

MACEWAN RESIDENCE LIFE STAFF: ENHANCING STUDENT LEADERSHIP

By

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of the requirements for the degree of

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In

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

MacEwan Residence, on the city centre campus of MacEwan University, opened in 2005 and houses 882 students in 450 suite-style units on a yearly basis. Offering a safe, secure, and academically focussed on-campus living experience, MacEwan Residence is committed to assisting in the transition of all students pursuing a postsecondary experience and to offering convenient, affordable housing in the heart of Edmonton, Alberta, Canada.

MacEwan Residence delivers this commitment primarily through the Residence Life Staff team, which is made up of 27 residence assistants (RAs) who live within each floor community and who support all residents. It is a well-known fact in Edmonton that there are many off-campus housing options to choose from including condos, apartments, and living with parents. The on-campus experience has to be more than just a convenient and fun place to live, but also needs to be a developmental experience in which relationships can be built, learning can take place, and the cost of residence is a worthwhile investment—in other words, a student doesn't just get a bed to put their head in but is able to thrive as a student and an individual.

Although MacEwan University is relatively young in comparison to postsecondary institutions in Canada, in its 43-year history, the organization has grown from Grant MacEwan Community College and has become a prominent organization focussed on producing outstanding graduates and citizens. Of the 11,838 full-load equivalent students enrolled at MacEwan University (MacEwan University, 2013), only a small percentage live on campus for varying periods of time. Whether students choose to live in residence for two or 12 semesters, their experience should reflect the core beliefs of the institution and the culture on which the organization was founded.

Operating as a comprehensive university, the school provides certificate, diploma, and degree programs that span a wealth of subjects (MacEwan University, 2013). Unlike a college where only niche technical courses may be offered or a large research university where dozens of degree programs are available from many different faculties, MacEwan University blends both universes that speak to the needs of thousands of students. John Corlett, Vice-President Academic and Provost, recently indicated that MacEwan University is becoming the envy of educational institutions that have bet on one type of student and that now yearn for the many cost recovery opportunities from offering a diverse experience (J. Corlett, personal communication, May 9, 2013). As the realities of postsecondary education shift, so too must institutions, and MacEwan University continues to successfully position itself as a “vibrant, innovative educational institution focussed on student learning” (MacEwan University, 2013, p. 5) and a forward-thinking organization that “fosters student success through a focus on teaching excellence, interaction among faculty and students, flexible learning delivery and high quality student support” (MacEwan University, 2013, p. 5).

These core beliefs not only run through the architecture of the academic buildings and programs, but also through the residence system as well. The commitment to being student focussed is not limited to classroom hours. Residence Services is driven to engage residents for the entire time they choose to live on campus and to lead in the development of academic success, community, and relationships. This mission is accomplished by the student RA team, and their leadership acts as the trigger for igniting the residence experience for almost 900 in-house residents. As the

RAs' leadership abilities are so critical to the overall goals of the organization, the opportunity to explore their leadership, the role they play in the community, to unpack its development, and to notice and name areas for enhancement was far too tempting to pass up. Moreover, student leadership, particularly in university housing in Canada, is largely unresearched and, given the young age of residents at MacEwan University, has provided an untapped area for exploration. Accepting the assumption that RAs are fundamental to the MacEwan residence experience, a clear opportunity exists for MacEwan Residence to better understand its student leadership team and to lay the framework necessary to propel the next evolutionary step for the Residence Life Staff team forward.

The inquiry question used to frame this organizational leadership project was: How can MacEwan Residence enhance its student leaders to facilitate an exceptional residence experience?

Additionally, sub-questions were used to support the research:

1. What leadership experience had the greatest impact on the community?
2. What visions do residents have to increase the health and vitality of RA leadership?
3. What capacities do RAs bring to their role?
4. What wishes do RAs have for their own future development?

In preparation for the action research component of the project and to provide a necessary framework for the overall inquiry, I immersed myself in relevant literature focussed on student leadership within university housing, including the role it plays and the impact it has on the campus community. Additionally, I also reviewed the ways in which student leadership has traditionally been fostered and enhanced and the role that supervisors play in guiding and coaching that development. The centre of the literature review was on understanding the history of RAs, their roles in residence, and ways they can be coached and developed.

In looking to understand the literature on all of these elements of student leadership in residence, several themes became apparent including the development of leadership identity through experience and feedback, and the nurturance and development of community and relationships. Additional themes that appeared included future-forward attitudes and a structured learning environment and, when considering the applications of student leadership in residence, the focus was on community and relationship building, academic mentoring, critical incident response, and role modelling resilience and capacity for development. In terms of developing student leadership as a supervisor, the clear themes were on the nurturing of pre-existing goals, allowing for confidence to be built through experiential education opportunities, and creating connections for contributions to be made to the larger organization where impacts can be seen and felt. Additionally, supervisors must establish clear expectations and outcomes that are tied to consistent feedback and recognition activities, and they must assist in finding balance and harmony between all student leader obligations. Overall, the literature confirmed that student leadership is an organic entity constantly shifting shape, form, and depth; is bound together

through experience, risk, and reward; and is coloured through feedback, recognition, community, relationships, and harmony amongst all of its conditions. Additionally, the impact of leadership cannot be denied as the literature explored that the connection between RA and residents is symbiotic and continually informing each other. As the RA builds community, so too does the community build the RA. All the authors who were reviewed reinforced that student leadership is an impactful yet fragile thing and that the nurturance required must be intentional, developmental, and focussed on learning. The need for student leadership in residence is necessary and yet a strong support network must be in place that is willing to challenge and support when necessary and to reward when appropriate as all activities go back to the overall residence community and the service to the students who reside within it.

In facilitating the inquiry, an action research methodology was utilized, which was most appropriate given the inherent nature of community in residence and the collaborative spirit with which action research embodies. Digging deeper, this methodology fit the nature of this project as the purpose of action research is to hear the voices of participants and to help frame their thoughts and feelings in order to be understood and tempered into tangible next steps, owned by all stakeholders, for enhancing the organization.

The overall process focussed on acquiring qualitative data through an online survey conducted anonymously of the entire residence community utilizing three questions. FluidSurveys (n.d.) was the tool of choice given its location in Canada and given that it addressed privacy and information collection issues present with a US service. This method was chosen given the ease, speed, and clarity that it afforded students who are extremely overwhelmed by daily obligations; it provided an anonymous forum where they could speak freely about their experience with the RAs leading this community. More specifically, I was looking for data around resident interactions with RAs, moments that stood out as exceptional, and resident visions of what RAs can do to enhance the residence experience. The next method that was selected was a focus group made up of all current RAs. This method was necessary to not only gauge the current experience of the Residence Life Staff team but also to seek feedback on ways that they believe their development program should be enhanced and their vision of student leadership. All current RAs were invited to participate in order to ensure sufficient data and a diversity of opinions, but no former staff were invited to join the focus group in order to ensure that results were grounded in the experience from this current academic year and were not residual unresolved thoughts and emotions from years prior. All participants were recruited with rigorous ethical considerations in place in order to address the conflict of interest present, given my role as supervisor of the RA and resident communities, and to ensure objectivity and distance from the participants and their contributions. Additionally, the voluntary nature of both methods was reinforced and clear expectations, in terms of withdrawing from the project and the confidentiality of the overall process, were conveyed.

Overall, 5.89% of the residence community participated in the online survey and 56% of the Residence Life Staff team engaged with the focus group, and both parties generated considerable data. Several patterns and themes were revealed in the data analysis, and the quantitative results were used to frame the findings, recommendations, and conclusions in order to thread participants' thinking throughout the results and to reinforce the collaborative nature of the process.

Through analysis of the data, four findings were revealed:

1. Residents define RA skills and abilities in a variety of ways.
2. Residents want RAs to build community.
3. RAs want to develop their personal leadership.
4. RAs want intentional leadership development.

The residents and RAs of MacEwan Residence have confirmed the intrinsic value of the community and relationships that the Residence Life Staff team creates, and they expect this from on-campus student housing. Furthermore, RAs have confirmed that they want to continue to develop their personal leadership abilities and that the development should be intentional and personalized to meet each individual leader. Additionally, a focus should be placed on the experiential development opportunities offered, and successes—both big and small—should be routinely recognized and celebrated. Overall, these findings have demonstrated an engagement and desire to excel and grow as leaders and have served to lay the foundation and shape the three conclusions and the five recommendations for enhancing student leadership at MacEwan Residence.

The three conclusions are as follows:

1. Residents want RAs to help them build relationships, support them both socially and academically, and to assist them in becoming members of the residence community.
2. RAs want to be high-performing leaders and resources who develop community and positively impact the student experience.
3. RAs want to be intentionally developed as leaders, as well as recognized and rewarded for their efforts by their supervisors.

The five recommendations are a culmination of the findings and conclusions:

1. Strengthen the RA role by aligning it to a vision for the community shared by RAs and management.
2. Refocus RA expectations on relationship and community building.
3. Increase Residence Life Staff hard-skill leadership development opportunities.
4. Review the RA performance assessment tool and shift towards individualized leadership development plans.
5. Enhance intentional Residence Life Staff recognition practices based on individualized leadership development plans.

The overall findings of this inquiry reinforce the commitment student leaders have to their role as an RA and the desire they have to be enhanced as leaders. None of the results demonstrated a disengaged leader or someone looking to coast to the end of their contract but instead reflected a commitment to evolve in their roles and to be a contributor to a stronger Residence Life Staff team. Clear work is to be done to shift our understanding of how to develop student leadership, to be far more intentional and personalized throughout the process, and to grow a culture of collaborative leadership enhancement all linked together under a clear and concise strategy. This inquiry has strived to understand the first steps and then to initiate a shift forward and has already played a major role in in establishing new directions for the next academic year.

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## CHAPTER ONE: FOCUS AND FRAMING

This organizational leadership project (OLP) focuses on the goal of enhancing the leadership of the student Residence Life Staff team at MacEwan Residence (MR). MacEwan University's (MU) residence life program is an academically focussed and developmental experience that plays an instrumental role in student's success throughout their post-secondary career.

Overall, this research examined the current state of student leaders at MR and provides recommendations for the continued learning and development of the student staff team. Komives (1994) noted that strong leaders are required to not only be engaged but also able to demonstrate responsibility and care for the community and that the opportunity to assume a leadership role within residence has the power to develop character and, in turn, the culture of the community.

MR, at MU in Edmonton, Alberta, opened in 2005 and houses nearly 900 students on a yearly basis. The residence provides opportunities for several students to assume leadership positions. The majority of the face-to-face interactions a student will have with Residence Services, the department responsible for operation of the building, is with student staff peers. Annually, leadership opportunities exist for students to serve as residence assistants (RAs) who are responsible for acting as peer mentors and role models, assisting in community management, and for developing events and programs. The student leadership model at MR continues to radically shift from an authoritarian role in which the primary function is that of enforcing of the rules to one of community development in which relationship and capacity building are viewed as paramount. As one of two residence life coordinators (RLCs), I am responsible for this organizational change, and I am passionate about the learning and development of the RAs. I,

along with the other incumbent RLC, am able to leverage any change to the RA role with little delay, and I am fully committed to the enhancement of the student staff I lead.

As such, this research project focussed exclusively on enhancing the leadership of the RA role. This focus was identified in a brainstorming session for the upcoming academic year by the senior management team. The performance of the student staff has been prioritized as an item to be addressed within the next several years (MacEwan Residence Life Leadership Team, personal communication, May 14, 2013), and the urgency of this issue has been reaffirmed by Clint Galloway, the manager of Residence Services and the organizational sponsor of this research project (C. Galloway, personal communication, May 14, 2013).

By focussing exclusively on the enhancement of the leadership of the student staff team, an opportunity exists to understand the role that RAs play in the lives of residents and in the culture on campus. This inquiry examined the following question: How can MR enhance its student leaders to facilitate an exceptional residence experience? The sub-questions of the inquiry are as follows:

1. What leadership experience had the greatest impact on the community?
2. What visions do residents have to increase the health and vitality of RA leadership?
3. What capacities do RAs bring to their role?
4. What wishes do RAs have for their own future development?

### **Significance of the Inquiry**

It is commonly known in the residence life profession that a student's expectation, when he or she arrives on campus for the first time, are exceptionally high. A sense of fear of the unknown also accompanies these expectations and plays a tremendous role in the transition of that student to university for the first time. Given the mix of emotions, resources in residence are



therefore needed to provide support and guidance to students and to assist them in transitioning to on-campus living, in building relationships, and in succeeding academically. These resources are delivered by the Residence Life Staff team and the RAs assigned to each floor. An RA who performs in an exemplary fashion and who provides support to their residents has a tremendous benefit to the residence system. The student staff team facilitates, as Ganser and Kennedy (2012) outlined, an out-of-classroom environment where learning is encouraged, opportunities for service to the wider community are created, involvement in the campus culture—where critical relationships can be formed—is offered, and resources to assist residents with their life choices are provided.

Within the residence life profession, RAs are commonly known to enhance the student experience. When their responsibilities are done well, they not only will deliver on the promise that MU has offered to its residents and their parents, but RAs will also influence the systems of MR in a variety of ways (Senge, 2006). The leadership that RAs bring to their community is, as Kania and Kramer (2011) suggested, like a backbone and provides the necessary organization needed to bring the community together, foster a sense of respect, and provide the infrastructure needed for support and development. The community, seeing this leader, will look to the RA not only for guidance when an issue arises but also as a resource for continued development of the community. A well-known fact by student affairs professionals is that if the leadership of the RA is weak, then the community will suffer and so, too, will the residents from a lack of community, relationships, and development of skills for academic success and, as a result, residents will move off campus.

Poor leadership by an RA, therefore, is significant and, if it were to persist, it could be concluded that the retention of the student community will suffer and occupancy rates will likely

decline drastically. Schroeder and Mable (1994) noted, “Residence halls should be powerful and purposeful educational settings and that residence hall staff are, first and foremost educators” (p. 300). If RA leadership is chronically poor, the war between the amenities offered for on-campus living and those offered for off-campus living will be a losing battle as MR “can only compete with these alternatives through adding educational value to students’ lives” (Schroeder & Mable, 1994, p. 301). This research project addresses the way in which RA leadership and the student experience at MR can be improved.

Key stakeholders within MR include the senior leadership team within Residence Services, the residence community, the RA team, and the wider university community. Of the four stakeholder groups, the RA team appears to be the group that will benefit directly from all levels of the inquiry given the focus on improving RA leadership. Further, with improved leadership comes an increase in their capacity to be leaders, a boost in their self-confidence, and a significant increase in the quality of the community being fostered within the residence building. These stronger communities, however, will positively affect the residents as they are able to build better relationships amongst their peers, strengthen connections within the university community, and to move towards greater academic success through the support network offered within residence. The final stakeholder, the senior leadership team, will also benefit from this research project by learning ways to coach better and to mentor RAs and help them, as Senge (2006) suggested, by bridging the gap between the current reality and that of their ideal reality.

### **Organizational Context**

MU was founded as Grant MacEwan Community College in 1971. In the 42 years since its inception, the university has evolved into a large—primarily undergraduate—university whose mission is to be a “vibrant, innovative educational institution focussed on student learning.

MacEwan fosters student success and student contributions within local, national and international communities” (MacEwan University, 2013, p. 5). The mandate of the university, as outlined in the *Comprehensive Institutional Plan*, is to be a “learner-centred” (MacEwan University, 2013, p. 5) service delivery that “fosters student success through a focus on teaching excellence, interaction among faculty and students, flexible learning delivery and high quality student support” (MacEwan University, 2013, p. 5). The plan went into greater detail and highlighted a number of areas of service and support that include “residence and campus life activities, and intercollegiate and intramural sports programs” (MacEwan University, 2013, p. 5).

As previously mentioned, MU established its first and only residence building in 2005, created the Residence Services Department, and tasked it with the overall management of this asset. The department is currently without a formal vision, mission statement, or a strategic plan. Unofficially, the language used to describe the function of the building is “to provide safe and secure academically focussed housing for MacEwan students” (MacEwan Residence Leadership Team, personal communication, July 7, 2009). Given the lack of formal documents, the organizational context that follows is summarized as per my experience working at MU since 2008.

Residence Services is made up of three distinct portfolios including Housing (admissions and front desk operations), Summer Group Accommodations, and Residence Life. The department is led by a team of nine full-time professionals including a manager who reports directly to the vice president of Student Services. Residence Life employs 21 RAs, four senior RAs, one senior programmer, and two first-year programmers. During the summer, MR also employs four summer RAs in order to provide support to a small student community that remains in the building and to assist in the development of the MR fall orientation week. As

outlined in the *2012–2013 MacEwan Residence Life Staff Manual* (MacEwan Residence, 2012), all student staff are responsible for the development of community through the creation of both social and academic programming opportunities. This programming is meant to engage residents in one-on-one activities to ensure that they are transitioning to university successfully and that they are not considering withdrawal or alternative housing. Furthermore, student staff acts as a support network, refers students to professional services as necessary, and responds to critical incidents and emergency situations (MacEwan Residence, 2012).

All 30 student staff report directly to the RLCs, which is my role along with another individual who holds the second RLC position. The RLC's role is primarily that of supervising the student staff, ensuring they are responding to issues appropriately, completing job performance requirements, acting as a mentor and support system, and delivering Residence Services' commitment of an exceptional residential on-campus experience that fosters academic success and that is supportive, developmental, and safe and secure for all residents. The RAs are also responsible for delivering this commitment to residents, and the quality of the delivery is directly proportional to their level of engagement. If an RA chooses to abandon elements of his or her position, MR fails in delivering on its commitments. If RAs choose to not run academic programs or to not touch base with the residents in their community one on one, stress levels rise and grades fall; the entire student experience suffers. The significance of this role in the larger organizational context cannot be understated, and the impact of an RA who chooses to not engage fully with their position has lasting impact on residents, their parents, the building community, and the university, including occupancy rates, revenue, and reputation.

## **Systems Analysis of the Inquiry**

Senge (2006) suggested that the world humans live in is not a function of horizontal or vertical events moving from one to another but a series of circles which humans influence, disrupt, and alter based on their abilities, will, and decisions. Systems are created by society; therefore, they are composed of relationships and the connections between those relationships. In a system, especially one that is hardwired into an organization, not only is an understanding of how the system operates paramount but also of how internal factors can be leveraged in order to influence the system for growth and change.

The cornerstone of this inquiry is rooted in the development and success of the student leaders within MR. In order to understand the forces at work within Residence Services, Figure 1 illustrates the positions of the Residence Life Staff team within the service delivery model of MR, the internal and external factors that influence the overall system, and the systems involved with the Residence Life Staff team (see Figure 1).

At the centre of the system is the RA team itself; the members of the team are responsible for interacting and engaging with all 900 residents as well as residents' parents and guests, delivering the mission and mandate of the University, and making decisions, which both impact the Student Services division and require responses from this division. The performance of the RA team is directly supervised and assessed by Residence Services senior management team.

The double-ended arrows between the core influencers of Residents, MR Senior Leadership, Student Services Division, and MU indicate that these internal factors are not only influenced by the RA team but influence each other as well.

An illuminating recent example of the way in which the various components of the system interact with each other is that of a university-wide hiring freeze that was declared after

recent concerns of budget shortfalls. This freeze was initiated during the most recent recruitment campaign and had major impacts on RA employment for the upcoming academic year. More significantly, the freeze hindered the senior management team from completing recruitment milestones, which resulted in an inability to find quality candidates before they found other employment. Once the freeze was lifted, six of the top individuals selected for senior RA roles and key positions amongst the team turned down offers based on securing jobs with higher pay and apartments with better amenities and at lower prices than what is offered in residence. The impact to the system is still being felt as management scrambles to find adequate staff to fill the team and to deliver the residence life program. June is an unusual time within the industry to still be hiring for the coming academic year, but that is the result of the decision made by the university and is very relevant in demonstrating the impact one area can have on the entire system. Overall, a tremendous movement throughout the entire system is occurring, and the senior leadership team is still feeling effects of these changes.

Finally, the external factors that have tremendous influence over the system include the cost of living in residence, the oil-based economy of Alberta in which labour is often paid exceptionally well and creates expectations for salary well beyond what MR is able to meet, the culture of the university, and the values of the current generation of students.

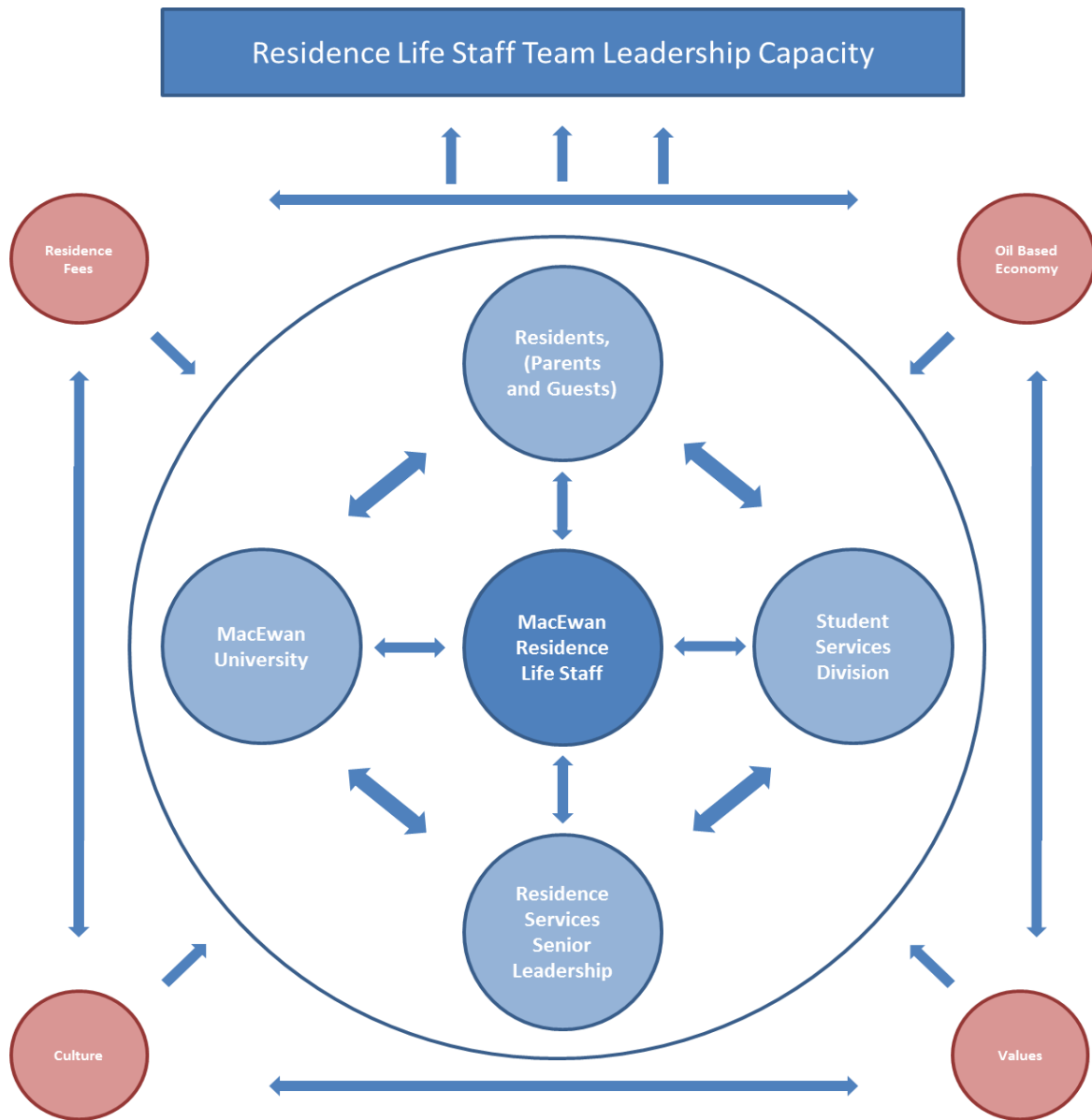


Figure 1. Diagram depicting the position of the Residence Life Staff team within the larger MU system as well as internal and external influences.

The Residence Life Staff team’s leverage over this system is significant and so an equally strong vision to support RA development must exist. Senge (2006) spoke to the concept of vision as it relates to systems and noted that a vision is a perfectly fine idea but that it will not have the ability to make impactful changes unless it is supported by a clear understanding of how the system works. Senge (2006) also suggested that if the ability for people to become passionate

artists of their work, to be fully connected to the vision they have for themselves and the organization, and to contribute to the success of that organization is missing, they will then flounder. These concepts are relevant to the RA team system because its development has been founded on a vision and nothing more. The Resident Life Staff system has not been grounded in the understanding of the role that the RAs play in the university's success nor has the currents of the university that influence the RAs been taken into account. Further to that, the clear vision needed for personal mastery and growth within the roles of the RAs is flawed because it lacks an appreciation of the systems at work. Wheatley (1999) suggested that one piece of the puzzle is an understanding of the living nature of the system; this understanding is not only a willingness to grow and to develop but is also a greater strengthening of the connections that will allow the system to evolve. Wheatley (2010) also suggested that connections are not the only piece necessary for understanding systems and that collaboration—as a team and as a piece of a larger organization—not only breeds strong performance but also creates an ability to collectively understand and contribute to the system. For the RAs to become stronger, a clearer vision is needed. This vision must be rooted in self-awareness of the system of which it is a part, in the strengthening of connections between all internal factors, and in a willingness to be engaged and to work collaboratively in order to improve the performance and health of the overall system. The collaboration needed at all levels of this process cannot be understated. Only then can personal mastery be within reach and only then can the system evolve into a higher performing asset to the university.

### **Project Sponsor**

The sponsor for this organizational leadership project is Clint Galloway, manager of Residence Services. Clint is my direct supervisor and provides direction and support to the



overall Residence Services Department. I have worked with him for over 5 years, and he has become not only my mentor for my work as a professional but also a trusted advisor and advocate. Clint has worked for nearly 20 years in the field of student housing, has held the position I currently do at a number of institutions, and has also completed graduate work, which is a valuable asset to understand the rigours of a program such as this. Clint, by reporting directly to the vice president of Student Services, has a tremendous amount of clout in terms of securing support for projects and for making changes. He is able to introduce new policy, procedures, or processes across the portfolios he oversees without issue given the small nature of the department. He has the respect of the entire Residence Services team, both student staff and professionals. Most importantly, he has the leverage to implement recommendations of the inquiry without delay. Overall, Clint is the ideal choice as a sponsor for this project because he fully understands the issues, recognizes the need for change, and is completely supportive of this inquiry.

### **Chapter Summary**

This chapter has been responsible for establishing the focus and the framing of the inquiry, which is centred on enhancing the leadership of the Residence Life Staff team at MR. MR has struggled with developing consistently high-performing student leaders as well as retaining them for future years. Additionally, this chapter has reviewed the current conditions of MU as a postsecondary institution, the role that residence services plays in the larger organization, and the roles that RAs play in delivering the MR life experience to all students who choose to live on campus as well as the RA's part in the larger systems at work. Finally, this chapter serves as a launching pad for the literature review found in Chapter 2.

## **CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW**

The following literature review provides an academic foundation for the selected inquiry question: How can MR enhance its student leaders to facilitate an exceptional residence experience? The sub-questions of the inquiry are as follows:

1. What leadership experience had the greatest impact on the community?
2. What visions do residents have to increase the health and vitality of RA leadership?
3. What capacities do RAs bring to their role?
4. What wishes do RAs have for their own future development?

The first topic for consideration is principles of student leadership and the impact this leadership has on students and their own growth and development. The second topic includes the ways in which student leadership is nurtured and enhanced, and the results this growth has on the overall community and culture.

### **Principles of Student Leadership**

The following literature review contains a synopsis of student leadership particularly within a university housing setting. The areas that are examined include understanding student leadership in residence and applications.

#### **Understanding student leadership**

Student leadership within a residence system will be determined and defined by the university it inhabits. Every organization will design its systems for its specific needs, mission, and vision. Commonly knowledge within the student housing industry is that a best practice in system design doesn't exist and that universities within several miles of each other will have stark differences in staffing, responsibilities, and outcomes. A university housing system that lacked student leaders would be difficult to find, especially in Canada. The role of the RA is a

universal position across North America, although it may be referred to as a don, residence fellow, or community assistant, but the role is the same: a student leader entrusted to support and mentor a community of students for the duration of the academic year.

Komives and Wagner (2009) noted that the ability to engage in the concept of leadership is a skill that is developed. Shankman and Allen (2008) agreed and suggested that developing leadership is based on growth in areas such as relationship building and in self-identity which, Evans, Forney, Guido, Patton, and Renn (2010) noted, is not only critical but necessary for the upward momentum of individuals who choose to take on leadership roles within a university setting. Komives and Wagner (2009), Shankman and Allen (2008), and Evans et al. (2010) noted that student leadership is a function of experience and, in order to grow into the role of the student leader, one must simultaneously experience being a leader and receive the feedback needed to course correct as necessary. The symbiotic relationship between experiencing and learning cannot be understated, and Komives and Wagner (2009) commented that without experience, leadership is reduced to a title.

Blimling (2010) took the principle of student leadership a step further, particularly as it related to the experience within residence, and suggested that the RA is responsible for the development and experience of the community they are charged with as well as of the individual students who reside within that community. An RA's growth as a student leader then is intrinsically tied both to their own growth, the development of the community, and to the residents within that community. Blimling (2010) also suggested that the success or failure of an RA is directly proportional to the learning they are willing to commit to, and Shankman and Allen (2008) noted that accepting the context and location of the student leader role—in this case, a student residence where trial and error will be a regular occurrence as one slowly

develops as a student and an individual—will be key. McCuskey (2013) added a layer to the significance of time and place and suggested that the student leadership required of an RA is not only about the experience, or the willingness to learn, or the unique community they are working in but is also contingent on forward momentum. Traditional leadership, such as that of a president or prime minister, is easily perceived as being steadfast or constant in times of upheaval but student leadership—because all stakeholders involved are continually moving towards new milestones in their lives—depends on constant change.

McCuskey (2013) noted that a focus on the future, of the new and untested, is immeasurably important and that an RA who focuses on the past—on what they have previously experienced or learned and somehow comes to believe that is sufficient—will lose not only the ability to think beyond the present but also access to critical new experiences that are needed for personal growth and community. Komives and Wagner (2009) agreed with this thinking and suggested that the need to continually close the gap between what one was and what one can become is critical in order to sustain forward momentum. Blimling (2010) concurred with this thinking and reinforced that student leadership of an RA is predicated not only on being open to experience and on using that experience as leverage for personal growth but also on the forward momentum and the future of the community, which is just as critical.

In considering all of these elements of student leadership, particularly in the context of an RA within a university residence system, one can understand that the development of an RA's student leadership abilities is a result of new experiences and facilitating the development of a new community. Furthermore, an RA must not only be committed to the learning and environment they serve but also to their future and the future of the community as well. Given

these principles of student leadership and their relevance to enhancing RA performance within a university system, their inclusion within this research project is appropriate.

### **Applications of student leadership in residence**

Moving beyond the principles of student leadership as they relate to the RA role, an important consideration is the way in which student leadership is applied within the university housing setting. Every university will invent its student staffing structure as it sees fit but, overall, the RA role is well known to be consistent across Canada.

Riker and Decoster (2008) outlined that the responsibilities of a student leader in residence include assisting with academic concerns and referring students to the resources that will help them be successful. Beyond this, the RA role is also instrumental in facilitating an engaging environment that is a cornerstone of the academic mission of the university. Blimling (2010) added that student leaders within residence serve as a role model and, given their leadership position, will often be emulated by new students. The behaviour of an RA then is critical, and Blimling (2010) suggested that if a student leader's behaviour is poor then students who live within that leader's community are likely to behave in the same manner. The impact a student leader has on the community is not limited to hard skills, such as facilitating programming or responding to academic concerns, but includes ephemeral interactions that, although fleeting, will leave a lasting impact. Riker and Decoster (2008) noted that residence offers a total learning environment that is not limited to academic success but must also consider the whole person and help that individual grow in a responsible and developmental way through the application of student leadership. RAs who drink every night and choose not to attend class will likely be popular amongst their fellow residents but, in terms of leadership, is grossly missing the mark in the type of impact he or she should be having on the community.

Shankman and Allen (2008) suggested that one way student leadership can be applied is through RAs who act as coach and who use the influence and leverage they have over the community to support development and positive experiences by serving as role models. Another way is to provide feedback to residents about ways to approach situations they may face. Komives and Wagner (2009) agreed and took this a step further by suggesting that collaboration is one of the most important tasks a student leader can take on, which doesn't end at simply showing one how to behave but goes on to being an active participant in the development of the community. Both Shankman and Allen (2008) and Komives and Wagner (2009) suggested that in acting as a collaborative role model or—as Blimling (2010) offered—a change agent, the entire residence community is able to develop and not simply as a result of emulating the student leader. The application of a student-leader-facilitated, collaborative approach is one of the most essential roles RAs can play within their community, and it reinforces that a peer-based leadership model has tremendous benefit.

Ganser and Kennedy (2012) added a layer to this thinking when they noted that the student leadership of an RA is instrumental in the successful transition of residents to university by providing architecture from which students are able to use to navigate to success both academically and personally. More importantly, both Shankman and Allen (2008) and Komives and Wagner (2009) highlighted extensively that one major impact will be the building of healthy and productive relationships. McCuskey (2013) referred to these relationships as community and, the role of the RA is to build those relationships amongst residents and to facilitate the formation of the healthy community.

In considering the application of student leadership to the residence community, a number of factors are to be taken into account. Through a peer-mentor relationship focussed on

collaborative experiences as well as relationship and community building, RAs are able to lay a foundation of strong student development and well-being that has a lasting impact on both the student leadership team and the residents who choose to reside in on-campus housing.

### **Enhancing Student Leadership**

This literature review examined the enhancement of student leadership within a university housing setting. Strategies for enhancing RAs and the role of supervisors in developing this leadership will be considered.

#### **Traditional strategies for enhancing student leadership**

Belch and Kimble (2006) reiterated the value that RAs play in developing an on-campus community for the thousands of students who choose to live in residence halls each year. The authors took this concept further though and identified student leaders not merely as employees but as the living assets of the university who contribute to the larger mission and vision. Horvath and Stack (2013) agreed on the value RAs have on community development and also suggested that this contribution to the larger organization can reduce harm, risk, and liability. Student leadership then is not merely valuable to the lighter side of the experience but also vital to the overall operation of the organization. Blimling (2010) concurred with the critical role of the RA and, if done well, can address at-risk behaviour of students and can reinforce the academic mission of the institution. Belch and Kimble agreed with what Horvath and Stack and Blimling suggested and added that leadership has continually been enhanced within the RA role through focussed training programs directed at improving RA performance and, in turn, leadership. Hargrave (2006) added that the strategies for setting the tone of something as critical as RA leadership enhancement must be determined through the assessment of the community and by asking residents what would improve their experience. Belch and Kimble noted the incredible

importance of the community having a voice in establishing exactly the kind of leadership they are looking for in the RA role of peer mentor. Osteen and Coburn (2012) added that leadership enhancement must also consider the culture of the organization and institution as a whole. All things considered, strategies for enhancing RA leadership is a direct function of assessing the desires of the community and funneling that data into the creation of RA training programs.

Belch and Kimble (2006) noted that once the foundation of the strategies have been put in place one key element is to ensure that the training program is as experiential as possible and provides an opportunity for the RA to test their competency in any particular area and to course correct as necessary. Belch and Kimble added that through this process, areas such as self-confidence will grow, and Blimling (2010) suggested that a culmination of an RA's own experience in life paired with the learning and development outcomes established by the university creates a model for the development of student leadership. Osteen and Coburn (2012) reinforced that leadership enhancement is not exclusively a choice a RA makes for themselves but the role of the supervisor cannot be understated and that just as leadership is traditionally enhanced through assessment and training, a culture of challenge and support from the student leader's supervisor must exist to ensure that outcomes established by assessment data and the university are followed through on.

Enhancement practices in residence, the role of the community, and the overall determination of strategies at the university become clear by unpacking the concepts of traditional leadership. Those who work within the student housing field know that residence life programs are founded on relationships. These relationships frame the entire student leader experience from setting outcomes to supporting RAs through their growth and development, and any traditional method for enhancing student leadership in order to better serve the community



begins with that community. The intent of this inquiry is to respect the fundamental role of the community and to make use of it in all elements of creating new strategies for the enhancement of RA leadership moving forward.

### **Role of supervisors in enhancing student leadership**

As noted above, the role the supervisor plays in challenging and supporting RAs in their roles as student leaders cannot be understated. Kuh, Kinzie, Schuh, and Whitt (2010) outlined the ways in which university administrators provide not only support but intervention when necessary. Belch and Kimble (2006) explained that administrators and faculty were once perceived to be equal to that of parents and responsible for discipline in the same manner. As the role of leadership within universities has evolved, Belch and Kimble noted that institutional staff have shifted to become advisors instead of adjunct parents.

Kuh et al. (2010) suggested that to be both challenged and supported is not only vital to student success but necessary for those who wish to take on leadership roles within the university. One of the principles of supporting student leaders is that of transparency. Martinez (2013) explained that an exceptional supervisor will provide clear and transparent expectations that do not leave any ambiguity about expectations as well as provide a clear indication that supervisors have an understanding that student leaders are in fact very busy individuals with academic and personal commitments outside of the RA role. Belch and Kimble (2006) agreed with the concept of transparency and added that there must also be a sense of collaboration must also exist.

For a supervisor to coach the development and enhancement of leadership within residence, an RA requires an agreement of co-ownership of the process and of mutual respect flowing from both individuals. Mills (2009) elaborated that enhancing a leader is a function of

helping the individual to identify and accomplish goals. Belch and Kimble (2006) noted that many RAs will arrive to their communities with pre-established goals, which may or not be realistic or attainable; therefore, the role of the supervisor is to help fine-tune these plans and, as Martinez (2013) suggested, to refocus these goals on their residential communities.

Horvath and Stack (2013) further identified that an RA who invests in and helps enhance his or her own leadership development will find that this development often comes at the expense of other commitments such as academics, friends, and other employment. Horvath and Stack noted that the balance required of a student leader is tremendous, and Blimling (2010) suggested that without sufficient balance student leaders will often stumble in their role and all areas of their life, particularly academics, will suffer. Horvath and Stack and Blimling agreed that the role of supervisor in helping a RA to find harmony between their goals and responsibilities is paramount and that this balance is one of the most fundamental elements student leaders must capitalize on if they are to be successful and are to thrive in their role. Horvath and Stack outlined—and Belch and Kimble (2006) agreed, as noted above—that the foundational role of a student leader is that of being a peer mentor and role model. One of the key areas of support that new students will look for is how to manage their academic demands. The leadership needed of an RA then is one of role modelling academic success and, therefore, the role of the supervisor is instrumental in helping student leaders become better students by, as Kuh et al. (2010) noted, ensuring that RAs have a strong grasp on their academics, are balancing their obligations, and are fulfilling their commitments to their communities and themselves.

The role a student leader's supervisor plays in enhancing that student's leadership is by providing feedback, as Kuh et al. (2010) suggested, by challenging and helping refine their goals, as Belch and Kimble (2006) added, and by helping to ensure balance and harmony between

obligations, as Horvath and Stack (2013) and Blimling (2010) noted. Kuh et al., Belch and Kimble, Horvath and Stack, and Blimling all agreed that the commitment required of an RA is significant, and a successful supervisor will be able to enhance that leadership by building a relationship founded on mutual respect, collaboration, and a desire to develop the whole student, RA, and leader.

### **Chapter Summary**

Chapter 2 has been focussed on reviewing the key literature involved with this inquiry project. Topics that have been unpacked include understanding student leadership within a postsecondary student housing system and the ways this leadership is applied on a day-to-day basis in terms of developing relationship, community, and overall student success. Additionally, literature focussed on traditional methods of enhancing student leadership as well as the role that supervisors play in developing RAs. Themes that were revealed from this literature review included the significant role RAs play in helping students to transition to university for this first time, responding to emergencies, and acting as a role model and support system for all residents. Likewise, themes around enhancing student leadership to deliver this important work was also revealed. The themes indicated that RAs who serve in residence halls today expect a high degree of focus on their own development by supervisors and that traditional methods for engagement and development are shifting to obsolescence. Student leaders today are looking to have their predetermined goals and abilities fine-tuned with the help of supervisors and coached in a manner in which their success is acknowledged, reinforced, and rewarded on a regular basis. My overall understanding of these themes has been greatly enhanced by this literature review, which has provided the foundation needed to move forward with the inquiry and to better understand the next steps needed in order to enhance student leadership at MR.

### SECTION THREE: INQUIRY APPROACH AND METHODOLOGY

#### **Inquiry Approach**

This section provides the inquiry approach and methodology for the capstone project. Using action research, the inquiry used several methods, including an online survey and a focus group. The focus of the research was on student leadership as a critical factor in delivering a residence experience and sought to answer the question: How can MR enhance its student leaders to facilitate an exceptional residence experience? The sub-questions of the inquiry investigated the following questions:

1. What leadership experience had the greatest impact on the community?
2. What visions do residents have to increase the health and vitality of RA leadership?
3. What capacities do RAs bring to their role?
4. What wishes do RAs have for their own future development?

This capstone project focussed exclusively on action research as a means to investigate student leadership. Stringer (2007) identified action research as an avenue for members of an organization to collectively problem solve and to address a particular issue in a constructive way that improves the effectiveness of that institution. Weisbord (2012) added that the creation and strengthening of community, something that is often a result of action research, is a tremendous asset to the organization. Coghlan and Brannick (2010) confirmed that action research, and the recommendations that emerge from a project, are stronger as they are the result of the efforts of the individuals who face the challenge on a daily basis. All three authors agreed that a collaborative and community-focussed atmosphere is essential to the project, which is ideal for MR and the selected inquiry topic.

As a university student residence, MR is well suited for action research as its purpose is to provide a community-based setting that creates opportunities for students to learn and develop. In choosing this approach, all levels of the community were able to participate in a way that created the opportunity to help shape the inquiry as it moved forward, including the final recommendations. This project was framed from a qualitative approach given the ephemeral nature of the residence community as it easily reinvents itself every 4 months with the arrival and departure of new and old residents and student staff. This culture makes it difficult to quantify specific numbers or statistics as the community changes throughout the year in an unpredictable way. The specific methods for collection of data began with a survey of current residents, and the results were used to set the tone of resident expectations in terms of experience and the role that the RAs play in program delivery, and then the project shifted to a focus group made up of student staff members to inquire into their perceptions of the ways in which they are prepared and trained to deliver that experience.

### **Project participants**

Given the design of this capstone project and its focus on the MU residence experience and the student staff who facilitate that experience, this inquiry relied on participation from both residents and RAs. A purposeful sample processing was used as a requirement of inclusion in the project and all inquiry participants must be either current residents or members of the Residence Life Staff team (Stringer, 2007). Stringer (2007) outlined the usefulness of this strategy when considering those individuals who are at the centre of the issue being examined. Participants were selected based on their current membership within the two MR communities and, for the anonymous survey, all residents were invited to participate in order to obtain sufficient data. Likewise, all 25 members of the current RA team were asked to participate in the second step

focus group. No former residents or RAs will be considered for participation as they no longer are members of the community or are stakeholders within the MR. Coghlan and Brannick (2010) noted the need for reflection on past experiences; therefore, this research focussed on current RAs, who had had at least 1 year of experience within MR, who had been within their role as RAs for at least a full 4 months, and who therefore were able to also comment on both the current state and their past experiences. Both residents and RAs were required to provide informed consent that outlined confidentiality, explained that participation is fully voluntary, and informed participants that anyone who wished to withdraw from the inquiry could do so but that their data would not be extracted.

The inclusion of current RAs was necessary for implementation of the recommendations as they will be at the centre of the intended changes. As the focus of this capstone project is on the enhancement of the RA team and the specific development of the student leaders, their feedback is necessary for the development of not only the recommendations themselves but also any future implementation as the project moves forward.

As I am currently one of two supervisors of the RA team and of the general residence population, direct interactions with any participants taking part in the inquiry were not appropriate for me. As such, the survey was delivered anonymously through FluidSurvey (n.d.), and no personal data was collected that would allow me to identify individual responses. Furthermore, a counselor from the Student Life Office was invited to facilitate the focus group, and data were transcribed in order to eliminate the possibility of linking answers to specific individuals. The counselor from the Student Life Office has no supervisory influence over the MR communities and was fully removed and neutral.

The inquiry team was made up of the counselor from MU Student Life, my fellow RLC, and the sponsor as defacto member, along with myself. All members completed an inquiry team confidentiality agreement (see Appendix A). Additionally, along with the inquiry team, Residence Services full-time staff served as pilots of the inquiry methods and provided feedback on development and refinement.

## **Inquiry Methods**

### **Data collection tools**

The inquiry was made up of two qualitative methods: an anonymous survey and a focus group. A survey was selected as the first stage of the project as it is a method traditionally used within MR to assess the leadership of RAs and to seek feedback on the residence life experience from the perspective of 40 to 50 residents. Stringer (2007) noted that surveys are particularly useful tool when speaking to a large number of participants from diverse perspectives. Surveys are traditionally rolled out twice a year at varying times so the community is used to this method being employed. The survey was run anonymously through FluidSurvey (n.d) in order to eliminate any ethical concerns as I hold a position of power within the residence community. The survey was used to capture residents' feedback on their current experience as well as the role that RAs play in delivering that experience and ways that the RA role can be enhanced from the residents' perspectives.

The project then shifted to the perspectives of the RAs and to ways that they envision enhancing the leadership development of their role, which is the fundamental research question of this research project. The focus group consisted of fourteen current RAs and will be, as Barbour (2007) suggested, useful in discussing the process of how RAs are prepared to facilitate the residence experience in which the learning and development program can be enhanced.

The inquiry team was used to pilot the survey and focus group questions and provided feedback in order to ensure a breadth of perspectives and not be framed, as Stringer (2007) highlighted, on the bias of the individuals conducting the inquiry project. Questions for both the anonymous survey and the focus group were prepared in advance (see Appendix B) and were further developed by the inquiry team and through the pilot process by full-time Residence Services staff.

### **Study conduct**

The research project officially commenced in December 2013 with the completion of the ethics approval process of both Royal Roads University and MU. Once approved, an e-mail invitation was sent to all 882 in-house residents inviting them to participate in an electronic survey by me via FluidSurvey (n.d). Copies of the questions (see Appendix B), survey invitation (see Appendix C), and consent forms (see Appendix D) were developed and further refined by the inquiry team. The decision to send invitations to all in-house residents, although a significant number, is done so by design and in order to ensure an adequate response rate. Data from the survey will then be used to inform the content of the questions for the focus group and to set the tone for the discussion.

The focus group, consisting of eight to twelve current RAs, was conducted by a counselor from the Student Life Office instead of by me as I have a direct reporting relationship with these students. A general invitation to participate in the focus group was shared with all 25 RAs at the Residence Life Staff team winter training retreat, which took place the first week of January. I shared the purpose of the inquiry, the timelines, information about what has previously taken place, and the role of the focus group and the participants. Current members of the team have previously indicated interest in participating so I anticipated no concern with proceeding in late



January 2014. E-mail invitations (see Appendix E) to participate were sent by the counselor and received by her as well. She also managed consent forms and ensured participants submit all required documentation. Aforementioned drafts of the questions (see Appendix B) and consent forms (see Appendix D) were developed and continued to be refined. I had no knowledge of who chose to participate as I did not have access to any of the raw participant data. Findings collected within the focus group were recorded electronically by audio recorder and then transcribed by an approved transcription service. Participants of both the survey and the focus group were informed via the aforementioned consent that they were able to withdraw from the process at any time but that their data would not be able to be exacted and all final data would be destroyed at the conclusion of the capstone project, no later than June 18, 2014.

Before any of this process could take place, both methods were fully piloted in order to fine-tune and to ensure roll-out was as smooth as possible. The pilot was conducted by the inquiry team, which was previously selected from MR stakeholders with offers and acceptances made via e-mail. Their primary role was to assist in the aforementioned piloting process as well as coding data. Dunne, Pryor, and Yates (2005) recognized the value of piloting both to ensure proper development of questions and to eliminate researcher bias as much as possible through a rigorous review process for all survey and focus group questions. The piloting process is key to maintaining the overall validity of the capstone project and ensuring integrity.

In considering the overall validity and rigour of the project, transparency was a key factor and was accomplished by communicating all aspects of the project including timelines, research procedures, and outcomes to the inquiry participants. Stringer (2007) noted triangulation as a useful technique to ensure overall rigour. Although it would be easy, in an inquiry focussed on RAs to engage only RAs, they are responsible for the overall service delivery to the community.

It was therefore necessary to engage in triangulation and to invite residents to provide their perspectives on the inquiry topic, thereby ensuring the overall trustworthiness of the capstone project.

Ownership and implementation of the final recommendations were maintained by the sponsor through the current organizational structure of MR. The sponsor was responsible for providing direction to the Residence Life portfolio, and the RLCs are responsible for ensuring implementation. As all stakeholders are involved in the inquiry team and have a voice within the capstone project, momentum was maintained and implementation will begin in August 2014.

### **Data analysis**

Jupp and Sapsford (2006) emphasized that although action research is intended to provide conclusions about a specific problem or issue, these recommendations must be validated through an extensive process of sorting and scrutinizing the data. Stringer (2009) commented that rigour in a research project is assured through a series of detailed checks and balances designed to identify themes. In order to ensure the integrity of this capstone project, a series of steps were taken throughout the data analysis process in order to maintain validity. These steps included the complete documentation of all data, both at the survey and focus group stages, and the use of triangulation and member checking in order to confirm analysis of the data, transparency, and trustworthiness. Team members participated fully throughout the data analysis in order to provide perspective and second opinions as needed.

In terms of specifics, Hairston (2011) noted that the process of separating data and categorizing them into themes is a critical step and does not allow for large amounts of data to overwhelm the process. This was accomplished by colour coding specific themes from the survey data and then using those colours to assist in the sorting and breakdown of the larger data

into specific areas of concentration. The identified themes were then used to set the tone of the focus group and to provide a visual snapshot of the results thus far. Focus group questions were developed based on the themes and sub-themes identified, and the visual perspective of emerging trends was necessary as questions were drafted. I also made use of the word cloud feature within FluidSurvey (n.d.), which grouped data and highlighted areas of interest without bias or influence from the inquiry team. Coghlan and Brannick (2010) warned of tying the researcher's interpretation of what he or she sees in the data to reality; therefore, tools, such as Wordle (Feinberg, 2013), are important to use in order to reduce bias, provide a third party analysis of themes, and to code free of personal sentiment. A similar approach was then used for focus group results, again using multiple avenues of analysis to seek patterns or, as Coghlan and Brannick suggested, the relationship that the various layers within the organization have on one another. Stringer (2007) concluded that recognizing impact is an essential element of any action research project, and recognition of impact was especially relevant to this project as the inquiry question looked to examine the current impact that RAs have and ways in which that impact can be further enhanced.

### **Ethical Issues**

Coghlan and Shani (2005) acknowledged that action research has tremendous impact as it emerges and that the ethical considerations, much like the organizations the research is taking place in, are not only extensive and complex but also difficult to predict. In designing and implementing an action research project, due diligence is required in issues related to ethics.

In order to facilitate a capstone project that is in line with established ethics, adherence to the key principles of the *Tri-Council Policy Statement: Ethical Conduct for Research Involving Humans* (Canadian Institutes of Health Research, Natural Sciences, and Engineering Research

Council of Canada, & Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada [TCPS], 2010) was necessary. The policy statement considers that the dignity, welfare, and justice of all individuals who participate, or are the focus of a research project, be of paramount importance at all times (TCPS, 2010). As two universities and over 50 students participated in this project, the TCPS principles acted as cornerstones for the conduct of this project.

### **Respect for persons**

The inquiry project was designed intentionally as a volunteer opportunity for both residents and RAs and can be opted into or withdrawn from with no consequences. Respect for the individual's choice to participate and for the transparent communication of conditions of involvement were shared at all stages of the inquiry process. This included the overall intention of the project as well as the inherent risks and benefits. Given my role as a supervisor of the MR community and the Residence Life Staff team, all feedback on the survey was anonymous, and I had no knowledge of the focus group participants or the ability to link comments back to the originating individual as data collection was facilitated by a neutral third party. No participant was at risk by providing responses given the multiple levels of separation in place between the primary researcher and the survey and focus group responses.

### **Concern for welfare**

The welfare of participants and their data were a key element of the ethical conduct of this inquiry project. Data were secured on MU servers by password protection at all times, were not deposited onto a cloud service, or shared with any individual not on the inquiry team. Furthermore, all data, at the conclusion of the project, were permanently destroyed with no backups maintained.

## **Justice**

All residents and RAs were free to participate in the inquiry project, and a copy of the capstone final report will be posted to the MR website and provided to all participants as well. No individual was excluded with the exception of those who no longer reside within or are employed by MR, which was in line with the aforementioned commitment to purposeful sampling and a fair and just approach to this project.

Given the nature of the inquiry, my proximity to the participants, and my intimate knowledge of the residence life program, potential for researcher bias did exist. Stringer (2007) noted the need for objectivity and distance when collecting data from within our own organizations in order to limit influence. I am, however, deeply invested in the success of the residence life program; therefore, just as much as this project looks to enhance the residential experience, I too must acknowledge and work on, as Weisbord (2012) noted, my need to control all aspects of the residence life program and reflect on the influences I bring to this project.

## **Chapter Summary**

Chapter 3 has reviewed the action research methodology that was utilized in order to obtain, review, and understand the overall question of how student leadership at MR can be enhanced. The project participants—current residents and RAs—and the ways in which data was collected—online survey and focus group—were unpacked, and the ethical issues and project deliverables were also considered. The ethical implications of conducting research on two communities I directly supervise was discussed at length, and measures were put in place to safeguard those who chose to participate. Overall, the variable complexities of conducting action research within MR was discussed and created the conditions necessary for this inquiry to move forward. Chapter 3 provided a strong foundation needed to move forward and cemented the specific methodology needed to approach the inquiry question from an ethical and sound point of view.

## CHAPTER FOUR: ACTION INQUIRY PROJECT RESULTS AND CONCLUSIONS

This chapter examines the findings of the action research project, which was undertaken to discover ways to improve the leadership of student staff, and presents the conclusions that have been revealed from the survey and focus group. Additionally, the limitations and scope of the project, as well as their impact, are discussed. This organizational leadership project sought to explore the following overarching research question: How can MR improve the leadership of its student staff team? The sub-questions of the inquiry are as follows:

1. What leadership experience had the greatest impact on the community?
2. What visions do residents have to increase the health and vitality of RA leadership?
3. What capacities do RAs bring to their role?
4. What wishes do RAs have for their own future development?

### Study Findings

This project focussed on two methods—an anonymous online survey and a focus group—to garner data necessary to respond to the inquiry questions. The survey was sent electronically to 882 in-house MacEwan residents with 52 responses recorded, representing a 5.89% response rate. Invitations for the focus group were sent to 25 members of the Residence Life Staff team and 14 participated, which revealed a 56% response rate. Overall, given the 70 students total who responded, significant data have been generated, and four findings have been identified.

The overarching theme of the data was a desire for individuals, both residents and student leaders, to feel connected to the community in a number of ways and for that community to be respectful, engaging, and adaptable. Many respondents expressed that there is a responsibility on the part of residence to be far more than a place where they put their head in a bed. The results of

the inquiry reflected the issue of student leadership and its impact to be a personal issues for many respondents. Furthermore, the data revealed that residents are looking for stronger leadership from the RAs, that their floor communities be more responsive and adaptable to their needs as students, and that RAs offer more opportunities for relationship and connection building. Likewise, RAs identified the desire to enhance their leadership abilities, for there to be an improvement in the leadership development program all RAs participate in, and for their supervisors to approach RA leadership development from a less punitive position. Both residents and RAs indicated positive feedback and areas for improvement in their responses, all of which is examined throughout this chapter. Direct quotes from participants will be identified with (S) for data from the anonymous survey and (FG) for insights recorded within the focus group.

Although at first glance the response rate for the survey appears to be small, significant data were gathered that reflects a personal desire for MR to be more than a place to live given these responses: “[For RAs to] create more activities in which floor mates can meet one another; because I barely know any of my neighbours” (S) and “I would want the leadership team to get to know the people they work with, so that the residence experience can be as welcoming as possible” (S). These comments suggested that the residence experience is far less about four walls and a roof and far more about relationship and community building. The focus group provided significant data as well as 11 pages of transcribed results that featured responses speaking to the development opportunities of the RA role; for example, being an RA “pushes you to be out of your safety zone” (FG) and provides the opportunity “to be there for the residents in a way, other than, whoever said, about getting to know them on a deeper lever, rather than just ‘oh hey, I live on your floor’” (FG). Overall, these examples reflected an investment in the residence community and the RA role and have laid the foundation for enhancing the

leadership of the RA role that will improve the Residence Life Staff team and the entire residence experience.

In considering all of the data, the following four findings reflect the combined results of the survey and the focus group:

1. Residents define RA skills and abilities in a variety of ways;
2. Residents want RAs to build community;
3. RAs want to develop their personal leadership; and
4. RAs want intentional leadership development.

**Finding 1: Residents define RA skills and abilities in a variety of ways**

Residents were asked to speak to what they believe the RA role was and where they perceived that it could be improved. No preloaded options were provided, and respondents were left to reflect on their own experiences with the Residence Life Staff team and to define the strengths that they believe student leaders should have in the RA role. Of the results provided, several themes emerged, but the top three strengths RAs should have—as determined by residents currently living within RA lead communities—were as follows:

- good communication,
- openness to new people and ideas, and
- an outgoing personality and positive attitude.

Earning the highest ranking, “good communication” (S) between RAs and residents was indicated to be of the most important strengths that MR student leaders should possess.

Comments that supported this thinking included, “I think that an RA team needs to have good communication skills with each other and their residents. Good communication skills makes a person look more professional and shows other people that they know what they are doing” (S) and “Good communication. Very open and willing to share their time. Capable of handling



disputes while being unbiased” (S). These comments, and the response rate for this theme, reflected a desire on the part of the residents to see RAs as someone they can talk to, bring concerns to, and can engage and build a relationship with.

The second and third highest scoring themes of “open to new people” (S) and “ideas and outgoing and positive attitude” (S) solidify the core concepts of relationship building to which respondents were speaking. These two themes relate that above all else, residents want to belong to an open and receptive community led by an engaged and inclusive student leader. Respondents commented that RAs need “to be friendly, open, and have a willingness to approach and befriend every member on their floor” (S), and the RAs themselves echoed this comment when they shared,

You learn to interact with a lot of different types of people. There’s so many people in residence that are from totally different socioeconomic backgrounds and stuff that you end up meeting people that live a totally different way than you. (FG)

The importance of communication, relationship building, and community is further reinforced by the fact that not all residents agree that this is being done to their expectations, as indicated by the following the comments: “I don’t know because I do not have communication with my RA” (S) and “I haven’t personally experienced, what I’d call, an exceptional RA leadership moment” (S).

In the results of the focus group, RAs repeatedly echoed that they were looking to build relationships with residents as well and that fellow students being active participants in the community was of major importance to them. One RA said,

I think it’s a chance to connect with people in other ways that you wouldn’t normally get to. You form a bond on a deeper level, instead of superficial, “Hi I’m blank, and I live on your floor with you. (FG)

In addition, another RA commented, “The networking that we all do with each other, and with the residents that we meet on our floors, could count to our future jobs” (FG).

Communication then goes both ways in the minds of RAs. They are not looking to exclusively be a resource or enforcer of the rules but to network and build community with their residents as well and to share their leadership in an open, honest, and inclusive way.

Communication, as well as a positive and open engaging attitude, has been identified as key factors by both residents and RAs as critical leadership elements within a residential on-campus setting. Communication has been identified as a key element to building community as well as supporting individuals, responding effectively to issues, and responding effectively to new ideas. Although not all respondents were able to indicate that they have had this experience with an RA, the lack of an experience demonstrates that it is being missed, which reinforces its value. Residents indicated they were looking to create connections with their RAs and enhance their university and residence experience; RAs revealed that they too are looking to build connections and create supportive networks with residents and enhance the communities that they lead.

**Finding 2: Residents want RAs to build community**

In reviewing the result of both the survey and focus group, community clearly is the most important element to both residents and RAs. Digging deeper, residents are looking for a well-developed, open, and inclusive community where they can meet new people and build relationships as evidenced by this quote:

I reported a week late for school and I did not really know anyone in Alberta. When I walked onto my floor I was welcomed with very warm smiles from my RAs. They helped me settle in and briefly showed me around. During the semester they always checked on me, it’s almost like we were friends before! (S)

Support is clearly a factor, and RAs acting as a resource extends beyond simply being friendly and welcoming as transition issues are not limited to knowing where the laundry room is or being introduced to your next door neighbour:

Last year, when my RAs found out I was visually impaired, they offered to take me grocery shopping, invited me to go out with them to attend orientation activities, etc. I felt really well taken care of, even though I take pretty good care of myself. (S)

Residents are clearly looking for RAs to lead and support the community and to assist in a variety of ways. This expectation is in line with the traditional role and job expectations of what an RA does but to be able to share these defining moments reinforces the value of the RA leadership role within the residence community.

Likewise, RAs are looking to develop those relationships as well and to be a support and resource, as one participant shared:

I would like us to be a community that is seamlessly integrated within the building for the people within it to view us not just as other students but as their friends, as those that are there to support them and ultimately to have them to respect us and realize that we're only there for their betterment. (FG)

The concern of being the “fun police,” a term often heard within residence by both residents and student leaders alike, is a major theme for RAs. Residents themselves wish for concerns to be dealt with in a fair and consistent manner, as one survey participant suggested: “They should not be aggressive or demanding when enforcing these rules and regulations” (S). Of all survey respondents, two priority themes were highlighted, which included RAs needing to be caring and willing to support the community and a need for RAs to ensure that residents are respectful and respected. These numbers reflect the fact that residents want RAs to respond to issues that negatively impact the community. One relevant quote from a respondent who supports this thinking indicated,

My roommate and I were studying for finals and the party on the floor below us was excessively loud, especially during the 24 hour quiet period, and when we went to our RA about it he went downstairs and shut them down. (S)

The feedback of this respondent emphasized the role an RA plays in facilitating a respectful community that creates conditions for academic success. Connecting to the previous comment of support, these findings—of both the survey and focus group—indicated that residents expect the community to support them through conflict and management of personal issues. Several residents reported that RAs had supported them in a variety ways, including this comment:

I went through some very dark and rough times and my RA always had an ear to listen and never judged. He was very supportive and was always willing to listen to me. While it may not have been a huge leadership thing to the masses, it was something that really stood out to me and touched me. (S)

The impact this RA had on this resident cannot be understated, and this not only adds the layer of supporting student mental well-being to the responsibilities of the RA and the expectations of a student leader in residence. RAs themselves concurred with this line of thinking:

I like to consider myself as a person who has a lot of empathy, and I think that's really important because you come across so many different issues and conflicts between roommates, and you have to be able to empathize and be really genuine with wanting to help them out. (FG)

Another RA seconded that comment and added that the leadership of an RA is one that looks to address each individual problem and not simply provide a blanket solution:

For me, one of my strengths is context and for me being able to empathize with someone that having something in common with them that I can connect with and having so many people in this team that have so many different life experiences, really brings a lot to the table for everyone and in that way you can show the residents you know, we're all human, we all go through these things. I can help you with the resources that I've used, and these are the resources that are available to you. (FG)

RAs clearly view their role as leaders of a community much the same way that residents do in that the Residence Life Staff team serves to create conditions for support in which residents can be engaged and lifted up in times of need. Additionally, the findings painted a clear picture that residents and RAs both view community development in residence as being done for each other, as peers, and not as an extension of an employment responsibility of the university. Little data within the survey reflected that residents perceived RAs to be simply doing their job; evidence clearly suggested the overarching perceptions of RAs being peer leaders who are viewed as equals and that the community itself is then peer based and not a direct result of student affairs programming. The focus group data varied with regards to RA commitment versus job expectations as participants were specifically speaking about their jobs; however, the overall theme of what residents and RAs are looking for in terms of community is one of support and respect delivered by students for students.

**Finding 3: RAs want to develop their personal leadership**

RAs who participated in the focus group were asked to identify skill sets that they feel they currently bring to their role as a student leader. The results were fairly wide spread and, although I entered all of the responses into word cloud software, no major themes stood out above all else. In reviewing the transcripts of the results, however, the RAs evidently spoke to similar themes but their language was not aligned and, therefore, no easy way to highlight the top themes presented. Overall, though, RAs clearly view themselves as leaders and their leadership identity as a culmination of building relationships, contributing specific skill sets, and being challenged on a regular basis to enhance their abilities.

Not surprisingly, relationship building and networking were commented on several times as these themes align with findings from the anonymous survey and are an inherent part of the

RA role. These findings are unique in that respondents did not view these skill sets as being exclusive to themselves. As one participant reflected, the value of the RA role is found in “being able to connect with the residents on a fairly ‘nerdy’ or ‘geeky’ level. Just like being able to have something really pretty big in common with them and blowing that up to include an entire floor or building” (FG). These commonalities are not insignificant and the ability to create meaningful and deeper connections that support community development as a student leader have been highlighted as exceptionally important by focus group participants. One respondent indicated that the skill she cherished was “the ability to guide people through things, to be there for them, and be able to have that first step up ahead of everybody else, and show them the right direction, is very important” (FG). Evidently, relationship building, much like the survey reported, extends beyond being friendly, and the ability to provide significant support is viewed as key.

Additionally, the role of a supportive community developer is not only an important element for the residence system but helps to develop the skills within the individual RAs as well while lifting up residents in need:

I feel like we’re good listeners, and that plays into the fact that sometimes you have to listen for the little cues, for instance, because they’re not always going to tell you what’s happening or what’s wrong, and you have to listen and be able to ask those questions in a tactful way so that they respond to it. (FG)

Relationship building then has acted not only as a stepping stone for supporting residents, but the role is acknowledged as being a major catalyst for the leadership development of the Residence Life Staff team. Another focus group participant suggested that the skills needed to be an RA included responding to crisis situations and approaching the issue from an assertive and emotionally intelligent perspective:

I think that with being more assertive you have to deal with not taking things so personally and not internalizing it, thinking it’s just your fault. Obviously it’s just the situation, they’re just taking it out on you, and that it’s not your fault. (FG)

Another respondent concurred with this thinking, that emotional intelligence also helps to build confidence, which is another layer added to the overall skill set of the RA role: “I think that with [assertiveness] comes confidence to handle those things. When you’re in certain situations you need a certain amount of confidence to just hold your ground and be able to deal with it” (FG).

Finally, many RAs commented on the need for resilience and for avoidance of sliding into a negative head space: “I’d like to have more resilience, so when things are tough, and not getting so down about it or negative” (FG). This was linked as being valuable when challenged in order to develop beyond the RAs current level of ability; specifically, one participant stated that the role “pushes you out of your comfort zone, in one way or another, it doesn’t matter what your personality type is, or any of those things, and it will push you” (FG). These two elements are important to acknowledge because they speak to the wider forces at work within the RA role, which is designed to continually add another layer onto itself. Beginning with relationship building, then moving into skill development, and then shifting to challenging and enhancing abilities, the RAs have clearly acknowledged and identified the way in which they grow within the student leadership role and the way that all elements continue to compound one another in a progressive way. Many acknowledged that this was often not an easy process and that many areas can be changed in order to enhance RA leadership. Overall, these findings reflected student leaders who are engaged with their own learning and development and who recognize the larger complexities at work within their student leadership role.

#### **Finding 4: RAs want intentional leadership development**

Focus group participants spoke about how they believed that the leadership of the Residence Life Staff could be enhanced. The results highlighted three themes that RAs expressed

were present in the current way that they are supervised and developed as leaders; these themes included a need for greater trust between the residence life coordinators (RLC) and the RAs and to allow RAs to take the lead on community decisions, for focus to be placed on the development of hard residence life leadership skills such as critical incident response, and for RAs to receive regular and genuine feedback and recognition for the work they do.

When considering the issue of trust between the RLCs and the RAs, focus group results strongly indicated that this was an area for growth and of significant importance as indicated by the following comment: “I would like to be treated, not as student leaders, but as adult leaders. I feel like in a lot of situations there is a lot of things that they have to stop us from doing, or we can’t be doing” (FG). The idea of being perceived as leader without the added qualifier of student was echoed several times and was further unpacked with the comment:

Leave us to make our own decisions that we believe are going to actually improve residence, and if they don’t work out, or if they don’t work out as well as we planned, then talk to us about what we could have done better, instead of just saying that we can’t do that, because we’re scared of liability, or we can’t do that because we’re scared of whatever. (FG)

The issue of truth was further unpacked with several comments about the inherent nature of the type of candidate that is hired for the RA role: “Actually when it comes down to it, you’ve kind of been put into this job based your own personal experience, and how you handle yourself, and how you handle situations, like how you would like to be treated” (FG) and, furthermore,

I think that’s what they interview you for, that you have good common sense and that you can handle situations just kind of by assessing it. I think that no matter what, for anything, there’s no real set standard, with a party or something, there’s not really steps. I think that’s the challenge that makes you develop. (FG)

RAs indicated that trust is not only something that must come with being a leader but also is an inherent characteristic of being hired for the role to begin with. These comments provide an excellent bridge to the notion that RA capacity is not simply about being trusted to do the job but



is also about the intentional development of hard skills, which is essential, as noted by one focus group participant:

I would like a little more focus on learning “hard” skills in relation to this job. We learn a lot of “soft” skills and that’s very useful, but sometimes when you need to know how to do something and you’re left up to making your own interpretation. (FG)

Another respondent agreed and commented,

If you run into this sort of situation, here are 4 or 5 steps. If you run into this situation, here are 3 steps and if there’s variations, go ahead, feel free to do you whatever you feel is right. (FG)

RAs expect to be trusted to do the job based on their initial qualifications but want concrete training and development for specific areas such as critical incident response, difficult roommate mediations, and suicide intervention. RAs stated that mock incident response should be in depth and done a regular basis; as one focus group participant noted, “Mock rounds is where I learnt everything” (FG). Another RA agreed and added, “I found mock rounds was the most beneficial thing I did in that whole 2 weeks. That’s where I learned pretty much the entire scope of this job, I feel” (FG). These comments highlighted the desire by RAs to be intentionally prepared for the hard leadership moments of the role and revealed the further intentional development that RAs are seeking. Another theme that RAs highlighted within the focus group was that of recognition and performance evaluation. Many respondents commented on the timeliness of performance feedback and, as one respondent noted, it should take place much later into their contract and not reflect their entire performance:

I feel like the evaluation that we go through after what, is it a month or two? I feel like it doesn’t actually represent what we are doing, and I feel like it’s a very unfair way to judge how we’re doing our job when sometimes even they don’t see us doing certain things because obviously they’re not walking rounds with us and I don’t know if it’s fair for them to tell me that I need to give more encouragement when they don’t even see me ever doing it. (FG)

Additionally, another RA commented,

I feel that it was an inaccurate representation of how I had been doing versus when that happened, which I think it was in the beginning of October which is still the very beginning of when we started this job. (FG)

The theme of timing was echoed again, and one RA recommended on doubling the evaluation process: “I also feel like maybe having a second evaluation, in the second semester, because that will help show how much you’ve grown throughout the job” (FG). Another RA agreed and suggested shifting the timing to a later point during the academic year: “I think having maybe a second one, or even pushing the first one, much later” (FG). The accuracy of the evaluation process in addition to the timing was a strong criticism and reflected a desire for continuous feedback that considers the larger development and performance of the RA within the role.

Additionally, many RAs commented on the fact that they want praise and recognition to happen on a more regular basis. One focus group participant indicated that each RA should feel appreciated on a more regular basis:

I find sometimes we tend to feel appreciated only when times get tough and some of us are talking about leaving and things like that, and then all of a sudden we notice that changes are being made, and I’d like to be appreciated or shown that we’re appreciated all throughout the year, not just when things are tough. (FG)

Another agreed and suggested that positive feedback should not be used as a tool for retention, but should in fact reflect genuine appreciation for the contribution of each RA:

I feel like I want genuine comments from my employers so when they tell me that I’m doing a good job, I don’t want them to tell me that because they want me to come back next year. I just want to be praised, well not praised, but told that I’m doing a good job when I’m actually doing it and corrected when I’m not. (FG)

Another echoed the comment regarding retention and highlighted the need for intentional and genuine positive feedback: “Don’t tell me something just to get me back for next year, tell me it because you actually value my work, and because you want me back” (FG). Overall, RAs

are looking for feedback and appreciation that is focussed on their development but also in such a way that they feel both acknowledged and rewarded for their work. These comments reflected a need for RAs to feel praised for their hard work and their growth and development within the role, which is a direct result of being trusted to do their job. Having had their hard skills for the role be intentionally developed and honed, they are able to shine as student leaders.

These four findings reflected the passionate perspective from which both residents and RAs approach the residence community. The inquiry has revealed that residents are seeking strong relationships as a result of well-developed communities and that RAs want the opportunity to reveal their personal leadership and want their practical leadership abilities developed and recognized.

### **Study Conclusions**

The study conclusions are a culmination of the data collected from both the survey and focus group components of the inquiry project. These conclusions are a culmination of the inquiry sub-questions and relevant literature introduced in Chapter 2. The three conclusions are as follows:

1. Residents want RAs to help them build relationships, support them both socially and academically, and to assist them in becoming members of the residence community.
2. RAs want to be high-performing leaders and resources that develop community and positively impact the student experience.
3. RAs want to be intentionally developed as leaders, as well as recognized and rewarded for their efforts by their supervisors.

**Conclusion 1: Residents want RAs to help them build relationships, support them both socially and academically, and to assist them in becoming members of the residence community**

Conclusion 1 addresses the first two sub-questions of the inquiry and speaks to the needs of the residence community and their expectations of the RAs. The findings identified that residents were satisfied with the overall work of the RA team and that performance in the areas of communication, respect, support of residents through difficult periods of time, and response to community concerns were all indicated as being well done. Additionally, the data revealed that many residents believe they are part of a community and that the RAs were instrumental in making that happen. Not all respondents perceived that as the case, though, some identified that they did not know who their RA was or could not name a time when the RA in their community impacted their time in residence.

Clearly, residents are looking for the community and the connections that the RA team facilitates, and these student leaders have been instrumental in supporting their success as a student and resident. Residents highlighted the role the RAs have played in responding in a respectful and empathetic way to mental health crises, community standards violations, first-time transitions to university, and to residents with different levels of abilities. All of these examples, although different in theme and tone, reinforce relationship building as the cornerstone principle of the RA role and an essential element of the community building at work. Residents have confirmed that the community is not simply a collection of rooms in a hallway, but is a living organism that is brought to life by RA leadership and grows in strength by the connections that are created through the interactions of the students within the community.

The community that residents and RAs equally want to see developed is, as Horvath and Stack (2013) noted, a foundational component of the on-campus living experience and is critical to creating conditions that limit the risk and potential harm that may come from a residence experience. The living nature of the community is, as Belch and Kimble (2006) suggested, as alive as the people living within the residence hall ways and, therefore, the RAs cannot be perceived as simply resources, but as living breathing assets that contribute back to the overall mission and vision of the organization. Blimling (2010) added that the residence community, and the work RAs do to establish and support the residents who live within it, is vital to the health of the university.

This type of philosophy is in sync not only with resident expectations but also with RA goals for the residence communities that they lead. Additionally, this line of thinking also speaks to the goals of MacEwan University (MU), which is to be a student-focussed organization that places development of future graduates as the paramount mandate of the institution (MacEwan University, 2013). RAs play a tremendous role in delivering on this vision, and the findings reflect that the relationship building they are responsible for overwhelmingly creates conditions for students to live, learn, and thrive within the residence community.

**Conclusion 2: RAs want to be high-performing leaders and resources that develop community and positively impact the student experience**

The second conclusion speaks to the third and fourth sub-questions of the inquiry and to the wishes that RAs have not only for themselves as they develop as student leaders but also to the capacity they bring to their role. The study findings clearly reflected that RAs are caring, empathetic, and dedicated individuals to the residents within the community that they lead. Although it would be impossible to find the perfect RA, the student leaders who serve within

MU are exceptionally dedicated to the overall health of the community and are driven to build relationships and enhance themselves and their residents. The drive to foster connections with a new resident who has just moved in or to help students succeed academically by reviewing papers, lab reports, and study cards reflects not only a commitment to the role but to the well-being of every resident. The long hours and small salary, which are hallmark conditions of a student leadership role across Canada, are small rewards for a job that demands so much effort. RAs at MU take tremendous pride in the work they do and the residents that they lead and support; as McCuskey (2013) noted, the work of RAs cannot be limited to running events or enforcing quiet hours, but is the thread that seals the seam of the community together. Ganser and Kennedy (2012) added that student leadership is actually about creating resources and opportunities for support and about acting as coaches for the community. The results of the focus group significantly reinforced this concept as the majority of the respondents spoke to their desire to help residents and to make a difference in their lives. Many RAs who participated in the focus group continually spoke to the idea of being a champion for student success, someone to listen in a time of need, and of being a creator of opportunities for people to meet one another. No RA who participated in the inquiry spoke to the experience being exclusively about them, and most acknowledged that it is through the work that they do, and the relationships that they build, that their confidence and their personal leadership abilities are also enhanced alongside the residents and the overall community.

RAs highlighted a number of personal results that come from their work as student leaders and, as they continue in the role, their ability to approach a situation from an emotionally intelligent perspective is significant. Many spoke to the growth in their confidence and to their ability to not react so emotionally when involved in a volatile incident where alcohol and drugs

were in play. Additionally, some commented that their capacity for developing their own personal relationships had grown and that they were healthier and better students as a result. Komives and Wagner (2009) spoke to this concept and reinforced that leadership is not really about setting a direction for people, but is about developing productive and sustainable relationships. Blimling (2010) reinforced that the role model armour RAs must wear is not only for the benefit of the community but serves to enhance their own lives as well.

Evidently, many RAs entered their role not feeling capable to do the job, and some indicated they considered not even accepting the role because of their insecurity about their abilities. An overwhelming amount of data, however, reflected the fact that RAs are committed to the academic success of the students within their communities and the overall residence population as a whole.

**Conclusion 3: RAs want to be intentionally developed as leaders, as well as recognized and rewarded for their efforts by their supervisors**

The third conclusion speaks to the final sub-question of the inquiry: what wishes do RAs have for their own future development? This conclusion is focussed on the vision for the future that the RA team has for itself and the residence community that it serves. The findings of the focus group revealed that RAs believe they bring an inherent capacity to their role as student leaders and that, as a result, greater trust between the RLCs and MU employees should be in place. This is an interesting finding as it suggested that some RAs believe that they are, at the point of hiring, ready to begin leading without training or transition into the role with the exception of hard-skill development, such as critical incident response or navigation of a volatile roommate mediation. Although this finding cannot be dismissed outright given its prominence within the findings, Komives and Wagner (2009) suggested that RA development is a result of

being challenged out of one's comfort zone and then closing the gap between the current self and the ideal self. McCuskey (2013) agreed and noted that testing the untested and focussing on the future is a viable course of action in terms of student leadership development. Through the data and the literature, I was able to more clearly see that the desire of the RA to be trusted is not about blind faith but is in fact about creating the conditions where RAs can be challenged in new ways and then given the opportunity to succeed or fail, reflect, and then try again. This type of "challenge by choice" environment is not only ideal for residence but clearly is what RAs are thriving for. In developing their own personal leadership abilities, they are looking for their hard leadership skills to be tested, evaluated, and recognized as well with the opportunity to course correct.

Throughout the findings of this theme, the RA team showed clear support of situations in which they are given the opportunity to set goals and then continually practise. Many RAs highlighted the mock rounds practice scenarios as something they wished to spend more time—not only so they can better address incidents but also to develop their personal leadership. A clear link exists between RA personal leadership and hard-skill leadership, and RAs desire to continually enhance both through goal setting and trial and error practice. Horvath and Stack (2013) indicated that many student leaders will want to invest in their own development, and the findings reflected this. Belch and Kimble (2006) noted that the goals RAs develop, at least initially, are often unrealistic. The findings suggested that RAs have a deep desire for supervisors to intentionally make mock scenarios a priority, to link it to the goals that RAs have established for themselves, and to help them refine and develop their goals and, in turn, their hard-skill leadership through performance management.



The research data on performance management took Belch and Kimble's (2006) concept a step further and suggested that having the opportunity to practice and develop is not sufficient and that RAs are looking for concrete, broad, and timely feedback that speaks to their overall performance as a student leader. Additionally, RAs are looking for concrete praise and appreciation for their work. Significant feedback was received from the focus group that reflected both findings and suggested that the current model of RA evaluation and recognition is not sufficient in the eyes of those living within the role. Horvath and Stack (2013) and Blimling (2010) both agreed that the role of an RA's supervisor is to help them find harmony within all areas of their lives as student leaders. Additionally, Kouzes and Posner (2007) suggested that creating a culture of excellence is a result of celebrating and positively reinforcing those who excel in their roles regularly. Although several methods of staff recognition are in place, RAs are clearly dissatisfied with the process and, although performance management and RA appreciation have been discussion points at the management level for some time now, this data reinforced the fact that RAs are dissatisfied with the ways in which they are presently evaluated and rewarded and, as such, a change is needed.

### **Scope and Limitations of the Inquiry**

This inquiry was limited in a number of ways that likely created conditions in which the full potential of the project was not achieved. The most significant of these limitations was a small response rate for the electronic survey with only 52 respondents out of 882 in-house residents completing the survey from start to finish, which represents an overall rate of 5.89%. Traditionally, electronic surveys within MacEwan feature a much higher rate, often close to the 50% mark, and my expectations were in that range. My assumptions were far above the actual

result, which was disappointing considering the short nature of the survey and the limited time required to complete.

To further discuss the limitations, the survey invitation was sent over the winter break between semesters due to the time restraints of ethics approval by the MU Research Ethics Board and to the tight timeline to host the focus group so that the data could be sent for transcription. A second invitation was sent out, and another small bump took place in early January but, overall, the small results necessitated the need to generalize the data due to the size of the sample of the survey. Therefore, although good data were received the sample size is not statistically significant. In retrospect, to achieve a higher response rate, timing that takes into account the ebbs and flows of the academic year should be considered. Additionally, RAs could have advertised the survey on their community social media feeds and discussed at floor meetings. Unfortunately, the timing of the academic year is tight, which made it difficult to navigate given both Royal Roads and MacEwan timelines.

Despite the feeling of the response rate being small, the data provided were significant and provided a tremendous amount of information about the work that RAs do within residence. Additionally, the comments provided clear themes and spoke to the broad demographic of the residence community, albeit small sample sizes, as responses spoke to both domestic and international residents, both returning and new residents, and a variety of experiences while living on campus.

The focus group results were far more significant in terms of numbers; however, limitations were still present as it was hosted during the week to accommodate the facilitators schedule and, as a result, a number of RAs were in class at that time and midterms had begun. The participation rate was sufficient, though, and the data results actually felt overwhelming based on

the 11 pages of transcribed notes that were generated. The time needed to code, theme, and sort through it all was significant, but it provided a great numbers of findings and conclusions.

Finally, the realities of conducting research within my home department and with the student staff I supervise has not been an easy issue to navigate given the possibility of bias and a natural desire for interpretation. It added significant ethical considerations as well as personal limitations with the recruitment of focus group participants and as I divorced myself from the data and fought the urge to guess whose comments belong to whom. It has been difficult to remain emotionally detached from the findings and has challenged me both personally and professionally, given my close and personal feelings for an organization I have spent nearly 6 years serving.

## **CHAPTER FIVE: INQUIRY IMPLICATIONS**

This inquiry has been focussed on enhancing the leadership of the Residence Life Staff team at MU in order to provide a greater residence life experience for those students living on campus. This final chapter reviews the recommendations that have been generated out of the findings and conclusions of the previous chapter and connects to important literature. Overall, these recommendations speak to the larger inquiry question: How can MR enhance its student leaders to facilitate an exceptional residence experience? In addition, the following are the sub-questions of the inquiry:

1. What leadership experience had the greatest impact on the community?
2. What visions do residents have to increase the health and vitality of RA leadership?
3. What capacities do RAs bring to their role?
4. What wishes do RAs have for their own future development?

Additionally, this chapter examines the impact that the recommended changes will have on the Residence Life Staff team and on the wider residence community as well as the needed commitment of the MR leadership team to create the conditions needed for these recommendations to be implemented. Suggestions for further research are made in order to solidify the outcomes of this inquiry but to also create forward momentum towards a continually evolving student leadership experience are also included.

### **Study Recommendations**

Five recommendations have been developed as a result of the four findings and three conclusions discussed in Chapter 4. An overarching recommendation has been developed in order to serve as a guide post for the overall implementation of the inquiry results: MR management place priority on the enhancement of the RA leadership team in order to strengthen

the residence experience, which is evidenced by the combined survey and focus group results of the inquiry project. In order to facilitate the implementation process, supporting recommendations include the following:

1. To strengthen the current RA role by aligning it to a vision for the community shared by RAs and management.
2. To refocus RA expectations on relationship and community building.
3. To increase Residence Life Staff hard-skill leadership development opportunities.
4. To review the RA performance assessment tool and shift towards individualized leadership development plans.
5. To enhance intentional Residence Life Staff recognition practices based on individualized leadership development plans.

**Recommendation 1: Strengthen the RA role by aligning it to a vision for the community shared by RAs and management**

The findings and conclusions of this inquiry have reinforced that RAs are deeply connected to the community and residents that they serve. This sense of belonging is a major driving factor to continue to be a high-performing employee and is directly connected to the development of an RA's personal leadership. As a result of this symbiosis, a sense of being a caretaker of the community and its residents is created; with each added investment, an RA feels more responsible to the community. RAs continually affirmed that their development is shared and not simply the result of a job description of performance expectations. Many RAs commented that they want to be more trusted to lead without a supervisor micromanaging their efforts; the trust from supervisors should be a natural result of the inherent skills and abilities they are hired for; and that they should be free to lead, make mistakes, and then—in conjunction

with supervisors—reflect and course correct. The desire to be trusted and given the freedom to make mistakes is apparent and suggests that RAs are not looking to function completely independently but instead want a collaborative environment where their vision for the development of their personal leadership is intrinsically linked to the development of their community and the supervision they receive from their employers. The importance of creating conditions in which a shared vision between RAs and supervisors can exist is critical to the continued development and success of the residence life program. Evans et al. (2010) suggested that the development of an RA's personal leadership will be tied to their experience and their ability to expand their abilities with what they have learned through trial and error. Shankman and Allen (2008) agreed and indicated that, although this is true, feedback is also needed as they take risks and course correct. RAs then recognize the need for development, seek the experience necessary through their student leadership roles, want to be trusted to lead and given the space to fail, be coached through the experience by supervisors, and continually remain active participants in setting the vision throughout the entire process.

Student leaders at MU are not interested in being passengers during their RA experience. They want to be trusted to lead and to play an active role in developing the ways they are supervised and the expectations they are held to. This engagement, although a new shift in the last several years within the student housing field, can be leveraged by management to enhance the overall operation of the residence and is not something to fear. Student leaders looking to lead and assist in the development of their leadership model should be encouraged; as Kouzes and Posner (2007) noted, forward momentum fueled by significant achievements is a real possibility when a common purpose is owned by all stakeholders. Wheatley (2010) agreed and added that the conversation needed to change any condition, in this case creating a shared vision

owned by both RAs and management, is a result of collaboration, feedback, and an intentional effort to find meaning in the current systems in play. This dialogue would be of tremendous value to the RAs and enhances their personal leadership, the community, and the overall residence life program. Development of a vision shared by both RAs and management in order to strengthen the residence community is a first step in enhancing the RA experience and speaks to the next recommendation on shifting focus of the RA towards connection and community building.

**Recommendation 2: Refocus RA expectations on relationship and community building**

Significant data has been gathered that reflect a desire by RAs to spend more time focussing on building relationships with residents and on developing community. Focus group participants spoke at length that relationship building is not only limited to one-on-one conversations but also includes being able to develop the rapport necessary to de-escalate a volatile roommate situation or shut down a party that is disrupting the community late at night. This is an important distinction because of the popular stereotype that RAs are over-excited extroverts who run ice cream socials and twister parties. In reality, RAs at MR are looking to develop deep relationships that reflect mutual respect and trust; all student leaders who participated in the inquiry clearly indicated relationships as a number one priority. Residents also expressed that deep relationships are a major factor. Across the board, the number one expectation that residents have of RA leadership—as well as their wish for its enhancement—is that RAs be available, friendly, and willing to foster a cohesive community where people can make friends and form connections. It is recommended that the RA position description be fully reviewed and refocussed by a committee consisting of the RLCs, current members of the

Residence Life Staff team, former RAs, and current residents. The review should include all RA responsibilities, expectations (both stated and implied), the Residence Life Staff competency model as it is intended to reflect the ideal RA, and a greater assessment of the expectations residents have upon transitioning into residence. The overall conclusions of this committee should serve as a road map for a detailed evaluation of RA recruitment and expectations practices for the future.

It is recommended that the review process consist of former RAs who now have distance from their experience, and have been given the time to develop perspective of living on and off campus. These former RAs can bring a unique perspective to the table and provide context on what they would have liked to do differently when they were in the role. Weisbord (2012) suggested that when an entire system is moving and all those who are involved are firing off each other, like an over stimulated neuron, those who are not involved—such as the former RAs observing from a distance—will not only understand what is happening but will also have perspective of the larger system. These former RAs, who are no longer part of the relationships within the system, can bring a resolution to the barrier that Snowden and Boone (2007) referred to as a dimension of chaos; as Oshry (2007) suggested, when one lacks perspective from within systems, reality will be just that, chaotic. By creating a committee made up of current castaways from within the system and of those who now fly above it, conditions will be created in which an honest and thorough reframing of the RA role can take place without delay.

At the conclusion of the review process—when the role of the RA, as it currently exists, is understood—it will then be possible to make concrete decisions that allow for the role to be refocused on relationship and community building or, as Senge (2006) noted, leadership will be able to better understand the system and be able to redirect the forces at work. The benefit of



proceeding in this direction is that the RA role can evolve to a place not made up entirely of employer expectations but can become be a collaborative environment in which success is measured not by how many events have been run, but by the depth of the relationships and community forged or, as Wright (2012) explained, a culture where engaged leaders perform at their highest levels.

**Recommendation 3: Increase Residence Life Staff hard-skill leadership development opportunities**

The findings and conclusions revealed a number of clear barriers that RAs believe exist and hinder the work they do as community builders and leaders. Although many student leaders expressed that they bring inherent abilities to the role such as problem solving, approachability, and empathy, they have a clear desire for strong development of hard skills such as responding to a student in crisis or attempting to shut down a party that has gotten out of control. The current model of delivering the procedures is via lecture-style instruction and then a day of practise scenarios called Mock Rounds where returning RAs serve as actors and new RAs attempt to resolve each scenario. The findings and conclusions of the inquiry reflected that this is one of the best learning experiences for RAs and that RAs have a strong desire for more leadership development opportunities like this at multiple times throughout the academic year. Given the clear desire for this specific type of learning opportunity, RAs clearly have identified where they currently are in terms of their hard leadership abilities and have always created a vision of where they believe they can be with further development. Senge (2006) noted that the response to a barrier of this nature is to create conditions where the gap between the current reality and the ideal reality can be bridged. In the context of a residence community, crossing that ravine is especially critical as this element of the RA role is, as Blimling (2010) noted, responsible for

responding to at-risk behaviour. Horvath and Stack (2013) further reiterated the connection to a reduction in liability and harm. The Residence Life Staff team has identified that the iron and steel needed to cross that gap is that of intentional hard-skill leadership development.

The third recommendation, therefore, is that the learning outcomes of the RA training program be reviewed and expanded to include greater opportunities to engage in hands-on activities such as mock rounds during the initial training program at the beginning of the student leader contract. It is also recommended that a mock rounds session be developed to take place at the midpoint in first semester between September and December and another session take place in January after the Christmas break as RAs have been off-duty for several weeks. Not only will this allow RAs to layer new learning opportunities onto an already developed skill set, but will give student leaders the opportunities to further set goals within this specific area of their role. Additionally, the added benefit of having multiple mock round sessions through the year will allow staff to respond to a continually shifting residence culture. It is commonly known within the Residence Life profession that drug use is significantly on the rise on campuses across the country, and additional hard-skill leadership development training will provide the opportunity to address, as Osteen and Coburn (2012) noted, the shifting culture of the organization and institution.

This inquiry has repeatedly revealed that RAs are seeking to develop not only their personal leadership and the connections they have with the residents they serve and with the community but also their capacity for responding to emergencies within that community. It is essential that MR acknowledges this identified area for development and makes the changes necessary to prepare RAs to be high performing in this area. The result will be an enhancement

of RA's service to the residence community and also assist in the growth of personal leadership in areas of confidence, emotional intelligence, maturity, and many others.

**Recommendation 4: Review the RA performance assessment tool and shift towards individualized leadership development plans**

Throughout the course of this OLP, many aspects—including the ways in which RAs are supervised and coached within their roles—have been explored. According to the findings and the conclusions, RAs are wanting their role to be developed in an intentional way and that the role should consider their growth throughout the course of their contact as well as consider the goals they have set for themselves. Martinez (2013) noted that although many RAs will come to their role with predetermined goals, such as wanting to make new friends or wanting to connect with the community, these objectives are often vague and lack clarity or connection to their actual role. The role of the supervisor is to help narrow and define these goals, which traditionally, across the entire student housing profession, is done through a performance evaluation delivered in October or November. Stange (2013) noted that performance evaluations serve to lay out their entire performance to an employee and to also create conditions in which staff members can develop the tools they need to be successful within their roles.

The structure of RA performance assessments at MR, however, and across Canada at many postsecondary institutions, is a complex and drawn out process that does not allow for evaluation to continue throughout the year. Focus group data reflected that this is a major issue for RAs and RAs are looking for the timing of the evaluation to be later in the year, be broader in terms of the feedback they receive from their peers, and more focussed on their development as opposed to areas they have not done well in. The role of an RA is inherently about learning and

developing in all areas of the role, so it is not surprising that RAs wish to be evaluated far more on their development and far less on their deficiencies.

Bailey (2012) discussed that a supervisor focussed on learning and enhancing the abilities of a student leader must not only assess that learning but must also continually move the process forward so the opportunity for development is not lost or does not become stagnant. I therefore recommended that the assessment process for the Residence Life Staff team at MR be shifted to individualized leadership development plans. The goals would be developed by RAs in conjunction with their supervisors in September with regular follow-up throughout the academic year. Starcke and DeLoach (2012) noted that reflection is one method that can help student leaders be inwardly focussed on their own development and can also help them to lay out their experience with a greater degree of articulation. Starcke and DeLoach also suggested that reflection must be done in short bursts so as to not allow for soft answers, which would not function for a single assessment, but would be ideal for a regular conversation with RAs and supervisors twice a month.

When looking at the impact that performance evaluations have on RA, it is evident that this issue weighs heavily on the minds of the student leaders who inhabit the role. A shift in performance assessment to an individualized process that is drawn out over the course of their contract is not only logical but also reflects a learning-focussed environment where student leadership is continually assessed and enhanced.

**Recommendation 5: Enhance intentional Residence Life Staff recognition practices based on individualized leadership development plans**

Residents and RAs have continually spoken about their desire to feel connected to the residence community in a variety of ways. The theme of community has been repeated

throughout the findings and conclusions, and it is evident that this desire is, above all, the reason many students choose to live and work within residence.

Digging deeper, the results reflected a desire by RAs to be appreciated and recognized regularly for their efforts and contribution, given their long hours. The findings are clear in revealing that this need varies drastically depending on the student leader but ranges from receiving a thank you to achieving a promotion and that recognition is an expectation. RAs place tremendous value on their contribution being noticed, named, and recognized, and that MR makes this a priority. Although this appears to be selfish behaviour on the surface, the expectation for an organization to thank individuals for their contribution is not a new concept, and this expectation reflects a need for employees to perceive that the organization they invest so much into be aware of that investment.

Robinson, Perryman, and Hayday (2004) suggested that recognition efforts are essential to an employee's level of engagement and that the value they place on their work is directly proportional to the value that the employer places on them. My fifth recommendation, therefore, is that the current model of RA recognition be reviewed by a committee made up for both RLCs, current and former RAs, and members of the residence community at large in order to determine the success or failure of current practices and to determine activities to widen or adjust based on their analysis. Additionally, goals established by RAs within their individualized leadership development plans should be used as markers for achievement and serve as points at which to celebrate the individual success of each student leader. Based on each individual staff member's level of comfort and need, he or she should determine how that celebration and recognition must look. Overall, the recognition efforts led by MR supervisors should not only speak to each

individual RA but also be tied to the shift in performance management and become an enhanced component within the culture of the Residence Life Staff team.

Kouzes and Posner (2007) noted that leaders demonstrate their care and concern by behaving in an engaged and empathetic way, by injecting it into the fabric of the community that the RAs have sewn together, and by colouring the community with a culture of reward and appreciation. This recommendation seeks to do just that: enhance the culture of recognition within MR, address RAs desire for engagement and individualized appreciation, and reinforce the seams of the community by acknowledging the good work being done by student leaders throughout residence.

### **Organizational Implications**

The role of an RA in creating community and in delivering the residence life program at MR cannot be understated, and this inquiry has reflected not only their necessity but also the tremendous impact they have on residents and each other. Enhancement of their leadership has been the overall goal of this inquiry, and creation of the conditions in which this process can move forward is the next logical step. This project was originally initiated in order to reflect on changes enacted six (6) years ago however, through the research, it has become evident that the needs of the RA team have shifted away from many traditional assumptions of the role and the type of student leaders who serve in this capacity. Although creating community and building relationships is clearly still a goal that both RAs and residents are invested in, the Residence Life Staff team has a deep desire to be developed in an intentional and individualized way. The one-size-fits-all approach for student leadership development does not work at MR any longer. The findings, conclusions, and recommendations resulting from this research emphasize RAs' clear desire for their development to be an intentional and personalized process. To that end,

enhancement of RA leadership will require a shift in the foundational understandings of the role as well as the organizational approach and management of student leadership at MR.

Although the role of an RA is commonly known to be applied in relatively the same way across North America by hundreds of intuitions, there is little doubt that student leaders, their expectations, and the experiences from which they approach their role are all changing. The enhancement of RA leadership will be a function of both recognizing the changing nature of student leadership and adjusting the RA role to fit this ongoing shift. To address these shifts, a change is required in the management culture and the way it approaches the RA role and in the expectations placed on student leaders. The system, in which the RAs are at the heart, will need to change in order to meet the Residence Life Staff team's shifting nature and will require the endorsement of the administration of MR itself. The conversation needed to begin this shift will be a tremendous step forward and, as Short (1998) suggested, this dialogue is not the only thing needed when attempting to change a group of people who impact a system, but the conversation itself must also evolve to consider the people and culture that are in a state of flux, and the entire language of the organization must evolve in order to respond to the rising tides at the heart of the issue. It is therefore critical that MR management begins to understand, review, and absorb an evolved perspective on the role RAs play in residence; the expectations that were held to 10 years ago are vastly different than they are now. The key is creating a foundational vision of student leadership in the 21st century that is owned by RAs, residents, and management. This vision should reflect not only the values of MU but also those of the students who attend the institution as well. There is no doubt that all stakeholders appreciate the role RAs play, but the stakeholders have vastly different expectations of what an RA should do. The co-creation and adoption of a shared vision will, in itself, create the conditions necessary to enhance RA

leadership. Kouzes and Posner (2007) explained that the ability for an organization to agree on the recipe needed for one stunning element of change allows for common purpose to roll out. In the case of the RA role at MR, an opportunity exists to adapt and enhance the Residence Life Staff team in order to meet the needs of students, residents, and the organization while changing the conversation on a national level about how RAs are developed.

By allowing these recommendations to fall to the way side, while not likely disastrous to the residence life program, the door opens for disengagement by the Residence Life Staff team, which could cause issues with recruitment and retention of ideal candidates. The demand for a student leader's time is significant, as Mockaitis (2006) noted, and if an RA does not feel the energy they are exerting is returned by their supervisors, their commitment will crumble. Mockaitis also suggested that the proportional response from an RA's commitment to that of their supervisors operates like a coefficient and that if unbalanced will spell certain demise for that student leader and their effort and commitment; however, if the relationship is balanced and the RAs feel they are being rewarded and developed for their efforts, a tremendous amount will be achieved. Senge (2006) noted that bridging the gap between the current and the possible is a difficult exercise and many shy away from it. This inquiry, however, has revealed that RAs are not only looking to leap across the gap in as few bounds as possible but that they also expect supervisors to assist in many significant ways. MR would benefit from reinforcing this ideology; neglect of these recommendations then will not only cause quality candidates, who are engaged and who seek development, to withdraw but will also prevent their retention and promotion for the future.

MR management would benefit from shifting the way in which they approach the leadership of the Residence Life Staff team. As it currently stands, RAs are the ones responsible



for facilitating and developing the residence community as well as responding to critical incidents and supporting the residents who live on their floors. Given the significant role RAs play in delivering the residence experience at MU, it behooves the organization to approach their recruitment, development, and overall enhancement with a more careful and intentional hand.

From an organizational perspective, an opportunity exists for management to capitalize on the data and to create a shift in the intentional development of the RAs. Although the entire Residence Services Department is not responsible for the direct supervision of the Residence Life Staff team, the culture of an organization usually trickles down to those who are responsible for the greatest amount of frontline work. Given that the RAs are charged with that responsibility, and that they are the ones responsible for creating community, the culture should shift to support the work they are doing, and this should serve a primary pillar of MR going forward. Sinek (2014) noted that organizations with a strong culture aligned towards leadership and development create the conditions in which employees form connections beyond simply coming to work and, in fact, allow for pride, trust, and attachment to build. Sinek also suggested that when these feelings are present and when employees feel a sense of comfort and ease within the places they give so much of themselves to, a circle of safety is created, bonds form, and employees spend less time worrying about themselves and more time focussed on their responsibilities. In the case of the Residence Life Staff team, that responsibility is building community.

MR management should drive far more energy towards creating this safe space where intentional individualized development is the machine that bridges the two universes of RA and supervisor together. This will be accomplished by aligning the many processes that currently exist—such as performance evaluations, competency models, recognition practises, and training

procedures—into one cohesive and intentional document, and borrowing a title from Friday Night Lights written by Peter Berg (2006), entitled *Clear Eyes, Full Heart, Can't Lose: MacEwan Residence Life Staff Core Competencies and Learning Outcomes*, which would speak to the enhancement of each individual RA. Collins (2012) outlined that processes that are student leader focussed and that morph to each individual RA are ideal. Kouzes and Posner (2007) agreed and noted that enabling the leadership or others must always be a paramount goal of any organization.

MR is at a major turning point as it approaches its 10th year of operation and, with the recent announcement of MU consolidating down to one single, sustainable campus (MacEwan University, 2014), the influx of new residents will be tremendous. By allowing the large organizational processes currently in place to remain disparate, the development of the Residence Life Staff team will be left equally stagnant. The results of this are disengagement, an inability to retain quality staff members, and half-developed communities. Conversely, with an alignment of processes and a focus on intentional individualized experiential learning, RAs will be given the opportunity to thrive. MR has the opportunity and as one piece of a larger educational institution, an obligation to enrich student leadership learning and development. Sinek (2014) suggested that change is a result of a large force that is ignited through an engaged residence life program that wants to allow for its employees to feel safe to take risks and grow, to push themselves out of their comfort zone, and to be guided in a sustainable and adaptable way in which leadership is enhanced and community thrives.

### **Implications for Future Inquiry**

As this research project comes to an end, I have thoughts of alternative directions this inquiry could have veered into. The development of student leadership is an exceptionally broad

topic, but the niche area of its implications to student housing is virtually uncharted. There is a multitude of other realities to explore and to expand upon the findings of this project. One particular area for consideration is that of the retention and development of male student leaders, which is the smallest demographic at MU (MacEwan University, 2013) and by far the hardest type of student to recruit for the RA role. The RA position is well known to be perceived as a motherly caregiver role or a job that is about ruining the fun of others by enforcing ridiculous rules. Male leadership development is a research area that is rife for exploration and one that would complement the overall enhancement process of the RA team that was undertaken by this inquiry. Beyond this, another opportunity for future inquiry lies in understanding the impact that living in a student-led residence community has on academic success versus living off-campus. Areas of consideration could include assessment of the role that RAs play in contributing to academic success through their support initiatives and could even include an investigation into the implications of students all enrolled within the same program and courses living together on campus as a single cohort. Overall tremendous opportunity exists to investigate the way in which student leadership and the residence community intersects and to discover opportunities for creating stronger relationships that facilitate the conditions needed for improved academic success.

### **Report Summary**

The overall mission of this inquiry has been to understand the current state of RA leadership at MR and the ways in which it can be enhanced in order to deliver a more cohesive and well-developed community for all residents. The data of the inquiry have revealed that residents perceive that RAs are a tremendously important part of the residence community and that the RA role is essential for helping new residents transition to a university setting for the

first time, to respond to critical incidents, and to be a support network when one is struggling either personally, academically, or both. Additionally, the findings of this inquiry have reflected that RAs want to lead, want to be developed and recognized in an intentional and individualized way, and want experiential-based training and development that helps them grow into better leaders and people.

The role that MR plays, as an organization in enhancing RA leadership, will require a shift in thinking when it comes to how the RA role is supervised and will need a change from a reactive to a far more intentional and individualized process. Additionally, centralization and unification of all processes currently in use for RA leadership development around a single set of competencies and learning outcomes will be needed so that the recommendations of this inquiry do not fall to the wayside. Residents and RAs have been clear in their expectations and, therefore, MR now has an obligation to take this data and use it to strengthen the overall tapestry of the residence community.

My intention, as the primary researcher and one of two RLCs, is to use the inquiry findings to move forward as soon as possible. The time of year in terms of the academic calendar is perfect as the RLCs has already begun to lay the foundations for policy and procedures for next year's Residence Life Staff team. Additionally, the integrations of some recommendations are well on their way to being incorporated already and the feedback, although very small, has already been positive. The journey has been mapped; it is now merely a question of when the adventure fully begins.

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## **APPENDIX A: Inquiry Team Member Letter of Agreement**

In partial fulfillment of the requirement for a Master of Arts in Leadership Degree at Royal Roads University, Tim Lade (the Student) will be conducting an inquiry research study at MacEwan Residence to inquire into how the residence life program can enhance their student staff in order to better facilitate an exceptional residence experience. The Student's credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by calling Dr. Brigitte Harris, Director, School of Leadership, at [telephone number] or email [email address].

### **Inquiry Team Member Role Description**

As a volunteer Inquiry Team Member assisting the Student with this project, your role may include one or more of the following: providing advice on the relevance and wording of questions and letters of invitation, supporting the logistics of the data-gathering methods, including observing, assisting, or facilitating an interview or focus group, taking notes, transcribing, or analyzing data, to assist MacEwan Residence's organizational change process. In the course of this activity, you may be privy to confidential inquiry data.

### **Confidentiality of Inquiry Data**

In compliance with the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Policy, under which this inquiry project is being conducted, all personal identifiers and any other confidential information generated or accessed by the inquiry team advisor will only be used in the performance of the functions of this project, and must not be disclosed to anyone other than persons authorized to receive it, both during the inquiry period and beyond it. Recorded information in all formats is covered by this agreement. Personal identifiers include participant names, contact information, personally identifying turns of phrase or comments, and any other personally identifying information.

### **Bridging Student's Potential or Actual Ethical Conflict**

In situations where potential participants in a work setting report directly to the Student, you, as a neutral third party with no supervisory relationship with either the Student or potential participants, may be asked to work closely with the Student to bridge this potential or actual conflict of interest in this study. Such requests may include asking the Inquiry Team Advisor to: send out the letter of invitation to potential participants, receive letters/emails of interest in participation from potential participants, independently make a selection of received participant requests based on criteria you and the Student will have worked out previously, formalize the logistics for the data-gather method, including contacting the participants about the time and location of the interview or focus group, conduct the interviews (usually 3-5 maximum) or focus group (usually no more than one) with the selected participants (without the Student's presence or knowledge of which participants were chosen) using the protocol and questions worked out previously with the Student, and producing written transcripts of the interviews or focus groups with all personal identifiers removed before the transcripts are brought back to the Student for the data analysis phase of the study.

This strategy means that potential participants with a direct reporting relationship will be assured they can confidentially turn down the participation request from their supervisor (the Student), as this process conceals from the Student which potential participants chose not to participate or simply were not selected by you, the third party, because they were out of the selection criteria range (they might have been a participant request coming after the number of participants sought, for example, interview request number 6 when only 5 participants are sought, or focus group request number 10 when up to 9 participants would be selected for a focus group). Inquiry Team members asked to take on such 3<sup>rd</sup> party duties in this study will be under the direction of the Student and will be fully briefed by the Student as to how this process will work, including specific expectations, and the methods to be employed in conducting the elements of the inquiry with the Student's direct reports, and will be given every support possible by the Student, except where such support would reveal the identities of the actual participants.

Personal information will be collected, recorded, corrected, accessed, altered, used, disclosed, retained, secured and destroyed as directed by the Student, under direction of the Royal Roads Academic Supervisor.

Inquiry Team Members who are uncertain whether any information they may wish to share about the project they are working on is personal or confidential will verify this with Tim Lade, the Student.

**Statement of Informed Consent:**

I have read and understand this agreement.

_____	_____	_____
NAME (PLEASE PRINT)	SIGNATURE	DATE

**APPENDIX B: Survey and Focus Group Questions**

Anonymous online survey questions

- 1) What are the qualities and strengths of your RA?
- 2) Please give an example of an exceptional leadership moment from your RA.
- 3) If you had three wishes for your RA what would they be and why?

Focus group questions

- 1) What stands out for you about your RA experience?
- 2) What are the qualities and strengths you bring to the table?
- 3) Where would you like to grow and develop in your role as a student leader?
- 4) What are three visions you have for the RA team?

**APPENDIX C: E-mail Invitation for the Survey**

Dear [Prospective Participant],

I would like to invite you to be part of a research project that I am conducting. This project is part of the requirement for my Master's Degree in Leadership at Royal Roads University.

The objective of my research project is to inquire into how MacEwan Residence can enhance its student leaders to facilitate an exceptional residence experience.

Your name was chosen as a prospective participant because you are presently an in-house resident and can provide valuable feedback on the role of the Residence Assistants (RA) assigned to your floor and the overall Residence Life Staff Team and their facilitation of the MacEwan Residence experience.

This phase of my research project will consist of an online survey conducted throughout December 2013 and is estimated to last 10 to 15 minutes. The attached document contains further information about the study conduct and will enable you to make a fully informed decision on whether or not you wish to participate. Please review this information before responding.

You are not required to participate in this research project. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw without prejudice until January 1, 2014 at which point responses become part of an anonymous data set. I realize that due to our collegial relationship, you may feel compelled to participate in this research project. Please be aware that you are not required to participate and, should you choose to participate, your participation would be entirely voluntary. If you do not wish to participate, simply do not reply to this request. Your decision to not participate will also be maintained in confidence. Your choice will not affect your status as a resident of MacEwan Residence in any way, shape, or form. Project deliverables will include a final report which will be shared with all project participants as well as full-time staff and student staff of MacEwan Residence and final recommendations will be shared with MacEwan University executive leadership.

Please feel free to contact me at any time should you have additional questions regarding the project and its outcomes.

If you would like to participate in my research project, please click the link below and proceed with the online survey. If you have any questions or concerns you may contact me at:

Name: Tim Lade

Email: [email address]

Telephone:

Warm regards,

Tim Lade

**APPENDIX D: MacEwan University Informed Consent Form**

**Project Title:** MacEwan Residence Life Staff: Enhancing Student Leadership

**Researcher(s):** Tim Lade, Residence Life Coordinator, MacEwan Residence Services, Royal Roads University Master of Arts in Leadership student, [telephone number], [email address]

- **Purpose of the Research:** In partial fulfillment of the requirement for a Master of Arts in Leadership Degree at Royal Roads University, Tim Lade (Primary Researcher) will be conducting an inquiry research study at MacEwan Residence to understand how MacEwan Residence can enhance its student leaders to facilitate an exceptional residence experience. The Student’s credentials with Royal Roads University can be established by calling Dr. Brigitte Harris, Director, School of Leadership, at [telephone number] or email [email address]. **Procedures:** A focus group of 8-12 current MacEwan Residence Life Staff members will be conducted by Brenda Barrett, Counselor in the Student Resource Centre. It is estimated this survey will take no longer than 45 minutes to complete. This focus group will take place on the City Centre Campus in a meeting room located in the Robbins Health Learning Centre. Aggregate data will be provided to the primary researcher and at no point will comments be linked to individual residents. Raw data will be destroyed at the conclusion of the research project no later than June 18, 2014.
- If you have any questions or concerns of the procedures outlined please feel free to contact the primary researcher, Tim Lade, at the contact information provided above.
- **Potential Risks:** There are no known or anticipated risks to you by participating in this research.
- **Potential Benefits:** Benefits in participating will include playing an active role in nurturing the development of one’s leadership abilities and the abilities of fellow team members.
- **Compensation:** Members of the Residence Life Staff Team who participate in the focus group will receive a light pizza dinner.
- **Confidentiality/Anonymity:** Focus group data will be collected via standard recording device as well as hand-written notes by the facilitator, Brenda Barrett, Counselor in the MacEwan University Student Life Office. Recordings will then be sent to a transcription service and aggregate data will be shared with the primary researcher. The primary researcher will not have access to the raw data at any point and will be kept on file until June 2014 at which point it will be destroyed. The primary researcher and focus group facilitator will undertake to safeguard the confidentiality of the discussion, but cannot guarantee that other members of the group will do so. Please respect the confidentiality of the other members of the group by not disclosing the contents of this discussion outside the group, and be aware that others may not respect your confidentiality.

I grant permission to be audiotaped:  Yes  No

I wish to remain anonymous:  Yes  No

I wish to remain anonymous, but you may refer to me by a pseudonym:  Yes  No

The pseudonym I choose for myself is: \_\_\_\_\_

You may quote me and use my name:  Yes  No

- Collected data will be used in completing the final report of this research project. It will also be used in creating recommendations to the university on the enhancement of student leadership within MacEwan University Residence.
- At the conclusion of data collection participants may review all data collected by contacting the facilitator with the information contained in the invitation. You are able to review your submission of the transcript of the focus group

**Right to withdraw:**

Participation is voluntary and answer only those questions that you are comfortable with. You are not required to participate given your employment as a member of the Residence Life Staff Team. You may withdraw from the research project for any reason without penalty by ignoring the e-mail request to participate or by withdrawing from the focus group once it has started. Once recording has begun, a request to withdraw can be announced and you will be free to leave however, it will not possible to separate your answers from those provided and recorded.

- **Follow up:** A copy of the final report will be provided by Brenda Barrett to all focus group participants.
- **Questions or Concerns:** If you have any questions or concerns, please contact the researcher(s) using the information at the top of page 1.

**Questions or Concerns about Ethical Conduct:** This project has been approved on ethical grounds by the Royal Roads University Research Ethics Board on December 4, 2014 and was cleared to begin by the MacEwan University Research Ethics Board on December 11, 2013. Any questions regarding your rights as a participant may be addressed to the Board at [telephone number] or [email address].

**Documenting Consent:**

**Signed Consent for Focus Group**

My signature below indicates that I have read and understand the description provided. I have had an opportunity to ask questions and my questions have been answered. I consent to participate in the research project. A copy of this Consent Form has been given to me for my records.

_____	_____	_____
<i>Name of Participant</i>	<i>Signature</i>	<i>Date</i>

***A copy of this consent will be left with you, and a copy will be taken by the researcher.***

**APPENDIX E: E-mail Invitation for the Focus Group**

Dear [Prospective Participant],

I would like to invite you to be part of a research project that Tim Lade, Residence Life Coordinator is current conducting. This project is part of the requirement for Tim's Master's Degree in Leadership at Royal Roads University. I am conducting this focus group on his behalf in order to maintain ethical guidelines.

The objective of this research project is to inquire into how MacEwan Residence can enhance its student leaders to facilitate an exceptional residence experience.

You have been chosen as a prospective participant because you are presently a member of the Residence Life Staff Team and your experience as a student leader, presently on-going, can provide us with valuable feedback on your growth and development as an RA.

This phase of the research project will consist of a 1 hour focus group which will be in late January 2014. The attached document contains further information about the study conduct and will enable you to make a fully informed decision on whether or not you wish to participate. Please review this information before responding.

You are not required to participate in this research project. If you do choose to participate, you are free to withdraw without prejudice until February 1, 2014 at which point responses become part of an anonymous data set. I realize that due to our collegial relationship, you may feel compelled to participate in this research project. Please be aware that you are not required to participate and, should you choose to participate, your participation would be entirely voluntary. If you do not wish to participate, simply do not reply to this request. Your decision to not participate will also be maintained in confidence. Your choice will not affect your status as a resident of MacEwan Residence in any way, shape, or form. Project deliverables will include a final report which will be shared with all project participants as well as full-time staff and student staff of MacEwan Residence and final recommendations will be shared with MacEwan University executive leadership.

Please feel free to contact me at any time should you have additional questions regarding the project and its outcomes. If you would like to participate in the research project please reply to this e-mail with the subject line Focus Group.

My contact information for questions or concerns

Brenda Barrett, Counselor  
[email address]  
[telephone number]

Sincerely,

Brenda Barrett