containing my thoughts on the study to that point and on the overall process; and a methodological log where I list decisions related to methodology, such as selection and follow-up questions (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Additionally, members of my committee examined the process undertaken to collect and evaluate data, approving that these steps have been done in a trustworthy method. They also reviewed my discussion of the findings and recommendations to ensure the overall trustworthiness of the study. This step of putting items in place for an inquiry audit added to the overall credibility of this study by providing an opportunity for my committee, or another outside group, to challenge the process and findings of this study (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006).

Confirmability

Confirmability is the final criteria needed to establish trustworthiness. Confirmability can be defined as the degree to which the findings of the study are shaped
by the statements of the participants and not by the researcher’s bias, motivation, or other interests (Cohen & Crabtree, 2006). The audit trail mentioned above also served as the way to establish confirmability in this study. In this step an outside group, my committee, is able to evaluate the overall accuracy of the study, examining whether my interpretation and conclusions of the PA experience are supported by the data.

**Limitations**

A possible limitation of this study is that my familiarity with the program did not enable me to approach the PAs’ experience with a completely open mind. By acknowledging this and bracketing this study from my previous experience as described earlier in this chapter, I hoped to minimize this limitation. Additionally the techniques used to establish trustworthiness help to address this issue, specifically peer debriefing, inquiry auditing, and keeping a reflexive journal.

Another limitation is that participants self-selected whether or not to be considered. Seidman (2006) says this is an inherent limitation in studies that use volunteer interviews to collect data. Self-selection may have affected the participants I was able to recruit through the study. On the one hand, it is possible that PAs who had a negative experience were less willing to participate in a study related to the FIGs. On the other hand, those with a negative experience may be more motivated to share their concerns. Either way it is impossible to know what data I may be missing from those PAs who chose not to participate in the study.

Finally, transferability may be another limitation. This study focuses on a specific set of student-staff members in a specific program at an individual university. The experience of student-staff members similar to PAs at a different type of institution (e.g.,
size, mission, location) may result in a different description of what the essence of being a PA is in that setting. Additionally the FIGs program has been part of the University of Missouri for almost 20 years; it has become institutionalized. This history has led to buy in of faculty and administrators across campus. A younger program may not share the same institutional buy-in resulting in a different experience of student staff members such as the PAs; this could be especially true in regard to their experience working with faculty and staff such as the Cofacilitators in the FIGs program. However, as previously discussed, I used thick description, which should help readers identify whether the experiences are transferrable. In addition, I hope the insight gained by learning more about the PA experiences at MU will encourage others to examine the experience of similar student leaders at their institution.

Summary

This study used a transcendental phenomenological approach to examine the experience of being a PA in the FIGs program at the University of Missouri. Semi-structured interviews with current PAs was used to collect data on this experience. These interviews were transcribed and analyzed to find common themes among the participants. The themes were used to construct the textural description of the experience and the context in which the experience happened was used for the structural description. Finally, I used these themes and descriptions to construct the overall essence of the experience of being a PA. The following chapter will focus on the analysis of these 15 interviews.

Trustworthiness was established through activities related to credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability. It is hoped that this study provides a
better understanding into the PA experience for administrators at the University of Missouri and those who work with similar programs. This understanding may help shape the expectations of the program to improve the students’ experience, or at the very least provide more information on the overall contributions of the FIG program for all students involved, not just the first-year participants.
Chapter 4

FINDINGS

This chapter presents the findings from the data collected during interviews with undergraduate students who served as Peer Advisors (PAs) in the Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs) program at the University of Missouri about their experiences in the PA position. I also analyzed the PA job description (Appendix E) to better understand what the department identifies as experiences and expectations associated with the position. This chapter will begin with an overview of the participants. Next I devote the majority of the chapter to introducing the themes that presented themselves during the analysis of the 15 interviews conducted for the study: managing multiple relationships, setting priorities and making sacrifices, challenges engaging residents, and the PAs’ reflection of the outcomes of their experience. These themes are used to present the structural and textural elements and description of the PA experience. Finally, the themes as well as the structural and textural elements are used to arrive at the overall essence of the PA experience.

Participants

As discussed in the previous chapter this study included 15 participants who were PAs in the FIGs program during the 2013-2014 academic year. Of the 15 participants, seven were men and eight were women; this is consistent with the overall PA population, which is 58% women (44 men and 61 women in total). Ten participants were in their first year serving as a PA and five were returners; in the overall PA population, 53% were in their first year (56 new hires and 49 returners). It is worth noting that one of the
returning PAs in the study, Caroline, was hired at the semester break of her first year; thus, her first year teaching the proseminar was the Fall 2013 semester. Finally, 11 of the PAs worked in community style residence halls, while four were in suite style buildings; 69% of FIGs were in traditional style residences halls campus wide for the 2013/2014 academic year (72 traditional and 33 suite style). Additional information regarding the participants is listed below in Table 1.

Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participant</th>
<th>Gender</th>
<th>Ethnicity/Race</th>
<th>Year in College</th>
<th>Hall Type</th>
<th>PA Years</th>
<th>FIG tied to Major</th>
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<td>Community</td>
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<tr>
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The residence hall type that the PAs worked in was related to some of the themes that emerged. Community style residence halls are a traditional set up characterized by double rooms on both sides of a hallway with a shared bathroom at the end of the hall. These areas are typically segregated by gender, although genders may be mixed on a
floor but grouped together in the same section of a floor. Suite style residence halls are typically grouped together where a semi-private bathroom is shared by a small number of residents; typically four to six. The suite style rooms tend to offer students a greater sense of privacy due to the limited sharing of living space. Another factor that was related to the PA experience was whether or not the FIG they were teaching was related to their major; the information was self-reported and is listed in Table 1. Further information and descriptions of these factors will be provided as needed in the theme discussions that follow.

The rest of this chapter is devoted to describing the themes that emerged through analysis of interview transcripts. Quotes from participants will be used to provide examples of how the themes emerged and to ensure the voice of participants is included. As mentioned above, the four themes that emerged are managing multiple relationships, setting priorities and making sacrifices, challenges engaging residents, and the PAs’ reflection of their outcomes of their experience.

**Theme One: Managing Multiple Relationships**

All participants mentioned managing multiple relationships as part of their PA experience. Through their job responsibilities the PAs are expected to work with a wide variety of people in a number of ways. The PA job description lists other student staff members, Residence Hall Coordinators, faculty and staff, and residents as possible groups that the PAs will interact with through their position. Participants identified these same groups as salient in their relational experiences as PAs.

This section will examine how the PAs managed these multiple relationships. The other residential life staff members the PAs worked with will be discussed first (i.e.,
the Residence Hall Coordinator and other student staff members). Especially in the case of other student staff members, the amount of time they spent together through their work and living arrangements resulted in more personal relationships, such as friendship development. The relationship between PAs and their Cofacilitators, as well as how they co-taught the FIG proseminar will be discussed. Finally, I discuss the relationship the PAs developed with the students in their FIG. This may be the most complex relationship the PAs had to manage. Because they lived with the students and served in both a disciplinary role and instructional role for a college-credit course, the PAs had to manage many levels of relationship with their residents/students.

Residence Hall Coordinator

About half of the PAs talked about the interactions they had with their supervisor, the Residence Hall Coordinators. For Bob, Caroline, and John K. this was a positive relationship. They mentioned how their Hall Coordinator would have conversations with them about how they were doing teaching the FIG proseminar, as well as in other classes. One PA shared he was comfortable enough with his Hall Coordinator to discuss personal problems such as his love life and family.

However, some of the PAs described negative experiences they had with their Hall Coordinator. The most common complaint was that their Hall Coordinator expected too much of them, typically in regard to developing educational programs or time commitment within their residence hall. Iris’ negative experience was directed toward the interim Hall Coordinator she had after her original Hall Coordinator had left the institution. She felt that her interim Hall Coordinator (the Area Coordinator who supervises multiple Hall Coordinators) would often give them short notice on
requirements, such as training during their semester. Iris did mention having a good relationship with her original Hall Coordinator as well as the new one who was hired, it was the interim Hall Coordinator that she struggled with.

It is interesting to note that the five participants who talked about having a negative experience with their Hall Coordinator were all in the first year of their position. One of the PAs, Ella, stated that the experience she had with her Hall Coordinator contributed to her decision not to return,

I'm not coming back next year, and I think that if I had a different HC, I probably would. Just because I don't like how things are ran with him. And I don't like the way he conducts himself as our HC and stuff. So I think that if-- it made my experience bad. – Ella, PA 1 year

It may be that PAs who have a negative experience with their hall coordinator typically do not return to the position for multiple years. Another possibility could be that returning staff members have adjusted to working with the Residence Hall Coordinators’ expectations. In contrast, none of the PAs who served in the position for more than one year discussed having a tenuous relationship with their Hall Coordinator; three of the PAs with more than one year experience did not discuss having a relationship with their Hall Coordinator.

Other Student Staff

Approximately half of the PAs in the study talked about the interactions they had with other student staff members with whom they worked that included other PAs, Community Advisors, and Leadership Advisors. PAs who identified as women were more likely to mention the relationships they developed with other student staff members than those who identified as men. Most of the PAs who discussed these relationships
described them as being positive. Cynthia, an international student, talked about how her fellow PAs would help her with some of the American slang related her position, such as “doing bulletin boards.” They also talked about helping each other out when having to confront behavioral issues within their building, calling on other student staff members to reinforce and support them when needed.

A few of the PAs also discussed the challenges they had working with their peers, mentioning how in a large group it is not uncommon to have some personalities that work together and others that do not.

Working with a staff, is always a challenge. Working with any group of people is always a challenge, you get some good eggs and you get some bad eggs. I guess there’s not a lot more that I can say about it than just—there is some people that you get along with, some people you don’t get along with, but at the end of the day you all got to get along. – Kim, PA 3 years

This sentiment was echoed by other PAs; they may not always get along with their peer staff members, but they were committed to presenting a united front to the students in their residence halls. There were some exceptions. In particular, Adam mentioned feeling more of a connection with the students in his FIG and in his residence hall, to the point where he would take their side when he felt the other student staff members were “out to get” his residents.

As far as my relationship with my residents, I really value that, and it’s very apparent on multiple levels with my residents. They know that I've got their back when it seems like other PAs, CAs and especially the LA (Leadership Advisor) in our hall are out to get them, it seems like. – Adam, PA 1 year

The many hours PAs spent together through training, staff meetings, and simply living together led to many strong friendships developing. Some even stated that the best friendships they had made so far in college were with the other students on their staff.
Relationships became stronger through sharing difficult experiences that they had.

Friendships also served a utilitarian purpose. For example, Cynthia mentioned how the relationship she had with other staff members made it easier for her to ask for help when needed and for support from other PAs when she experienced challenges of the position.

Like Adam, not all PAs developed the same level of friendship with their coworkers. Iris also discussed not connecting with the other students with whom she worked. Iris specifically related it to her introversion.

There are a lot of people Res Life that are much more extroverted and social than I am. Part of the reason they're there is to make friends, and have a great old time with everybody in Residential Life. That's not really me. I like being in (my residence hall), but as far as the whole department goes, the training experience is more - you're with everybody in the department usually - and that's another big group situation that I'm just-- that's not really where I flourish. – Iris, PA 1 year

The residence hall Iris worked in is one of the smallest on campus in terms of residents and staff. While Iris was the only one to mention it specifically, it may be worth noting how the characteristics of a residence hall influenced the PAs’ experience as it related to developing relationships with the other staff in their building as well as across campus. Iris did go on to say that she felt a connection with her residents, because of a shared major, and that she enjoyed spending time with her boyfriend when not working. It may be that these relationships met Iris’s needs, and she did not need to spend time and energy connecting with the other PAs in the department.

**Cofacilitators**

The PAs also worked closely with and developed relationships with their Cofacilitator, a faculty or staff member connected to the theme of the FIG. Unlike other constituents, every participant in the study mentioned the role their Cofacilitator played
in their experience as a PA. For many of the PAs, their interaction and relationship with their Cofacilitator was focused on co-teaching the FIG proseminar. As a reminder, the majority of the PAs in the study taught the FIG proseminar for the first time the year they were interviewed. These PAs talked about how their Cofacilitator helped them organize lesson plans, arrange guest speakers, learn how to hold a class’ attention, and manage difficult situations in class such as working with students who were not attending class and failing students.

He had taught, or been a Cofacilitator for 3 or 4 years before. So he had been experienced. He had a lot of insights that he offered me. He was just really great, overall with being open. And, always there when I needed him. – Caroline, PA 1.5 years

Other PAs had a less positive experiences with their Cofacilitators. Some of the negative experiences included Cofacilitators who did not attend the class or stopped participating halfway through the semester and did not reply to the PAs’ emails. These PAs seemed to adjust to the circumstances. They talked of bringing the Cofacilitator’s lack of participation to the attention of the FIG administrators, which sometimes made a difference but most times did not. In fact, a few of the PAs seemed to prefer having a less involved Cofacilitator.

My Cofac only showed up like twice in the semester and that was okay with me because I'm okay. It's hard, it's almost harder than when they're there because you're trying to impress your kids and keep them interested, but then you got impress your Cofac on top of that. Yeah, I had some lesson plans that were flops and maybe I could have asked my Cofac for more help on that, but it's okay. – Rene, PA 1 year

Perhaps these PAs were comfortable with the lack of participation by the Cofacilitator because it was one less relationship they had to manage in their position. Or, the PAs may have been resigned to the situation because they knew they would have to continue
teaching the proseminar and leading the FIG no matter how involved their Cofacilitator was.

Six of the PAs mentioned that their Cofacilitator served as a mentor to them; discussing with them how they were doing academically and about their career goals. In addition, the Cofacilitators had helped them by writing letters of recommendation, identifying internships, and even making connections for employment after graduation. The development of a mentoring relationship with their Cofacilitator was most common among PAs who had been in their position more than one year; all but one of the PAs with multiple years of experience mentioned having their Cofacilitator as a mentor was an important part of their experience. This relationship may have encouraged them to return to their position in following years. Although, it is worth noting that one of the returning PAs mentioned having a mentoring relationship with his current Cofacilitator, not with the Cofacilitator he had his first year as a PA; his first Cofacilitator stopped attending the proseminar midway through the semester. This experience was not limited to PAs who taught a FIG related to their major. For example, Adam and Kim discussed how their Cofacilitators continued to be supportive even after they switched their major while they still led FIGs tied to their original major. Adam noted,

But then I just realized that I don't really want to do broadcast (journalism), which still I think that the relationship was beneficial, because I think that we're in the point in that relationship where, if I need a favor from him, like, let's say, a letter recommendation for an advertising agency that I want to go to, he would gladly write a rec letter for me just in regard to my work ethic and teaching skills. – Adam, PA 1 year

Whether the interaction was positive or negative the PAs described managing the relationship they had with their Cofacilitator as being an important part of their overall experience.
FIG Students

PAs likely spend more time with the students in their FIG that any other group of people at the university. Because of their position, the PAs live with the students in the FIG, often spending time together in common areas of their buildings and in their dining halls. The PAs also teach the proseminar course in which the students are enrolled—one more hour each week that they share together in a close setting. Finally because of their similar academic interests, it is not uncommon that PAs and their residents have classes together or engage in similar academic activities. This frequent interaction in a variety of settings makes the relationship between the PAs and their residents/students a unique experience.

Similar to traditional Resident Assistants (Blanton & Husmann, 2006; Schaller & Wagner, 2007), PAs discussed the difficulty of managing relationships with their residents in the residence halls. One reason for this may be because of their role enforcing policy within the residence hall as outlined in their job description. PAs talked about the difficulty of finding the correct balance between being friendly and still maintaining their authority in the residence hall, being careful not to go too far to one extreme or the other.

It's hard. I don't want to be really weak but I also don't want to be very aggressive and yell at them. That's not what we should do. It's pretty challenging. I tried different ways and balance how to do it. – Cynthia, PA 1 year

In addition to developing relationships with their residents and holding them accountable for residence hall policies, PAs shared the experiences they had to negotiate teaching and grading a college level course that their residents are enrolled in. Kim summed this complexity up when she said,
It's more of a unique experience, especially as a Peer Adviser, because you are literally living with and teaching people. And it's such a strange dynamic because you want to be their friend because they live with you. . . So you want them to like you and be your friend but at the same time you're the classroom instructor and you're responsible for whether or not they get a credit for this class. But also you're like a disciplinarian, so it's like, please do not drink alcohol and smoking weed in the resident halls, so, it's such a weird balance- just the weirdest. – Kim, PA 3 years

The relationship with the students in the FIG became even more complex when issues in the residence hall would spill into the classroom and vice-versa. In fact, many participants used the classroom to address behavioral issues in their residence hall such as alcoholism, homophobia, and gender stereotypes. Issues from the classroom would also enter into the residence halls. For example, several PAs described having to confront students in the students’ room or hallway who were absent from class or who had not turned in assignments. Unlike most class instructors, who would have these conversations during office hours or in the classroom, PAs literally brought their work home with them and addressed classroom concerns in the residence halls. Despite these complicated relationship roles, participants found a way to manage them.

Many of the PAs went on to describe how they felt they had developed mentoring relationships with the students in their FIGs. They described helping their residents choose their major, classes, and student organizations in which to get involved. Much of this mentorship was related to helping students navigate the university and progress through academic areas. Caroline shared her perspective on this. She had been hired during the second semester of the previous year, so did not teach the FIG proseminar her first year. She expressed how teaching the proseminar, which she refers to as “the FIG,” helped to facilitate feeling like a mentor her residents.
And this year definitely, I saw myself more as a mentor than just a staff member to them, which was really cool. A lot of that was due to the FIG, because I was just able to spend more time with them. – Caroline, PA 1.5 years

It may be that having the extra layer in the relationship with their residents, teaching the proseminar in addition to traditional Resident Assistant roles, facilitated the PAs’ development as mentors to their residents because of the additional time they spent with them in and out of the classroom and the multiple settings in which they interacted. Whether or not it was teaching the proseminar that led to the PAs assuming mentoring relationships, time with the residents did seem to play a primary role in the overall experience of the PAs.

One of the overarching experiences the PAs had was that of managing relationships with the multiple individuals with whom they interacted. These relationships took place across the participant’s experience and in multiple environments. The PAs interacted with their supervisors, the Residence Hall Coordinators, and fellow student staff members in a work setting, staff meetings, but also in the residence halls where the PAs lived. Participants in the study maintained the relationship they had with their Cofacilitator; balancing teaching responsibilities between the PA and Cofacilitator as well as the experience of working with a faculty member or administrator. Finally, the relationship with the FIG students was made even more complex by the dual roles the PAs served in as classroom instructors and through their responsibilities related to discipline and programing in the residence hall; again, the participants’ living environment they shared with the FIG students. A large part of the PA experience was managing the multiple relationships the participants had as a part of their position.
Theme Two: Setting Priorities and Making Sacrifices

Related to time, the theme of setting priorities and making sacrifices emerged from the PAs’ discussions. Preparing to teach the FIG proseminar, serving as an on-call resource in their residence hall, as well as attending the residence hall staff meetings and FIG meetings contributed to the amount of time PAs said their position required. The PAs also discussed how the position took more of their time during the Fall semester than during the Spring semester, primarily because the FIG proseminar is only taught during the Fall.

If you ask anybody at Residential Life if the PAs are less busy in the Spring, they'll say, 'No. It's made up in other places.' They're lying. It's way easier in the Spring. You don't have to teach the class. – Iris, PA 1 year

This sentiment was consistent among PAs of all different levels of experience, from those in their first year to those in their third year. It is important to remember that these time commitments and requirements were in addition to their own academic responsibilities, involvement in other activities on campus, and responsibilities off campus including friends and family. Because of these additional responsibilities and time commitments, a number of the PAs discussed having to improve their time management skills. Those who had not kept a planner before assuming the PA position now did, and those who previously had a time management system described how they took their scheduling to a new level of detail. As an example, Adam said “I really had to force myself to manage my time effectively. I found myself scheduling out every 15 minutes of my week. This year was the first year that I've ever gotten a planner.” Through this discussion of time, the theme of setting priorities and making sacrifices emerged.
Many of the PAs had a realistic view of their time and commitments. They discussed an awareness of being involved in multiple activities including being a PA and having to make time for the different priorities they held.

But it's trying to have a schedule where you have to have time management, but also be able to prioritize. So if I know I have staff meetings at this time, that's what I'm going to. That's what I have, I fill in those time blocks. . . . So it's just being flexible but mainly prioritizing what are the most important things to you. For me, it's my academics, it's residential life, and it's the organizations I'm involved in. – Alex, PA 1 year

This understanding may have been because the interviews occurred during the last half of the Spring semester, after the PAs had taught their proseminar and had a chance to reflect on the difference in their schedules between the two semesters. If the discussions had occurred during the Fall semester, the focus may have shifted from prioritizing time to the struggle of having to fit everything in to the time allotted.

A number of the PAs felt their involvement and leadership in organizations on campus contributed to their selection. However once they were hired they were asked to put those organizations and involvement second to their responsibilities as a PA. These PAs felt a struggle between wanting to stay involved in their previous organizations while still meeting the expectations of being a PA.

Res Life only hires people that are really involved with the Mizzou community because then you're knowledgeable about a lot of things. You are like open to meeting new people and stuff like that, which is important for this position, but at the same time once you are hired as a staff member, they sort of do a 180, and it's like, 'Okay, we know you do all these things, but now you need to make Res Life your number one priority, besides maybe school work,' which is hard when you're involved in all those things, because you can't just drop them for those job, but that's kind of what they want you to do. – John K., PA 1 year
Similar to John K. many of the PAs discussed setting priorities on how they would use their time. They kept in mind that according to the PA job description, their co-curricular priority was the PA position.

For some of the PAs the activities they sacrificed were conscious decisions. Ending involvement in organizations and quitting other jobs were most frequently mentioned. This, too, was stressful for the PAs, because they felt like they were quitting and going back on a commitment they had made.

It was really hard because I definitely don't like to be like a quitter. And if I'm selected for a position or an organization, I want to do it right and I want to finish it out. I don't want to have to step down from it. So one of the things I was involved in, I decided that I didn't have time for it. I wasn't doing it well and I wasn't really benefiting the organization. It was really hard for me to come to grips with that, and talk to the person in charge and explain to them. And they were totally understanding and fine with it. But just for me, it was really hard to realize that I can't do it all, and I have my limits. – Caroline, PA 1.5 years

PAs also mentioned how they missed out on some social activities with friends because of their position. They discussed spending less time with friends because they were on-call in their residence hall in the evening or on weekends. Others discussed struggling to find a good balance between their position and spending enough time with their significant other.

Another factor that may have led to the PAs’ experience and making sacrifices to their social relationships was the type of residence hall in which they worked. All of the PAs who discussed making sacrifices to their social life came from community style residence halls. None of them mentioned a specific connection between the type of hall they worked in and their social sacrifices, but it may be the less private setting PAs have in these halls had a detrimental effect on their social life.
I'm not going to be working as a peer advisor this coming year. Two years was enough, the second year was wonderful. I got to kind of perfect the art a little bit, but two years was enough. And I decided that it was time to live independently before I started heading off to various coasts and having to live independently there. – Renly, PA 2 years

Additionally, seven PAs, all of whom worked in community style residence halls, mentioned that they were not returning the following year; none of these students were graduating and therefore had an opportunity to return. While Renly was completing his second year as a PA, the other six who were not returning were in their first year. It is possible that the type of residence hall the PAs worked in may have led to sacrifices they felt they made and their decision about returning to the PAs position the following year.

In addition to social sacrifices, PAs also discussed how their academics were negatively affected due to the requirements of their position. Alex was fine with this realization, stating that the benefits he received from being a PA made up for what he may have missed in his overall grades saying “My grades maybe not a 4.0 but I'm happy with what it is, considering everything I've gotten out of college.” This realization was echoed by others who, while regretting their grades and overall GPA may have gone down some, mentioned how the experiences they gained through the PA position outweighed the losses.

Three of the PAs, all in their first year, stated the time commitment as a reason they were not returning as a PA the following year. For Adam and Kyle it was an example of competing involvement opportunities. Adam had the chance to do an international internship that would not end by the start of PA training the upcoming year. According to Adam, the Department of Residential Life would not excuse him from the training so he chose the internship opportunity over returning as a PA. Kyle realized that
with a heavy class load and work at a local newspaper he would not have the time available he felt he needed to also be an effective PA. Rene’s situation was a little different. While she was not returning as a PA, she was coming back to work as a Community Advisor (CA).

I will not be a FIG leader next year. I actually switched to a CA position in a different building. I was too worried for my grades. It hurts my grades, for sure. – Rene, PA 1 year

Rene’s situation is worth noting not only for the fact that she infers her grades were less than she had hoped because of being a PA, but also the thought that being a Community Advisor would require less commitment allowing her to improve her grades. While Rene was the only PA to discuss switching positions, a number of other PAs stated they felt their position was more time intensive and more difficult than those of the other student staff members, such as Community Advisors and Leadership Advisors.

Eleven of the 15 PAs in the study discussed having to set priorities and make sacrifices as part of their PA experience. For the majority it was an awareness of how they were using their time to fit all of their responsibilities into the time available. However to meet these priorities, some had to sacrifice the roles they played in organizations outside of the PA responsibility or to social interactions they had previously. Others noted how their priorities had come at a cost to their GPA. For three first year PAs, their priorities resulted in them not returning to the PA position the following year.

In the end, the theme of setting priorities and making sacrifices was common in the PA experience. PAs discussed the experience of balancing the commitments they had to their position as well as balancing academic and social responsibilities. Some of the
PAs discussed sacrifices they made, both in their academic responsibilities and with social relationships. While many of the participants felt the benefits of being a PA outweighed the sacrifices, others chose not to return to the PAs role because of their priorities.

**Theme Three: Challenges of Engaging Residents**

The PAs in the study discussed the challenges they had maintaining their residents’ engagement in the activities associated with their FIG, both in the residence halls and in the classroom. In the residence halls the PAs planned events for their residents referred to as educational interactions (Residential Life - University of Missouri, n.d.-a). The educational interactions focus on achieving learning outcomes and objectives established by the residence hall and administration within the Department of Residential Life, which often correspond to an academic theme similar to the FIGs. PAs described planning programs where they would have faculty come in and discuss current issues related to an academic field, staff who would come in and discuss degree options with students, and other guest speakers related to theme of the community. The process of planning educational interactions for the FIG and larger community begins during the preceding year in a process the PAs referred to as community planning.

Despite the time, energy, and effort the PAs put into developing the educational interactions, the PAs reported that the majority of the programs were poorly attended.

Earlier this week, our music grad assistant, which is my Cofac - he's like has an office in the building - he organized an event and had the director of the school music come to have open discussions with students, which was really a good event. It was very poorly attended, there were six people there and four of us were staff members. Not really beneficial for-- it was interesting for me but I was also one of only two music students there. That was not really worth anybody's time. – Iris, PA 1 year
The PAs cited a number of reasons why they thought students were not attending the events. Some PAs admitted that part of the problem could be poor planning on their part. However, others commented that they thought the frequency of programs mandated by their hall coordinator could contribute to the lack of attendance. While another reason presented was simply that the students had other things to do with their time.

I think a lot of it is pretty, I don't want to say worthless, but there - it's pretty evident that the majority of the people in my residence hall are fine without the programming. Just want another way to kind of spend their time their freshman year. – Adam, PA 1 year

Adam’s comment raises a good question, is the amount of time, effort, and resources put into the programming worthwhile?

Another challenge PAs had in getting their residents to attend educational interactions was that not all residents in their building, or even in their FIG, were interested in the academic theme associated with the FIG. According to a number of PAs, some students chose a FIG for the housing location, not because of the theme or academic focus. Because the educational interactions are designed to tie into the academic theme of the FIG community, getting these students engaged was a difficult task.

Then you also have people who aren't even in [the discipline] who live there. That's weird, too. Because we have all these events that are aimed toward [the discipline] students. And they're like, "I'm not going to do that. That's not going to help me at all." – Ella, PA 1 year

This lack of interest in the FIG topic carried over into the classroom as well. Just as the PAs had a hard time engaging the students not interested in the FIG topic in residence hall activities, they also struggled to engage the students in the classroom. Some PAs
noted how these students withdrew from the proseminar while others simply stayed in the class, but were not engaged.

Engaging all students in the classroom was also a challenge for a number of the PAs. They realized that teaching a class and holding their students’ attention for 50 minutes was a difficult task. Kyle commented that the experience was weird for him because he was usually the one in class who would mentally check-out, but now he had a better understanding of what his instructors went through. The fact that the FIG proseminar is graded on a pass/fail basis did not help to keep the students engaged either.

One of the hardest things was engaging students as well. That's overall a hard thing in college, because students don't necessarily want to be in class, especially a FIG class, because they're like, "It doesn't count for my GPA. Why do I have to be here?" – Caroline, PA 1.5 years

Some students became so disengaged that they stopped participating or attending. Because of this, some of the PAs talked about the experience of having to fail one of their students. The PAs in this situation discussed reaching out to the students, even to the point of talking to them in the residence halls about their in-class performance. But inevitably some of the PAs did have to fail their students.

Or another instance was one of my FIG students didn't show up. He ended up having to fail the class. And so, finding a way to talk to him, go to his door, and say, "Why aren't you coming to FIG class?" But also, understand that-- I'd be like, "I'd see you in the hall. I know you can come to FIG." And so, it was tricky that-- I would be like, "I know that you are here. But why didn't you come to class?" So it was just the tricky thing. And then, he ended up failing the class. So that was a little an interesting dynamic that I had to deal with, where I had to go talk to him. – Caroline, PA 1.5 years

This situation was awkward for the PAs, who felt they had to fail their students for their lack of participation even if they did not want to. Making the situation even more
uncomfortable was the PAs’ realization that they would often have to continue interacting with the student in the residence hall.

Whether it was in the residence hall, in the classroom, or in both settings engaging the students in the FIG was a challenge that was common among the majority of the PAs in this study. The challenge of keeping students’ attention and keeping them engaged in activities was made even more difficult knowing that some students in the FIG had chosen it for the residence hall it was housed in, not the theme of the FIG. Some of these students had no interest in the academic focus of the FIG, yet the PAs were still expected to engage them in discussions and activities. Even if the students were interested in the theme, competing priorities and interests frequently lead residents to become less engaged.

Theme Four: Outcomes of the PA Experience

Finally, as the PA’s reflected on their experience the theme of the salient outcomes of the position emerged; two sets of outcomes were mentioned. The first set focused on skills that the PAs felt they developed through their position. They also talked about how they anticipated using these skills beyond their college experience. The second outcome participants reflected on was a sense of accomplishment and satisfaction they felt as a result of their experience as a PA. This section will explore these two outcomes in further detail.

Skills Development

All of the PAs interviewed discussed what they had learned from their experience. Many of them made connections to the skills they felt they could apply after graduating
from college. Two of the PAs, Iris and Kim, were education majors. They found the experience of teaching the FIG proseminar to be very helpful and felt it helped to prepare them for their future career. Specifically, each said that being in front of a classroom of students helped prepare them to teach a class in the future.

Beyond teaching, one of the most common skills the PAs mentioned was the development of public speaking skills. Similar to the education majors, other students felt that the experience of standing in front of a classroom and presenting information was a beneficial experience. Cynthia, an international student, shared how the experience was especially meaningful for her and her confidence.

I know I am getting more and more confident standing in my class and talking about leading a group of students who just came to Mizzou and wants to have a wonderful time in Mizzou. It's awesome. Also, as an international student, it is definitely really rewarding for me to teach the class with native speakers and I can - it has proved myself that I can do this, and I can do as good as other American students. – Cynthia, PA 1 year

Other PAs discussed how the experience of presenting in front of the class prepared them for anticipated future interactions when they would be asked to present in a work setting.

Another common skill the PAs developed was learning how to work with other people, especially those they described as being different or with whom they disagreed. More simply, they improved their communication skills; learning how to communicate a message to multiple individuals with unique learning styles.

I got to learn a lot more about how to communicate things to different people, because everyone has a different learning style. So you're trying to get your message through to all the different students in the class at the same time, adapting to how people communicate, figuring out how to engage people to communicate - because not everyone is engaged by the same things. – Bob, PA 3 years
The PAs also discussed learning how to communicate with people who were not always friendly with them. They gained these skills in instances such as when they would confront residents who were violating policies or would have difficult conversations with their supervisor. Again, a number of the PAs found these experiences useful and anticipated a time in the future when it would help them communicate with individuals from different backgrounds, different learning styles, of with whom they disagreed.

Through responding to emergencies in their residence hall, a few of the PAs discussed developing problem solving skills and the ability to stay calm under pressure.

I learned how to handle something, like emergency issues that I never even think about. I've become much calmer about things that just happen accidentally. – Cynthia, PA 1 year

They were able to refer back to these emergency situations as examples of how they responded under pressure. By sharing some of the true emergency issues they faced, involving the life and safety of others, reflected that they had experience in stressful situations were able to take action and remain calm.

In addition to the skills mentioned above, participants discussed gaining experience with interviewing as being helpful. In addition to their own interviews PAs discussed how their involvement in interviewing other individuals, including professional staff, helped prepare them for the future when they would be interviewed for positions post-graduation.

I've not only had to do interviews for Res Life but I've also conducted interviews with potential new HC's so they give us that opportunity and I really like doing that because you get to be on the other side so you get that experience and as a 20 year old, you usually don’t get that. – Ella, PA 1 year
Through the skills they developed, experiences they had working in high pressure situations, and experience being interviewed, as well as interviewing others, the participants felt confident that their experience would be beneficial in pursuing careers after their graduation.

**Satisfaction and Accomplishment**

When reflecting back on their experience, seven of the PAs expressed a sense of satisfaction and accomplishment. Some of them talked about the sense of satisfaction they felt from the interactions they had with the students in their FIG and watching the students grow. The PAs felt that they had had a positive impact on their residents’ first-year of college and beyond.

> Just being able to give them the right resources and knowing that they're right was, I enjoyed that. I felt good about that just because that way they're not wasting their time going somewhere that their friend told them to go or something. – Ella, PA 1 year

Some even mentioned how their residents had shared with them the impact that they had on them, reinforcing the sense of accomplishment and satisfaction.

> For other PAs, satisfaction was more intrinsic. They reflected on the many experiences they had such as teaching, responding to emergency situations, and helping students and they felt that they had done a good job. PAs described their personal growth and the sense of accomplishment that come from that.

> Like I said earlier, it's just changed me as a person. I feel a lot more ready to just conquer anything. I feel a lot more responsible. I can hold myself personally accountable for things, I'm a lot more confident. It's just little aspects of that that I can definitely take away for the rest of my life probably. – John K., PA 1 year

Through the experience of being a PA, participants expressed a sense of accomplishment in the development they saw both in their residents and in themselves. This sense of
satisfaction and accomplishment was shared not only by PAs who shared they were returning the following year, but also by those who were able to return (i.e. not graduating) but chose not to. It seems that the sense of accomplishment and satisfaction was present even when the overall experience did not meet their expectations or priorities.

**Essence**

According to Moustakas (1994) and Creswell (2007) the goal of phenomenological research is to distill the statements of participants and emergent themes into a short statement that describes the overall essence of the experience being examined. The essence is arrived at by examining the structural and textural elements of the experience as described by participants. The structural elements focus on the environments (Moustakas, 1994) in which the PA position was experienced. For the PAs, the environments in which their experience took place were focused in the residence halls, classrooms, and throughout the entire campus. These environments are important to note because they were often, almost continually, shared with the students in their FIG. The environments were also shared with the PAs’ supervisors, peers, and Cofacilitators, all individuals with whom the PAs interacted on a regular basis through the requirements of their position. These shared, often overlapping, environments are key to understanding the PA experience because, as the environments overlapped, so did the PAs’ responsibilities and relationships.

The other factor that leads to understanding the overall essence of the PA experience are the textural elements the PAs describe (Moustakas, 1994). The textural elements are used to understand how the PAs interacted with their environment, or the
structure of their experience. The PAs in the study discussed the textural elements of their position that included the various relationships with their residents, other student staff members, their supervisors, and their FIG Cofacilitators. Time commitments that the PAs had, as well as the realization that they may not be able to do everything they wanted to do, were also textural elements of the PA experience.

The overall essence of the PA experience comes down to balancing the multiple relationships, roles, and responsibilities that are part of their position. The cover of an album titled “A Juggler on His Blades” (Eddie from Ohio, 1992) shows the image of a man skating on rollerblades while juggling balls in the air. I think this image provides a visual of the PA experience. The PAs have many balls all up in the air related to their position that they are juggling: relationships with a variety of individuals, meetings related to their position, teaching a class, developing educational interactions in the residence halls, and holding residents accountable to community standards. They are juggling these responsibilities, while trying to keep themselves in balance and upright as a student. The PAs still have to maintain their own academic requirements and grades, are involved in organizations on campus and off campus, and have personal relationships not associated with the PA position. Being a PA is about simultaneously juggling all the responsibilities of their position while also being an academically successful college student; balancing the many components they have in their life at that time.

Adding an additional degree of difficulty to the balancing act done by the PAs is the reality that many of these responsibilities and relationships overlap and are interconnected. The individuals with whom the PAs work are both their residents in the residence halls and their students when in the classroom. These two roles, student and
resident, overlap when issues from the classroom are discussed and confronted in the residence halls, such as when PAs would talk to students about class attendance while in the residence halls. Issues in the residence hall would be discussed in the FIG proseminar class such as homophobia, racism, and sexism. There are no clear lines of distinction between when PAs are dealing with individuals as residents and as students, it is simultaneous and continuous. This is probably the most apparent, and most complex, example of this overlap. But it can occur as well in the PAs’ relationship with their Cofacilitator. The PA may be assigned to a Cofacilitator who is a faculty member in their department with whom they have a class but in the FIG proseminar they are in an equal position as instructors. Being a PA is about finding ways to balance the multiple responsibilities and relationships one has, as required by their position, while simultaneously balance being a PA with being a student and their own individual.

**Summary**

Analysis of the 15 participant interviews in this phenomenological study led to the emergence of four programmatic themes which encompass the PA experience. The first theme that emerged was related to the multiple relationships the PAs managed as part of their position. This included the relationships they developed with their supervisor, with their fellow student staff members, and with the Cofacilitator with whom they worked. The complex, dual relationship PAs managed with their residents, who were also their students in the FIG proseminar, was included in the theme of managing multiple relationships. The next theme to emerge was that of how the PAs set priorities regarding their time and commitments and the sacrifices that that resulted from their priorities. The struggle PAs had in engaging the FIG students in residence hall and classroom activities
also emerged as a theme. Finally, the PAs’ reflection on the outcomes of their experience emerged. These outcomes included improved communication skills, confidence in their ability to interview for and transfer skills to professional positions, and an overall sense of accomplishment.

The four themes that emerged help to explain the structural and textural factors of the PA experience. Analysis of these elements led to the conclusion that the overall essence of being a PA is balance; balancing their roles of discipline and community development in the residence halls with teaching in the classroom, balancing the multiple relationships they have as part of their position, balancing their multiple time and commitments, and balancing being a PA with their responsibilities as a student. The following chapter will discuss how this essence reflects and contributes to the overall body of literature as well as how it can influence future research and practice.
Chapter 5

CONCLUSION

This phenomenological study examined the experience of being a Peer Advisor (PA) in the Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs) program at the University of Missouri. Individual interviews were conducted with 15 undergraduate PAs. Transcripts of the interviews were analyzed and four themes emerged that describe the PA experience: managing multiple relationships, setting priorities and making sacrifices, challenges engaging residents, and the PAs’ reflection of the outcomes of their experience. These themes led to the structural and textural elements of the PA experience. From these elements I identified the overall essence of the PA experience: balancing multiple relationships, responsibilities, and roles that are part of their position.

In this chapter I will discuss the findings in further detail, relating this study to previous research discussed in chapter two. Next I will discuss how this study fits in the current body of literature and fills the gap in understanding the experience of the PAs who work in the FIGs program. Recommendations for practice of both the FIGs program and similar programs overall will be explored. Finally, I will discuss recommendations for future research related to the PA position and other areas of student involvement.

Discussion

The research question for this study asked “What is the phenomenon of being a Peer Advisor in the FIGs program at the University of Missouri?” The essence of the study answers this question, being a PA is about balance. The undergraduate participants in this study described how their experience as a PA taught them how to balance the
multiple relationships, responsibilities, and roles that are part of their position. The following sections explore these areas of balance in more depth and how my findings support and contribute to the current literature.

**Relationship with Supervisor: Residence Hall Coordinator**

As discussed in the previous chapter, managing multiple relationships played a major role in the overall experience of being a PA. One such relationship was with the PA’s Residence Hall Coordinator. Similar to the literature regarding direct supervision of resident assistants (Benjamin, 2004; Blanton & Husmann, 2006), several PAs discussed the positive experience they had with their Residence Hall Coordinator, referring to that experience as helping to develop a positive relationship. However, other PAs had a negative experience with their Residence Hall Coordinator and discussed frustrations they had with their fellow PAs when they thought overall supervision was poor, reinforcing previous studies (Deluga & Winters, 1990).

**Relationship with Peers**

Also in the residence halls, the PAs discussed the relationships they developed with the members of the staff they work on as well as other student staff members across campus. Some PAs described the strong relationships they developed with other student staff with whom they worked, similar to the findings of Blanton and Hussmann (2006). However, other PAs discussed not getting along with the other student staff members. Some of these PAs felt a stronger connection with their FIG students. Others valued the relationships they made outside of their role as a PA more than those associated with the position. These findings reinforce earlier studies that found resident assistants often have
difficulty balancing social relationships both inside and outside their position (Blanton & Husmann, 2006; Schaller & Wagner, 2007).

Astin (1993) identifies peer relationships as an environmental factor in his student involvement theory. The relationships that PAs developed with their peer student staff members, or lack of relationships, can be seen as environmental factors that contribute to their level of involvement in college, overall college experience, and development as students. According to Astin, the strongest factors associated with peer relationships are leadership abilities and leadership development. Because leadership skills are often enhanced through collaborations with peers, PAs who do not develop relationships with their peer student staff members may not develop the same leadership skills and abilities as those who did report developing relationships with other student staff members as being part of their PA experience.

In addition to the role of peer relationships, Astin’s (1993) theory of involvement emphasizes the role that quality and quantity of time spent in involvement have on development. As PAs, students are spending large amounts of time with their peers through training, meetings, and other responsibilities. It can also be argued that this is quality time focused on addressing specific topics, both that they are learning and presenting to others. This mix of quality and quantity may serve to increase the positive outcomes mentioned of peer interactions, or be decreased for those PAs who put less importance on these relationships.

**Relationship with Faculty: Cofacilitator**

The relationship developed with their Cofacilitator was also key to the overall PA experience. Through co-teaching the proseminar PAs worked closely with a faculty or
staff member on a frequent basis. According to Astin (1984, 1993), frequent interaction with faculty is an environmental factor that can have a positive effect on students’ satisfaction with college, more so than any other institutional characteristic. While it can be argued that the faculty member’s involvement is more for the benefit of the FIG students than the PA, the regular interaction the PA has through planning the proseminar makes this a unique experience. For example, this relationship facilitated connections that led many of them to ask for recommendations and letters of reference. Other PAs used their Cofacilitator as an academic resource for themselves, taking classes taught by their Cofacilitator.

It is also important to note that not all PAs discussed having regular interaction with their Cofacilitator. Some PAs mentioned Cofacilitators who were “hands-off” the entire semester, and others who had Cofacilitators who became less involved as the semester progressed. According to Astin’s (1993) theory, this lack of Cofacilitator (i.e., faculty) involvement could result in different outcomes for the PAs with this experience than for those PAs who had a more involved Cofacilitator. Again the quality and quantity of these interactions with faculty may play an important part in the PAs’ overall college experience and development as students.

Many of the PAs in this study described relationship with their Cofacilitator as developing into a mentorship. PAs discussed how their Cofacilitator guided them through questions related to college and their career. This relationship is similar to that of the mentoring relationship that develops between undergraduate teaching assistants and the faculty with whom they work (Astin, 1993; Fingerson & Culley, 2001; Newcomb & Bagwell, 1997). However, none of the PAs mentioned how the relationship they
developed with their Cofacilitator led them to an interest in teaching as a career as other studies have found (Adams & Krockover, 1997; Gafney & Varma-Nelson, 2007; Solomon & Crowe, 2001; Swartz, 1996). There are differences between the participants in these studies and in my study. The participants in Solomon and Crowe’s (2001) study were in the final semester of their undergraduate program, only 22 of the 119 participants in Gafney and Varma-Nelson’s (2007) study were still undergraduate students, and all participants in Adams and Krockover’s (1997) study had previously graduated. Again, all participants in my study were current undergraduate students; three were graduating seniors, three were juniors, and nine were sophomores. It may be that while interaction with faculty does lead to increased interest in teaching, this awareness is only realized after further development and reflection on the part of those who have experience teaching as undergraduates.

**Relationship with Residents/Students**

Balancing the relationships the PAs had with the participants of the FIGs program was the most complex aspect of their roles. Because the FIG activities took place both in the residence hall and the classroom, the FIG participants were both the residents and the students of the PAs. It was difficult to draw clear lines between these two roles because concerns in the residence halls such as social justice and alcohol abuse were topics discussed in the curriculum for the proseminar. Classroom issues would also overlap into the residence hall. Sometimes these situations were intentional, such as bringing faculty or speakers into the residence halls who were associated with the academic theme of the FIG. Other times, this overlap was unintentional to the FIG program, such as following up on attendance or assignment issues from the classroom in the residence halls.
Similar with other studies (Blanton & Husmann, 2006; Schaller & Wagner, 2007), the PAs discussed having a difficult time negotiating the relationship they had with their FIG students. A key component of the PA experience is learning how to balance the relationships PAs had with their students. Extremes were seen on both ends of the spectrum. Some PAs explicitly stated that their goal was to form personal friendships with the students in the FIG while other PAs felt it necessary to keep distance socially between themselves and their FIG students.

Both have the potential for negative outcomes. Those who focus too strongly on developing relationships with their residents may have more difficulty balancing the roles of discipline and teaching with being the friend of the residents. Those that distance themselves too much may be missing out developing another peer group relationship. Because of their close proximity in age, the FIG students comprised a group of peers that shaped the college environment of the PAs’. Peer groups can help establish norms and expectations for its members, especially in the area of academic major (Astin, 1993). The PAs both contributed to and benefited from this peer support. Some of the PAs discussed wanting to give back to the first year students in their area as a reason for becoming a PA. Their desire was to help the incoming students the same way in which they had been helped. The influence can be seen as a way of helping new students adjust to the norms and expectations of being a student, both at the university and in a specific academic field.

Similar to the discussion regarding the peer relationship PAs developed with other student staff members, Astin (1993) notes that an outcome of developing peer relationships is improved leadership development. Other developmental outcomes are
related to tutoring, an act similar to what a number of PAs discussed doing while helping other students adjust to college and navigating their major. Specifically outcomes related to academics and academic success as well as higher GRE test scores were associated with taking on tutoring roles in peer relationships. The PAs who successfully balance this relationship may have greater outcomes and development in these areas than those who do not.

Multiple roles. In their positions as PAs, the participants are asked to combine two separate roles: resident assistant and undergraduate teaching assistant. There is a great deal of consistency between the literature related to the outcomes of these two unique roles and that of being a PA. For example, similar to resident assistants, the PAs in this study described how the many meetings they had to attend, responsibilities in their residence halls, and responsibilities they had as a student, such as studying, led to perceived improvement in their time management skills (Schaller & Wagner, 2007).

Moreover, communication and public speaking were skills the PAs developed through presenting material in the residence halls and in the classrooms; the development of these skills is similar to the skills developed by undergraduate teaching assistants’ while teaching or leading group discussions (Borgon et al., 2013; Fingerson & Culley, 2001; Schalk et al., 2009). Through interactions with the FIG students in the residence halls and in the classrooms, PAs discussed developing skills in understanding how to work with a diverse range of individuals and their personalities, also common to the experience of undergraduate teaching assistants (Fingerson & Culley, 2001; Gill et al., 2008; Schalk et al., 2009; Weidert et al., 2012).
In addition to learning about others, the PAs in this study shared how their experience led them to learn more about themselves, such as their interests and how they handled pressure situations. This increased self-awareness was also described as an outcome of the resident assistant experience (Blanton & Husmann, 2006; Schaller & Wagner, 2007) and undergraduate teaching assistant experience (Gill et al., 2008; Johnson & Loui, 2009; Schalk et al., 2009). Finally, because of the type of conversations PAs had with the students in their FIG, not infrequently involving issues of mental health or conflict resolution, the PAs discussed developing skills related to advising and counseling, similar to skills developed in association with being a resident assistant (Lillis & Schuh, 1982; Schaller & Wagner, 2007).

The PA position, and both roles they play, is considered an on-campus job. Having an on-campus job is an environmental factor that can have a positive impact on students’ college experience (Astin, 1993). Astin points out that one of the areas of development associated with working on-campus is affective growth and development related to attitudes, values, and concepts. This is consistent with Astin’s findings, as many of the PAs mentioned the growth they experienced as a result of their PA position, such as working with individuals from a different background and dealing with emergency situations.

As previously discussed, Astin (1984) emphasizes the importance of quantity and quality of time spent in involvement activities. Because the PAs live with, present academic and social programs in the residence halls, and co-teach an academic class for the students there is high level of quality and quantity of involvement associated with the PA position as it relates to working with FIG students. As with other factors, they high
level of quality and quantity of involvement may lead to increased positive outcomes related to satisfaction and leadership for the PAs.

**Contribution to the Current Literature**

This study advances the current body of literature in two ways. The first is specific to gaining a greater understanding of the PA position in the FIGs program. As noted in chapter two, previous studies (Beckett, 2006; Nesheim et al., 2007; Pike et al., 1997; Purdie II, 2007) have examined the impact the FIGs program has on the first year students who participate. Outcomes associated with serving as a Cofacilitator in the FIGs program have also been examined (Kennedy, 2006). However, previous to this study, no one had examined the experience and possible outcomes of those students who served as PAs in the program. This study helps to fill that missing piece.

Gaining greater insight into the PAs’ experience can be beneficial to the FIGs program at the University of Missouri and similar programs in multiple ways. The first benefit is in providing additional information on the benefits to students of such programs, beyond just the first-year students (Beckett, 2006; Nesheim et al., 2007; Pike et al., 1997; Purdie II, 2007) for whom the program is designed. This study demonstrates that the program also benefits the students who serve in the PA role. Similar to the experience of resident assistants and undergraduate teaching assistants, the PAs in this study perceived that they improved in skills related to time management (Schaller & Wagner, 2007), communication and public speaking (Borgon et al., 2013; Fingerson & Culley, 2001; Schalk et al., 2009), and working with individuals from different backgrounds (Fingerson & Culley, 2001; Gill et al., 2008; Schalk et al., 2009; Weidert et al., 2012). The benefits that the PAs in this and similar programs experience can be used
to provide additional justification of such programs to campus or to other constituents when needed. Further understanding the PA position can help the FIG program at MU make adjustments to the program or position responsibilities as they see fit. Specific suggestions will be discussed later in this chapter. Even if the program does not make any changes, there is at least greater awareness of the PAs’ perception of their position, the benefits they gain from the experience, and challenges they face.

The other contribution this study makes is better understanding this complex student position. As noted, this position is the combination of two separate roles: resident assistants and undergraduate teaching assistants. While previous research has looked at the experience of resident assistants (Arvidson, 2003; Benjamin, 2004; Blanton & Husmann, 2006; Blimling, 2002, 2011; Conlogue, 1993; Deluga & Winters, 1990; Lillis & Schuh, 1982; Sargent, 2010; Schaller & Wagner, 2007; Utterback et al., 1990) and undergraduate teaching assistants (Adams & Krockover, 1997; Borgon et al., 2013; Fingerson & Culley, 2001; Gafney & Varma-Nelson, 2007; Gill et al., 2008; Johnson & Loui, 2009; Micari et al., 2005; Schalk et al., 2009; Swartz, 1996; Voyles et al., 2011; Weidert et al., 2012), I have not been able to find any other studies that examine a single position that combines these two sets of responsibilities and experiences like the PA position at the University of Missouri.

The PAs have uniquely overlapping responsibilities of educating (both formally and informally), disciplining, role modeling, and developing a community. It is where these positions and responsibilities intersect and overlap that the unique experience of the PAs is found. In this study, the PAs discussed the challenges of moving through these interactions. They talked about the difficult conversations and relationships they had
with their FIG students, such as conversations related to disciplinary issues in the residence halls overlapping or spilling over into the classroom setting.

Perhaps more difficult was when issues from the classroom, such as class attendance, submitting assignments, and even failing students would overlap into the residence halls. Because the residence halls were the shared living space for both the PAs and the FIG students, the difficult conversations and relationships were not confined to the classroom environment as they are with most other instructors, but also entered the living environment, taking away one of the boundaries that most other instructors have. It is important to remember that the PAs are still undergraduate students, often in the second year of college. These students are still progressing through developmental moments and stages that most college instructors have gone through prior to teaching at the university level. Examining this position adds to the overall literature by exploring how undergraduate students experience this intersection of roles and responsibilities. More research on this overlap of responsibilities and roles, as well as the outcomes of this type of experience, is needed.

**Recommendations for Practice**

A greater understanding of the PA experience can have implications for residential learning programs in general, and the FIGs program specifically. Below, I discuss the three most salient implications for practice. The first implication focuses on balance, the central part of the PA essence. Next, I recommend that the FIGs program evaluate the current responsibilities of the PA position. The final recommendation is related to educational programming in residence halls, specifically the lack of resident participation, and ideas on how to address this concern.
Assist the PAs with Balance

As mentioned earlier, the essence of the PA position comes down to balance: balancing relationships, balancing responsibilities, and balancing roles. Because this notion was central to understanding the phenomenon of the PA experience, the FIGs program needs to explore ways in which they can help PAs with balance in these areas. Deluga and Winters (1990) discuss how role ambiguity leads to increased levels of stress among resident assistants. Having to balance multiple roles and responsibilities, as the PAs described doing, can add to their stress by increasing the ambiguity they have as to what role they are playing when. Deluga and Winters recommend addressing the issues of role ambiguity during the staff selection process and through in-service training opportunities.

One recommendation for the FIGs program is to have frank discussions with candidates about the multiple relationships and responsibilities they will need to balance as part of their position. While this message can come from professional staff in the FIGs program, it should also come from current first-year PAs. Such a discussion will not make balance and role ambiguity any less of an issue, but hopefully it would make candidates more aware of this reality.

The FIGs program should also explore ways to help the PAs deal with the multiple areas of balance once they are in their position. This may include training from professional staff or faculty on how to manage multiple and complex relationships. It could also include workshops on time management and setting priorities. These workshops and trainings should not just occur once at the beginning of the semester, but be included throughout the semester with topics being revisited multiple times. The topic
could also be discussed during regular meetings PAs have with their Student Coordinators and their Residence Life Coordinator.

Finally, the FIGs program should assess whether it is appropriate to place undergraduate students, the PAs, in a position where they are sharing a living environment with others students to whom they are assigning an academic grade. While instances of having to fail a student appeared minimal according to the PAs in this study, the difficulties of living with students with whom you are also teaching was a common theme among the PAs. Having to balance this dual role seems inherent in the current structure of the program and the position, and it may need to be revisited. Perhaps a middle ground is possible. Restricting the PA position to only junior and senior undergraduate students may reduce some of the difficulties related to balancing relationships related to friendship between the PAs and their residents.

**Examine the Responsibilities of the PA Position**

The majority of the PAs in this study, and throughout the program, are sophomore students serving in the PA role for the first time. These students, as well as continuing PAs, discussed differences they saw between the PA role and other similar positions within the department, most frequently the Community Advisors. The Community Advisors serve a role in the residence halls very similar to that of traditional resident assistants. According to the participants in this study, the main difference in the responsibilities between the PAs and the Community Advisors is that PAs teach the FIG proseminar during the Fall semester. In fact, the responsibilities between the two positions are so similar that many of the participants in this study often referred to the PA responsibilities only in light what they did in relation to teaching the FIG proseminar.
They implied that the responsibilities in the residence hall was the Community Advisor part of their job, which they often referred to as their “RA” (resident assistant) job. Despite having different, and perhaps more, responsibilities, the PAs and Community Advisors receive the same compensation, room and board.

PAs also noted how different their work load was between the Fall and Spring semesters. PAs described that throughout the year they were expected to organize educational programs in their residence hall, serve on an on-call rotation with other staff, confront disciplinary issues, and develop an overall sense of community within their building. During the Fall semester, they had the added responsibilities related to teaching the FIG proseminar: class preparation, teaching the class, grading, meeting with their Student Coordinator, and meeting with their Cofacilitator. The PAs often thought that their workload during the Fall semester was much greater than what they had during the Spring semester.

The FIGs program should assess whether this imbalance in responsibilities and compensation leads to PA attrition after only one year. As quoted in the previous chapter, Rene specifically mentioned changing from the PA position to Community Advisor position because she perceived the new position to be less demanding. It may be that the demands of the PA position and the increased level of responsibility, with the same level of compensation when compared to Community Advisors, adds to other factors which result in PAs not returning for multiple years.

One suggestion to address this perceived imbalance is to compensate PAs for the responsibility of teaching the proseminar. Cofacilitators currently receive funds for professional development as partial compensation for their involvement in the FIGs.
program. Is it possible to provide similar compensation, such as a book stipend, to students who serve as PAs? Another option is to reduce the PAs’ responsibilities in the residence halls, such as programming or serving on-call, during the Fall semester. Other in-hall student staff positions, such as Community Advisors and Leadership Advisors, may be able to take on a larger role in these areas during the Fall semester. However, this would require enough Community Advisors and Leadership Advisors in each residence hall to pick up this increased load, which I do not believe is currently the case. This could be addressed by keeping the same total number of student staff positions, but reducing the number of PA positions. In this model, PAs and an additional student staff member, such as a Community Advisor, would share responsibilities with a set of students equal in size to two FIGs. During the Fall semester, the PA would teach two proseminar sections and the Community Advisor would take on extra community development roles in the residence halls. During the Spring semester, both would take an active role in programming and community development in the residence hall.

The FIGs program may also want to assess whether the benefits of having PAs live in the residence hall outweigh the challenges discussed in this study. Originally PAs were not required to live in the residence halls, but were given additional compensation if they did live on campus. There responsibilities were also different than they are currently structured, focusing on teaching the proseminar and being available for study sessions. However, initial analysis of the program indicated the overall experience for students was better when their PA lived in the residence hall. Within two years of the start of the program PAs were required to live in the residence hall as a responsibility of their position (F. Minor, personal communication, April 8, 2015). It may be time for the
program to reassess this structure. Providing PAs the opportunity to live off campus may encourage more juniors and seniors to serve in the position and may alleviate some of the ambiguity that results in overlapping roles and responsibilities.

These are only a few possibilities to address the issue of the PAs’ perception of imbalanced job responsibilities among the student staff positions. For at least one participant in this study, Rene, this imbalance caused her to switch from being a PA to a Community Advisor. At the very least, the Department of Residential Life and the FIGs program need to evaluate whether the multiple student staff positions have equal levels of responsibility and compensation to match.

**Residential Programming**

The final recommendation is not specific to the FIGs program, but a larger question for residential life programs in general. Residential life programs need to take on the challenge placed by Blakely (2011) and Blimling (2015) of examining whether current programming models meet the needs of today’s students. As Blimling notes, not only are student staff members, such as the PAs, competing with other entertainment and educational options for students’ time, the topics student staff typically cover are available for students online where they can learn about them at their leisure.

Specifically, for the FIGs program, does the current structure of the FIG proseminar meet the current needs of students or, like traditional programming, is it offering information that could be presented for students to access at a time convenient to their schedule?

Both Blakely (2011) and Blimling (2015) encourage residential life programs to explore new ways of engaging students. One such recommendation is to encourage residents themselves to take a more active role in presenting information to their
residence halls; I realize this goal is often difficult to achieve. This could also be accomplished in the proseminar by having the FIG students take a more active role in selection and presentation of content. This could take place during the second half of the semester after other foundational information has been presented. Assigning a grade to the students’ participation and presentation may encourage them to take the responsibility more seriously. Allowing opportunities for students to collaborate with their peers and faculty can lead to increased learning outcomes for participants in living learning communities (Brower & Inkelas, 2010). By asking the FIG students to take an active role in the selection and presentation of material they become more active learners in their environment, and hopefully become more invested and have improved outcomes related to learning.

Another recommendation is to explore more “in and out” types of activities where students can participate at a time convenient to them (Blakely, 2011; Blimling, 2015). Could the purpose of current programs and classroom experiences be accomplished online through discussion boards or social media? Could videos be made available online that students could watch and then come together to discuss, similar to the flipped classroom model that is frequently discussed? Whatever the response, the difficulty PAs had in engaging students in their classes and residence hall activities is not unique to their position, but a response and evolution in residential programming that should be explored.

**Recommendations for Future Research**

The purpose of this study was to begin exploring the PA position, a role and group of students who previously had not been looked at in the research. While this
study begins to describe the experience of being a PA, and some of the outcomes, there is much more to know about this position and ones similar to it. The recommendations below highlight further research that can lead to a greater understanding of the PA position and other student involvement activities.

**Power**

The PAs have a lot of power over the students in their FIG. Like traditional resident assistants, they have some say in whether or not the students in their residence hall are found in violation of university or department policy. Previous studies have explored feelings of power (Arvidson, 2003) and superiority (Schaller & Wagner, 2007) resident assistants can display in their position in relation to their residents, often in the area of policy enforcement and discipline. PAs also work with the Cofacilitator on assigning grades in the FIG proseminar, this collaboration can give PAs an additional level of influence over their students in regard to their academic grades. Power in relation to student grades did not come up in the literature related to undergraduate teaching assistants, possibly because these students are not responsible for assigning grades.

Exploring the PA position through a lens of power could provide insight into the overall PA experience. Are PAs aware of the power they have over their residents? If so, how does that knowledge affect the perception and practice of their position? What are their residents’ knowledge and perception of the power relationships between them and their PA? What role does power have in the other relationships that emerged as part of the PA experience with fellow student staff members, their supervisor, and the Cofacilitator? Similar questions have been examined in research related to resident
assistants (Arvidson, 2003; Schaller & Wagner, 2007), but how the additional role of teaching affects these feelings of power and superiority should also be explored.

A more complete understanding of the PAs’ perception of the power they have in their role can provide additional understanding overall of the PA position. With this knowledge, the FIGs program may address areas of concern related to an abuse of power, if any exists. Exploring the concept of power in relation to the PA position could also give further understanding to the way these students manage the multiple positions and roles in which they find themselves.

**Long Term Outcomes of Being a PA**

Similar to the study conducted by Lillis and Schuh (1982) on the long term outcomes of being a resident assistant, a similar study should be done regarding students who served as PAs and have since graduated. As I mentioned in my epoche, the FIG program sent a questionnaire out to past PAs as part of the program’s 15th anniversary. However there was little analysis of the data received. A similar survey should be sent out to past PAs again asking them to reflect on their experience as a PA. This information can continue to give further insight into the position and potential benefits. It can also be used to see if serving in a role that combines resident assistant and undergraduate teaching assistant responsibilities has similar or different outcomes than serving in these roles separately. Additionally the Department of Residential Life could send a similar survey out to past students who served as Community Advisors. This would give a comparative group and an opportunity to further examine if the combined responsibilities of being a PA are related to different outcomes than students who serve in
solely a residential role. Interviews and focus groups could also be useful in gaining qualitative data from these groups.

**Intersectionality**

As mentioned when discussing the essence, the position is about balancing the multiple roles and responsibilities that are asked of the undergraduate students who serve as PAs. It is where these roles and responsibilities intersect that the truly unique experience of the PA position comes to light. Not only do PAs balance the many roles that accompany the resident assistant responsibilities of their position (Blanton & Husmann, 2006; Blimling, 2011; Deluga & Winters, 1990), they have the added role of teaching an undergraduate class.

Much of the research on student development and the student experience looks at student activities in separate silos. But what happens when the multiple roles that students are involved in intersect and overlap? Do overlapping environmental factors have an additive or multiplicative impact on the outcomes of being a college student (Astin, 1984, 1993)? Are there some combinations that have a more positive impact on student development than others? Do some combinations lead to negative outcomes? More research should be done on experiences where the multiple roles college students are involved in intersect and the outcome associated with that intersection.

**Conclusion**

This study examined the experience of being a PA in the FIGs program at the University of Missouri. Analysis of the participants’ description led to the conclusion that the overall essence of being a PA is about balancing multiple relationships, multiple
roles, and multiple expectations. It is especially where these relationships, roles, and expectations overlap that the uniqueness of the PA experience comes to light. A specific example of this is the interaction PAs have with the FIG participants who are both their residents in the residence hall and their students in the FIG proseminar class and how these roles can carry over from one environment to the other. Examining this experience through the lens of Astin’s (1984, 1993) theory of involvement treats the PA role and associated components as environmental factors that lead to different developmental outcomes for the students who serve in the PA position.

While this study begins to give insight into how these overlapping roles and responsibilities affects PAs and the possible outcomes associated with the role, there may be other student leaders on campuses who have similar overlapping experiences. One possibility is a student active in recruitment for a social Greek organization who also helps teach an undergraduate course. This individual could experience overlapping roles and relationships if a first-year student who is trying to pledge into the Greek organization is also enrolled in the class the older student helps teach.

The experience of being a PA highlights the complexity of having roles, responsibilities, and relationships that overlap. More research, qualitative and quantitative, needs to be done to further understand this unique role and what effect it has on the students where serve in the position. As mentioned earlier, future research should also examine the outcomes associated with intersecting roles and responsibilities associated with other student leadership opportunities.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX A: RECRUITMENT EMAIL

Dear Peer Advisor,

I am a PhD. candidate in the College of Education’s Educational Leadership and Policy Analysis program conducting research on the experience of being a Peer Advisor (PA) in the FIGs program at Mizzou. I hope the findings from this study may result in a better understanding of the overall experience of being a PA.

I am inviting all PAs in the Department of Residential Life at the University of Missouri to participate in this study. If you would like to participate please complete the attached information form and return it to me at wiesej@missouri.edu.

From all interested participants, I will invite approximately 15 to meet with me to discuss in greater detail your PA experiences. Submission of the attached information form indicates permission for the data on the form to be used in the overall study. Involvement will consist of a discussion regarding your experience as a PA that will last approximately 90 minutes. At the end of the discussion you will be given a $25 gift card to the Mizzou Store for your participation in this study.

Be assured your responses to this e-mail, completion of the attached information form, and your discussion will be kept in the strictest confidence. During the discussion no identifying information will be asked of you. No identifying information will be used in any publications or presentations that result from this research. All information, including any audio recordings and transcripts, will be stored for 7 years after the data are recorded and will be destroyed thereafter.

If you have questions or concerns regarding this study please contact me at wiesej@missouri.edu or (573) 884-7920; you can also contact my faculty advisors Dr. Brad Curs (cursb@missouri.edu or 573-882-2759) or Dr. Jeni Hart (hartjl@missouri.edu or 573-882-8221). If you have any questions regarding your rights as a research subject, please contact MU’s Campus Institutional Review Board at (573) 882-9585 or umcresearchirb@missouri.edu.

I look forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,

Jeff Wiese
APPENDIX B: DEMOGRAPHIC FORM

DEMOGRAPHIC INFORMATION

Pseudonym (fake name): ________________________

Gender (select all that apply):

☐ Man
☐ Woman
☐ Transgender
☐ Other

Ethnicity/Race (choose an item):

African American
American Indian/Alaskan Native
Asian
Hispanic
Multiple Race/Ethnicity
Native Hawaiian or Other
White
Non-Resident International
Prefer Not to Answer

Year in College (choose an item):

1st Year
2nd Year
3rd Year
4th Year
5th Year
6+ Years

Were you in a FIG as a first-year student? (choose an item):

Yes
No

Academic Major (choose an item):

Accountancy
Agribusiness Management
Agricultural Economics
Agricultural Education
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<td>Agriculture</td>
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<td>Animal Science</td>
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<td>Anthropology</td>
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<td>Architectural Studies</td>
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<td>Art</td>
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<td>Art History &amp; Archeology</td>
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<td>Athletic Training</td>
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<td>Film Studies</td>
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<td>Fisheries &amp; Wildlife</td>
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<td>Hospitality Management</td>
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<td>Human Development &amp; Family Studies</td>
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<td>Industrial Engineering</td>
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Linguistics
Mathematics
Mechanical Engineering
Middle School Education
Music
Nursing
Nutritional Science
Occupational Therapy
Parks, Recreation, & Tourism
Personal Financial Planning
Philosophy
Physical Therapy
Physics
Plant Sciences
Political Science
Psychology
Radiologic Science
Religions Studies
Respiratory Therapy
Romance Languages
Russian
Science & Agricultural Journalism
Secondary Education
Social Work
Sociology
Soil, Environmental, & Atmospheric Science
Special Education
Statistics
Textile & Apparel Management
Theatre

Type of Residence Hall (choose an item):

- Suite
- Traditional

Which position(s) did you apply for with Residential Life (select all that apply)?

- [ ] Community Advisor
- [ ] Leadership Advisor
- [ ] Peer Advisor

Years as a Peer Advisor (choose an item):

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1st year
2nd year
3 or more years

Was the FIG(s) you were a PA for directly related to your major? (choose an item):

No
Yes

Were you previously a Community Advisor?

☐ No
☐ Yes. How many years? _____

Were you previously a Leadership Advisor?

☐ No
☐ Yes. How many years? _____
APPENDIX C: WAIVER OF DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT

WAIVER OF DOCUMENTATION OF CONSENT

INVESTIGATOR’S NAME: JEFFREY A. WIESE

PROJECT # 1210560

STUDY TITLE: UNDERSTANDING THE EXPERIENCE OF BEING A PEER ADVISOR IN THE FRESHMAN INTEREST GROUPS PROGRAM AT THE UNIVERSITY OF MISSOURI: A PHENOMENOLOGICAL STUDY

1. I would like to ask you to participate in a study that involves research.
2. Participation is voluntary and your decision not to participate will not involve any penalty or loss of benefits.
3. For this study, we will discuss your experience as a Peer Advisor in the FIGs program. This discussion will last approximately 90 minutes. After all discussions are concluded you will be asked to review a transcript of our discussion and confirm themes that emerge from that conversation. I anticipate this information will be sent to you before August 2014. I anticipate the study will be concluded by December 2014.
4. The purpose of this study is to gain better insight into the experience of being a Peer Advisor in the FIGs program at MU.
5. I am asking approximately 15 subjects to participate in this study.
6. The study staff may withdraw you from the study at any time after explaining to you the reason for withdrawal.
7. There are no foreseeable risks associated with participating in this study.
8. There are no benefits, other than those mentioned below in #11, to you for participating in this study.
9. If you choose to participate, you will select a pseudonym. This pseudonym will be used during our discussion as well as in all reports and presentations associated with this study. Your real name will not be used.
10. There are no monetary costs associated with participation in this study.
11. You will be given a $25 gift card to the Mizzou Store for your completion of the interview process.
12. It is not the policy of the University of Missouri to compensate clinical research subjects in the event the research results in injury. The University of Missouri,

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fulfilling its public responsibility, provides medical, professional, and general liability insurance coverage for any injury in the event such injury is caused by the negligence of the University of Missouri, its faculty or staff. The University of Missouri also will provide facilities and medical attention to subjects who suffer injuries while participating in research projects at the University of Missouri.

13. If you have any questions regarding your rights as a participant in this research and/or concerns about the study, or if you feel under any pressure to enroll or to continue to participate in this study, you may contact the University of Missouri Institutional Review Board (which is a group of people who review the research studies to protect participants’ rights) at (573) 882-9585.

14. If you have any problems or questions, you may contact me, Jeff Wiese, at 573-884-7920. You may also contact either of my faculty advisors; Dr. Brad Curs (573-882-2759) or Jeni Hart (573-882-8221).

15. I would be happy to answer any questions that you may have.

16. A copy of this script will be given to you to keep.
APPENDIX D: DISCUSSION PROTOCOL

DISCUSSION PROTOCOL

I. Thank you for participating; Introduction of Researcher

II. Overview of the project

III. Consent form, Demographics form, Choice of pseudonym

IV. Ground Rules
We will have a discussion regarding your experience as a Peer Advisor (PA) in the FIGs program at MU. I would like you to talk honestly about your experience and articulate specific details and any stories that will help me to understand what it is to be a PA in the FIGs program. Remember anything you share in this interview is confidential.

If you prefer to have this discussion conducted without audio taping, we will proceed in that manner. In addition, if you wish to have the recording turned off at any time please let me know and we will conduct the discussion without taping or will end the conversation based upon your preference.

V. Interview Protocol

1. May I record this discussion?

2. What is your pseudonym?

3. Tell me about your experience as a Peer Advisor in the FIGs Program.

4. Potential discussion areas:
   i. Tell me about your proseminar
   ii. Tell me about your Cofacilitator
   iii. Tell me about your Student Coordinator
   iv. Tell me about your residence hall

5. Have you shared with me all that is significant regarding your experience as a Peer Advisor?

VI. Thank You:
Should you have any other comments, concerns, or questions about this interview or the overall study please feel free to contact me. Contact information is available on the copy of the consent form you received prior to starting the interview.
Student Staff Position Descriptions

Click on the links below to go to the position description you're looking for:

- Floor staff position descriptions (CA, LA and PA)
- Desk Supervisor position description
- Desk Attendant position description

Floor Staff Position Descriptions

Student staff members contribute to the Residential Life Mission and the objectives of the Freshman Interest Group (FIGs) program by serving as residence educators in their community. They work directly with students, professional staff, stakeholders, and co-facilitators (PAs only) to create cohesive and academically-focused communities that enhance students' personal and academic success. As members of a building(s) staff team, they report to and assist the Hall Coordinator (HC) in the facility and operational management of the residence hall(s) to which they are assigned.

All student staff members are expected to work an average of 20 hours per week. However, what each staff member does to fulfill this requirement varies based upon a number of factors including, but not limited to, the needs of the community, the level of student leadership in the community, and the number of staff in that community. Decisions regarding the specific responsibilities of each staff member are made by the Hall Coordinator of the building in consultation with their Area Coordinator (AC) and FIGs Coordinator.

In order to most effectively achieve the Residential Life mission (including the FIG and Learning Community objectives) staff members work together and meet regularly with their HC to discuss the best way to fulfill the following responsibilities:

- **Develop a Cohesive and Academically-Focused Community that emphasizes active student involvement, inclusion, service, and appreciation of diversity**
  - Encourage interest in academics through a variety of means such as: bulletin boards, your door, newsletters, and promoting/attending speakers or events that might be of interest to students in the FIG and in the community.
  - Help students transition to MU by taking your community to specified Fall Welcome events, and encouraging their participation in Fall Welcome overall. Plan and attend community specific activities that will help build community and prepare students for their academic coursework.
o Assist residents in developing, enhancing and maintaining appropriate community governance structures. Advise community government.
o In collaboration with students and/or community government:
  ▪ Develop a sense of community within your hall and/or complex, both within each FIG and Learning Community and the community as a whole.
  ▪ Plan, implement and assess educational interactions designed to achieve the desired learning outcomes (and the objectives of the thematic learning community if applicable). Integrate the educational interactions and the pro-seminar whenever possible.
  ▪ Implement the community standards process and assist residents in holding themselves and other house members accountable for observing their community standards, University policies and Residential Life policies.
  ▪ Publicly recognize academic achievement.
  ▪ Organize study groups and lead initial meetings.
  ▪ Establish connections between students and faculty/instructors, as appropriate.
o Be an academic and social role model and encourage responsible behavior by abiding by Residential Life and University policies.
o Participate as a stakeholder.

- **Provide Individual Support**
  o Ensure every resident is known on a personal level by a staff member.
  o Tutor students when possible and convenient and direct students to the appropriate academic resources when you are not able to assist them (i.e. Learning Center, Academic Advisors, Professors/TAs, etc.).
  o Motivate students to succeed academically and personally.
  o Work with students to set goals, develop and implement action plans. Engage in regular follow-up.
  o Be available to assist students in resolving problems that arise. Refer issues, when appropriate, to the correct person/office (i.e. counseling center, back to their roommate, etc.)
  o Mediate roommate conflicts.

- **Respond To Student Crisis and Other Emergencies**
  o Understand crisis protocol and respond appropriately when emergencies arise within the community and/or hall (e.g. fire, tornado, medical, emergency securing, etc.).
  o Fulfill on-call responsibilities and on campus coverage.
  o Confront and document policy violations.
  o Educate residents on conflict resolution skills and mediate group conflicts.
  o Promptly communicate concerns about residents and actions that may or have put themselves or others in dangers.
  o Establish contact with MUPD and/or the HC on-duty as necessary.
- Inform HC of significant issues in the community.

- **Ensure Residence Hall Administration Is Complete And Accurate**
  - Complete all administrative duties in an accurate and timely fashion.
  - Assist desk staff in responding to students’ needs including but not limited to check-in and check-out procedures, completing RICC forms, helping with lock-outs.
  - Disseminate routine information to residents (via pro-seminar, bulletin boards, flyers, announcements at house meetings, etc.).
  - Complete Health and Safety Checks as required.
  - Assist as needed in other processes as determined by professional staff including your Hall Coordinator, Area Administrative Supervisor (AAS), Area Coordinator, FIGs Coordinator and others.
  - Assist Hall Coordinator and other staff in the Community Planning process for the following year.

**Responsibilities Specific to Community Advisors**

The Community Advisor (CA) position works to directly enhance residents’ knowledge of community service and civic engagement within their community (hall, campus, local, and national levels). The responsibilities outlined below are to take place in addition to the general departmental expectations.

- Plan & implement service opportunities for the residence hall community.
- Attend and participate in all assigned CA touch base sessions.
- Complete professional development tasks and projects as assigned.
- Serve as a resource and make residents and staff aware of service opportunities within the hall, at MU and within the local community.
- Provide opportunities for residents to engage in the study of current issues.
- Collaborate with the LA with civic engagement topics within the residence halls.
- Collaborate with PAs to bring the academic focus of the proseminar into the residence hall via community service opportunities.
- Lead small group and/or individual discussions on civic engagement and how residents can advocate for positive change.
- Take initiative for ongoing self-development and serve as an educator in community development and provide resources to other staff within the community.
- Coordination of a central programming calendar for the residence hall.

**Responsibilities Specific to Leadership Advisors**

The Leadership Advisor (LA) position works directly to enhance leadership education for students & student staff, and assumes responsibility to be a student advocate for all
residing in the residence halls. The LA position will have a strong working knowledge of the Social Change Model (SCM) of leadership development and social justice based subject matter. The responsibilities outlined below are to take place in addition to the general departmental expectations.

- Plan & implement Tigers Lead Program
- Co-advise Hall/Group council with the Hall Coordinator.
- Design and implement publicity, meetings to solicit candidates, and elections for RHA Reps and Hall/Group council members with Hall Coordinator.
- Meet with and advise RHA Representatives from hall/group, attending RHA meetings as needed.
- Collaborate with RHA, NRHH, & other relevant student organizations and departments
- Attend weekly/bi-weekly LA group leadership meetings led by the Leadership & Educational Resources Advisor.
- Execute large-scale leadership seminars/events for their hall and/or area, focused on SCM and/or other relevant leadership or social justice education.
- Lead small group and/or individual discussions on leadership and/or social justice for students.
- Act as a resource by identifying & offering assistance to students and staff members on leadership development and social justice topics.
- Advocate for social justice within the Residence Halls, MU Campus, Columbia Community, etc.
- Take initiative for ongoing self-development of awareness and understanding of leadership development and social justice.
- Collaborate with hall staff to assess needs of residents and provide appropriate topics & levels of educational programming.
- Support and implement hall wide & campus student government officer training.

Responsibilities Specific to Peer Advisors

The Peer Advisor (PA) position works to directly enhance residents’ knowledge of an assigned topical area both inside the classroom in conjunction with a faculty or staff co-facilitator and within the residence halls. The responsibilities outlined below are to take place in addition to the general departmental expectations.

- **Fulfill all FIG Responsibilities**
  - Attend all FIGs Program staff meetings including individual meetings with the SC, weekly team meetings and co-facilitator meetings.
  - Create weekly lesson plans that provide for college level work in the FIG pro-seminar.
  - Become familiar with syllabi for the co-enrolled FIG courses; demonstrate your awareness of upcoming tests, papers, and projects.
o Invite the co-facilitator(s) of your FIG to eat dinner in the residence hall with the weekly.
o Incorporate the theme of your FIG into the educational efforts in the community.
o Provide ongoing educational support to all of the residents in the community.

- **Pro-seminar**
o Maintain an effective co-teaching dynamic with the FIG co-facilitator.
o Have regular contact/communication with the co-facilitator.
o Execute elements of the standard syllabus developed by the FIGs Core: final project, cultural event, diversity and ethics lesson plans.
o Develop the syllabus and lesson plans in collaboration with the co-facilitator(s).
o Respond to student work in a timely manner. Ensure that the students are present to fill out program evaluations at the end of the semester.
o Teach pro-seminar every week of the fall semester.
o Spend about six hours on your PA job responsibilities.

**General Departmental Requirements**

- The CA/LA /PA position is a full academic year commitment.
- Maintain required grade point average:
  - **CA/LA Grade Requirements**: Maintain a MU cumulative GPA of 2.75 or better. Failure to maintain this cumulative GPA will result in loss of your position. Failure to achieve a semester grade point average of 2.75 or better for CAs/LAs/NCOs will result in probation. Failure to achieve a semester grade point average of 2.25 or better will result in the loss of your position.
  - **PA Grade Requirements**: Maintain a MU cumulative GPA of 3.00 or better. Failure to maintain this cumulative GPA will result in loss of your position. Failure to achieve a semester grade point average of 3.00 or better for PAs will result in probation. Failure to achieve a semester grade point average of 2.25 or better will result in the loss of your position.
- Limit academic course work to 16 credit hours per semester (12 credit hours for graduate students) and 9 hours per eight week summer session unless approved in advance by the Hall Coordinator.
- Attend and participate in all training programs as specified by the Hall Coordinator and department. Fall training begins at least two weeks prior to the first day of classes. Spring training begins at least one week before the first day of classes. Training programs during the semester vary in time and date; participation is required during employment.
- Be available a minimum of 20 hours per week in your community. Note: Time spent in staff meetings, pro-seminar, etc. is included as part of this 20 hours.
• **Forego all other employment unless approved in advance by the Hall Coordinator or designee.**

• Do not hold any office during the first year of employment in a student organization or activity that has significant time demands or poses a conflict of interest (Note: you may continue membership or affiliation in those groups). The following offices that may not be held while employed as a student staff include, but are not limited to: President or Vice-President of the Missouri Student Association, President or Vice-President of the Graduate/Professional Council, President or Vice-President of the Legion of Black Collegians; President or Vice-President of Residence Hall Association, or Editor-in-Chief or Managing Editor of major campus publications (e.g., the Maneater). Staff members are not allowed to be candidates in the MSA President/Vice-President election process while they are a staff member.

• Do not participate in any extended time or extensive academic or field experience (e.g. clinical programs, Journalism 4450, ASUM Intern) during your first semester of employment or the Fall semester. Participation in such activities during following semesters must be approved in advance by the Hall Coordinator. See the student staff manual concerning participation in these types of programs during the summer and interim sessions.

• Attend and participate in all required meetings (i.e. staff, Community Education Team (CET), individual, stakeholder, etc. meetings).

• Participate in the paraprofessional and professional staff selection processes

• Assist the dining hall staff in maintaining appropriate behavior in and around the dining facilities.

• Live in the halls whenever the halls are open, return when the halls open following each vacation period, and remain through the last day of employment agreement (or as stated by the department) in both the fall and spring semesters. Follow the departmental staff arrival and departure dates to meet job requirements relating to opening, breaks, and closing.

• In cooperation with your CET and HC, work as an effective member of a team to collaboratively create a learning supportive environment through educational interactions, bulletin boards, door decs, and community builders.

• Be a role model for students by following all residence hall and university policies, and state/federal laws. Refer to the student staff manual for the departmental alcohol expectations of student staff and the dining plan use policy. Follow all policies related to academic integrity.

• Participate in assessment efforts at the floor, hall and departmental levels.

• Carry out additional duties and responsibilities, including collateral assignments, as may be required by Residential Life and the FIGs program.

### Hall Front Desk Position Descriptions

**Desk Supervisor Position Description**

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The Desk Supervisor (DS) is a student staff member whose primary responsibilities include the management of front desk/mailroom operations and supervision of Desk Attendants (DAs) and Mail Attendants (MAs). The DS reports directly to the Area Administrative Supervisor (AAS).

**General Responsibilities:**

- Coordinate and supervise residence hall front desk and mailroom operations
- Schedule DA/MA hours
- Review time for payroll process
- Work 10, 15 or 20 total hours per week as a DS. Five of these hours must be spent working a desk shift. The remaining hours will be spent on administrative and supervisory tasks.
- Average total 10-20 DS hours by desk.
- Supervise all staff working the front desk/mailroom (with the assistance of the AAS)
- Hire and terminate DAs/MAs (with the assistance of the AAS)
- Perform evaluations of DAs/MAs
- Provide hall-specific DA/MA training
- Observation and documentation of DA/MA conduct
- Recognition of outstanding DA/MA performance
- Day-to-day follow-up with DAs/MAs
- Review DA “communication log” regularly
- Desk Supervisors are required to return early and leave later to assist with opening and closing of residence halls, which might be more than 20 hours per week. If so, the DS is compensated for those times.
- Attend weekly meetings with AAS
- Other duties as assigned
- Support the academic mission of the University and Department of Residential Life

**General Requirements:**

- Maintain MU cumulative grade point average of 2.75 or better. Failure to maintain the MU cumulative grade point averages will result in loss of your position. Failure to achieve a semester grade point average of 2.500 or better may result in probation. Failure to achieve a semester grade point average of 2.25 or better will result in the loss of your position.
- Desk Supervisors must live on campus in the residence halls while employed. Desk Supervisors may not move to another residence hall without consent from their supervisor.
- Desk Supervisors may not hold other campus or off-campus jobs without consent from their supervisor

**Minimum Qualifications:**
• Good customer service skills and experience
• Two semesters of living in the residence halls
• MU cumulative grade point average of 2.75
• Sophomore standing by job start date
• Good judicial standing with the University and Residential Life
• Live in a residence hall.

Preferred Qualifications:

• Previous experience as a Desk Attendant
• Live in the residence hall in which they are employed
• Strong organizational and computer skills
• Strong supervisory skills and experience

Compensation:
The compensation is $8.40/hour for the time designated as Desk Supervisor hours. Extra hours worked as a Desk Attendant are paid at the DA pay rate. Staff cannot exceed 20 hours total per week (including the Desk Supervisor hours and the standard Desk Attendant hours), except during training, opening, and closing. If extenuating circumstances require it, an Area Administrative Supervisor may approve exceptions.

Desk Attendant Position Description

Looking for a job where you can work close to home and help residents and their guests? Love to lend a helping hand? Check out the Desk Attendant position!

The Desk Attendant (DA) is the primary contact with residents at the front desk. Desk Attendants work assigned hours each week as a point of contact and assistance for current residents, their guests, and visitors to Mizzou. The primary responsibilities include answering questions, handing out forms to residents, completing necessary paperwork for the front desk, checking out equipment at the front desk and acting as a resource to the residents and visitors of the building. While at the desk, DAs may accept deliveries and sort mail, assist with student lock-outs, and assist during hall openings and closings. The DA reports directly to the Desk Supervisor (DS).

General Responsibilities:

• Work assigned hours each week and all required weekends (up to 20 hours each week)
• Attend all required DA training at the beginning of the Fall and Spring semesters. Additional training throughout the semester may be required if the DS finds it necessary.
• Attend monthly DA meetings as assigned by the DS. Meetings may be more than once a month during the beginning of Fall and Spring semesters.
• Assist with opening and closing of residence halls. This means you might be required to stay late or come back early during vacation periods.
• Act as an information source to residents and visitors
• Complete all necessary paperwork in a timely and accurate manner
• Take a positive attitude toward residents, building staff and visitors
• Do not violate any of the hall or University policies. Failure to do so will result in automatic probation with the possibility of termination.
• Check MU e-mail on a daily basis
• Perform various administrative tasks as assigned to you by the DS or Area Administrative Supervisor (AAS)
• Perform within the professional standards as expected by the DS and/or AAS
• Desk work is the first priority. All desk work must be completed before homework. Games are not permitted at the front desk.
• Other duties as assigned by the Desk Supervisor, Area Administrative Supervisor, Hall Coordinator or other Residential Life staff

Minimum Qualifications:

• Good judicial and Residential Life standing
• Strong customer service skills
• Must be ready to begin training as assigned; AAS will communicate return dates and times.
• Maintain MU cumulative GPA of 2.50 or better. Failure to maintain this cumulative GPA will result in loss of your position. Failure to achieve a semester grade point average of 2.50 or better for DAs will result in probation. Failure to achieve a semester grade point average of 2.00 or better will result in the loss of your position.

Preferred Qualifications:

• Previous experience as a Desk Attendant
• Previous employment with customer service
• Strong organizational and computer skills
• One or more semesters of living in the residence halls
• Live on campus during employment as a Desk Attendant

Compensation:
The starting compensation is $7.40 per hour.

Desk Attendant Applications are a separate process from the other student staff positions. Residential Life accepts applications throughout the year, but to be considered for the first round of selections for current academic year, you must submit by the deadline on the main page. Due to application deadline occurring prior to class registration, please list your extracurricular activities on your application, and we will ask for your Fall class schedule at a later date.
• FRI MAY 17  
  Halls close  
  5:00 PM  
• FRI MAY 17  
  Meals end with Dinner  
  6:00 PM
Jeffrey (Jeff) A. Wiese grew up in the St. Louis, Missouri area. He earned a BA in Communication Studies from the University of Missouri-Kansas City in 1998 after starting in the Conservatory of Music as a Music Education major. While at UMKC Jeff became a resident assistant, beginning his interest in working with college students. Jeff then earned a Master of Education in College Student Affairs Administration at the University of Georgia in 2000 where he worked as a graduate assistant in the Department of Residential Life at UGA. Jeff stayed at UGA an additional year, serving as a Residence Hall Director. Jeff then went to the Georgia Institute of Technology where he worked as a Residence Life Coordinator in the Freshman Experience Program from 2001-2003.

Following his time in Georgia, Jeff returned to Missouri in 2003 serving in various positions at the University of Missouri. From 2003 until 2006 Jeff served as the Coordinator for Student Services and Records in the Trulaske College of Business at MU. In this role he coordinated the summer orientation and advising for entering business students and acted as an academic advisor throughout the year. Jeff then became the Coordinator for the Freshman Interest Groups and Transfer Interest Groups programs at MU, a role he served in from 2006-2010. It was in this role that he first became interested in the experience of Peer Advisors who worked in the program. In 2010 Jeff returned to the Trulaske College of Business as Director of Undergraduate Programs.
Since 2012, Jeff has served as the Assistant Dean of Undergraduate Programs and Student Services in the Trulaske College of Business. In this role he oversees the college’s undergraduate advising office, the Professional Development Program, and student recruitment and retention. He intends to remain in the area of student services, both in academic affairs and student affairs, helping students reach their goals and successfully proceed through college.