

A TRAINING NEEDS ASSESSMENT OF UW-STOUT RESIDENT ADVISORS

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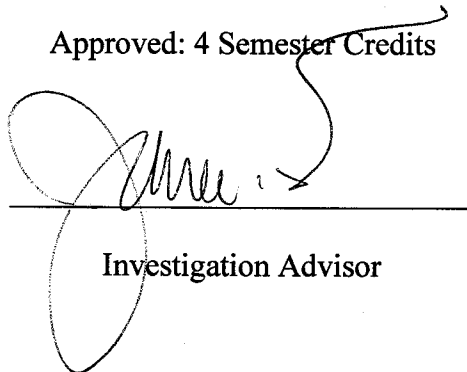
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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "J. Lenartz", is written over a horizontal line. The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long, sweeping underline that loops back under the signature.

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ABSTRACT

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A Training Needs Assessment of UW-Stout Resident Advisors

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Dr. James Tan

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This research provided a training needs assessment of Resident Advisors on the University of Wisconsin-Stout campus. This was accomplished using a two-stage data gathering process. The first stage consisted of obtaining task inventories from five Resident Advisors using structured interviews and obtaining data from the Housing & Residence Life administrative staff during a meeting. The results of these interviews and the meeting were combined by the researcher with the 2003-2004 Resident Advisor Competencies & Learning Objectives established by the Housing & Residence Life department to design a survey that was administered online to all 94 Resident Advisors on the University of Wisconsin-Stout campus.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Purpose of Project

The purpose of this research is to evaluate whether the training University of Wisconsin-Stout Resident Advisors receive meets the Housing & Residence Life training objectives and whether Resident Advisors feel they are being adequately trained for their jobs. Another objective is to assess the level of training Resident Advisors feel they have in various areas and to determine whether there are any vital tasks of the Resident Advisor positions which are not covered during training. This information is important at the present time because due to UW system-wide budget cuts, the amount of money available to UW-Stout's Housing & Residence Life department has been decreased and it is imperative to determine whether the limited funds available for training are being spent in the most efficient way possible. Additionally, the findings can be used to ensure training is focused on the knowledge, skills, and abilities required to be a successful Resident Advisor and to reduce the high level of turnover at the position.

Background

Training is any systematic activity an organization undertakes to acquire new skills or enhance existing skills for their employees which results in improved performance (Colarelli & Montei, 1996; Goldstein & Ford, 2002). The success of learning from training depends on the development of individual employees. In other words, training evaluation should be focused on individual employees (Senge, 1990). Training research has found evaluating training to be of significant value to an organization. Ninety percent of American firms offer formal training at a

cost of \$40 billion a year and spend an average of 33 hours on new employee training (Colarelli & Montei, 1996). Research is imperative to ensure that this time and money is being well spent particularly when companies are working with limited resources. Additionally, the quality of training has an impact on all aspects of the organization. For example, employees who are well trained are more likely to experience success on the job and are less likely to leave their jobs (Ferris & Urban, 1984). In fact, turnover has been found to be significantly negatively correlated with quantity of training; the more training that takes place, the less turnover results ($r = -.40$; Colarelli & Montei, 1996). Bartram and Gibson (2000) stated that it is important to analyze training needs even when they appear obvious in order to determine the level of training required by employees. In addition, Bartram and Gibson stated that other benefits of training include: to 1) give a focus and direction to training, 2) identify priority training needs, 3) identify the appropriate method for meeting these training needs, 4) give recognition to the contribution training makes to organizational growth and success, and 5) measure the benefits of training against the initial costs.

Although training has been repeatedly proven to be valuable, it is far underutilized. Cascio (1989) feels companies should devote at least 2% of their annual payroll to training and development activities and that training should be treated as an investment. As jobs become more specialized training will continue to grow in importance. Kapp (1999) stated "The only sustainable advantage an organization will have in the future is the ability to learn faster than its competitors." (p.46).

There are two main types of training: formal and informal. Formal training is most often used for new hires and to meet recurring competency requirements for existing employees. Formal training is also where the acquisition of skills and knowledge is the primary goal of the

organization-sponsored activities. The other type of training is informal and is usually done on a periodic basis. Furthermore, during informal training, the acquisition of skills and knowledge is secondary to other activities (Colarelli & Montei, 1996). Tannenbaum and Yukl (1992) estimated that substantial money (about \$180 billion per year) is spent on informal training as well. The Resident Advisor Training Needs Assessment is focused on whether the objectives of a formal training program implemented every fall for Resident Advisors are being met.

Training evaluation should be undertaken after training is completed (Goldstein & Ford, 2002). There are several goals during training and training evaluations assess whether these goals have been met. Three types of validity can be established by training evaluations. *Training validity* will determine what trainees learned during training and whether what they learned fits the organization's training objectives. *Transfer validity* will determine whether what was learned during training led to enhanced performance in the work organization. This type of validity assesses whether the knowledge obtained during training is used on the job to make employees more effective. Finally, *intraorganizational validity* will determine whether the performance of a new group of trainees in the same organization performs as well as incumbents who went through a different training program (Goldstein & Ford, 2002). This can be utilized for an organization that frequently changes its training procedures to determine which procedures are most effective and to make sure the quality of training new employees receive is at least as effective, if not more effective, than the training current employees receive. This Resident Advisor Training Needs Assessment will be used to determine these three methods of training validity. The level of training for each training objective will be assessed to determine training validity. Whether this knowledge is utilized in job performance will be assessed to determine transfer validity and the performance of groups of Resident Advisors who went through different

training sessions will be analyzed separately to determine intraorganizational validity. This information can be used to determine which training session was perceived to be more effective by the recipients.

Performing evaluations of training success both immediately and after several weeks is important because training which appears effective immediately may be less effective in the long-term and vice-versa (Hesketh, 1997; Schmidt & Bjork, 1992). A meta-analysis of 53 training articles found that substantial skill loss does occur with non-practice or non-use of trained skills (Arthur, Bennett, Stanush, and McNelly, 1998). Alliger, Tannenbaum, Bennett, Traver, and Shotland (1997) also found both immediate learning and retention assessments to be positively correlated with actual learning ($r = .35$ and $r = .58$ respectively). Thus, the use of both immediate and retention assessments provided the best assessment of employee learning from training.

A tool found to be particularly successful in improving training is a job analysis which is used to identify the knowledge and skills necessary to perform a job. This can be used to identify training needs, identify the knowledge and skills that people must possess in order to perform effectively on the job, and ensure training is linked to the trainee's needs (Gupta, 1999; Goldstein, 1989; Goldstein & Ford, 2002). Salas and Cannon-Bowers (2001) found training needs analyses in particular to be a very important step in training development. Some of the benefits they reported for training needs analyses were to determine where training is needed, what needs to be taught, and who needs to be trained.

Furthermore, Swist (2002) reported a training needs assessment to be the important first step in performance improvement. Similar to Salas and Cannon-Bowers (2001), Swist noted that training needs assessment is important because it helps determine what training is relevant to

employees' jobs. Time and money are often wasted on training employees on tasks they will not use. Another reason to use a training needs assessment is to determine what type of training will improve performance so employees are fully prepared for their job responsibilities. The third reason to use training needs assessment reported by Swist is to determine whether training will make a difference or whether job tasks themselves need to be changed or are not being utilized on the job. When training resources are limited, the resources should be focused on areas that employees spend the most time on and the areas that are most important. A needs assessment can therefore determine which employees require additional training and in what areas (Ostroff & Ford, 1989).

More importantly, another reason for conducting a training needs assessment is to link improved job performance with the organization's goals and bottom line. A training needs assessment can determine whether the actual training being performed is the same as the established training objectives. If this is not the case, training can be adjusted to focus more on the areas management determines are vital.

Other reasons for performing a training needs assessment reported by Bartram and Gibson (2000) are to (a) gain information from job incumbents about their perceptions of training needs related to their jobs, and (b) assist in the development of departmental job training programs.

Cascio (1989) argued that training needs analysis is necessary to determine whether the benefits from training are worth the amount of money being spent on training. If this is not the case, the money could be better spent elsewhere in the organization.

The main goal for a needs assessment is to determine whether a discrepancy exists between knowledge, skills, and abilities which training is attempting to implement and the

knowledge, skills, and abilities used in job performance (American Society for Training & Development [ASTD], 1998). Subject matter experts (e.g., employees in the organization who work in the position being studied and have in-depth knowledge of the position being studied) have been found to be crucial during a needs assessment of their positions (Swist, 2002). Testing the subject matter experts is the best way to determine whether the knowledge, skills, and abilities being trained for are the same as those being utilized on the job. Salas & Cannon-Bowers (2001) found most incumbents preferred the subject matter expert method to traditional ability rating scales for gathering information during a training needs assessment. This is because rating ability scales may only look at certain tasks which new employees have been trained for and omit tasks the incumbents performing the job feel are important. Despite the importance of a training needs analysis, it is used by only 27% of companies (Saari, Johnson, McLaughlin, & Zimmerle, 1988).

A job/task analysis is used to identify the information necessary to create learning objectives. This will provide a detailed description of the work functions which are performed on the job and which knowledge, skills, and abilities are needed to successfully perform the tasks required by the position (Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001, Arvey, Salas, & Gialluca, 1992). The job/task analysis allows the employees with hands-on experience to give input into the tasks they perform both daily and on an infrequent basis and to state whether they possess the knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to perform these tasks. Task analysis is the first stage of a needs assessment, which defines the tasks that comprise the target position and collects data from employees about the tasks, knowledge, skills, and abilities necessary to perform effectively at the position. Another benefit of task analyses is it can be used to forecast skills that will be needed to perform a job in the future (Arvey et al., 1992).

Affective reactions, which involves an evaluation of training for liking, is the most common used training evaluation and has been found to be useful. However, Alliger et al. (1997) found it to be less valid for evaluating success of training than other evaluation methods in a meta-analysis of 34 studies on training, and reported it should be used in conjunction with other methods. They found utility reactions, which are asking respondents about quality of training and level of learning, to be the most valid predictor of learning when combined with affective reactions. Furthermore, the exclusive use of positive reactions as a proxy of training success is problematic. Tan, Hall, and Boyce (in press), for example, found that negative evaluations were the best predictor of employee learning. As such, evaluations of training success should not solely rely on positive reactions.

There have been previous compilations of the tasks and responsibilities of UW-Stout Resident Advisors. For example, the University of Wisconsin-Stout Resident Advisor Competencies & Learning Objectives (2003-2004) lists the competencies required for the Resident Advisor position. Additionally, Dose (1999) evaluated both Resident Advisors and their superiors to establish an inventory of Resident Advisor responsibilities. Stange (2002) studied the perceptions of housing officers, who are Resident Advisor superiors, to determine the competencies they found most important for Resident Advisors. The proposed research will extend these established competencies and tasks.

A successful training needs analysis requires support from all levels of an organization (Goldstein & Ford, 2002). By examining the base stages of an organization (i.e., the training undertaken by new employees) one examines the goals and objectives for the organization itself and, at the same time, also evaluates whether these goals and objectives correspond to the organization's stated goals and objectives. Since new employees are the recipients of the current

goals and objectives for the organization, it is important they learn and display organization-relevant attributes. Additionally, including workers in all levels of the analysis can prevent “counter-training” (i.e., employees being resistant to training and not participating as fully as possible). It is therefore important to involve as many organizational stakeholders as possible in the training analysis because this will build support for the project and offer information from many different perspectives. In fact, Sparhawk (1999) reported it is best to assess the entire target population whenever possible for the most valid results.

The most effective needs assessments use more than one type of data collection method (Goldstein & Ford, 2002). The questionnaire method is useful because it can be administered to large numbers of people at the same time to obtain quantitative results, is fairly inexpensive, allows subjects to express their ideas anonymously, and the data obtained can be easily summarized and reported (McArdle, 1998). Disadvantages of using questionnaires include: (a) the instruments allow for little free expression of unanticipated responses, (b) require substantial time for development and analysis, and (c) can suffer from low return rates (McArdle, 1998). Interviews, on the other hand, allow respondents to identify feelings, causes of and possible solutions to problems, and allow the maximum opportunity for subjects to express themselves. Face-to-face interaction also can encourage trust and openness (Bartram & Gibson, 2000). Disadvantages of the interview are these are difficult to analyze results quantitatively and are time consuming (Goldstein & Ford, 2002). Thus, using both interviews and questionnaires for the Resident Advisor Training Needs Assessment allowed for the subsequent quantitative analysis of respondent data and the collection of information that a questionnaire might miss. Also, the American Society for Training & Development (ASTD, 1998) stated that gathering preliminary information from interviews leads to more successful questionnaires. Electronic

questionnaires in particular are useful because of the quick turnaround of responses and reduction of error in data entry (ASTD, 1998) and were used for this research.

Chapter 2

Phase One

Methodology

The first phase of the assessment consisted of interviewing five randomly selected Resident Advisors from all Resident Advisors on campus. Three of the Resident Advisors interviewed have been in their positions for more than one year and had participated in at least two training sessions. The other two Resident Advisors were in their first semesters at the position and have participated in only the August 2003 training session. The objective of these interviews was to determine the tasks and competencies required to be a successful Resident Advisor. The instrument which was used to conduct these interviews was adapted from Gupta (1999) and is attached as Appendix A. Based on Goldstein & Ford's (2002) recommendation to include all levels of an organization in a training evaluation, a meeting was held with the Housing & Residence Life administrative staff to review the survey which was to be administered online and to receive feedback about other possible items to include.

Results of Phase One Interviews

The information from these interviews was added to the Housing & Residence Life's Resident Advisor Competencies & Learning Objectives. Training needs identified by the Resident Advisor interviews which were not included in the Housing & Residence Life's Resident Advisor Competencies & Learning objectives or which required further clarification for inclusion in the second measure were:

- policy enforcement
- rounds
- desk work

- referring residents to proper resources
- hall council
- meaningful interactions
- floor meetings
- Resident Advisor recruitment and recommendations
- move-in procedures
- move-out procedures
- drug issues
- incidents and reporting

Additionally, the item “fire safety” was changed to “fire safety and response” and the item “programming” was changed to “programming and publicity”.

Based on the meeting with the Housing & Residence Life administrative staff the following items were added to the instrument:

- hall maintenance issues
- emergency procedures
- Have you received training which pertains to this job elsewhere?

This question was intended to evaluate whether Resident Advisors who received relevant training elsewhere perceived the level of training they received at UW-Stout differently than those who did not.

- Is there any other information regarding Resident Advisor training you would like to add?

This was an open-response item with space for respondents to anonymously submit information or perceptions regarding training.

Based on this information a second instrument was developed to be administered online to all Resident Advisors at the University of Wisconsin-Stout to assess whether Resident Advisors feel they are being adequately trained in specific areas.

Chapter 3

Phase Two

Methodology

The second instrument was based on Gupta (1999) and is attached as Appendix B. The content of the second instrument was based on the results of Phase One. The items on the survey were training objectives identified on the Housing & Residence Life Competencies and Learning Objectives and also based on information gained from the Resident Advisor interviews and the meeting with the Housing & Residence Life administrative staff. The researcher sent out a letter through email to all 94 Resident Advisors at the University of Wisconsin-Stout campus. This letter contained a link to the survey for those respondents who wished to reply.

Results of Phase 2 Questionnaire

For the questionnaires which were emailed to Resident Advisors 68 of the 91 surveys were returned, resulting in a response rate of 74.7%.

The items were grouped into two categories: (a) interpersonal items and (b) task-based items. The alpha reliabilities for the responses based on these categories were .90 for time spent by respondents on the interpersonal items, .78 for time spent on the task items, .96 for level of training on the interpersonal items, and .94 for level of training on the task items (see Appendix B).

Our *t*-test results indicated that based on the categorization of the response items, the level of training exceeded the time spent by Resident Advisors for both interpersonal ($t = 6.80, p < .01$) and task items ($t = 6.99, p < .01$). One individual item where the time spent on the task

greatly exceeded the level of training was “meaningful interactions”(t= 2.48, $p < .05$). The mean response to amount of time spent was .56 higher than the level of training received.

The range of responses for time spent was 1.51 (relationship violence) to 3.86 (community development). The range of responses for level of training was 2.64 (grief and loss issues) to 3.98 (alcohol abuse issues). The items with the lowest reported time spent are: “relationship violence” (1.51), “blood borne pathogens” (1.53), “grief and loss” (1.63), “sexual harassment” (1.67), and “suicide” (1.67). The items with the most reported time spent are: “community development” (3.86), “rounds” (3.80), “meaningful interactions” (3.63), and “campus resources knowledge” (3.61). The items respondents reported having the highest level of training on are “alcohol abuse issues” (3.98), “conflict mediation” (3.72), and “incapacitation” (3.72). The items with the lowest reported level of training are “grief and loss” (2.64), “ethnoviolence and hate crimes” (2.78), “damage prevention program” (2.78), “RA recruitment and references” (2.89), and “academic assistance” (2.90).

Female respondents reported spending more time on interpersonal items than males ($F = 5.173$, $p < .05$). The perceived time spent on training for task items was not significantly different by gender. The level of training on interpersonal items ($F = 2.68$, $p < .05$) is significantly higher for Resident Advisors with more semesters of employment. Time spent on tasks related to the various responses and level of training for task items were not significantly different based on length of employment. There were no reported differences in level of training on interpersonal items based on age, only on semesters of employment as a Resident Advisor. Resident Advisors who reported experience in previous positions related to their current position reported a higher level of training for both task ($t = 8.23$, $p < .01$) and interpersonal items ($t = 8.28$, $p < .01$). They also reported more time spent on both task ($t = 9.48$, $p < .01$) and

interpersonal items ($t = 7.03, p < .05$) than Resident Advisors with no experience from previous positions which relates to the Resident Advisor position.

Table 1
Amount of time spent and level of training

<i>Issue</i>	<i>amount of time spent</i>		<i>level of training</i>	
	mean	s.d.	mean	s.d.
Academic assistance	2.23	.932	2.90	1.197
Alcohol abuse issues	2.76	1.187	3.98	1.194
Blood borne pathogens	1.53	.862	3.21	1.253
Campus resources knowledge	3.61	1.122	3.55	1.155
Community development	3.86	.975	3.67	1.179
Conduct system	2.86	1.135	3.50	1.098
Conflict mediation	2.54	1.149	3.72	.940
Confrontation	2.78	1.097	3.69	1.057
Damage prevention program	2.60	1.212	2.78	1.303
Depression	1.76	.970	3.12	1.277
Desk work	3.29	1.237	3.23	1.388
Diversity	2.28	1.097	3.18	1.208
Drug abuse issues	1.80	.939	3.30	1.243
Eating disorders	1.78	.891	3.05	1.217
Emergency procedures	2.20	1.079	3.54	1.208
Ethnoviolence/hate crime	1.75	.841	2.78	1.316
Fire safety and response	1.81	.742	3.37	1.221
Floor meetings	2.58	1.068	3.17	1.126
Grief and loss	1.63	.824	2.64	1.238
Hall council	2.62	1.211	2.91	1.199
Hall maintenance issues	2.81	1.139	2.93	1.351
Helping skills and interventions	2.56	1.161	3.15	1.223
Incapacitation	1.94	1.018	3.72	1.067
Incidents and reporting	2.79	1.109	3.45	1.224
Meaningful interactions	3.63	1.119	2.98	1.433
Move-in/check-in procedures	2.23	1.207	3.27	1.148
Move-out/check-out procedures	2.10	1.125	3.21	1.171
Police Issues	2.34	1.031	3.46	1.058
Policy enforcement	3.25	1.090	3.69	1.065
Programming and publicity	3.33	.993	3.52	1.112
RA recruitment and references	2.23	1.031	2.89	1.197
Referral of residents to appropriate resources	3.13	1.238	3.50	1.198
Relationship violence	1.51	.736	3.03	1.193
Residence hall policies	2.97	1.045	3.68	.971
Rounds	3.80	1.078	3.52	1.366
Safety and risk management	1.91	.957	2.92	1.078
Self-esteem issues	2.20	1.117	2.97	1.169

<i>Issue</i>	<i>amount of time spent</i>		<i>level of training</i>	
	mean	s.d.	mean	s.d.
Sexual assault	1.78	.881	3.25	1.271
Sexual harassment	1.67	.808	3.25	1.284
Stress management	2.60	1.087	3.02	1.228
Student development	2.78	.992	3.08	1.191
Suicide	1.67	1.014	3.20	1.339

Chapter 4

Discussion

It was found that the time respondents reported their training overall in the two groups was significantly higher than the time spent on tasks related to each group. This indicates that overall respondents are well-trained.

The items with the lowest response reported time spent were “relationship violence,” “blood borne pathogens,” “grief and loss,” “sexual harassment,” and “suicide”. These items emergency-response type items which would typically be rarely encountered, but still necessitate proper knowledge in the chance they do occur. Because of this, a discrepancy between time spent and level of training is likely not an issue. The items with the most reported time spent are: “community development,” “rounds,” “meaningful interactions,” and “campus resources knowledge”. Respondents reported a fairly high level of training on most of these items, indicating the training is comparable to the time spent. The one area where level of perceived training was substantially below the time spent was on “meaningful interactions” indicating this may be one area to increase future training on. Because the time spent on the other areas rated as having low levels of training for is relatively low as well, this is likely not a problem.

The finding that female respondents reported spending significantly more time on interpersonal issue than males leads to a couple of possibilities. One is the job requirements differ by gender and training could be adjusted to reflect this. Another possibility is that either male Resident Advisors are not spending enough time on tasks related to interpersonal issues, or female Resident Advisors are spending an excessive amount of time on interpersonal issues. Further research specifically targeting this issue could provide clarification and indicate areas for change in training.

Resident Advisors who have been employed for more semesters reported a higher level of training on interpersonal items. The level of training on task items did not differ significantly based on length of employment. As Resident Advisors who have been employed longer have undergone more training sessions, this could potentially mean that previous training sessions have more effectively trained Resident Advisors on interpersonal issues than more recent ones. However, another possible explanation is that interpersonal items benefit from a cumulative level of training, while task items are more criterion-based (i.e., once someone has learned the skill, they will not benefit from further training).

In addition to continued assessments of long-term training retention, utility reactions of the effectiveness of training should be obtained immediately following training. Alliger, et al. (1997) and Miller (2001) suggested this for the most valid training assessments. This could be done on the same form the training administrators use to collect affective reactions at the present time. The form could list the training objectives and have trainees indicate whether the objectives have been met.

Another method suggested by Schneider and Konz (1989) and Arvey et al. (1992) which could be used to improve training is using Subject Matter Experts to project how a job will change and what new tasks will require training. This could be accomplished with periodic interviews of incumbent Resident Advisors.

Using an email survey resulted in a very high response rate for this study. This is a promising and unexpected finding which could be the basis for future research. If electronic questionnaires are found to generally have such high response rates, this will greatly aid future studies. This cannot be determined from this single study however. The high response rate may have resulted from the researcher being a member of the group which was being evaluated.

Based on the findings of the Resident Advisors level of training exceeding the time they spend on work-related tasks, the Housing and Residence Life staff must decide whether overtraining is their goal, or whether training could be reduced, and the resources spent elsewhere.

Limitations of study

One limitation of this study was using a 1 to represent “never perform this task” and “did not have training focused on task” instead of a 0 or N/A. This was necessitated by the limitations of the program used to develop the online survey, but may have resulted in respondents treating the scale as a 1-6 Likert scale and skipping items which they did not perform or did not have training on. Because of this some respondents may have skipped over items they otherwise would have answered 0 or N/A to.

Another limitation is the relatively small sample size and specific nature of the job examined, which limits the generalization of the findings. Grouping the various task categories into interpersonal and task groups will increase the validity of the findings, and reduce the likelihood the findings result from chance. The high reliability of the groupings indicate this was indeed a result.

Table 2

Gender of respondents

Gender	Number	%
Male	28	41.2
Female	40	58.8
Total	68	100

Table 3
Age of respondents

Age	Number	%
19	22	32.4
20	21	30.9
21	13	19.1
22	8	11.8
23	2	2.9
24	1	1.5
36	1	1.5

Table 4
Semesters as an RA

Semesters as an RA	Number	%
1	41	60.3
2	6	8.8
3	11	16.2
4	5	7.4
5	4	5.9
7	1	1.5

Table 5

Previous training

Does RA have previous training?	Number	%
Yes	29	42.6
No	39	57.4

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Appendix B

Categories of items

<i>Interpersonal Items</i>	<i>Task Items</i>
Academic assistance	Blood borne pathogens
Alcohol abuse/issues	Knowledge of campus resources
Community development	Damage prevention program
Conduct systems	Emergency procedures
Conflict mediation	Ethnoviolence/hate crimes
Confrontation	Fire safety and response
Depression	Hall council
Desk work	Hall maintenance issues
Diversity	Incapacitation
Drug abuse/issues	Incidents and reporting
Eating disorders	Move-in/check-in procedures
Floor meetings	Move-out/check-out procedures
Grief and loss	Residence hall policies
Helping skills and intervention	Safety and risk management
Meaningful interactions	Stress management
Police issues	
Policy enforcement	
Programming and publicity	
RA recruitment and references	
Referral of residents to appropriate sources	
Relationship violence	
Rounds	
Self-esteem issues	
Sexual harassment	
Student development	
Suicide	