

## What's Your Professional Development Plan?

By: Paige Abe  
Community Director  
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill



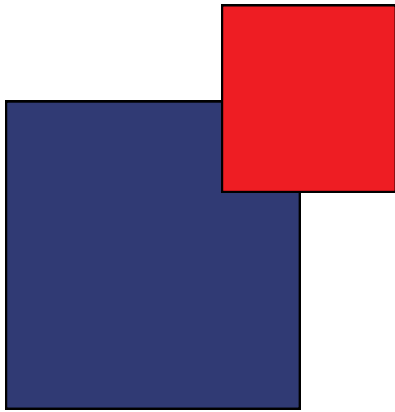
When beginning a new role, most of your energy may be focused towards learning the core functions of your position. But once you've managed to grasp the responsibilities that comprise your main job description, have you thought about what steps you should be taking to further your professional development? In this article, I will outline several strategies that will assist you in identifying opportunities that will enable you to grow in your passion areas and build your professional resume.

**Start small:** Don't feel as if you immediately need to sign up for every opportunity that comes your way in order to prove yourself. Take time to learn the departmental and institutional culture before you seek professional development opportunities. Do you want to join a departmental committee or would you benefit from collaborating with a campus partner on a new initiative? Begin talking with your supervisor about your plan for the next few years. Do you want to stay in residence life or are you considering moving on to another area within student affairs? Pursue opportunities that will help you to grow as a professional and bolster your plans for the future. If you have an interest in women's issues, start to develop a relationship with your institution's Women's Center sooner, rather than later. You never know when the opportunity may arise to plan a program or presentation together.

**Colleagues:** Use the resources available to you at your current institution—your colleagues. Take time to learn about your coworkers' interests. Do you want to learn more about multicultural competence? Ask a colleague who is skilled in that topic for advice on how to build your knowledge in this area. They may be aware of opportunities such as webinars, workshops or conferences to get you started. Take time to share your ideas and explain what you are seeking to learn. Don't be afraid to ask for advice or recommendations regarding how best to pursue your goals. Ask your colleagues to share strategies that helped them to be successful in their role.

**Finding your passion:** What are your passions? What are your areas of growth? You may find that these areas change depending on the student population that you are working with. How are you going to continue to educate yourself on these topics? Talk to folks in your department to identify who may share those passion areas and set up a meeting to learn more about their experiences. You may find that you develop new passions and interests based upon the student population with which you are working. Consider joining an interdepartmental committee or attending a conference to expand your knowledge in your area(s) of interest.

**Expanding your professional network:** Now that you've taken time to learn the ins and outs of your departmental and institutional culture, it's time to attend some conferences and meet other professionals. If you haven't been to a conference before, consider attending a statewide or regional conference. This will allow you to meet colleagues at peer institutions who may work with similar student populations. If you have already attended several conferences, consider volunteering to learn more about the "behind-the-scenes" aspect of the conference, or sign up to give a presentation. There's nothing worse than reviewing a resume completely devoid of professional involvement, presentation experience and article submissions.



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**Networking online:** There are many ways to get involved online, from following twitter discussions (#SAchat) to joining Facebook groups (Student Affairs Professionals) to getting involved in one (or more) of NASPA's Knowledge Communities. I've met half a dozen fantastic professionals across the country through working on the Women in Student Affairs Knowledge Community social media team. Networking online may be a great way to expand your social and professional network when your interests reach beyond what resources your institution has to offer.

So take some time to explore. Talk to colleagues, sign up for a conference or two, make a reading list to expand your knowledge base, and begin to devise your professional development plan for the next few years. Good luck!

## Having a Sense of Academics in the Residence Halls

By: Matt Zalman  
Coordinator of Academic Initiatives and Residential Learning Communities  
Appalachian State University



Being engaged in the academic experience of your residents is one of the best parts about working and living in the residence halls. To be engaged in what you do every day while living professionally in Housing is to be aware of your surroundings and in touch with your senses.

### **See: What do I see when I enter the residence hall, the floors in my building, my office?**

Think back to the first time you entered your very first residence hall as a student. How did you feel? Did it make you think about the academics at the institution or was it more of a functional space for sleeping? Recent trends in Housing have allowed for the hotel like atmosphere to take over and leave the academics of the institution in the past. From this, it is easy to be blind to the fact that it is difficult to connect with everyone in the same way in regard to their academics while also presenting the overall impression that academics are the main reason that the students are here. This is done through the visuals that the person first sees as they enter. Are there signs about quiet hours posted? Are the study lounges well lit and easily accessible? Who is being recognized for their achievements via posters and signs? Is it just the intramural teams and the sports stars of the building or is it the top academic achievers?

### **Touch: What are some of the resources one can physically touch in your residence halls that will help your students' academics?**

What is the level of comfort of the furniture? Is the lighting adjustable? Does your hall have the obligatory pamphlets that sit idly by the desk? These are great for the casual passerby, and some might argue, more effective in communicating a message to a student who is timid in corralling his or her RA, but ask yourself how many of those pamphlets are for academic issues, both positive and negative? Most of these pamphlets are usually for those struggling and while they do serve a purpose, what about a pamphlet that celebrates the academic achievements of individuals or even pamphlets that say, "So you mastered English 101, how else are you going to challenge yourself?" These would help the student "feel-out" what is next on his or her path.

## **Having a Sense of Academics in the Residence Hall Continued from Page 2**

**Hear: What are the messages that a resident hears communicated by your student staff and the professional staff who walk around in the morning or on those late night rounds? What conversations are RAs having with students about academics?**

In the residence halls, sometimes we are so geared to create the relational atmosphere that we do not think about what academic atmosphere we could create in regard to the students' academics.

This conversation over the years has also changed from actually talking, which in its own right does the best job of getting the word out, to the conversation's connection with social media. If one were to take a look at the messages sent out on social media, are they mostly touting the recent football game or a fun social event on the floor? Count how many times that a residence hall's Facebook page highlights an academic achievement of one of its floor members. Also, are you listening to the needs of your students? What are you doing to answer those questions that might not say academics directly but are helping to support them, such as regulations of quiet and courtesy hours and lack of study space.

Also, think about your hall's reputation on campus. Does it evoke an aura of academe or is it a conduit for conduct and an unconnected community. Do you hear a buzz when you walk through the halls...that hum of academic success? If so, you are on the right track; if not, try the above suggestions and the academic growth will be deafening.

**Smell: Figure out what "stinks" about academics and figure out who you can fix it.**

It stinks to have a roommate who doesn't understand the meaning of quiet or that moment that your laptop decides to crash and burn before that big paper. The key is to think ahead and be proactive. Offer surveys or assessments in your hall to see what the students think could make the area more study-friendly. If you make the survey just a few questions, more students would likely take it and more than likely you will get the answers that will help everyone.

If it is a person who smells of slack and indifference, guide them to be better. If it is a policy that promotes lackluster performance, work to change it. If it is you who is holding your students back, aim for ambition and be the example that you want them to be.

All in all, remove the unenthusiastic practice of academic lethargy and let the aroma of active academe permeate the halls and the minds of the students living there.

**Taste: Cleansing the palate of bad past experiences.**

Sometimes negative study habits or feelings toward academics are found by having a bad taste in your mouth from previous experiences. If a resident is struggling, ask the residents what their previous experience in the realm of academics was like and how they chose to deal with it. From this, show them alternatives: different study habits, choosing a better place to study, finding the right background noise or no noise at all, all to help create that environment for the student to be successful. Reward them for small victories and build their confidence up for that next round of tests. Also, remember to show resilience if things don't go as planned. What are ways that they can cope with a bad grade? Do you as the professional know academic policies or at least where the student is to go to get help right away? Take some time to savor the sorbet of reflection in order for you to cleanse your palate.

**Lastly, there is that elusive sixth sense. That power to envision the future.**

In order to know the future, you have to know the past. How has your hall performed academically in the past? Recognize the successes and setbacks of the past so that you can ask yourself what you would like the future to look like. What would the perfect academic experience for those living in your residence halls look like? What would the vision of residents taking full advantage of all the amenities that come with living in the residence hall look like in the end? The power of vision is that it sits in on an attainable goal. Set the course today for your vision of the future.

Overall, I hope that Housing programs sense that there is a need to highlight the academic endeavors happening in their halls and push to have intentional academic conversations with their residents; thus in turn, building a strong community through the reason the residents are there in the first place: to get an education. We need to foster and cultivate an academic atmosphere in the residence halls so that our residents can be more successful in accomplishing all of their goals while at an institution of higher education.

# **Demystifying Residence Hall Associations: What they do, why they matter, and how they can be supported.**



By (left to right): Megan Delph, Assistant Director for Residence Life, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
Regina Gavin, former Coordinator for Residence Life, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro  
Anna Patton, Coordinator for Residence Life, The University of North Carolina at Greensboro

For many Housing and Residence Life Departments, a Residence Hall Association, or equivalent student group, is a quintessential leadership development opportunity. However, it can be puzzling for housing professionals who do not work directly with an RHA-type organization to fully grasp its purpose and impact. The Residence Hall Association (RHA) or some variety of that name, Inter-Residence Council (IRC), Residence Hall Federation (RHF), etc. are all student organizations within the residence hall community. These organizational bodies serve as the governing council and voice for residential students across most campuses in the nation. This body of students is often the first group utilized by school administrators to get an opinion or something changed within the Residential System. From laundry price increases, to student fees, to Coke or Pepsi, these bodies can have a major impact on the life of a college student. RHA is the very first organization a student can join when stepping foot onto their respective campuses. Students are able to join hall council which is the individual hall's governing body that reports to the large RHA governing body. From the moment that a student joins this council, we as Student Affairs Professionals have the opportunity to 'suck them in' and educate them about the wonderful world of student affairs. We can help to enlighten them on a world they wouldn't have known otherwise. Hall Council members are the future of our profession as a whole and often an underutilized opportunity.

Hall Council and RHA have the opportunity to expose students to a host of experiences: advocacy and what it means to be a true advocate for something, service learning and giving back to something much larger, leadership development and developing from the inside out, programming and event planning and the most popular, conferences! While in high school, students are given the opportunity to develop leadership skills, host a program or two, participate in a service event and so on. However, when coming to college it is, for most, the first time they have been away from home. It is the first time they get to test out their morals and values and, truthfully, make decisions for themselves. This is a very instrumental and important time in their lives. RHA provides an outlet to further these skills and endeavors in the context of this new light that has been cast upon them. In addition to furthering skills and creating and participating in new endeavors, RHA provides an opportunity to network campus wide. Not only do students have the opportunity to meet new people and make lifelong friends, but since RHA is a 'go-to' body, students have the opportunity to network at the campus level with Housing Administrators and even campus administrations such as parking, dining, and even the Chancellor or President. Additionally, RHA has a unique opportunity to network and collaborate with other university and student organizations and truly get involved in the greater university community. RHA students also have the opportunity to network at the regional and national level and even participate on executive boards at those levels through conference attendance. As a high-impact student organization, it should be our desire, as housing professionals, to support such an engaging group.

Housing professionals should support the mission and values of RHA because it helps ensure the future of our profession. Students who are actively involved in RHA may decide to take a career path that leads to a professional position in Housing due to their positive experience within the organization. These students will stay true to the heart and mission of our field because they've gained an understanding of the importance of what we do--helping promote a safe and secure environment for all students that is dedicated to personal, academic, and career growth of these students.

## **Demystifying Residence Hall Associations: What they do, why they matter, and how they can be supported.** **Continued from Page 2**

Housing professionals must also understand that RHA is an organization that strives to be accessible for all students, actively promoting inclusivity and leadership in future residential student leaders. Additionally, students involved in RHA could potentially increase university retention and exposure. RHA is one of the first leadership positions a first-year student can serve in on campus. With these leadership capabilities and social involvement instilled early on in their college careers, these students may feel empowered to successfully navigate through college knowing they have a healthy support system.

Becoming involved in RHA as a Housing professional could foster one's own connection to campus. This can be especially helpful for new professionals who are looking for key ways to become active in their residential communities and learn the traditions, resources, and campus culture of their new environment. In regard to advisors, such persons can attend sessions at RHA conferences that are geared toward helping them become better equipped advisors. Advisor Recognition Training (ART) is offered as one-step classes that teach advisors important aspects of residential leadership organizations and how they can actively support the development and growth of such organizations. When all steps are completed, advisors will become ART certified and can choose to participate in ART Master classes thereafter. Lastly, being involved in RHA can help Housing professionals network with other professionals both on their campus and on other campuses. These networks could lead to cross-collaborations with other institutions, as well as working relationships and even friendships.

One of the key components of a successful RHA chapter at any campus is intentional, consistent departmental support. Support can come from many angles, but it starts with the fundamentals: promote, promote, promote! One of the best ways for Housing professionals to support the RHA at their institution is to spread the word about the opportunities it provides our residential students. Having a department full of professionals working across many areas of campus will undoubtedly produce higher yields than one advisor or two recruiting independently. Promoting RHA also includes staying informed about RHA programs and sharing these events with building staff and students. In addition to referring interested students to the organization, a second source of meaningful support is by making individual hall governments a priority. RHA organizations are built upon robust residential governments across campus. When hall governments are strong, RHA then becomes stronger, too. Seek to be an intentional advisor to hall council just like when working with a building staff. Not only will the commitment benefit the individual community through a vibrant residential life, but it will also pay it forward with RHA.

Supporting RHA can occur not only through indirect actions, but also through direct involvement with the organization—even when not serving as the organization's primary advisor. Being a visible presence by attending RHA meetings and events is an easy way to show appreciation and support for RHA on your campus. By spending an hour or two at a meeting, we can role model that RHA is valuable and worthwhile on our campuses. Our calendars are often stacked with meetings, so adding another may seem too much; but thankfully, RHAs usually host a variety of programs and events that may be more enjoyable than a business meeting. One fun avenue might be to ask what temporary advising opportunities might be available. Are chaperones needed for an overnight retreat? Could RHA use a dynamic presenter at training? Would an extra set of hands be beneficial at the next student conference? Even though many RHAs operate in their world, there are usually opportunities to catch a glimpse into it! Finally, supporting RHA efforts on a departmental level provides a full-circle of support. For example, find out if your RHA is planning to bid for or host a conference to see if there advising opportunities for conference committees. RHA is a dynamic, ever-changing organization with a host of avenues for involvement. Although it often seems to operate in its own world, don't hesitate to jump into it to develop yourself and your students!

*The authors represent three generations of RHA advisors for the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Prior to advising at UNCG, RHA has held a special place for each of them in their professional journeys. Megan served as an RHA advisor during her graduate studies as well as 2009 NCARH Conference advisor; Regina began her tenure with RHA in 2010; and Anna was an RHA member during her undergraduate studies and a SAACURH 2010 regional conference committee advisor during graduate school. It is their hope that his article serves as inspiration and encouragement to get involved in one of the most transformative student development opportunities on campus.*