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“Make It More Fun”: Residence Life Employees’ Insights on Hosting and Advertising Outreach Programs for Undergraduate Students

ABSTRACT

What can library workers learn about student-centered programming and outreach from student employees who design, advertise, and lead programs for college students as part of their employment in a student housing or residence life department? This study draws on cognitive work analysis to understand how employees of the Office of Residence Life (ORL) at a public research university host outreach programs for students. Fourteen interviews were conducted and analyzed to ascertain the definition and purpose of programming led by resident advisers (RAs), challenges in this work, and strategies for overcoming those challenges. Findings indicate that these student employees build community while meeting ORL’s programming requirements, assessing students’ needs, designing relevant and fun programs, and advertising programs in multiple ways. This study offers recommendations for program planners in libraries and extends the literature on co-curricular programming, providing detail from student employees’ perspectives.

KEYWORDS

programming, residence life, cognitive work analysis, academic libraries, student affairs

Academic libraries are one of many entities in American higher education that host optional co-curricular programs (such as workshops and other events) as outreach to students. Additional campus program organizers include student affairs units (including residence life or university housing offices), academic departments, student clubs, and administrators. These groups offer programming to meet specific organizational goals, as well as to support campus-level learning objectives (Akens and Novak 2016, 339), and to promote student engagement (Eshbach 2020), a feeling of belonging (Eshbach 2020, 4), and a sense of community (Jaworski 2018, 114) on campus.

Most students who live in on-campus university housing have the opportunity to participate in programs offered by student employees who live in the same facility (Beck 2015, 36; Erb, Sinclair, and Braxton 2015, 93; Jaworski 2018, 4). These employees, usually known as resident advisers/advisors or resident assistants (RAs), are often required to design and host programs for students who live in the residence halls where the RAs also live and work

(Akens and Novak 2016, 336). Students living in campus housing, often called residents, are not usually required to attend programming, so RAs must attract residents to their programs. This is a familiar problem for libraries, who often struggle to attract students to programs. However, unlike most library staff, RAs can apply their experiences as college students (Roland and Agosto 2017, 187) to their programming work.

This study explores, through the lens of cognitive work analysis (CWA), how RAs pursue programming work. The goal was to learn from the RAs' dual experience as current students and program planners. My experience as a "Faculty Friend" for a residence hall at the university where I work as a librarian inspired this research. In the Faculty Friend program, a faculty member is paired with a residence hall and invited to attend some of the events with the students in that hall. The goal of the program is to create positive faculty-student interactions. Through interactions with the staff in my assigned residence hall, I heard discussions about the challenges RAs face in their programming work. I hoped that learning about RAs' work would ultimately allow me to support them through training (Roth and Bisantz 2013, 240), collaborations, or other interventions—or maybe even embed library-related content into their programs. Because I chose to focus on the programming work that RAs do, I selected CWA as the theoretical framework in which to ground this study.

Literature Review

Cognitive Work Analysis (CWA). CWA centers on how people do work in complex sociotechnical systems (Stanton and Jenkins 2018, 7). CWA is a multidisciplinary approach that connects to psychology, engineering, and sociology (Stanton and Jenkins 2018, 7). Jens Rasmussen and colleagues at the Risø National Laboratory in Denmark originally developed CWA in the 1960s and 1970s to design more reliable nuclear power systems (Naikar 2017, 529). Researchers employing CWA have studied many types of work, including librarianship (Simons, Dainoff, and Mark, 2007), health care, urban planning, and others (Stanton and Jenkins 2018, 4). I found no evidence of literature applying CWA to the work of RAs. This omission in the literature exists despite the fact that CWA is especially suited to "complex, dynamic" domains that require workers to "act adaptively in the face of unanticipated consequences" (Roth and Bisantz 2013, 240). Since RAs must display adaptability (Longwell-Grice and Kerr 2013, 99) in a complex domain—the residence hall—CWA is an appropriate framework for studying their work.

Residence Hall Programming. RAs develop programs for students living in residence halls, yet little research explores how they do this work. Numerous studies examine RAs' experiences, including how they navigate their responsibilities (Roland and Agosto 2017), build community (Erb, Sinclair, and Braxton 2015, 92), experience racism (Harper et al. 2011), and understand their contributions to student success (Renn 2020). An extensive search of the literature retrieved only five studies with results about RAs' programming work (Beck 2015; Conlogue 1993; Jaworski 2018; Riker 1988; Sargent 2010). One study found that RAs believed hosting programs was the twelfth most important job task out of about eighty (Riker 1988, 28). In another study, RAs

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reported that, of the fourteen roles they play, providing programs was the least important (Conlogue 1993, 68). The residents in these studies also reported low enthusiasm for programming. Respondents in one study recommended that RAs should stop providing social and educational programs (Sargent 2010, 123). However, one study found that participating in RA programming was “significantly predictive of residential students’ thriving levels” (Jaworski 2018, 122). Finally, a study that analyzed perceptions of programming argued that “programming is ultimately a tool for community creation and maintenance,” and that programs benefited the residents and the community (Beck 2015, 36).

Residence Life and Library Collaborations. People working in residence life and in academic libraries have collaborated on outreach programs for students in a variety of ways. Early collaborations included creating libraries in residence halls. This type of collaboration was popular in the 1940s to 1960s in the US, but was almost non-existent by 2014 (Miller 2015, 3).

In recent years, library workers have provided services or outreach in residence halls, including hosting craft programs (Miller 2015, 11), offering makerspace tools and services (Shivley, Jarrell, and Denton 2018), and scheduling librarians to staff or live in residence halls (Long 2011; Ruediger and Neal 2004; Schmehl Hines 2007; Strothmann and Antell 2010; Tag, Buck, and Mautino 2005; Tran 2014). Several other authors describe various library outreach efforts in student housing (Barnes and Payton 2007; Beene et al. 2019; Bishop 2018; Nicholas et al. 2015; Riehle and Witt 2009; Ursin Cummings 2007), all of which attracted low student participation. These housing-based library outreach efforts, despite their unpopularity, illustrate the recent trend of embedding library outreach efforts in residence halls and other student-centered spaces on college campuses (Rudin 2008, 60; Strothmann and Antell 2010, 48).

Library staff have also collaborated with residence life staff by hosting outreach events for on-campus residents in academic libraries, instead of in residence halls. These types of collaborations are less common in the literature. Examples include library-hosted workshops and films as part of a residence life learning model (Kelly and Gauder 2020) and library orientations for RAs (Barnes and Payton 2007; Cannon-Rech 2018). Residence life staff have also initiated programming in library spaces, with one example being an overnight event in a library for residents and RAs, hosted by library staff (Otto et al. 2016).

Methodology

Theoretical Framework: Cognitive Work Analysis. In its fullest expression, CWA includes five phases of analysis that focus successively on different layers of work (Roth and Bisantz 2013, 240). These phases are:

1. Work domain analysis: Examines the overall work domain, or the “physical and socially constructed constraints” in which work takes place (Roth and Bisantz 2013, 244).
2. Control task analysis: Considers the tasks that people do within the work domain (Stanton and Jenkins 2018, 20; Vicente 1999, 183).
3. Strategies analysis: Identifies how people accomplish these tasks (Vicente 1999, 113).
4. Social organization and cooperation analysis: Addresses who uses these strategies to accomplish tasks (Vicente 1999, 114), including how people communicate and cooperate (Stanton and Jenkins 2018, 32).
5. Worker competency analysis: Focuses on workers’ skills, cognition, and knowledge (Vicente 1999, 115).

This study employed the first three phases of CWA: work domain analysis, control task analysis, and strategies analysis. Few published studies utilize all five CWA phases; most studies employ the phase(s) that relate(s) to the needs of the design project (Roth and Bisantz 2013, 258). I selected phases 1–3 because I was interested in the strategies RAs employed to achieve their programming-related tasks, in hopes of possibly supporting their work by providing library-related programming content in the future.

Participants in this study were employees of James Madison University (JMU), a public research university in the American South. Enrollment at the time of data collection (2018–2019) was 21,820 students, 19,918 of whom were undergraduates. Approximately 32 percent of students lived in university-owned housing. First-year students were required to live in residence halls on campus. Over 200 students were employed by JMU’s Office of Residence Life (ORL).

Strategies analysis and other phases of CWA require an analyst to collect information about “a variety of concrete cases from multiple sources” (Roth 2009, 142) and multiple roles. I first spoke with ORL faculty members to understand with whom RAs work, to create a plan to interview multiple people in their work domain.

The university’s ORL and Institutional Review Board approved the research protocol. A grant from the library provided prepaid debit cards as incentives for participants. I worked with ORL faculty to recruit ORL employees via email. Interested participants submitted an online form linked from the email message. I scheduled interviews with twelve people, based on the order I received form responses.

Pseudonym	Role	Length of experience working in the residence life field
F1	Faculty member	Ten years
F2	Faculty member	One year
HD1	Hall Director (HD)	<1 year as HD; 2 years as RA
HD2	HD	<1 year
HD3	HD	<1 year as HD; 3 years as RA
PA	Program Adviser (PA)	2 years as PA; 1 year as RA
RA1	Resident Adviser (RA)	3 years
RA2	RA	3 years
RA3	RA	2 years
RA4	RA	3 years
RA5	RA	<1 year
RA6	RA	<1 year

Table 1. Participants.

I interviewed six RAs, three hall directors (HD), one program adviser (PA), and two faculty members from ORL (see Table 1). RAs are student employees living in a residence hall. They provide leadership, programming, and support for the students living on their assigned floor or in their hall. HDs supervise RAs. PAs are student employees who provide supplies and program ideas to RAs. The ORL faculty members provide management, support, and vision for programming and other learning initiatives in the residence halls.

Data Collection. I wrote interview questions based on the first three phases of CWA (see Appendix 1 for the interview questions for RAs). The interviews were semi-structured; I followed the interview guide, but I also asked unplanned follow-up questions and sometimes asked questions in a different order than

originally specified. Each interview lasted between 45 and 90 minutes. All interviews were audio recorded after informed consent was confirmed. The recordings were professionally transcribed with personally identifiable details removed.

I interviewed the HDs, PA, and faculty members once each, and I interviewed the RAs twice each. The first RA interviews took the form of paired depth interviews, to discuss their work in general, answering questions inspired by CWA’s work domain analysis and control task analysis. I selected paired depth interviews as the first RA interview because they allow participants to interact with each other and compare their experiences in conversation (Wilson, Onwuegbuzie, and Manning 2016, 1551). Paired depth interviews can be helpful to describe “phenomena shared by persons in commonly formed teams or relationships” (Wilson, Onwuegbuzie, and Manning, 2016, 1559). I also chose to start with paired interviews because, among other aspects of my identity affecting this research, I am a faculty member, a position that typically grades student work and wields other types of power in the university. This

power differential might have been intimidating to students. I had hoped that by pairing RAs with a coworker in the first meeting, the interview would be more comfortable for each RA. I fully recognize that the power differences still existed and that they may have affected the RAs’ comfort, as well as how they answered my questions.

“All research participants consistently identified building community as the main goal of the RAs’ programming work.”

Next, each RA participated in an individual interview, in which we talked about the challenges they faced at work and the strategies they developed in response to these challenges. This individual interview was inspired by CWA’s strategies analysis phase. I held individual interviews for this phase because I wanted the RAs to be able to discuss work-related challenges without a coworker present. Topics that could cause shame or embarrassment should be avoided in paired depth interviews (Wilson, Onwuegbuzie, and Manning, 2016, 1555).

Analysis. I considered using a variety of CWA’s conceptual tools, such as decision ladders or abstraction hierarchies (Roth and Bisantz 2013, 254). However, my analysis did not follow one of these “specific manner[s] of representation” (Roth and Bisantz 2013, 256). Instead, CWA inspired my analysis of the data, which relied on open coding, loosely based on CWA’s first three phases.

After I read the transcripts once each, I created codes related to the first three phases of CWA. I then re-read and coded the transcripts using NVivo, which is software that supports qualitative data analysis. After coding, I used NVivo to retrieve all text associated with certain codes. I then sought to identify common themes and illustrative stories within each code. Next, I wrote analytical memos summarizing my early findings. As my interpretations continued to develop, I used two main criteria to determine whether to include each claim in these findings: the “intensity and insightfulness” (Harper et al. 2011, 187) of comments and stories, and the number of times each concept or code was mentioned by participants.

Data Trustworthiness. By asking the same questions of multiple people in a variety of workplace roles, I designed triangulation into data collection (Wilson, Onwuegbuzie, and Manning 2016, 1555). Triangulation, in qualitative research, refers to a researcher “drawing from evidence from multiple sources” to increase the credibility of research findings (Given 2008, 893). As I interpreted the data and wrote the analytical memos, I continually referred back to the interview transcripts to ground the findings in the data. Additionally, I shared

these memos with the faculty participants as a member check, a qualitative research procedure in which findings and interpretations are shared with the research participants for their feedback as a way to “optimize the validity of qualitative research findings” (Given 2008, 501). The faculty members were invited to give feedback on the analytical memos, in case I had misinterpreted anything. I also shared initial findings with a new group of PAs and received feedback from them, as an additional member check.

Findings

Work Domain Analysis: RAs Aim to Build Community Through Programming. All research participants consistently identified building community as the main goal of the RAs’ programming work. As RA1 put it, “you’re trying to build community within a building.” Multiple RAs posited that programs help them build interpersonal relationships with their residents, which is an important basis for building community. For example, when RA2 explained that she dissuaded other staff from attending her programs, she said, “it’s a relationship with my residents.” RAs also reported that programs help residents build relationships among each other. As RA6 explained, attending programming helps residents “get out of their own world . . . and know that there are other people in the hall.” As HD1 stated, “I think the main goal [of programming] is to build that community and make sure that everybody’s comfortable.” The PA described programming as ameliorating negative aspects of community, arguing that programs “avoid problems in the halls or resolve issues . . . [and] bring everyone together for that group atmosphere.” Similarly, a faculty member explained that programming may help improve relationships between RAs and residents, offering, “I think from an RA perspective . . . they get the benefit [when they lead a program] of being seen as something other than a disciplinarian, and so that helps them build community.”

Work Domain Analysis: RAs Must Adhere to a Programming Model. When discussing the definition of programs, all participant types referred to the ORL programming model. At the time of data collection, ORL’s programming model required that RAs host two community programs, one academic program, and one multicultural program every semester. Additionally, HDs were required to offer specialty programs covering topics such as safety and security. RA1 summarized the RAs’ sentiments when she defined programs as “an organized time to be with your residents and talking about a specific topic, but I’d say they [ORL] define a program in their categories and I think that’s more how my mind thinks of them.” A faculty member explained, “programs are planned activities that should be intentional in design, so the RAs should think about what their residents need as well as how they fall into the categories within our programming model.” The PA also emphasized the programming model, defining programs as “events held by RAs that are meant to challenge residents, to educate residents, to give them a new experience... the program model wants these programs to be substantial for students.”

Control Task Analysis and Strategies Analysis: Top Four Challenges RAs Face. To understand how RAs applied a variety of strategies in their programming work, I asked multiple questions about their jobs’ complexities and challenges, and how they faced these. The four main challenges that RAs described were: getting residents to attend programs, scheduling programs, designing academic programs, and summoning the creativity to design programs.

All participants discussed the challenge of low program attendance. RA2 stated, “the biggest challenge is attendance and making sure people want to show up.” As HD3 said, “no matter what we try, students just were not interested in attending programs.” RA3 shared details about how this can be

disheartening, noting, “the most challenging thing [is] when you’re expecting more people to show up, but only a few people show up, and you still have to hold the program. You’re obviously disappointed at the lack of turnout, but you still have to make it worth their while for the people that did show up. I think that’s probably the hardest part of programming.”

The difficulty of scheduling programs was another main challenge. As RA5 explained, “you’re never going to find a time that everybody can come. All students are ridiculously busy.” Several participants linked scheduling programs with the attendance challenge, as well as with the concept that a program needs to be worth the time. RA3 noted that, “you have to think of . . . what time would work for you, and then try to incentivize [residents]. Because [programs] are taking away time from them to do something. You have to make it worth it. . . I think that’s probably the biggest problem I have, making sure that tradeoff is there.” HD1 also discussed the attendance and scheduling challenges, and linked them back to the community-building goal, explaining, “you don’t know . . . whether people are going to come [to programs] and what day works best, so I think that can be a challenge. Just that initial start-up of ‘How do we build a community?’”

Most participants underscored that it was challenging for RAs to create academic programs that met the requirements of ORL’s programming model. All research participants believed that academic programs should primarily help students succeed with their schoolwork. A faculty member offered, “we have academic programs because we want them to be a successful college student.” RAs echoed this, including RA3, who stated, “academic [programs are] something that you can discuss in the residence hall that will benefit you in the classroom.” However, all participant types noted that it was sometimes difficult to discern whether a program meets ORL’s definition. HD1 found it challenging, even after previous experience as both an RA and an HD, offering, “I’ve always struggled personally understanding what meets an academic program . . . It’s just hard understanding what really makes it academic.” A faculty member acknowledged this difficulty, musing that, “sometimes RAs get confused about what we would say is an academic program.” Similarly, HD2 noted, “I’m going to be honest. The RAs struggle with the academic one because it’s hard to make it informative and appealing for the residents.” Multiple RAs discussed the struggle to create programming that meets the definition of an academic program. For example, RA4 said: “[ORL] can be kind of strict on what is considered an academic program . . . so sometimes you really have to make a reach.” RA4 linked academic program requirements to the attendance challenge, observing, “I think community programs get more . . . attendance than something that’s about academics.”

Mustering the creativity to design programs was another common challenge for RAs. As RA4 said, “creativity [is a challenge], because I kind of lack that. I want the residents to come [to my programs], but I’m more of a black-and-white type of person, like, ‘Let’s throw a PowerPoint together and do this,’ but maybe that’s why I don’t get a lot of residents, because maybe it sounds boring.” RA5 reflected, “thinking of ideas [for programs is a challenge] . . . I don’t want them to feel bored. But I also don’t want to expend a ton of energy to try to think of something wildly creative.” However, some RAs enjoy the creativity challenge, such as RA2, who explained, “[RA1] and I both really enjoy the creativity part of this. I like coming up with ideas and making it personal to my hall’s needs, but I know that some [RAs] struggle with that.”

Strategies Analysis: Assess Residents’ Interests and Needs. I identified three main strategies that the RAs developed to accomplish their programming work, all of which were a direct response to the challenge of attracting students

to the programs. With freedom to pick or design topics within the required programming categories, multiple RAs noted that getting to know the residents' interests and selecting a topic that would be relevant to the residents was extremely important to attract participants to programs. RA1 argued that RAs need to "choose what best fits your community's needs." The PA said RAs should design "something that residents will be excited about and want to come to. It's good to take that inventory of what residents need." RA5 explained that aligning programs with the residents' current needs is important. She shared an example in which she had led a well-attended program on marijuana after a related incident in the hall. She believed that the residents who attended the program on marijuana "were assured that I was paying attention and . . . cared about them. So, I think sometimes we [assess needs] subtly under the radar." HD1 noted that RAs "are encouraged to make sure they're meeting the needs of their residents because . . . that's the overarching goal of the program in the first place."

The RAs assessed what residents needed in multiple ways. Some RAs asked their friends for program ideas or invited those friends to lead programs. Other RAs wrote whiteboard prompts to enable asynchronous communication about programs. RA1 offered, "I've tried writing on my whiteboard . . . and I've gotten pretty good feedback." However, she also noted that asking open-ended questions wasn't enough—she needed to offer multiple program ideas to get good feedback. She explained, "when I ask, 'What do you want to do?' [residents] typically don't come back with a response. So you have to really [ask], 'If I have these ideas, which one would you be interested in doing the most?' . . . You have to be very direct . . . That's probably the biggest struggle: coming up with multiple ideas." Some RAs relied on their personal experiences—recalling the programs they had attended or remembering what they had needed when they were earlier in their college career—to develop relevant programs for their residents.

Strategies Analysis: Design Fun Programs. When facing the challenge of attracting attendants, RAs made programs that were both pertinent and fun. Research participants often noted that their most successful programs were fun. To probe how the research participants defined successful programs, I used NVivo to retrieve all the concepts (shared in Figure 1 in a word cloud by frequency) the research participants used when describing good programs.

So many participants focused on "fun" that it was synonymous with "successful" programs in this context. For instance, RA6 described a successful program by saying, "I combine programs with [mandatory hall meetings]

because I know that [residents] will already be there. At the end of my hall meeting, I said, 'Okay, we're going to do a quick kahoot [a quiz via an online game-based learning platform called "Kahoot!"],' because kahoots are fun . . . I just made it funny and fun . . . they had fun with it and got competitive with it." HD3 also mentioned competition as an aspect of fun, noting, "I think competition is a big thing . . . we want them to get engaged, and that's why I try to do games." The PA emphasized games as



Figure 1. All concepts describing successful programs

well, advising, “I would say just make it more fun. Games . . . are really big for programming.”

RAs consistently contrasted interactive or fun programs with academic classes. A few RAs made statements similar to RA6’s point, that “[residents] sit through class and they don’t want to sit through something boring, so [a good program] would have to be interactive or somehow [offer] some incentive for the students to get them to come.” A faculty member also noted this contrast, sharing that “what students want right now is something they can do [that’s] interactive . . . They don’t want to be lectured at anymore . . . programming [should be] engaging and interactive.” Finally, “fun” was also the keyword mentioned by multiple RAs when describing searches for program ideas. For example, RA5 said, “Pinterest [an online image sharing platform] is also helpful. . . . You can literally look up ‘fun RA programs’ and people have posted pictures of their flyers. Pinterest is so fun . . . It’s secretly the best.”

For the RAs, writing eye-catching program titles was an important aspect of creating successful programs. RA2 explained, “sometimes I like to keep [the title of the program] somewhat mysterious because then it’s like, ‘I don’t know,’” implying that residents would attend a mysteriously-named program to find out what it is. Other RAs suggested that successful program titles should refer to a game, use a punchline, or catch the eye in another way. As RA4 said, “I think an eye-catching name plays a role in whether to come check [a program] out. You’re like, ‘Oh, this sounds fun.’”

Strategies Analysis: Advertise Programs in Multiple Ways. Most participants emphasized the importance of advertising programs in multiple ways as a strategy to attract residents. HD1 explained the range of options, saying that RAs have “many ways [to advertise]. Our hall has a Facebook page . . . [RAs] also use GroupMe . . . They’re encouraged to make flyers . . . Sending out emails [is] also appropriate.” However, several people noted that students do not read email. For instance, HD1 also said, “my main communication for the hall is emailing, and nobody ever reads my emails.” Flyers in the bathrooms and on residents’ room doors were popular advertising tools. RA2 explained, “I really like . . . to make door invitations. I’ll tape it to their door, usually close to their doorknob so they’ll literally have to look at it to unlock their doors. I also put them in the bathroom.” Creating flyers in Canva, an online graphic design platform, was mentioned often. For example, RA6 explained, “I make really cute flyers using Canva. I’m like, ‘If this is cute, maybe they’ll come.’” RA2 argued that, contrary to what some think, students look at non-digital marketing as long as it’s eye-catching. She explained, “there are bulletin boards in [the] residence hall. People look at them . . . Some people are like, ‘Oh, they’re not going to look at a flyer.’ People look at them more than you think. If they’re catchy, eye-catching, you’re going to slow the walk down.”

Discussion and Implications

As the RAs in this study pursued their programming work, they focused on building community, meeting ORL’s programming requirements, assessing their residents’ needs, designing relevant and fun programs, and advertising programs. These efforts were in direct response to the challenges of attracting residents to programs, scheduling programs, offering academic programs, and channeling the creativity needed to design programs. These findings reflect and extend the current published literature on residence hall programming, while offering detail from residence life employees’ perspectives.

This study is not the first to note the attendance challenge for programming, whether in libraries (e.g. Eshbach 2020, 3) or residence halls (e.g. Jaworski 2018, 125). One librarian noted that RAs are “occasionally stumped for programming

ideas that are simultaneously educational and engaging” (Long 2011, 204). A former “Faculty in Residence” member argued that people who offer programs face a “major impediment” because “college students do not want programming” (Browne, Headworth, and Saum 2009, 26). However, this same faculty member doubled program attendance after working with RAs (Browne, Headworth, and Saum 2009, 26). Similarly, another librarian who had served as a “Faculty Resident Mentor” found that RAs are “aware of the specific interests of their peers” and suggested that librarians should “seek their input to integrate fun learning activities and new ideas into library-related workshops” (Bishop 2018).

The findings in this study related to fun, games, competition, and interactivity in programs reflect similar themes in the literature, while adding new details about student employees’ perceptions of fun programs. This study complements a librarian’s claim that students will attend optional residence hall programs that are fun, interactive, and relevant (Long 2011, 207), and mirrors another study’s findings that argued “programming would draw more participants if it were more interactive” (Beck 2015, 38). This study’s findings also align with another study that argues that hosting competitions may help build community and identity in residence halls (Erb, Sinclair, and Braxton 2015, 91).

Although academic librarians and residence life staff have pursued multiple types of partnerships, none of the literature on these partnerships describes efforts to understand what RAs do before embarking on these partnerships. This study, with its focus on the student employees’ work, contributes to the literature on library partnerships with residence life. I selected CWA for this research not only because it is a work-centered lens, but also because it “allows for creative thinking and problem solving,” which encourages an analyst or designer to “consider the need they are addressing, rather than jumping straight in to solving the problem” (Stanton and Jenkins 2018, 44). Therefore, this article reports on the RAs’ programming needs, but does not share the interventions that may be created based on these needs. Library workers and others who host programming for college students may benefit from reviewing the specific programming needs and challenges expressed in this study. However, any library partnerships with residence life should be tailored to the specific needs of the residence life staff, their preferences for collaboration, and the culture of the campus (Bishop 2018).

Recommendations for Library Workers Offering Programming

Library workers who plan to work with RAs or other residence life employees to offer programming to on-campus residents should prioritize:

- Seeking to understand the requirements that shape the programming work of the residence life staff. The interview guides for this study may be adapted for this purpose.
- Designing library-related programming that will help RAs meet work requirements and overcome common job-related challenges.
- Asking residence life staff, especially student employees, for advice on how programming could be designed to be fun for students who attend.
- Providing library programs that RAs can offer directly to their residents, such as an interactive online quiz (e.g., via Kahoot!), or materials for a library-related game or interactive experience that RAs can lead. Asynchronous program content may make it easier for the RA to schedule the program because they will not need to consider the library workers’ schedules.

When designing any type of library programming for students, library employees should consider adopting some of the strategies for programming success that RAs described in this study, including:

- Assessing students’ interests and needs. Consider inviting students to vote or provide other quick feedback on various program ideas via whiteboards or other low-barrier mechanisms.
- Combining library programs with other campus offerings, or providing a structural incentive for students to participate, such as extra credit.
- Designing programs in which the major goal is offering a fun experience, keeping the library-related instruction as a subsidiary goal. Gauge carefully what a specific audience considers fun. One method to understand fun might be to ask a few RAs what their most successful programs have been, even if there is no plan to work with residence life staff on a program.
- Naming programs cleverly to catch attention. Consider asking RAs, other student employees, or a student advisory board for advice on eye-catching program names.
- Asking RAs and other students who offer programs to share information about their online resources (e.g., Pinterest, Canva) or on-campus support for program design and promotion.
- Advertising programs in multiple ways, including digital and in-person media. Observe how student-led programming is advertised, and consider following the students’ lead on advertising.

Limitations

As a small, qualitative study conducted on one campus, this research has several limitations. First, I conducted it with a small, homogeneous group. The findings presented here may not be transferable or generalizable to other contexts. Second, the sample of participants may have been biased toward people with positive feelings about libraries. The recruitment message mentioned the library connection, and during the interviews several participants mentioned favorable opinions of the library. Third, the student participants in this study were generally enthusiastic about programming work. The findings and recommendations from this study may not apply to people who are less enthusiastic about programming work. Fourth, despite my attempt to mitigate the impact of my identity—especially my role as a faculty member—by starting with paired interviews for the RAs, the power differential was still in effect, and it may have influenced the student participants’ responses. Finally, because I developed the codes and applied them to transcripts, my biases influenced the analysis and findings.

Conclusion

This study examined residence life employees’ perspectives on how RAs offer outreach programs to undergraduate students. Using CWA as a theoretical framework, this study investigated the tasks and constraints that defined the RAs’ work, and their perceptions of the work, including its challenges and the strategies they employ in response. These findings and recommendations may help library staff who offer co-curricular programming to design successful, fun, relevant, and student-centered programs. Future work could refine scholarship and practice by conducting similar studies in more diverse environments or by applying the CWA framework to additional aspects of student-centered programming and outreach.

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Appendix 1. Questions for RA interviews

Paired depth interviews, each with two RAs:

- What year are you in school?
- How long have you worked as an RA here?
- How are "programs" that you lead defined by the Office of Residence Life (ORL)?
- Can you share an example of a program you led that went well?
- How many programs are you required to lead?
- What is the general workflow that you follow in designing and leading a program?
- How do you select program topics?
- What are some typical program topics?
- How do you design programs?
- How are you supported in your work designing programs?
- How are you expected to invite/attract students to attend your programs?
- Why do you think students choose to attend your programs?
- Are students living in the residence halls required to attend programs?
- Are programs required to have learning outcomes or other objectives/outcomes?
- Where do the programs typically take place?
- Are you given the option to hold programs in other places?
- When do the programs typically take place?
- What constraints does the semester schedule or academic year schedule place on your program planning possibilities?

- What types of decisions about program planning are you able to make on your own? Which decisions do you refer to others in ORL?
- What material resources (such as paper supplies for posters, food for events, etc.) are provided to you for the programs?
- What professional development support do you receive from ORL?
- Do any other units or offices on campus provide you support or content for leading programs?
- Do you know of any other units or offices on campus that provide programming to students like you do?
- What do you believe are the benefits of leading programs?
- Are there any other parts of your job as an RA that may seem like programming, but are actually defined by Residence Life as something else?
- What are other aspects of program planning that we haven't covered, but which you feel are important for me to know about as I proceed with this research?

Interviews with individual RAs:

- Who in ORL do you interact with or communicate with when designing and leading programs?
- How do you communicate with others when designing and leading programs? What modes of communication are used (face to face, email, text, social media, etc.)?
- Are RAs allowed to work together on designing or leading programs?
- Are RAs allowed to share program strategies and ideas with each other?
- What challenges do you face in designing and leading programs?
- What strategies do you use to overcome these challenges?
- How do your strategies for overcoming challenges change, depending on the type of challenge you're facing?
- How do the program planning requirements affect your ability to succeed in your studies and other non-work parts of your life?
- How are you trained to have the skills and knowledge necessary to lead programs?
- How are you otherwise supported in your professional development related to programming?
- How is the work that you do to lead programs evaluated?
- What are some of the most difficult and complex challenges that you face in your work planning and hosting programs?
- Can you tell me about a challenging or bad experience you had with designing or leading a program? (What made it bad or challenging? What caused the situation or challenge? How did you react to the challenge? What was the outcome? How did you feel during the situation? How did you feel afterwards? How did others help you, during or after this incident? What, if any, changes did you make after this incident?)
- Can you tell me about one of the best programs you've led? What made it so good?
- I am interested in providing RAs support for their program planning work, and/or some content or resources that you could use as programs or in programs. What sort of library-related content or resources do you think might be useful to RAs in their work to host programs? If we do put together content or resources for programs, how would you recommend we communicate these to the RAs?