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

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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.

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.