Exploring graduate student roles and responsibilities in enhancing sense of belonging in residence life during COVID-19

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Abstract
Based on an autoethnographic study, this article aims to better understand how graduate student residence life staff made sense of their responsibilities and roles in enhancing student belonging within residence halls. The article also explores how the graduate students’ own sense of belonging was impacted as a result of COVID-19 policy.

INTRODUCTION

March 2021 marked the first anniversary of the COVID-19 global pandemic and 1 year since Northern Arizona University (NAU) first closed down its residence halls and sent students home while campus leadership decided on next steps. Across the country, Housing and Residence Life (HRL) departments experienced dramatic shifts in the way their departments operated, including in programming, student retention in on-campus living facilities, and department finances (Gorgati et al., 2020; Williams, 2020). A critical mission of residence life departments includes building students’ sense of belonging on campus and within the halls (Strayhorn, 2018). With COVID-19 negatively impacting campus operations, this mission has been thrown into disarray as HRL grapples with how to manage risk, including limiting exposure to the coronavirus and creating policies and procedures for student and staff interactions (e.g., programming and conduct) as information about COVID-19 shifts regular residential life.

NAU defines a sense of belonging as the creation of an environment where residents feel that they belong in their communities. Belongingness is defined as the need to give and receive attention to and from others (NAU Housing and Residence Life, 2020). Research shows that students who live in on-campus spaces feel a stronger sense of belonging in the overall campus community (Hurtado et al., 2019). A stronger sense of belonging leads to higher academic success, more community involvement, higher campus engagement, and an overall increase in satisfaction with the collegiate experience (Garvey et al., 2018, 2020). However, due to the pandemic’s novelty, there is limited research detailing how HRL staff’s work affects student sense of belonging during the pandemic, including graduate students who tend to be student-facing and on the “front lines” of working with students.
The purpose of this article is to better understand how graduate student residence life staff (i.e., Graduate Residence Hall Directors, Graduate Assistant of Residential Colleges) made sense of their responsibilities and roles in enhancing student belonging while mitigating COVID-19 risk within residence halls.

**CAMPUS CONTEXT**

NAU sits at the base of the San Francisco Peaks in Flagstaff, Arizona and on the traditional and ancestral lands of the Navajo, Hopi, Hualapai, Havasupai, and other tribal nations. HRL is one department within the Division of Student Affairs. In Residence Life, there are 16 full-time Residence Hall Directors, six Graduate Assistant Residence Hall Directors, four Graduate Assistants for Residential Colleges, and two Programming Graduate Assistants. The department’s largest division consists of over 150 Resident Assistants and 23 Residential College Ambassadors. New in 2020 was the COVID-19 Care Management Team. Supervised by the Coordinator for Student Conduct, this team managed all on-campus quarantine and isolation housing. All students and staff living on campus were required to complete daily health checks that asked if they felt any symptoms associated with COVID-19 by the Center for Disease Control and if they had come in contact with anyone who had tested positive.

**SENSE OF BELONGING DURING COVID-19**

Sense of belonging is the guiding conceptual framework for this autoethnographic research. Broadly, sense of belonging generally refers to, “a feeling of connectedness, that one is important or matters to others” (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981, p. 164). This feeling that one is important can come through peer interactions, which can “produce or inhibit the sense of belonging” (Strayhorn, 2018, p. 2). Strayhorn (2018) narrowly defined college student sense of belonging as “students’ perceived social support on campus, a feeling or sensation of connectedness, and the experience of mattering or feeling cared about, accepted, respected, valued by, and important to the campus community or others on campus such as faculty, staff, and peers” (p. 4). Sense of belonging is at the center of NAU’s Learning Outcomes and the residential curriculum’s heart (NAU, 2021). Every program, idea, or decision at NAU regarding HRL has the student sense of belonging at the forefront. Erb et al. (2015) stated that fostering a sense of community should be at the center of every HRL professional’s job responsibilities.

Living in residence halls is one significant aspect that aids in student development, academic success, social integration, and creating a sense of belonging within the student body (Erb et al., 2015; Graham et al., 2018). When students feel they belong, peer support and student engagement increase (LaNasa et al., 2007; Pascarella, 1984). Without a sense of belonging, student retention drops (Jacobs & Archie, 2008), and behavior, affect, and cognition are negatively impacted (Strayhorn, 2018).

However, the pandemic created barriers to facilitating a sense of belonging. These countless barriers include poor mental health, substance abuse, interpersonal relationship struggles, and an existential sense of isolation all stemming from pandemic-related issues (Panchal et al., 2021). Mental health issues have also increased dramatically during the pandemic (CDC, 2021). According to the Center for Disease Control (2021), it is essential to learn new ways to cope with mental health to create resiliency during the pandemic.

In addition, the pandemic caused a sense of isolation that cannot be taken lightly. Social isolation on campus generally can be detrimental to students’ sense of belonging (Cheng,
Students may feel more isolated on campus when they leave their living spaces less often due to guest policies. After exposure, some students enter into quarantine housing alone and large group gatherings can result in suspension or action from judicial affairs. Aiding in this sense of isolation are new HRL programming models that limit COVID-19 exposure. At the same time, these models prevent social development and aid in the growing sense of isolation within student populations (Lenahan, 2020; Northwestern, 2021; UCLA, 2021; University of Virginia, 2021).

While COVID-19 barriers certainly affect students, professional HRL staff is not immune to the pandemic’s harsh realities. HRL staff experience a lower sense of belonging to campus as well (Anderson, 2020). Due to social distancing guidelines, staff cannot meet as one large group for department meetings or socialize outside of work. This restriction often means new staff members miss out on the camaraderie, team building, and social integration that occurs when socializing in person (Anderson, 2020). Working from home aids in the growing feeling of isolation. Instead of walking through the halls seeing students, sitting with one’s office door open, or meeting to conduct hearings in person, HRL staff may Zoom from home.

Professionals in HRL are not the only people affected by COVID-19 policy shifts; graduate students, as student-facing employees, also feel the impact of the pandemic. Not only do the challenging realities of living in a pandemic affect the social and work life but graduate students also experience the addition of academic stress. Preliminary studies detailed heightened anxiety, depression, and PTSD symptoms in graduate students (Perez & Smith, 2021). The same study found some graduate students struggled with food and housing insecurities, felt a lack of institutional support, and had concern for their future careers and degree prospects (Perez & Smith, 2021). While these increased mental health challenges, lack of access to resources, and disheartened worldview negatively impact graduate students’ sense of belonging, the lack of institutional support is most concerning. Studies show that professional relationships, networking, and micro affirmations enhance a graduate student’s sense of belonging (O’Meara et al., 2017). Without institutional support, it is challenging to foster professional relationships and receive micro affirmations, thus leading to less graduate student retention and success (O’Meara et al., 2017).

UNDERSTANDING THE GRADUATE STUDENT EXPERIENCE

The authors of this article used a scholarly residential life personal narrative methodology, also known as autoethnography (Ellis & Bochner, 2003). Scholarly personal narrative combines the authors’ life experiences with academic literature to provide answers to understanding an experience. The guiding question for the authors was: How do graduate residence life staff make sense of their responsibilities and roles in enhancing student belonging while mitigating COVID-19 risk within the residence halls?

The authors for this article are four graduate assistants (GA) who work in residence life at NAU (Erin, Benjamin, Abigail, and Zoe) and were enrolled full-time in the Counseling - Student Affairs Master’s program at the time of the study. Each student-author worked 20 h per week in their graduate assistantship and took 12 or 15 credit hours (4 or 5 courses) per semester. Most of the student-authors worked beyond their 20 h each week to fulfill their required duties. Their faculty member (Dian) assisted in the research process, providing an outside voice to probe and push their understanding of themselves in their roles.

The student-authors engaged in two rounds of narrative journaling. Additionally, they spent time in dialogic conversations at the beginning of the project, after each round of journaling, and during the writing process (Jones, Kim, & Skendall, 2012). Between formal meetings, each student-author probed their co-authors on their thoughts and
experiences through commenting on each other’s journals via Google Docs, leading to an ongoing conversation. Important to the process was ensuring that each student-author fully understood their peers’ experiences and identified commonalities and differences across the experience.

FINDINGS

Increased work expectations and general interactions

The theme of increased work expectations arose among the four authors and challenged the boundaries between these expectations and the concept of exploitation within their graduate assistantships. Zoe attested that there was a glorification of overworking by going past 20 h a week and that this was a cultural norm before COVID-19. Yet, the pandemic amplified the stress and burden to continuously overwork because of the uncharted terrain the university and world navigated, especially in the beginning of March 2020. As Erin articulated, “[t]here is an expectation for live-in staff members to always be on the clock… the department culture may be glorifying overworking.” For context, Erin and Ben have previous experience as resident assistants, and their conversations illustrate their established boundaries as they have transitioned to GAs. Erin’s philosophy is that “[w]hen I am in my apartment, I am a student, daughter, friend, and more importantly, dog mom.” Ben shared:

When I first started my position as a GA, I felt like I was not good enough because I was not going over my 20 hours and answering emails constantly. Still, over time I learned, I was doing just fine setting boundaries. As a culture for graduate students, it seems normal to overwork and not get extra pay, and because of this, it creates a culture of overexploitation.

All four GAs agreed that they were willing to consistently be available (even if outside of their 20 h) to the students they supervised. However, with COVID-19, work interactions became transactional, especially as it related to space and changing policy. In terms of physical space, all four GAs shared an office with another colleague. For Ben, Abigail, and Zoe, their supervisors asked for only one GARC to be in the office at a time. The restrictions of office space shifted the relationships to only occur at scheduled Zoom meetings. The GAs also noted that they received many emails and memos about changing policy and how to implement it but rarely were given the opportunity to provide input on the changes. This was problematic because they were often the people charged with implementing the changes but had little voice throughout the process. Sometimes interpersonal relationships became strained because of these types of robotic relationships. Abigail and Zoe summarized that the social cues to interacting with other people in a virtual setting had been difficult, specifically with nonverbal cues. Stated by Abigail:

You can read an email 20 different ways and get a different message from it. But when you’re in a conversation with a person, someone’s body language and tone and stuff like that can really help you figure out like… ‘okay, this [interaction] is going well we can keep meeting and talking’.

Due to the unclear tones in emails and the lack of previous relationships, the GAs sometimes felt unclear about what the expectations were for how they should respond.
The GAs were unsure if they were in trouble, needed to attend to a matter urgently, or if they were reading too much into a situation. The impersonal nature of emails and Zooms without the relationships normally built during staff meetings and other physical social interactions put additional stress on the GAs and affected some of their sense of belonging in the department.

Developing a sense of belonging: Personal impacts of departmental goals

Each GA’s ability to foster and maintain a sense of belonging varied based on their prior experiences and understanding of a sense of belonging. Erin and Zoe both indicated that they felt a sense of belonging from their prior experiences at NAU. Erin gained this sense of belonging from visiting her aunt as a kid; she said that “[she] feels connected to her family. Knowing that she is following in their footsteps [as former employees of NAU] makes her feel connected to the university.” Zoe indicated that she had “already built relationships with hall leadership”; however, that “building relationships (with new peers) is difficult as we intentionally isolate ourselves.” Zoe was also a second-year student.

Ben and Abigail were not a part of NAU before the pandemic, so, unlike Zoe and Erin, they were not able to draw on prior experiences or connections at NAU to foster a sense of belonging. Ben stated that “[he] was making connections, but none that felt truly emotionally fulfilling.” Abigail echoed this sentiment, stating that “developing a sense of belonging [at NAU] is easier said than done.” Ben used his experiences of not developing emotionally fulfilling connections to develop a new frame of reference; he shifted his definition of sense of belonging from being reliant on others to being satisfied with himself and more independent. Abigail indicated that she felt a sense of belonging at her undergraduate institution as a result of the relationships she developed with peers, faculty, and staff. She suggested that her undergraduate experience, and the sense of belonging she developed throughout that experience, served as a frame of reference for her understanding of student sense of belonging.

A point of contention that each of the GAs highlighted was that the world of Zoom made it challenging to develop meaningful connections. Zoe summed this point up by stating that “building community over a virtual medium does not replace the necessity of human connection.” Erin, who had opportunities to meet with student staff in-person and via Zoom, noted that “not only are virtual 1-on-1s less socially fulfilling, but they also are not as impactful, and I view them as more transactional than in-person 1-on-1s.”

Throughout the 2020–2021 academic year, meetings, programs, and classes were primarily conducted over Zoom and felt impersonal and task-oriented for the GAs. The transition to Zoom as the primary means of communication affected both the graduate students’ experiences and the student leaders they supervise. The pandemic’s toll on students and student staff weighed heavily on the GAs. Ben illustrated this when stating that “the hardest part of [his] role is boosting peer mentors’ morale.”

Changed behaviors

The transition into graduate school during a pandemic was difficult, but finding a sense of belonging seemed to be a major struggle for most of the graduate students. Research on COVID-19 and its impacts on mental health are still emerging. Preliminary studies have suggested that COVID-19 has affected people’s mental health (Cullen et al., 2020). One study suggested that people who live alone might have felt lonelier as a result of...
the decrease in social interactions that resulted from stay-at-home orders (Luchetti et al., 2020). This is a sentiment felt by many, and the ways in which graduate students coped with the unfamiliar and, to some, uncomfortable situations were unique to their case. The initial feeling of loneliness and isolation was hard to overcome, but with the utilization of many self-coping mechanisms, the graduate students persisted. Ben mentioned finding inner peace and learning to self-occupy but also mentioned the benefits of social connections. Ben and Abigail agreed that the self-discovery process involved a lot of learning more about self-awareness and learning to access energy levels and how much of the energy could be given in different situations. Of course, there was the use of outside support. Ben and Erin mentioned using support networks that were already present to help with the transition, such as family and already established friend groups, and all graduate students mentioned trying to make new connections or strengthen the already existing connections with peers in the Counseling - Student Affairs program. Zoe emphasized using already established connections and from there developing a support network.

When asked what could have been done differently to help foster a sense of belonging, the authors agreed that more attention should be paid to fostering casual conversation in the virtual environment. As Abigail and Zoe mentioned, there was a need to be intentional about trying to connect with individuals and missing the casual office or meeting conversations. Erin also described how her strongest connections were established through in-person interactions. Ben pointed out how when in the virtual setting, 1-on-1 meetings or small breakout rooms tended to yield a more personable experience. Creating more space for individual interaction is important, but doing it in a space and time that allows staff members to be most present is essential.

**DISCUSSION**

Sense of belonging across the students in this study differed based on their previous experiences with the campus during non-pandemic times. However, no matter the GAs’ overall stated sense of belonging, the pandemic impacted concepts that are associated with the “connectedness” that comes with that belonging (Rosenberg & McCullough, 1981). Specifically, the GAs felt isolated in their roles—from their student leaders, the department leadership, and each other. Some of this isolation stemmed from realities of the pandemic, as well as the way that interactive moments were organized and how the GAs perceived interactions in those meetings (Cheng, 2004). For example, some of the graduate students were unable to make sense of tone and intent in email interactions that then translated to the material relationships that were able to be formed or not formed in real life. This influenced their ability to build a meaningful sense of community in their residence halls, a desired outcome of their residence life values and job responsibilities (Erb et al., 2015). Others felt that the depth of the connectedness between them and their students was weakened because the majority of the interactions were digital. These relationships became even more strained because the GAs felt that they had to be available to their staffs and supervisors at all times, beyond their 20-hour work weeks, leading to lack of clarity around how to set boundaries.

Despite these experiences, the GAs also felt that they experienced some personal development. For instance, Ben and Abigail both noted that they better understood who they were as professionals and felt more able to make considered decisions about what they believed and how they related to others. They also were able to think more clearly about their energy and how to better discern how to expend energy in ways that were more fulfilling.
IMPLICATIONS

The lack of institutional support for GAs was most glaring in the journaling and conversations (O’Meara et al., 2017). Therefore, we draw on the experiences and suggestions provided by the GAs to offer implications to HRL leadership.

First, there must be individualized and casual ways to integrate connectedness. This suggests that socially distanced meetings, meetings held outside, or separate meetings that allow GAs to get to know their peers, students, and leadership are a necessity. Residence life leadership should not get caught up in only the day-to-day work but also work to build relationships much like they would if there was not a pandemic. These informal relationships provide an opportunity for GAs to better understand their roles, their relationships to others, and to feel more connected to their role and campus. While many universities are opening back up to allow in-person courses, HRLs should work with expediency to create relationships that are meaningful and lasting as early as possible in the school year. Perhaps creating buddy programs that match new graduate students with continuing students would allow for that sense of belonging to be built more easily.

Second, creative alternatives to large team meetings may also facilitate social integration and therefore a sense of belonging. HRL departments tend to be large units, and it is easy for GAs to become lost in the sea of people. Therefore, if meetings must be held on Zoom, then small breakouts and 1-on-1 opportunities to engage are suggested over only using large groups. Similar to the informal meetings, interpersonal social relationship struggles may be identified and corrected, GAs may feel more integration into the department, and there may also be more connection to their peer groups. Department may also implement team learning activities where, outside of core information sharing, small groups of staff spend time discussing other information, tasks, or projects in smaller groups that limit interaction and exposure.

Lastly, HRL leadership should pay particular attention to how GAs perceive their experiences with workload and relationships. All of the GAs noted that they felt like their work was transactional rather than relational and that they were often working beyond their contract hours. They spent their time implementing quick-changing policy with little input into the process which made them feel like they were not a part of a team but rather just responding to edicts from the leadership. Without really knowing the leadership on a personal level, this also caused a lack of clarity around where they stood with their leadership relationally. Building stronger relationships with GAs as well as feedback loops for GAs to provide input into important processes is integral for GA sense of belonging. Relying via email may be helpful for documentation, but for new GAs who are unfamiliar with HRL leadership, having short conversations, calls, or even passing information down to more familiar leadership may diffuse some of the confusion around message tone that can confuse graduate students. Also, creating clear lines of communication including noting who will send what types of messages and when can clear up why certain messages are sent at particular times.

CONCLUSION

The COVID-19 pandemic undoubtedly shook campuses and residence life systems across the globe. Specifically, some of the core roles of student affairs work such as social integration, student development, and feeling valued, respected, and connected—better known as sense of belonging—fell to the wayside. While GAs are considered professionals on campus, they also are still students who are in training to become professionals. They
still require experiences that are supportive, developmental, and connected. As the field moves into year 2 of the pandemic, there are many lessons to be learned and many ways that HRL departments can improve including by paying more attention to a valuable and often forgotten group of people, GAs.

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