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# Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students' Perceptions of Resident Assistants: Implications for Resident Assistant Selection and Training

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## **Abstract**

Through the use of in-depth interviews, the perceptions of Resident Assistants (RAs) held by 20 lesbian, gay, and bisexual students were explored. Students were asked about their experiences with and expectations of RAs. They were also questioned about their ideas concerning RA training. Students expected RAs to be open and accepting, personally supportive, and to create accepting climates. RAs who identified themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual were valued as confidants and network builders, and contributed in a positive way to students' favorable impressions of the residence life department.

## **Disciplines**

Education | Higher Education | Other Education | Student Counseling and Personnel Services

## **Comments**

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# Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual Students' Perceptions of Resident Assistants: Implications for Resident Assistant Selection and Training

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*Through the use of in-depth interviews, the perceptions of Resident Assistants (RAs) held by 20 lesbian, gay, and bisexual students were explored. Students were asked about their experiences with and expectations of RAs. They were also questioned about their ideas concerning RA training. Students expected RAs to be open and accepting, personally supportive, and to create accepting climates. RAs who identified themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual were valued as confidants and network builders, and contributed in a positive way to students' favorable impressions of the residence life department.*

Because on-campus living provides opportunities for students to build support networks, interact with people who are different from themselves, and be exposed to new ideas, it can have a positive impact on the psychosocial and cognitive development of students (Chickering & Reisser, 1993). Resident Assistants (RAs) are particularly influential in creating floor climates in which growth can take place (Schuh, 1989). Thus it is especially important that RAs work to develop a community in which all students feel comfortable and accepted.

Residence hall environments present particular challenges for lesbian, gay, and bisexual (LGB) students. Research suggests that these students often experience their residence halls as unwelcoming, hostile, and even dangerous environments (D'Augelli, 1989b; Love, 1997; Rhoads, 1994). Rhoads (1997) noted

that a sense of group identity, community, and a social network are crucial to offset the potentially negative aspects of residence hall living for LGB students. Slater (1993) also found that LGB students who had more support were better able to handle the victimization they experienced on campus. The potential does exist to create a sense of community and support among heterosexual and non-heterosexual students. Mohr and Sedlacek (2000) found that 42% of the first-year students they studied wanted to have or did have friendships with LGB individuals.

To encourage an open climate and to provide appropriate role modeling, however, RAs themselves must be knowledgeable and supportive of issues related to sexual orientation. Unfortunately, RAs are often misinformed (Bowles, 1981), possess negative attitudes about LGB students (Robertson, 1990), and demonstrate homophobic behaviors (D'Augelli, 1989a). However, the RAs in one study (Bowles, 1981) overwhelmingly requested further training in order to serve their LGB students more effectively. Robertson (1990) also suggested that RA training could have a positive impact on RA attitudes.

Clearly, residence life programs need to select RAs carefully based on their openness to all forms of diversity, including sexual orientation. Little is known, however, about specific ways in which RAs create a comfortable climate for LGB students on their floors and how residence life programs can effectively educate RAs about issues facing LGB students to enable RAs to create supportive environments.

This study examined the role of RAs through the eyes of LGB students living in college residence halls. The following questions were examined: What expectations do LGB students have of RAs? What recommendations do they have for selection and training of RAs who will be knowledgeable and supportive of LGB students?

### Method

A constructivist philosophy, which emphasizes the meaning that people make of their experiences, guided this study (Schwandt, 1994). Since little is known about the experiences of LGB students in residence halls, we felt that it was particularly important to gain a sense of students' perceptions using an open-ended interview approach rather than predefining a range of possible responses. We were particularly interested in the ways in which students interpreted experiences with their residence hall staff, how they viewed the role of the RA, and suggestions they had regarding staff selection and training.

This study was conducted at a Research I university in the eastern United States. This campus enrolls approximately 40,000 students, of whom 11,000 live in on-campus residence halls. The university requires that all first-year students live on campus. Although most students in this study characterized the university as politically conservative, efforts have been made in recent years to address the needs of LGB students through student organizations, programming, and a university-wide task force on LGB issues. The university is located in a rural area lacking visible LGB communities.

### **Participants**

Ten men and 10 women were interviewed for this study. At the time they were interviewed, all participants (a) were undergraduate students, (b) lived in a residence hall or had lived in one within the previous academic year, and (c) identified themselves as gay, lesbian, or bisexual (although some did not at the time they moved into the residence halls). In selecting participants, we attempted to achieve maximum variation (Seidman, 1991) with regard to gender, race/ethnicity, sexual orientation, area of campus where students lived, current living situation (on or off-campus), and degree of involvement in the LGB community.

Of the 10 men, 6 identified themselves as gay, 1 as homosexual, and 3 as bisexual. Five of the women identified themselves as lesbian and the remaining 5 as bisexual. No transgender students volunteered for the study. Eighteen of the students were White, 1 was Latino American, and 1 was Asian American. Two of the participants were exchange students from England. The study included 8 seniors, 5 juniors, 4 sophomores, and 1 first-year student.

On the basis of phone screenings conducted with the participants and information provided during their interviews, we categorized 7 students as actively involved in LGB activities and organizations, 3 students as somewhat involved, and 10 students as not involved in any organized LGB groups or activities. Based on interview data, we identified 8 students as extensively "out" (they were known on campus as being active in the lesbian, gay, or bisexual community; students on their residence hall floors knew they were gay, lesbian, or bisexual), 10 students as moderately out (selected individuals knew their sexual orientation), and 2 as minimally out (out to a few people) at the time of their interviews.

### **Procedure**

Participants were recruited for this study through personal contacts, referrals, posting requests on an LGB electronic mail discussion group, and seeking volunteers from the LGB student organization and in a class on sexual orientation. Four graduate students in either counseling or student affairs conducted the interviews (2 gay men, 1 lesbian, and 1 heterosexual woman). Each had professional residence hall experience and was familiar with issues facing LGB students. Interviewers completed a 2-hour training session and a practice interview that were critiqued by the senior author.

Interviews lasted between 2 and 2.5 hours, were audio-taped and later transcribed. The interviews covered students' impressions of the residence hall climate, their experiences and interactions with other students in the hall and with hall staff, and their suggestions for improving the residence hall climate. For the purposes of this study, questions focused on two areas: (a) interactions with and impressions of RAs, and (b) suggestions for staff selection and training.

### **Data Analysis**

Transcribed interviews formed the data set that the first two authors analyzed. Two data analysis techniques were used: (a) inductive coding techniques (Strauss, 1987), in which the data were analyzed for themes across

transcripts, and (b) interpretive techniques (Mishler, 1986), in which themes were examined within specific interviews. Each analyst worked independently to develop a coding scheme and themes. They then came together to review and reconcile discrepancies. The major themes that were identified were then compared with the existing literature. The third author, who was one of the interviewers and who had read and analyzed the data, served as an independent auditor, verifying the themes that emerged from the current analysis.

Trustworthiness was assured using guidelines established by Lincoln and Guba (1985). In addition to using two independent data analysts and an additional auditor to verify the analysis, we have provided quotes from the interviews to support our conclusions. We also subjected our analysis to peer debriefing and audit by residence life staff in a number of different settings.

### Results

Participants' comments about RAs fell into three broad categories: expectations of RAs, importance of lesbian, gay, and bisexual RAs, and suggestions for RA training. Several themes emerged within these categories.

#### Expectations of RAs

Most respondents had clear expectations about ways in which RAs should address issues facing LGB students on their floors. The students believed that RAs should be open and accepting, personally supportive, and work to create a welcoming environment.

RAs should be open and accepting. The respondents in our study expected that residence hall staff would be unbiased and sensitive to issues facing LGB students. Respondents often expressed the opinion that students would not, or should not, be RAs if they were not supportive of diversity, including LGB students. Several respondents assumed that students "would not be an RA if [they] weren't into promoting equality and making the residence halls a better place for everyone." Sometimes such assumptions of acceptance and openness were based on little supporting evidence. For example, one student stated: "I haven't really talked to him [the RA], . . . but he seems pretty friendly and pretty open. I'd be pretty sure that he'd be accepting of it [homosexuality]."

Not only were RAs expected to be accepting and knowledgeable about diversity, but they were also expected to serve as role models in this regard for other students in the hall. As one participant stated, "I think that [the RA] should be able to be a rock for respect of all peoples." Unfortunately, research conducted by D'Augelli (1989a) and Robertson (1990) suggests that our respondents' assumptions that RAs will be accepting and open may be inaccurate.

Because of the positive perceptions LGB students have of RAs, homophobic incidents that involved RAs were more stressful than other homophobic incidents. Students who experienced homophobic incidents involving RAs reported more negative feelings toward residence hall living than students with supportive RAs. These students were less likely to recommend residence halls to other LGB students, or to recommend being "out" in the halls. Respondents who perceived that RAs ignored homophobic incidents, regardless of whether the RAs actively participated in the incidents, expressed similar feelings.

RAs will be personally supportive of and knowledgeable about lesbian, gay, and bisexual students. Being open and nonjudgmental, however, was not enough. Respondents believed that part of a RA's job was "helping [those who are gay, lesbian or bisexual with] . . . the process of coming out, or helping them find their place in the residence halls." Students we interviewed were particularly appreciative of RAs who made a point of being actively supportive. One male student who considered his RA "a really great guy, very sensitive" reported, "He made sure that I knew [he was there]." Similar to respondents in Slater's (1993) study, students in this study who received direct support from their RAs were better able to handle harassment. Students believed that RAs should display a "safe zone" symbol on their doors to demonstrate their support. By displaying LGB symbols or resource materials, an RA can convey a message of inclusion without ever speaking to a LGB student, according to one respondent who said, "[the RA] seems very open-minded. On her door, she has LGB resources."

Students in this study also expected RAs to be knowledgeable about resources available to assist LGB students and to refer students if necessary. A respondent pointed out, "It's the RA's job to get a student who is coming out in touch with people they can talk to, especially if the person is isolated and doesn't know other gay people or doesn't know where to go." As Love (1997) and Rhoads (1994) reported, many students who are just coming out feel isolated on college campuses and unsure of how to find resources and support.

RAs work to create an accepting climate. Respondents expected RAs to create a positive climate for all students and to address issues that arose on their floor. One student stressed that it was the RA's job to "uphold that atmosphere in the dorms for that safety zone" and to "be ready to handle" whatever problems arose. Unfortunately, previous research suggested that RAs are often ill-equipped to do so (Bowles, 1981; D'Augelli, 1989a).

The importance of increasing awareness and educating people was viewed as crucial to improving the climate in residence halls. One young woman stressed, "When you increase awareness. . . that's the first step in increasing acceptance, . . . because a lot of stereotypes are built on fears which are built on ignorance." However, many respondents felt that programs were often ineffective because the people who needed to be educated did not attend. They did feel, though, that having programs addressing sexual orientation topics increased visibility and sent a message of support for LGB students. Respondents were particularly supportive of panel discussions that provided an opportunity for LGB students to talk about their experiences. One student pointed out, "A lot of people change their attitudes . . . when they see a [panel presentation involving lesbian, gay, and bisexual individuals] and . . . interact with people who are queer. . . .A lot of prejudice comes out of ignorance and just not knowing anyone." Studies (Geasler, Croteau, Heineman, & Edlund, 1995; Myers & Kardia, 1997) validate this student's perceptions of the value of educational programs, particularly those in which LGB students share their experiences.

The students interviewed in this study suggested that RAs should set a tone

on their floors by stating at floor meetings early on that it is important to respect all people regardless of their sexual orientation, race, or other characteristics. One student noted that he appreciated his RA setting ground rules for the floor by stating, "There will be no racial, no sexual [harassment], nothing against gay people." Promoting the open discussion of sexual orientation topics on the floor was another way respondents saw RAs creating an inclusive environment.

As Malaney, Williams, and Geller (1997) discovered in their study, symbols were important to the LGB students interviewed. Displays, bulletin boards, and posters were frequently mentioned as a way of educating students and making a statement that LGB issues were important to address. While discussing the role of the RA, one respondent spoke of the impact displays have on the residence hall climate. He stated, "I don't know that RAs really can do much more than be role models, and to set a very positive climate in the things they put up on the bulletin boards."

Confronting inappropriate behavior and homophobic statements was seen as an important aspect of the RA's job. One student suggested: "If there are problems with homophobia on the floor I would like him to . . . talk to them, discuss it, and not just let it go by." Another woman stated that if homophobic remarks were made, "it would be [the RA's] job to intervene."

#### **Importance of Lesbian, Gay, and Bisexual RAs**

Consistent feedback from this study's participants underscored the importance of having lesbian, gay, and bisexual RAs on staff. Such RAs served as confidants and helped to connect LGB students to other LGB people. Their presence also sent a positive message to LGB students concerning the residence life department.

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual RAs are confidants. The students in this study often had trouble approaching their RAs and discussing issues that were bothering them. However, having a RA who was gay, lesbian, or bisexual made a huge difference. One student commented, "I actually found out he was gay . . . at a social event. . . . And ever since then, we've gotten a little closer. . . . I can tell him things and talk to him about different stuff." This student later added that, for him, the best thing about living in the residence halls has been "my RA who has been very supportive." Another student mentioned that her bisexual RA became one of her best friends.

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual RAs assist in connecting students. As Love (1997) pointed out, LGB students, particularly those who may not be open about their identity, often have a hard time finding other LGB students with whom to socialize. A number of respondents noted that RAs who were openly lesbian, gay, or bisexual were very helpful in introducing them to other LGB students and creating a social network. One student mentioned that his RA organized a dinner for LGB students in their residence hall. Another student noted, "I think that I would really feel really lost if I hadn't known her [bisexual RA] and met a lot of people through her."

Lesbian, gay, and bisexual RAs create a positive impression of Residence Life. Several students mentioned that they had a positive impression of the residence



life department because of the presence of openly LGB staff. One student commented, "I think it's great that they [the Department of Residence Life] are integrating gay RAs." When asked what residence life could do to be more supportive of LGB students, another student emphatically stated, "Hire more openly gay RAs. . . . Promote who is gay and works in Res. Life." Malaney et al. (1997) indicated that aligning institutional practices with institutional values of support for all students was essential for improving the climate. Students in this study suggested that selection of RAs who are openly gay, lesbian, or bisexual would be one way to do this.

### **Suggestions for Residence Life Training**

Participants in this study stressed the importance of addressing sexual orientation issues during training and professional development activities to increase RAs' awareness. In fact, one respondent suggested that RA training was the most important factor in improving the residence hall climate for LGB students. Respondents had a number of suggestions for training RAs to be sensitive and responsive to the issues facing LGB students. These ideas included exposing RA trainees to LGB people, providing information about sexual orientation, and using affective as well as cognitive training strategies. Interviewees also believed that education of RAs needed to be an ongoing endeavor.

RAs should be well informed about LGB issues. Several respondents believed that RAs should take a LGB studies course: "Something that will . . . educate them on what issues gay people go through." Many respondents realized that RAs needed training on many topics, but stressed that information about sexual orientation should be included in RA classes. They were particularly concerned that RAs receive information about resources and referral possibilities. One student stated, "I think they should be informed of what resources there are in the community just in case a student should ask them about it."

RAs should be exposed to LGB people. During a study of social justice allies on campus, Broido (2000) identified the importance of allies being personally involved with target group members to learn about the issues these individuals face. A number of respondents stressed that getting to know LGB people helps to break down stereotypes, and suggested that opportunities to meet and interact with LGB students be included in RA training. One student noted, "I have a couple of friends who have been RAs and were not really okay with LGB issues and it's amazing how they turn around when they meet someone or become friends with [someone] who is gay." Discussion panels during which LGB students address issues specific to their comfort and development in the residence halls was a frequent suggestion. However, several interviewees cautioned that attending one panel presentation was not sufficient. Respondents suggested that RAs be encouraged or required to attend LGB student group meetings throughout the semester in order to maintain contact with the community.

Training should be experiential and affectively focused. Respondents noted that just providing reading material and going over its content was inadequate

to provide RAs with a true understanding of the complex issues that LGB students face. Mohr and Sedlacek (2000) also stressed the importance of training designed to overcome feelings of awkwardness in relating to LGB individuals. One woman in this study proposed the use of role-playing and experiential activities in which RA trainees put themselves in the position of a LGB person. Another student suggested that "exercises . . . where the feelings of being gay are focused over the issues of being gay . . . would help to get RAs more aware of the human and the feeling side of what it feels like to be gay."

Education must be ongoing. Participants stressed that ongoing education is necessary in order to insure that RAs become truly sensitive and knowledgeable about topics related to sexual orientation. As one respondent stated, "Being an RA means educating yourself constantly. . . . Part of being an RA is knowing when you can't do any more, either because you're not educated enough or because you're not trained enough to deal with this sort of issue."

### Implications

The LGB students interviewed had strong opinions about the role of resident assistants, the qualities and attitudes RAs need to possess to successfully support LGB students, and educational strategies that would help RAs prepare themselves for their positions. The comments of these students have implications for the selection of RAs and for RA staff training.

Students clearly expected that RAs would be open and accepting of all forms of diversity. One strategy residence life departments can use to secure applicants who meet this criterion is to actively recruit RA candidates from student groups dedicated to social justice, equality issues, and lesbian, gay, bisexual, and ally education. All candidates should be screened for supportive attitudes toward diversity, especially with regard to sexual orientation. Asking students about ways they have supported diversity in the past, rather than what they would do in the future, is a good way to determine if students truly believe what they might espouse in response to an interview question. Residence life departments also would be well advised to affirmatively seek out staff who identify themselves as lesbian, gay, or bisexual. LGB staff members provide immediate recognition and support for LGB students, access to LGB communities, and serve as positive role models.

RAs have a responsibility both to personally support LGB students on their floors and to create an accepting climate through role modeling and education. To carry out their roles successfully, RAs should be constantly challenged to increase their understanding of sexual orientation. RAs must be provided with information about sexual orientation, including theories about its etiology, how lesbian, gay, and bisexual identities develop, definition of terms and appropriate language, symbols associated with the LGB community, victimization of LGB individuals, and resources and sources of support available to LGB students. Opportunities must be provided to explore personal attitudes and beliefs at an affective level through experiential activities and role-play. Panel presentations and other means for RA candidates to hear from and interact with LGB students are important to increase RAs' comfort levels and to connect issues to the

experiences of actual people. Finally, RAs must be given opportunities to develop and practice the interpersonal, mediation, and conflict resolution skills they will need to handle concerns that may arise on their floors. Education about sexual orientation topics must be ongoing with each experience building on the previous ones.

As one respondent stated, "The right kind of RA can influence people a whole lot." It is incumbent upon residence life departments to take the steps necessary to insure that their RAs are "the right kind" by being sensitive to the needs of lesbian, gay, and bisexual students in their selection process and training programs.

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