Examining the Perceptions of Students of Color in the Resident Assistant Selection Process

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Resident Assistants (RAs) play a vital role in facilitating and co-constructing learning environments at residential colleges and universities. As practitioners and administrators respond to an increase in racially diverse students enrolling at higher education institutions, there is a need to focus on recruiting and maintaining racially diverse student staff members, like RAs. This study examined how students of color described the racial climate of the RA selection process at a large, Mid-Western Predominantly White Institution. Three themes emerged from the study. First, participants described the climate as fair but marginalizing. Second, participants described the climate for discussing diversity topics as surface-level. Finally, participants indicated that the climate of the selection process was isolating. The findings can inform practice for professionals working with student staff members as well as areas of future research.

Researchers and student affairs practitioners have long touted the benefits of living on-campus, such as higher grade point averages and increased retention rates (Schudde, 2011). Nationally, 15% of undergraduate students live on college campuses (Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, & Whitt, 2010). Residential life staff members, particularly Resident Assistants (RAs), have a large role in facilitating and co-constructing learning environments within the residence halls (Piper & Buckley, 2004). RAs have multiple roles in their communities – serving as mentors and role models, fostering living environments that value and support all residents, and enforcing university policies and procedures (Everett & Loftus, 2011; Jaeger & Caison, 2006; Piper & Buckley, 2004; Schaller & Wagner, 2007). The RA position also elevates these student leaders as perceived authorities in the residence hall environment (Everett & Loftus, 2011; Piper & Buckley, 2004).

Knowing that residence halls are integral in facilitating learning and support for students (Kuh, 2003), it is imperative that staffing, especially student staff members like RAs, focuses on recruiting and maintaining a racially diverse student staff. Although practitioners have sought to hire the most qualified students for the RA position for decades, there is little research or literature discussing the most effective means of selecting student leaders for the RA position (Jaeger & Caison, 2006).

Residential Programs and Services (RPS) at Indiana University, requires all first-year students, with few exceptions, to live in on-campus housing for their first year (Trustees of Indiana University, 2014a). Further, about 13% of first-year students enrolled at IU identified as a student of color in 2014, which is an increase from the previous year (IU Newsroom, 2014). The increase in diverse students falls in line with Indiana University’s strategic plan to build “a community that esteems diversity of all kinds; …that assures the full involvement of all its members in the classroom and in campus life” (Robel, 2014, p. 6). With more diverse students living on campus, it is imperative that RPS considers how the department constructs inclusive environments for all students, specifically
students interested in applying for the RA position. Because of IU’s espoused commitment to diversity and RPS’s role in creating positive residential experiences for students, we are examining the following research question: How do students of color describe the climate of the RPS Resident Assistant Selection process?

**Literature Review**

As we reviewed relevant literature, factors that justify the importance of student staff positions include student leadership and employment, student interactions with diverse others, and experiences of students of color at PWIs. These topics demonstrated a need to conduct further climate research to establish better support and programs for students of color.

**Student Leadership and Employment**

One of the core understandings of student persistence and retention is student engagement. Engagement involves resources, services, and opportunities provided by the university for the benefit of students in purposeful activities (Kuh, 2001; Kuh et al., 2010). Dugan and Komives (2007) noted that students in positional leadership roles are more likely to learn about and develop leadership because of their position. Living and holding a leadership position within the residence halls provides many opportunities for students to engage with peers and develop skills associated with leadership like navigating conflict and collaboration (Astin & Astin, 2000). Participation in leadership roles, like the Resident Assistant position, can lead students to success by allowing students access to more resources and opportunities (St. John, Rowley, & Hu, 2009).

The RA position is unique because in addition to being a campus leader, the RA is also an employee of the university. A study by Furr and Elling (2000) showed that students with a part-time campus job are more likely to complete a bachelor’s degree program and report satisfaction with college than students who work full-time or not at all. Additionally, students working on campus may have greater access to involvement opportunities and interaction with faculty and staff in informal settings (Furr & Elling, 2000). It is necessary for student affairs professionals, regardless of specific institution, to consider how student leadership positions can be distributed more equitably.

**Student Interaction with Diverse Others**

Exposure to diverse others is an educational practice that positively affects retention and graduation rates for students (Kuh, et al., 2010). Students who are exposed to diverse others “learn valuable things about themselves and gain an appreciation for other cultures” (Kuh, et al., 2010, p. 12). However, at many institutions, it is possible for students to graduate without having had a meaningful interaction with a peer from a different racial group than their own (Harper & Antonio, 2008). Students who engage in interactional diversity – experiences with individuals from diverse backgrounds – report improved learning because of their interactions with peers from different backgrounds (Light, 2001, as cited in Harper & Antonio, 2008; Tatum, 2007). However, other studies posit that the positive effects of interactional diversity are most beneficial to White students (Harper & Antonio, 2008). In order for all students to benefit from experiences with diverse others, student affairs administrators must be intentional in espousing institutional values of diversity and fostering environments that promote learning (Harper & Antonio, 2008; Kuh, 2000; Tatum, 2007; Watt, 2012).
Students of Color at Predominantly White Institutions

Predominantly White Institutions (PWIs) can challenge students of color. Flowers and Pascarella (1999) write that perception of the campus racial environment greatly affects African American students’ openness to engaging in diversity. This perception becomes increasingly important, because many students of color report that their institutions work against them (Cabrera, Nora, Terenzini, & Pascarella, 1999; Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002). Arminio et al. (2000) found that students of color at PWIs who were leaders in these organizations “felt pressure to assimilate in the culture of the predominantly White group” (p. 502). These students rarely identified a predominantly White environment as ideal (Arminio et al., 2000).

However, many scholars have also highlighted that participation in leadership roles, like becoming a Resident Assistant, provides students the social capital that can lead to success by teaching students how to navigate complexities of group interactions and develop skills in communication valued by American society (St. John, Rowley, & Hu, 2009). By gaining social capital through these mentoring relationships, students of color are more successful in college (Museus & Neville, 2012).

Researchers (e.g. Arminio et al., 2000; Museus & Neville, 2012; St. John et al., 2009) demonstrate a complex relationship between the benefits students of color gain from engaging in leadership positions and these students’ reported negative perceptions of campus climate. Hurtado et al. (1998) highlights the necessity for higher education administrators to “…strengthen the psychological climate on their campuses by purposefully becoming deliberate agents of socialization” (p. 291). These administrators must commit to ongoing assessment of climate to inform practices in order to strengthen the psychological climate for students (Hurtado et al., 1998). As such, our study will focus on the perceived racial climate for students of color participating in the RA selection process.

Conceptual Framework

In order to explore student perceptions of the residence life student staff selection process, our study will use a framework based on campus climate. Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, and Allen (1998) identify four dimensions of climate for a higher education institution, which are the historical legacy, the structural diversity, the psychological dimension, and the behavioral dimension (Hurtado et al., 1998, p. 282). Our study examines the psychological dimension, which addresses the perceptions and attitudes between and among groups, to understand the racial climate of the staff selection process.

Related to the psychological dimension, researchers show that “racially and ethnically diverse administrators, students, and faculty tend to view the campus climate differently” (Hurtado et al., 1998, p. 288). Racial climate entails students’ experiences as a minority on a college campus, which can include racism and perceptions that their current institution is not supporting diversity initiatives (Reid & Radhakrishnan, 2003).

Therefore, the climate could affect a student’s success in the student staff selection process and his or her ability to engage in a student leadership position. In the context of our study, the policies, practices, and behaviors of the residence life selection process influences the racial climate for students of color participating in the process.
Methodology

We used a case study design with the objective to explore phenomenon rather than to prove or disprove a hypothesis (Creswell, 2012; Merriam, 1988). Our goal is to reveal the experiences and perceptions of students of color who go through the selection process in order to move one step closer in fulfilling our departmental – and personal – pledges to diversity and inclusion. By examining the student perspective, we learned to what degree students of color felt supported by the department during the selection process.

Participants and Sampling

Our sample population was drawn from the RA candidates from the 2013-2014 selection process and returning RAs who self-identified as persons of color. Instead of specifying the racial identities of participants, the research team asked any individual who self-identified as a person of color to participate in the study. Because few students of color matriculate into the position, asking for specific racial identification risked breaching promised anonymity for the participants.

Students were considered part of the selection process if they submitted a completed application to the residential life department’s selection workgroup. This selection process begins with attending a mandatory information session and submitting an application before the end of the Fall semester. Applicants who have met basic requirements will enroll in an eight-week residence life course (U450) in the Spring semester. Upon completion of this course, applicant interview individually and in groups. In our study, we included RA candidates who were not selected as RAs to highlight additional perspectives. We worked with the department to email the 347 candidates who fit our search criteria from the official recruitment email account. From the candidate pool, we conducted focus groups and interviews with seven participants as listed in Table 1.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pseudonym</th>
<th>Status</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andrea</td>
<td>Hired as RA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Elsa</td>
<td>Not hired as RA</td>
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<tr>
<td>Maria</td>
<td>Hired as RA</td>
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<td>Nanika</td>
<td>Hired as RA</td>
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<td>Oliver</td>
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<td>Sarah</td>
<td>Hired as RA</td>
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<td>Toddeh</td>
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Data Collection

Focus groups and interviews were conducted for an hour with as many as three participants. Two moderators led a semi-structured focus group about the success and limitations students experienced throughout the process. Questions were designed to allow participants to create their own answers and guide the conversation, with moderators asking follow-up questions for clarification. The previously described psychological framework from Hurtado et al. (1998) was used as the basis for the interview protocol.

Because focus groups tend to share ideas more freely when participants share similar experiences (Rea & Parker, 1997, as cited in Schuh, Upcraft & Associates, 2001), students were intentionally organized in groups based on how far they progressed within the selection process. Grouping students in this manner allowed students to engage in dialogue about similar experiences. To protect students’ anonymity, the research team asked each participant to choose a pseudonym at the beginning of the focus group.
Interview Data Analysis

Analyzing the data through an interpretive lens, our goal was to “preserve the unique representations” of the participants’ perceptions (Gioia & Pitre, 1990, p.588). To ensure trustworthiness, the research team consulted with other academics, reviewed documents related to the selection process, and individually coded each transcript. Preliminary open codes included feelings students experienced, sources of support, various aspects of the process, and aspects of the participants’ identity. After organizing the preliminary codes into thematic groups, we assessed how students perceived the racial climate during the selection process.

Limitations

Several limitations were identified in our study. One of the limitations pertained to the positionalities of the research team and the student participants. Of the six researchers, the residential life department employed five as graduate staff members who supervised RAs, some of whom participated in the focus groups. Researchers were mindful of how the supervisory relationship could affect participation and attempted to minimize the power differential between supervisor and supervisee.

Furthermore, we considered the racial identities of the research team when selecting moderators for the focus groups. Five of the six members of the research team self-identified as White and one member self-identified as multiracial. Acknowledging that some students of color may not feel comfortable disclosing experiences to an entirely White moderation team, the researcher of color moderated each focus group with a partner.

Finally, some participants who were current RAs, could speak more directly to their racial identity in relation to the selection process, as they had the opportunity to explore this as part of formal RA training. Other participants may not have deeply reflected on their racial identity as a factor in their selection experience. Racial identity theorists explain that students of color develop racial consciousness at varying points in young adulthood (Cross & Phagen-Smith, 2001; Renn, 2004).

Findings

Through analyzing the participants’ descriptions of their RA selection process experiences, beginning with the information session and ending with their interviews, three themes emerged. As we considered all aspects of the selection process, the students highlighted experiences that occurred within the eight-week U450 course. Within the selection process, the U450 course served as an environment that provided students opportunities to build relationships with peers and residential life staff. These relationships and interactions strongly influenced the students’ perceptions of the overall climate of the selection process. While the students emphasized the setting of the U450 course to their experience, students provided other insights beyond the course that were significant to their perceptions of climate. Overall, students described the climate of the selection process as being fair, while also being surface-level and isolating at times.

Selection Process Climate as Fair

Overall, participants expressed positive perceptions of the selection process. Participants acknowledged that individuals with positional power in the process, specifically interviewers and U450 facilitators, treated them fairly. When asked to reflect upon her overall perception of the process, Elsa, a student who ultimately was...
not hired as a RA, described liking the process. Similarly, Oliver, a current RA, described the process as “fun”, while Maria, also a current RA, stated that “it was a good process overall.”

Students associated their positive feelings regarding the process to the perceptions that their personal identities were valued in a way that they interpreted as just. Oliver noted that his racial identity was recognized and appreciated while applying for the RA position:

I definitely came to the idea that I thought that my ethnicity, or racial background, was not a deterrent or a negative. I feel like a lot of times when I go to interviews for jobs, I feel like that [my race or ethnicity] might be sort of something that you don't want to, not bring up but like, it's not a good thing that you are a different color. Here I thought it was a good thing.

There are practices RPS currently utilizes that create a supportive environment for students of color. These practices tell students that they are valued and influence the students' perception of climate.

Additionally, participants perceived the U450 facilitators as supportive throughout the process. The students identified specific facilitator behaviors that affirmed their identities. Toddeh, a current RA, described a situation when his course facilitators confronted a classmate who had made a marginalizing comment about disadvantaged student populations. Toddeh said:

They [the facilitators] talked to him from more of an educational background and tried to get him to come to realize on his own terms of why that is not inclusive and why that's not an acceptable response in the community. And so, I think in the selection process, or at least in the U450 class, they do a really good job of trying to make you come to those realizations on your own rather than just saying "Diversity. Accept it.”

In this example, Toddeh identified the facilitators’ ability to promote a more inclusive environment within the classroom by educating students about diversity issues. Similarly, Maria described feeling supported by her course facilitator’s comfort addressing diversity topics. She explained:

She [the facilitator] really wasn't afraid of communicating her discontent with certain ideas and certain statements that students made...I think in that sense I felt supported because she was doing the job that I think should be done, if that makes sense. It wasn't like she supported me personally in these things, but she supported me by addressing issues that I thought were important as someone - a minority and someone of color.

For Maria, addressing marginalizing comments in class was an expectation she held for her course facilitators and this practice ultimately helped improve the climate for her, as a student of color, throughout the process. Participants suggested that administrators supported them during the process which led participants to believe the selection process was fair.
Selection Process Climate as Surface-level

Although students described the overall process as being fair and their course facilitators as supportive, they perceived the course curriculum and format as a barrier to meaningful conversations on diversity, specifically race. Toddeh was dissatisfied with the rigidity of the course content, which did not allow his facilitators to appropriately adjust content areas he felt required more in-depth discussions. Specifically, Toddeh stated that when the curriculum dictated diversity content, students in the course were not charged to think critically about the topics due to the fast-moving nature of the class:

None of the students really took much away from the idea of White Privilege, and so even though that was one of the topics we covered, it was glossed over like all of the other topics we talked about.

Maria, a current RA, also expressed that in-class conversations about diversity remained surface level. When prompted to discuss ways to enhance the class conversations, Maria discussed U450 facilitators taking the lead in facilitating conversations about diversity in race:

I think just having instructors who are willing to have that conversation and to address issues like that because we have biases even if we don’t realize it. Especially in regards to race… having like the authority figure be the one who communicates this to the students and potential RAs would be a good stepping stone.

The desire to have deeper conversation in class and having the facilitators exist more in the moment in the course could allow for greater understanding in the course. However, not all students desired the deeper conversation.

Similarly, Oliver stated that even though he felt that many of his classmates “took [the RPS Statement of Diversity] to heart” when it came to developing programming around diversity topics, “[the programs] didn't have anything to do with diversity, it was more just la–di–da fun stuff.” Oliver’s statement reflects the perception that students within the course are able to discuss issues of diversity superficially without being challenged to critically engage in the material. Oliver perceived diversity education within the U450 course to center on White students educating other White students, leaving little room to probe how marginalized student populations could experience diversity education within the residence halls. He explained:

Students [at Indiana University] are mostly white, middle-class, cisgender, heterosexual - and [U450 course curriculum] was always from their perspective. How do we get cisgender heterosexual men and women, who are fully-abled, and wealthy and middle class, to think about things? ...It was almost a class to be how to turn into an ally, I feel like a lot of times. Instead of how to empower those people who are already disprivileged [sic], and to come into their own.

A further critique of the process that led to feelings of superficiality was the course’s timing as part of the selection process. Participants believed that because enrolling in the course was part of the
selection criteria, the department created an environment where students were unwilling to critically engage in class discussion. Students believed the course limited honest conversations about challenging topics because students felt constantly evaluated. Toddeh described the class being:

Very, very awkward for a lack of a better word. And [other students within the course] almost seem like they were trying their best not to say the wrong thing and they felt like they were already being interviewed. And so, I know a lot of people use the comparison that the U450 class is like an 8-week interview, but I really would like to see more of those conversations where you do step on each other’s toes.

While the ultimate goal of the selection process is to hire student leaders that will fill a specific role within the residence halls, the process facilitates learning opportunities for all candidates. Participants indicated that their own learning often takes place in the form of dialogues about diversity topics. Maria acknowledges that not all students will want to initiate diversity conversations but that having facilitators willing to prompt these conversations can be a path for greater understanding and learning.

Selection Process Climate as Isolating

Students also described feeling isolated within the selection process. Isolation included feelings of tokenism, which is when minority students receives increased scrutiny due to lack of compositional diversity in the classroom (Kanter, 1977 as cited in P. Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & G. Gurin, 2002), stereotype threat, which is the fear of confirming negative stereotypes (Inzlicht & Schmader, 2011), and devaluation by White students. Feelings of isolation were especially salient throughout the U450 course for participants. The participants described being one of just a few students of color within their U450 section. When discussing the implications of compositional diversity in his U450 class, Oliver stated, “[U450] a good opportunity for discussion, but it’s also problematic in a way, it’s like, “hey you’re the one representative from this entire race, like, help me.”

Maria also shared instances where she felt pressure to attest to the experiences of specific populations because of her perceived salient identities:

I know that I'm usually called upon to address certain things like when we are talking about Black students or minorities in general. Like any minority, people just assume that I know something about [that population] or I can identify with [that group].

Feeling singled out can have an impact on students’ perceptions of racial climate. In addition to tokenism, some students worried about how their behavior and responses may be interpreted by other students in the class. Andrea, a current RA, described being concerned to share her experiences in class, worrying that she would be fulfilling a stereotype that some White students may believe is true of students of color:

There is this mental process that at least I go through, “should I open my mouth and point this out?”, “How am I going to say this?”, let me check my tone, let me check my body language, so that people don't get distracted by
Examining the Perceptions of Students of Color

that and aren't listening to what I say because they're just going to dismiss it as being angry or being too ethnic or whatever they want to call it.

To cope with feelings of isolation, Andrea relied upon a preexisting relationship with another student of color who was in her U450 course section as a source of support. Andrea and her friend shared their lived experiences in class when they felt it was important, despite concerns that the rest of the class was not willing to reciprocate. Students of color can feel unsure of how much to share about their lived experiences with their White peers as it may not be reciprocated. Andrea often debriefed these class sessions with the other student of color over dinner as a way of processing and validating their in-class experiences.

Participants also identified their own RA as influencing their perception of the selection criteria. Specifically, negative interactions created moments of dissonance for participants who questioned their value and place in the process. Oliver shared that White students perceived that students of color had an advantage in the hiring process due to their racial identity. Oliver explained:

I met a lot of Caucasian students [who] were like, "Yeah, that person is here because they're a different color"... I think that some people think they got the job because of ethnicity, which I think, I didn't necessarily think because as a person of color, my whole reference is never, "I got this job because I'm Black." It's always, "I got my job despite of my Blackness".

Oliver’s experience reveals that there are inconsistencies in the perceptions of the department’s espoused selection criteria by current RAs, acting in their role as departmental employee.

This inconsistency highlights a tension between the department’s espoused goal for an inclusive environment and the way both current staff members and White candidates perceive criteria for selection. Assuring students of color that they will be successful in the selection process because of their race may seem well intentioned, but these statements can affect a student of color’s attitude towards applying for the RA position. White students who hold the belief that students of color are only successful in the process because of their racial identity fail to acknowledge the other qualities individual candidates can bring the position, further invalidating the experiences of students of color.

**Discussion**

Using our findings and the Hurtado et al. (1998) framework on campus climate, we noted ways the psychological climate including structures and groups of people affected students’ experiences in the selection process.

**Process as Fair but Marginalizing**

While participants perceived that the selection process was fair, participants also felt marginalized in certain aspects of the process. Specifically, students’ perceptions of the microaggressions and tokenism felt throughout parts of the process, typically by White peers in the U450 course, suggests unnamed racism experienced by participants. Individuals normalize racist actions, which they deem fair, because they live in a society with pervasive and systemic marginalization (Hardiman, Jackson & Griffin, 2007 as cited in Watt, 2012). While
participants may not label the climate of the selection process as racist. Hurtado et al. (1998) explain that students perceiving environments as isolating may indicate a lower sense of belonging on campus. As one of few students of color in their section of the U450 course and perceived pressure from classmates, participants expressed feeling isolated.

Similar to previous research (e.g. Fries-Britt & Turner, 2002), many participants felt they were expected to speak on behalf of their entire race in the U450 course, which led to feelings of tokenism. For students of color, tokenism caused by being singled out creates roadblocks for students of color at PWIs, which helps form negative perceptions of climate (Arminio et al., 2000). Participants wanted to spend more time discussing the impact of race and privilege on individuals and groups of people within the curriculum. Despite the overarching theme of fairness, tokenism and isolation affected perceptions of psychological climate creating negative feelings towards aspects of the selection process.

Influence of Residential Life Course

Additionally, participants perceived that RA selection relied heavily on the U450 course, making the course seem like an eight week extended interview. As such, participants believed students hesitated to participate fully in class discussion due to the fear of offending others. The belief of the U450 course being an eight week interview was contradictory to training U450 facilitators received in managing their unique role of being a course facilitator, while also a part of RA selection (Residential Programs and Services, 2014a). Facilitators served in a selection role, providing a written evaluation of each student that was included within their department file used within the selection process (Residential Programs and Services, 2014a). The written evaluation based on course participation led some participants to make the connection that the course significantly influences hiring decisions.

Participated described a superficial climate because of their peers’ perceived discomfort participating due to the structure and timing of the U450 course.

Role of Current Resident Assistants

Participants viewed their RA not only as a peer, but as an employee and representative of the department, giving the RAs positional power over RA candidates. In this regard, current RAs are representing the departmental values and their actions can shape the way candidates perceive the climate of the RA selection process and the department. With perceived authority, current RAs can threaten perceptions of inclusivity by perpetuating the idea that students of color are valued in the selection process only because their race will add to the department’s compositional diversity. As psychological climate is influenced by behaviors of other individuals in the environment (Hurtado et al., 1998), it is necessary to consider how student leaders discuss racial diversity.

Implications for Practice

Supplemental Training for Current RAs on Selection Process

Current RAs can aide in eliminating feelings of isolation students of color experience within the selection process. Because of the relationships RAs build with their residents, it is natural for students to turn to their own RA as a resource throughout the selection process. As a result, the RA’s knowledge on
selection influences students’ experiences while going through the process.

In order to be a knowledgeable resource on the selection process, current RAs should be trained to understand how to talk to any prospective students about the position and the characteristics of ideal candidates. The training discussion should emphasize that diverse staff are necessary to serve the diverse set of students that live within residence halls without tokenizing specific identities or underrepresented groups.

In addition to generalized training, current RAs should receive training on interacting with prospective students of color. Current RAs have the ability to recruit students of color in a way that values their diverse perspectives instead of their contributions to compositional diversity. Housing professionals can encourage their student staff members to do this through using inclusive training models, raising consciousness about issues of diversity, and celebrating the contributions of student leaders of color (Griffin, Nichols, Perez, & Tuttle, 2008).

Because students may consider becoming an RA as early as the moment they move into their residence hall community, waiting until applications are due to train staff on the selection process may inhibit recruitment efforts of a diverse group of students. While the selection process officially begins when students attend an information session, these students often interact with their RAs prior to making decisions to submit their application. RPS can further support students by creating information sessions early on that are intended for students of color and familiarizing them with the complex selection process (Griffin et al., 2008).

**Mentoring**

In order to alleviate feelings of isolation, mentoring programs can help to integrate students of color into campus communities (Griffin et al., 2008). Mentors can help students navigate both academic and social environments (Griffin et al., 2008). As students from all racial backgrounds can serve in mentoring roles, departments should consider incorporating a mentoring system that serves all students. For the mentoring program to be effective and sustainable, it is important to consider what is feasible for student staff and administrators to implement that will empower current staff members as leaders and provide support for RA candidates throughout the process.

**Future Research**

There are several areas to consider for future research. First, while there is literature regarding student leadership, student employment, and involvement, there is less literature focused specifically on the unique position of RAs as both student leaders and university employees. As participants in our study indicated, the unique position of being a peer and university employee creates a power differential in which RAs must balance while working with their residents. Knowing many campuses employ students in the RA position, a greater understanding of how these positions can affect student learning and development can help student affairs professionals better support the students they supervise.

Additionally, examining individual identities of students does not fully capture the student experience (Poynter & Washington, 2005). Future research should include not only other social identities beyond race, but also how the intersections between these identities influence student perceptions of climate. Adding the context of intersectional identities to the voices of
these individuals will enable a more complete assessment.

Finally, participants often described White student staff members tokenizing student staff of color or engaging in behavior that did not advance the department’s diversity statement. Specifically, future research could investigate how White student staff members enact departmental diversity statements and what messages they are taking away from their experiences in the selection process. Pursuing these areas of future research may improve the climate of the selection process for students of color.

Conclusion

Although participants described the racial climate within the RA selection process to be positive overall, participants perceived their experience to be different from their White peers, as they felt isolated and tokenized during aspects of the selection process because of their racial identities. Our charge is to encourage all practitioners to ask students of color what they specifically need to feel seen, heard, and valued. Practitioners should utilize feedback from students of color as they work to construct positive, inclusive campus climates.

References


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