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### What is a Resident Assistant?: What is so special about the University of Tennessee?

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**Appendix D - UNIVERSITY HONORS PROGRAM  
SENIOR PROJECT - APPROVAL**

Name: Kristin M. Gourley

College: Business Department: Accounting

Faculty Mentor: Jerry Adams

PROJECT TITLE: What is a Resident Assistant?:

What is special about the University of Tennessee?

I have reviewed this completed senior honors thesis with this student and certify that it is a project commensurate with honors level undergraduate research in this field.

Signed: Jerry R. Adams, Faculty Mentor

Date: May 8, 2002

Comments (Optional):

# What is a Resident Assistant?

What is special about the University of Tennessee?

Senior Honors Project  
By  
Kristin M. Gourley

University of Tennessee, Knoxville  
May 2002

Every year, thousands of high school seniors select a university to attend. Once that problem has been answered, they must decide where to live. For some, staying home or commuting is the solution, while others choose to live on campus in residence halls. The question of housing does not seem to be a daunting decision, but the impact of that choice can affect a student's entire college career. The on-campus living experience is one that most students never forget because of the bonds that are made. Part of that experience is due to the efforts of a group of student leaders known as resident assistants, or RAs. What is an RA? That is a question with many answers. The roles and responsibilities vary from school to school, but the basic principles remain the same. RAs are representatives of the university. They are student leaders. They are role models to others, and they help make on-campus living worthwhile.

### **What is an RA?**

Although the definition of an RA's responsibilities varies with each institution, there are some basic duties that most have in common. Housing departments count on RAs to work desk shifts in the buildings. They assist with check-in and checkout procedures. They serve as information resources to students and parents. RAs promote social and mental development through inventive educational programming. They help maintain security both on campus and in the residence halls and serve as ambassadors of the university to their residents and their guests.

While the basic role of an RA is easily defined, each college or university has a different way of developing the roles. For example, at Valdosta State and the University in Georgia, each RA is required to work one night per week and must present seven informative programs a semester. Much like Valdosta State, RAs at the University of Florida present eight programs a semester, but they only work approximately one night a month and periodically over breaks. This difference shows how housing programs may be alike in one area and completely different in another. One might assume that RA requirements vary based upon the background of the institution. This theory, while valid, is not necessarily accurate. For example, Mercer University RAs must cover seven programs in a semester and work one day a week, and RAs at the University of South Carolina at Spartanburg have four programs a semester and work once a week and one weekend each month. Although requirements vary with each school, the basic premise of the resident assistant position remains constant, and each RA receives some sort of compensation.

The position of resident assistant tends to be a fulfilling job for a college student, but the work has the added benefit of offering a reward to the students for tackling such an obligation. Some schools offer free rooms to their RAs while others pay a salary to their students in exchange for their time, but no matter what, the student leader RAs gain some remuneration for their efforts. At Duke University, resident assistants, called resident advisors, receive a free room (valued at \$5000) along with a stipend of \$1960, and College of Charleston RAs get a half price discount on their rooms as well as a stipend of roughly \$900. The



Ohio State University gives RAs a \$1350 stipend along with a free room, but smaller schools, such as Middle Tennessee State University, give only a stipend of \$1600 per semester. Understandably, private universities seem to offer more financially to their student leaders, but in general, most institutions give either a free or discounted room or a stipend.

### **The University of Tennessee**

The housing experience at the University of Tennessee is unique from that of other institutions. UT RAs have several responsibilities that serve to help the department of housing run successfully. On average, the over 150 UT RAs work 6 hours per week. Much like the differences between roles of RAs in universities, the requirements of RAs at UT vary from building to building. In some residence halls, resident assistants work at the desk once a week. In other buildings, the RAs only work every other week. The programming requirement is universal across the campus. Each RA must do 10 programs a semester (five educational programs, 5 social programs) and attend at least three in-service seminars to help them improve their college experience and gain knowledge they can take back to their residents. From visitation and escort rules to alcohol and drug confiscations, the resident assistants enforce university policies on their floor and in the building. On top of their administrative duties, RAs must seek to establish relationships with their residents and mediate any conflicts that arise. RAs at other universities are generally not required to work school breaks, but at Tennessee, RAs work during Fall Break, Thanksgiving, and Easter. The resident

assistants at the University of Tennessee play many roles on top of their role as a student, and they are sufficiently compensated for it. Despite the funding crisis that the University of Tennessee faces each year, the stipend for RAs continues to be competitive. Resident assistants receive over \$4000 a year for their work. On top of the stipend, they are able to have a private room for the price of a double room. Tennessee RAs also enjoy a \$25 deduction on the cost of cable, and RA rooms come with carpet. Compared to other universities, resident assistants from the University of Tennessee receive roughly the same compensation for approximately the same amount of work, and they deserve such responsibilities and remuneration because of the large amount of training they go through to be qualified student leaders.

At the University of Tennessee, there is an extensive resident assistant application process. It can be assumed that this is a successful method based upon the excellent variety and continuous quality and work ethic demonstrated by the RAs. The application process for the RA position includes a thorough interview method along with "RA class". In that class, students learn about the different responsibilities of the position, and at the same time, the instructors put them in hypothetical situations to teach them how to handle student issues such as depression, alcoholism, racism, etc. It is at this time that applicants begin to realize what is required of an RA. They must be leaders. They must be policy enforcers. They need a good listening ear. They should be able to confront conflict and take control when a situation is getting out of hand. They must perform a balancing act between being a student and a part-time worker. After

candidates learn about the position and themselves, positions are offered to qualified applicants, and the next phase of training begins during the next academic year. The learning process does not stop during the RAs time working, but the foundations of the job are laid out during RA class. While much is given to and expected of RAs at the University of Tennessee, the far-reaching training process prepares the students to be leaders at a large university.

### **RA Survey and Motivation Factors**

Faced with a variety of expectations and responsibilities, University of Tennessee resident assistants can devote much of their attention to their job. In order to remain enthusiastic about their employment, it is necessary for RAs to find motivation from their positions. Recently, several resident assistants from the University of Tennessee were given surveys to see how they stay motivated in a job that can be demanding. The results from those surveys can be found in the following section.

Although most UT RAs feel that they are adequately compensated, many believe that more benefits would help them stay motivated and enthusiastic. Coincidentally, their requests mirrored the benefits that housing staff members at other universities receive. Many UT RAs included reserved parking spaces, free rooms, and increased stipends as benefits they would like to see implemented in the near future. Middle Tennessee State University, The Ohio State University, and the University of Florida offer reserved or specialized parking areas for their resident assistants. Several institutions offer free rooms and higher stipends than



the University of Tennessee. While implementing one or all of these benefits would seem to satisfy the desires of the RAs, it is essential that these RAs find motivation from their job in order to successfully serve their building.

With so many expectations and responsibilities, it can be difficult to remain enthusiastic about such a demanding position, but many internal reasons were given for returning for second, third, and even fourth years as resident assistants. Several RAs stated that their staff was an essential aspect to their return. They feel that they have formed a family with the people they work with, and therefore, they have a support system through their job. Some RAs claim that their greatest motivation is in being a resource to students. Still, others said that the RA position was ideal for a college student because the hours are flexible and accommodating to schoolwork. Each person has his or her own way of staying enthusiastic about the position, but the themes of their satisfaction focus on their interaction with others, whether staff member or residents, and the convenience and flexibility of the position.

## **Conclusion**

Although the title and responsibilities of resident assistants vary throughout higher education, the basic roles of the housing staff are the same. Resident assistants act as the first step for information and guidance, and they are ambassadors for the university to parents and students. They are invaluable assets to a housing department because of their ability to relate to students. Their active role as student leaders helps them develop into well-rounded

students and adds to the knowledge they gain while in college. The teamwork and time management skills that they must master while balancing school with work are life skills that they can carry on in to any profession, whether or not it relates to a university setting.

While the University of Tennessee fits along with the average of other universities in terms of responsibilities and benefits associated with the resident assistant position, many RAs believe that increased benefits would have a greater impact on their satisfaction with their jobs.

When it is all said and done, the resident assistants of a university add a great dimension of community and enthusiasm to a residence hall, thereby improving the overall college experience for an on-campus resident.

## **References**

All Housing Department information for each university was found in

"RA Study Results"

College of Charleston

Residence Life and Housing

Data Collected December 2000-March 2001

Please fill this out as honestly as possible. It will be used in a research/opinion paper.