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The Compensation of Resident Assistants and its Results on RA Retention

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NORTHERN ILLINOIS UNIVERSITY

The Compensation of Resident Assistants and its Results
on RA Retention.

A Thesis Submitted to the

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With University Honors

Department of Management

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ABSTRACT:

This study examines the role of compensation in relation to the resident assistant position. The purpose of the research is to evaluate if the compensation packages currently offered affect RA retention. This is the first type of research completed on RA compensation so there is little former research to refer to. Yet, ample research has been done on general compensation practices, and the most recent shows the theory, "you get what you pay for," as a current industry trend.

This study used a survey to collect information from volunteer resident assistants by means of five public, Illinois universities. Subjects were asked to rate how certain outcomes of being an RA met their expectations, questions were used to see their strength of agreement to positive comments regarding the RA position, and finally the subjects had to rate how important both topics were to them. A five point Likert scale was used to reply. Once the

surveys were returned and the raw data was transformed, analysis using mean comparisons and T-tests was completed. The results showed that there is enough evidence to conclude that compensation may have an affect on retention. But the results also provided reasons to believe that compensation is not the only aspect of the position that needs to be improved in order to increase retention.

Introduction

The issue of compensation has been the focus of numerous studies and research. Compensation can come in the traditional monetary form, and also in the form of perks such as special parking spaces and health club memberships. It is an important tool for communicating and reinforcing new values and behaviors, supporting accountability for results, and rewarding the achievement of new performance goals. Compensation can be used as a motivator. If used effectively, it can hasten the acceptance of and commitment to change. Compensation is a very powerful tool in any organization.

The focus of compensation in this study is in relation to college university resident assistants (RAs). Resident assistants are undergraduate students who each oversee, typically, 35-50 students on a residence hall floor. It is considered by housing executives to be a seven-day a week, twenty-four hours a day job. There are ongoing discussions and dialog as to how an organization should compensate such a position. Current forms of compensation include one or more of the following: room and/or board waivers, on campus parking waivers, stipends and other various perks. The type of compensation differs for each university depending on each of their budgetary allowances.

The question is, are current compensation practices adequate for the duties and responsibilities each resident assistant is given? How important is compensation to a

resident assistant? Does it play a role in their decision to return to the position? This study has been designed to examine such questions and hopes to provide some useful insight into the compensation of resident assistants.

Problem Analysis

The 24-hour per day job of the resident assistant includes many responsibilities and roles. In an article written for the Journal of College Student Development, the RA's role is described as, "acting as a leader, providing counseling and assistance with personal problems, mediating interpersonal disputes, making referrals to both on-campus and off-campus resources, performing administrative tasks, responding to medical emergencies and other crises, advising on academic matters, designing and organizing activities and programs, maintaining a positive living environment, and enforcing university policies," (Dodd and Hardy, 1998). In a related article, "Students and administrators at colleges and universities across the country agree that the job of the resident assistant has become very complicated...dealing with such problems as alcoholism, suicide, homophobia, racism, date rape, eating disorders and stress," (Dodge, 1990). Because of these great and varied responsibilities, resident assistants are generally required to return to the university up to two weeks before classes begin in order to complete rigorous training programs. These programs include communication skills, crisis intervention, and emergency response procedures. Many universities also require RAs to

complete additional training throughout the academic year. Parents are entrusting universities with partial responsibility for the well-being of their child, therefore, it is imperative that housing staff members are properly trained. This responsibility can not be taken lightly. Increasing amounts of time and money are being used towards training programs.

University housing organizations run a strong parallel to outside businesses in respect to the level of customer service that is expected in every aspect of the organization. RAs have an added expectation of exemplifying a high degree of customer service while performing their tasks. Taking into consideration the responsibilities the RA has, and the high level of professionalism that is expected of them, it seems that only top quality students would qualify for the position. Typically these students have numerous other employment opportunities available to them and get to choose the best opportunity. In most cases, one of the factors weighted most when college students are choosing employment is the compensation they will receive.

For years housing executives and employees have discussed the compensation of resident assistants. RAs do have 24-hour responsibilities and how does an organization compensate for that? Figure 1 shows research done by Scott P. Ranger, an assistant director of residence life at Appalachian State University. You can see that each university compensates their resident assistants slightly

different. This is representative of universities across the country.

**Resident Assistant Compensation Report
1998-99 Academic Year**

December 8, 1998

North Carolina Private Universities	Stipend	Room	Board	Private Room	Parking	Other perks:	Programming Requirement	Staff Dev. Hall Area	Requirement Campus	Break duty
Appalachian St.	1-\$3,190 2-\$3,690	No	No	No some consideration	No location preference	Cultural Events Pass (\$125)	3/wk.			Not req. \$41/day
East Carolina Univ.	\$210/yr.	Yes \$3,100 value	9-wk. plan \$1,810 value	Yes	No		2/mo. Plus comm. dev. Activity	0 0 new RA's - class	1/mo.	\$25/day 5 bldgs yr. rd.
Fayetteville State Univ.	NA	Yes (\$1,800)	No	Yes pending availability	No		3/wk.	NA	3/wk.	No
N.C. State	1-\$1,000 2-\$1,200	Yes	15/wk. & \$300 or 7/wk. & \$500	No some consideration	Yes	local phone	By area	By area	None	NA
North Carolina School of the Arts	1-\$2,070 2-\$2,250 Head RA - \$2,500	No	No	Yes (\$ double rate)	Reserved @ reg. student rate	programming budget of \$50	8 pts/wk.	NA	4 of 6 options	No
UNC-Ashville	1-2,400 2-2,520	No	No	No	No	Sweat shirt, Polo shirt, and 2 retreats	2/wk. (1 soc., ed.) 1 com. serv. proj./yr.	6/wk.	1/semester	No
UNC-Charlotte	not a net stipend	Yes \$1,800	\$250/wk. toward board	Yes	No	\$300 educational stipend	4/wk.	bi-weekly	4/semester	required
UNC-Greensboro	\$3,300	No	No	Yes (\$ double rate)	No	\$1660 scholarship/wk.	1-7/wk., depending on area	depends on hall & area		No full time staff
UNC-Wilmington	\$4,300	No	No	Yes (\$ double rate)	No	free refrigerator, trips, retreats	1/mo. (minimum)	1/mo. (depends on RC of h or a)	1 in service/mo.	Yes No comp.
Western Carolina U.	Head-\$4,120 1-\$2,340 2-\$2,399	1 BR Apt. No	No No	Yes Yes @ Dble. Rate	Reserved		2/sem., 1 Sportmeow/wk		1 per wk.	No

North Carolina Public Universities	Stipend	Room	Board	Private Room	Parking	Other perks:	Programming Requirement	Staff Dev. Hall Area	Requirement Campus	Break duty
Duke University	1-1800 2-1950	Yes \$5,000	No	Yes	No	extra b-ball tickets in buffer zone phone service	3/wk.		3/wk. GOLD options	Not req.
Gardner-Webb	1-\$1,700 2-\$1,850 3-\$1,900	No	No	Yes (\$ double rate)	No		3/wk.	NA	2/mo.	NA
Greensboro College	\$1,000	Yes (half price)	No	Yes \$2,350	Yes (free)		1/mo.	NA	1/wk.	if needed
Lenoir Rhyne	1-\$2,200 Scholarship	No	No	Yes	No	Head RA's get a \$500 bonus scholarship	9/wk.	1	2/mo.	No
Louisburg College	work study-\$1,200 all others \$1,000	No	No	Yes (\$ double rate)	Yes (free)		pt. system 2.5/wk.	NA	3/wk. (train. sessions)	NA
Mars Hill	\$1,250	No	No	Yes (\$ double rate)	staff spaces		3/wk. (1 soc., ed., com.)	NA	monthly in service	NA
NC Wesleyan College	\$1,440-\$3,000	No	No	Yes (\$ double rate)	No		4/wk. (3 individual, 1 grp.)	NA	in service throughout year.	Not req.
Wake Forest University	1-\$2,750 2-\$3,000	Yes \$1,000/wk	No	Yes (\$ double rate)	No	voice mail for all students	3 ed. (initiatives)/wk. newsletter, etc. to beg.	2/mo. NA	1/mo.	Not req.
Barton College	\$150	Yes half \$866	No	Yes \$1,000	No		3/yr.		1/mo.	Not req. \$10.50
Lees-McRae College	\$1,400-\$2,000 Scholarship	No	No	Yes \$510/yr.	Preference		3/wk.		1 Cr. Hr. Class	No
Davidson College	1- \$405 2- \$480 3- \$355	1/2 room \$3,600	No	Option	No	No	5/wk.		4/wk.	Yes Fall and Spring

FIGURE 1

When RAs view the chart, it makes some feel very fortunate and some very cheated. Their feelings are based on "the concept of equity in the perception of pay," by Karl E. Weick. He believes, "inequity exists for persons

whenever he perceives that the ratio of his outcomes to inputs and the ratio of Other's outcomes to Other's inputs are unequal" (Weick, 1972). Though it might be difficult for each university to have equal ratios in relation to one another, according to research, it seems necessary to obtain input/output equality at each individual university.

Thomas J. McCoy writes in his book on Compensation and Motivation that, "The business reality is that the performance level that you as a manager are paying for is the performance level that you are receiving" (McCoy, 1992). In short, you get what you pay for. Another source corroborates this sentiment by pointing out, "There is no doubt that money directs behavior" (Flannery, Hofrichter, and Platten; 1996). Further, W. Edwards Deming states that our present system of management crushes out intrinsic motivation by replacing it with extrinsic motivation, by constantly judging people (Flannery, 1996). This study of resident assistant compensation recognizes that it is not the only characteristic that leads to job satisfaction and retention. Therefore, research was collected on many different aspects of the position.

As a resident assistant for the past three years I have noticed an increasing trend of resident assistants that leave the position after only one year. Though numerous reasons have been given for leaving, the one that is frequently noted is the low compensation RAs are given in comparison to the work involved in the position. This study

seeks to find how important compensation really is to resident assistants across the state of Illinois and if it is possible to conclude the results are tied to increasingly low retention rates.

Method

Subjects

The subjects of this study consisted of volunteer resident assistants from five Illinois public universities: Eastern, Illinois State, Northern, University of Illinois at Chicago, and University of Illinois at Champaign. These universities were chosen due to a relatively equal number in the student body. Each university also had similar compensation packages that included room and board waivers as well as a monthly stipend. There was one exclusion to this, what will be known as university #1, does not compensate with a monthly stipend. A total of 47 subjects took part in the study. Of these, the two subjects from University of Illinois at Chicago were thrown out in order to have approximately equal representation at ten subjects per university, and also to have all the universities in a non-urban environment.

Method

Each subject was sent a survey (see Figure 2) to complete and return in a self addressed stamped envelope. No information, including the purpose of the survey, was given to the subjects prior to or upon receiving the survey. The survey consisted first of seven questions asking if

Resident Assistant Survey

University: _____

Please circle the one statement that most accurately describes your current situation:

- 1.) I plan on returning to the RA job next year.
- 2.) I would return to the RA job next year but I am graduating.
- 3.) I do not plan on returning to the RA job next year.
- 4.) I do not plan on returning to the RA job and I am not graduating next year.

Please rate the following outcomes based on your experiences. The left scale asks to what degree the center statements have met your expectations, the right side asks you to rate how important it is to you. Circle your answers.

Below Expectations	Neutral	Above Expectations	<u>Outcomes of Being an RA</u>	Not Important	Neutral	Very Important				
1	2	3		1	2	3				
1	2	3	4	5	Leadership skill development.	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	Resume enhancement.	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	Volunteerism opportunities.	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	Compensation/Benefits.	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	Experience relative to my academic major.	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	Interpersonal skills development.	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	Overall Experience.	1	2	3	4	5

Please rate the following statements based on your experiences. The left scale asks to what extent you agree with the center statements, the right side asks you to rate how important it is to you. Please circle your answer.

Highly Disagree	Neutral	Highly Agree	<u>Statements</u>	Not Important	Neutral	Very Important				
1	2	3		1	2	3				
1	2	3	4	5	I receive support from my supervisor.	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	I receive support from housing executives.	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	My programming responsibilities are reasonable.	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	Support services on campus have been willing to help me.	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	I have time to interact with residents on my floor.	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	The disciplinary system is fair.	1	2	3	4	5
1	2	3	4	5	The number of hours I am expected to work as an RA is reasonable.	1	2	3	4	5

- ♦ Are you allowed to hold outside employment? YES NO
- ♦ Have you obtained outside employment while being an RA? YES NO
- ♦ If there was one thing that you could change about the RA position, what would it be? (Use the back side if needed.)

FIGURE 2

certain outcomes of being an RA did or did not meet their expectations, based on a five point Likert scale. The subjects then rated the importance of those same outcomes. The next seven questions asked the subjects to rate their level of agreement, on a five point Likert scale, regarding positive statements about the position. They again were asked to rate the statement's importance to them. The final three questions asked specifically about outside employment opportunities and if they had taken advantage of any. There was also an opportunity to make any overall comments on the one thing about the position they would change. There were no instructions given to the subjects regarding the survey except a deadline for their return. I had no control over the conditions in which the survey was completed.

The hope is that the research will be able to decipher whether compensation is tied to resident assistant retention and if not, possible other reasons why the RA retention rate seems to be decreasing.

Results

Raw Data Transformation

Prior to analyzing the data, the following transformations were performed upon the raw data.

In order to have all of the information gathered from the survey in numerical form, there were number values assigned to questions that did not already have numerical value. In the first question, the RAs are asked to choose a statement that best describes their current situation. The

number 1 was used to indicate RAs that planned on returning, would return if they were not graduating, and RAs who did not plan on returning. The number 2 was used to indicate RAs who did not plan on returning to the position but were not graduating.

The last section inquires about outside employment opportunities and has yes/no responses attached to them. A "yes" response was indicated by the number 1, and a "no" response indicated by the number 2.

The final question asked the RAs to choose one aspect of the position they would change. If a comment was given, it was indicated by a number 1. If no comment was given, it was indicated by a number 2.

Once everything was transformed into numerical data, all of the information was put into a spread sheet so calculations and analysis could be completed. Overall means for each category were calculated to prepare the information for comparison. Next, surveys were separated by university and the averages were calculated for how respondents answered the compensation expectation and importance questions. Then, T-tests were run on those averages to see if they had any real significance which is set at $p < .05$. Finally, the percentage of students that took advantage of outside employment was calculated.

Data Analysis

Once the analysis of the overall means was complete (see Figure 3), RAs did feel that compensation met their

Average (per university) regarding compensation expectations

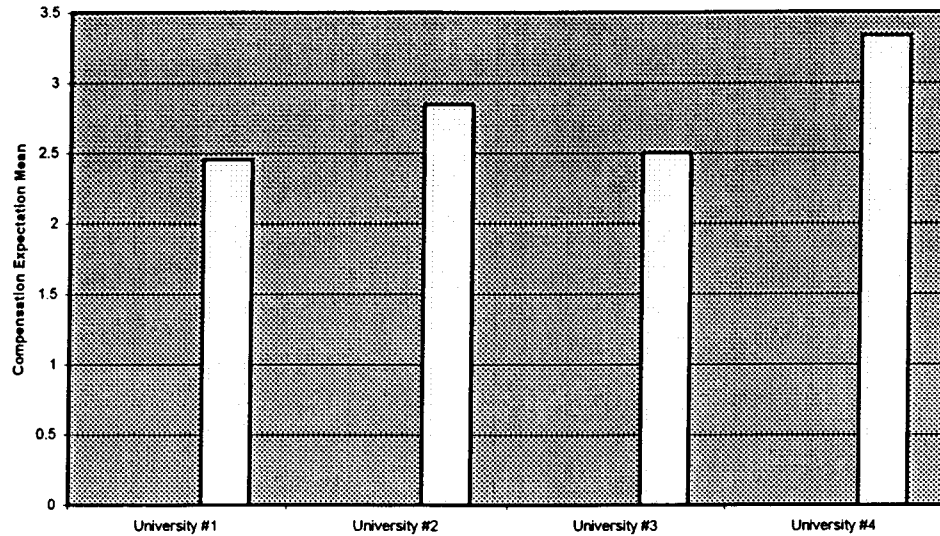


FIGURE 3

expectations the least. But it is important to note that compensation was only found to be moderately important when compared to other aspects of being a resident assistant. Clearly other experiences of the position such as leadership and interpersonal skills development were much more important according to the means.

When the universities were separated and means were again calculated (see Figure 4), university #1 who has the smallest compensation package, also had subjects the least satisfied with what they were receiving as compensation and it was the most important to them. In comparison, university #3 also had a low mean in the area of compensation meeting their expectations but they also scored it as the least important to them in relation to the other universities.

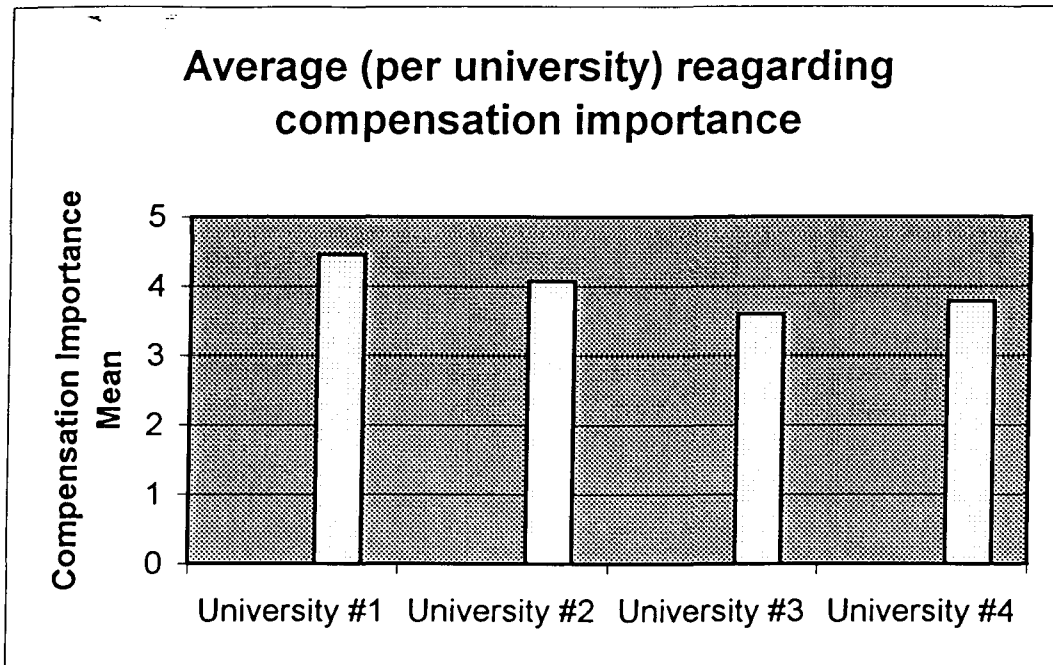


FIGURE 4

The T-tests run on compensation expectations between universities showed significance only in the results of university #3 vs. #4 (see Figure 5). Significance is noted when $p < .05$.

T-tests run on means of compensation expectations	
T-TEST - u1 V u2 0.439	T-TEST - u3 V u4 0.032
T-TEST - u1 V u3 0.931	T-TEST - u2 V u3 0.41
T-TEST - u1 V u4 0.07	T-TEST - u2 V u4 0.145

FIGURE 5

Further information regarding how many subjects, of

those who were allowed, obtained outside employment was calculated. Thirty-two of the 45 subjects were allowed to obtain outside employment and 65.6% of the subjects took advantage of that opportunity.

The last set of data that was analyzed was of the subjects that had a current situation of 2 (see Figure 6), which meant that they had no plans to return to the position (they were not graduating). This small subgroup of subjects with a mean of 2.2 out of a possible 5, felt that compensation was below their expectations. Of the 5 subjects in the subgroup, 4 of them came from university #1, who had the smallest compensation package. It is interesting to note that even though these RAs have chosen not to return to the position, they still have a overall 3.4 mean score in regards to how the position met their expectations. This mean score is similar to those RAs who have chosen to return. It implies that it was not the position that was disagreeable to them, but some other factor, possibly compensation according to the results, that played a role in their decision not to return.

Mean of Compensation Expectations and Importance For RAs Not Returning and Not Graduating			
<u>University Number</u>	<u>Compensation Expectation</u>	<u>Compensation Importance</u>	<u>Overall Expectation</u>
1	2	4	4
1	2	5	3
1	2	4	3
1	2	5	4
2	3	4	3
Mean	2.2	4.4	3.4

FIGURE 6

Written comments, regarding one thing they would change about the position, given by the subjects also need to be taken into account. Though there is no way to calculate a mean score in order to do comparisons, there were significant trends in the responses. The most common response was a request for more pay in the form of a stipend. It is important to note that in most cases when more pay was requested, the option to not receive more pay was viable, as long as the responsibilities were decreased. The second most common response was a desire for more support from housing executives.

Conclusions

Before discussing the results, it is important to point out where skewing could have occurred in the survey process. The subjects that were given the survey were volunteers from the different universities. It could be assumed that if students were really disgruntled with their RA experience, they would not volunteer to complete a survey. Since the surveys were sent through the mail, I also had no control over the environment in which they were completed, whether it was rushed or relaxed. Finally, there was a relatively small sample size of only 47 subjects. This too may have contributed to inaccurate results.

It is clear, that while compensation overall is not rated below expectations, it is the least satisfactory of all other outcomes of being a RA. Subjects who are leaving the resident assistant position are also indicating, by the

scores on their surveys, that compensation is below expectations and it is very important to them. Yet, they are still stating that their overall experience has been above expectations. I think it is appropriate to conclude that compensation may have a negative affect on overall job satisfaction and eventual retention. But, this is not the only aspect of the position that has not quite met RAs' expectations. The survey shows that housing executive support is lacking, and RAs are displeased with the amount of hours worked and programming requirements given to them. The items just mentioned, that fall below expectations, were rated as very important to RAs.

Implications

With housing professionals admitting to the increasingly difficult role the RA plays on a regular basis it is hard to understand why those RAs might not be compensated in accordance to the statement. Theorists are claiming that "you get what you pay for." Housing systems, with their great responsibility to the parents and students of the university, can not afford to hire anything but the best students. Are they limiting their applicant pool with the compensation they are offering? Should they spend the money, used to train new RAs every year, instead on current RAs in a retention effort? These are questions that require additional research to answer. Other areas that now need to be researched include, finding why at some universities, compensation is not considered important in comparison to

other aspects of the position. And, if responsibilities were decreased as some housing professionals suggest, would the current compensation packages now be adequate? The final area I suggest for more research would be, if additional monetary compensation could not be given, what other type of compensation or perks could be used in its place?

Research being done in the area of resident assistants is just beginning to occur. Therefore, this study is very basic and can not possibly be comprehensive with the limited background and statistical information available. My goal is to at least draw attention to the issue, in hopes that future generations of resident assistants are compensated for the hard work and dedication the position requires. And for housing systems to have the ability to recruit the most qualified applicants for such an important job.

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