

**Student Staff Selection, Training, and Retention: A UMR Assessment Project  
Survey Results 2008**

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**Purpose**

For years now, Housing and Residence Life staffs have been discussing the trend of decreasing applicant numbers for the Resident Assistant (or equivalent) position. For clarity, throughout the rest of this document, these positions will be labeled as “RA/CA.” There has been speculation as to the various reasons behind this trend, but nothing concrete has been determined. In order to maintain and grow successful Residence Life programs, it is critical that our departments maintain a well-trained and satisfied student staff. With the changing generation of students from which we draw our staff, Residence Life programs may have to start adapting their processes to help get the students to buy into the RA/CA position.

In 2008, the UMR-ACUHO Assessment and Information Management (AIM) Committee decided to collect data from throughout the region to determine if the perceived trend was in fact reality, what some schools have done to maintain a well-trained and satisfied staff, and to offer suggestions as to what may help in the future. The committee chose to focus on a few questions in particular such as recruitment methods, application and interview styles, length of training time and method, return and transfer processes, and compensation initiatives.

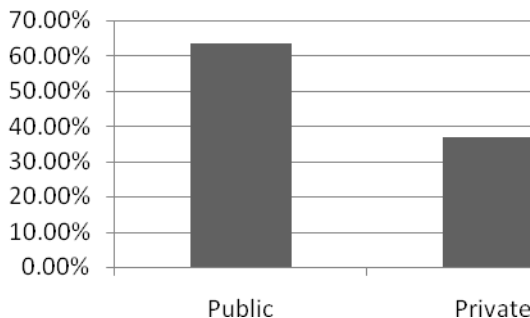
**Method**

An internet-based survey was sent via email to the senior housing officers of all 116 UMR-ACUHO member institutions. The recipients were asked to either complete the survey, or delegate the responsibility to the most appropriate individual. As a follow up to the initial email, another email was sent reminding member schools to participate. Finally, at the UMR-ACUHO Summer Meeting the AIM Committee went to all the individual committee meetings to give paper reminders of the survey to representatives from institutions that had not already received or completed the survey. While 83 schools began the survey, 79 completed it in its entirety, resulting in a 68.1% return rate.

**Results**

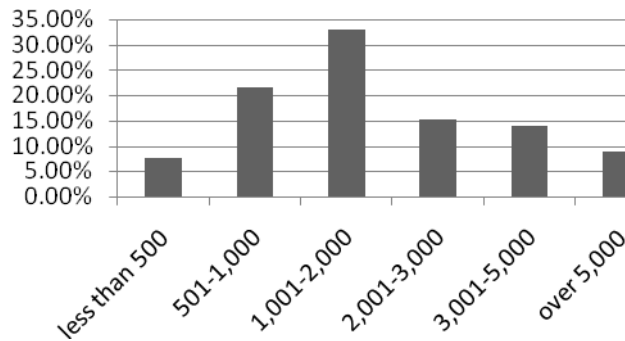
*Demographic Information*

Of the 79 institutions that completed the survey, 63.3% were public while 36.7% were private (Figure 1). 2.5% of the schools were 2-year institutions, while 97.5% were 4-year institutions.



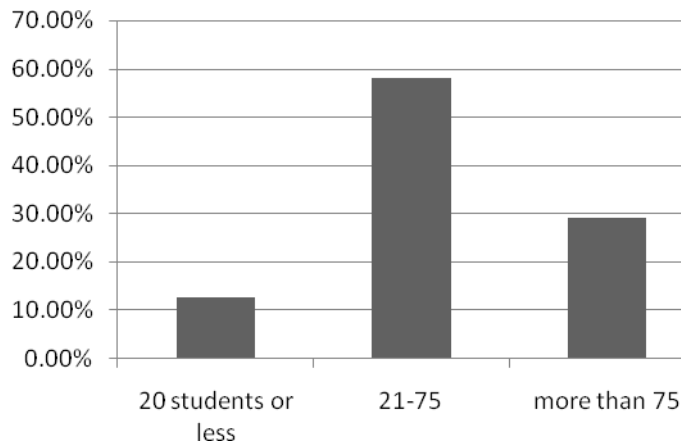
**Figure 1. Institutions responding as either Public or Private (%)**

7.6% of respondents housed less than 500 residents, 21.5% housed between 501-1,000 residents, 32.9% housed between 1,001 and 2,000, 15.2% housed between 2,001 and 3,000, 13.9% housed between 3,001 and 5,000, and 8.9% of respondents housed over 5,000 students (Figure 2).



**Figure 2. Residential population of responding institutions**

100% of the responding institutions employ student housing staff such as Resident Assistants, Resident Advisors, Community Advisors, Student Advisors, or House Fellows. The majority of schools (58.2%) employ between 21 and 75 student staff members. 29.1% employ more than 75 students, while only 12.6% employ 20 students or less (Figure 3).

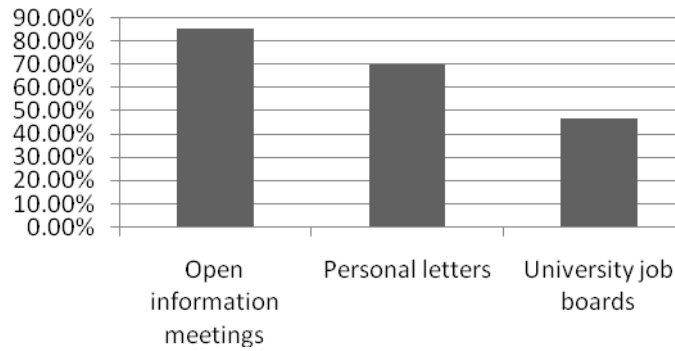


**Figure 3. Student RA/CA staff employed**

All institutions were located in the upper Midwest region, including Iowa, Kansas, Manitoba, Minnesota, Missouri, Nebraska, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin.

**Recruitment**

100% of responding institutions take part in active recruitment of RA/CA applicants, and all use at least posters or flyers to advertise. There are some additional recruitment methods used though. For example, 84.8% use open informational meetings, 69.6% use personal letters, and 46.8% use university job boards (Figure 4).



**Figure 4. RA/CA Recruitment Methods**

In addition, other means included are as follows: internet promotions, word of mouth, information tables, visiting student organization meetings, or referrals from various campus departments. When comparing effectiveness of different recruitment methods, it was found that there does not seem to be any one type that has the greatest impact. The numbers of applicants are consistent regardless of the recruitment type. There is also no impact on the different genders in the applicant pool.

Currently for every one female position available, the highest percentage of respondents (40.5%) has between 2-2.9 applicants on average. Only 10.1% of schools have over 5 applicants per available position. Currently for every one male position available, the highest percentage of respondents (44.3%) has between 1-1.9 applicants on average. Additionally, 94.9% state that they have not had a candidate (in the last 5 years) identify as transgender. While it would be intriguing to know how this compares to the past, the vast majority of respondents replied “unknown” to the question. Also interesting, there is little to no difference between public and private schools in response to this question. One slight difference that did arise though is that private schools on average had 1-1.9 female applicants per opening while public schools had 2-2.9 per opening. There was no change in regards to male applicants.

### *Application*

In order to be eligible to apply to be an RA/CA in is not uncommon for certain criteria to be met. 98.7% of schools have a G.P.A requirement. While this requirement may differ from institution to institution, the overall average requirement is 2.5 on a 4.0 scale. The second highest ranked criterion focuses on the number of semesters living on campus. 94.9% utilize this as a hiring requirement, with the vast majority requiring at least 2 semesters of residential experience before they can begin working as a RA/CA. In addition, 75.6% of schools considered the number of credits each applicant had completed, with the average necessary being 24-30 credits. Conduct history was considered by 79.5% of institutions.

100% of respondents utilize some sort of application process. 93.7% include a reference form, and 92.4% include an information form. 82.3% include a short answer or essay section, while only 40.5% ask for a resume (Figure 5).

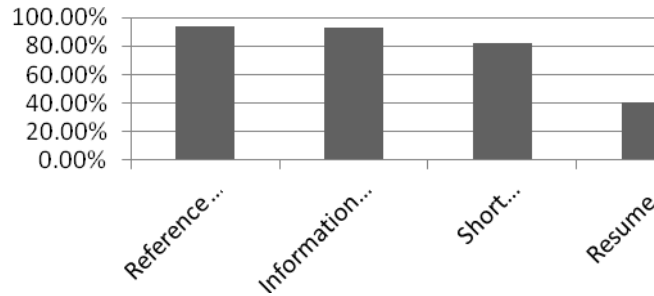


Figure 5. RA/CA Application Process

### Selection Process

There are many ways to organize a RA/CA selection process. 97.5% of schools utilized a centralized process, meaning that applicants apply to an overall department instead of a particular residence hall. Only 2.5% of schools utilize a decentralized process, where applicants apply to a residence hall of their choice. Of the schools using a centralized process, 70.1% take the applicant's residence hall preference into consideration. 81.0% utilize a combination of a group process and individual interview style. 32.9% complete the process (from application availability to candidate notification) in 3-5 weeks, and 31.6% complete the process in 6-8 weeks. Only 6.3% of schools take longer than 12 weeks to complete the selection process.

When organizing a screening committee, 96.2% of schools utilize professional staff (Hall Directors). 59.5% utilize central staff, 51.9% utilize current RA/CA staff members, 11.4% invite professionals from other departments, and only 3.8% form a committee including residents-at-large (Figure 6). These results did not vary due to the size of the institution's residential population.

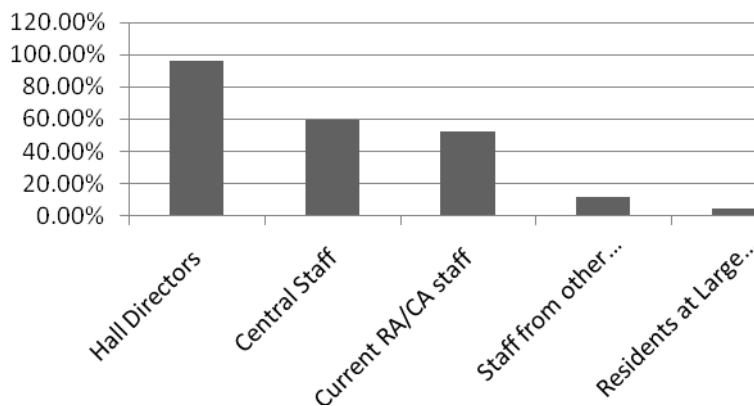


Figure 6. Staff Involved in RA/CA Selection

### Training

Arguably the most important part of building a strong staff is the training process. The vast majority (79.8%) of the institutions take part in a training period of over 8 days. 55.7% train in a centralized manner, meaning that all staffs come together for joint sessions but may have some individual staff time. Only 3.8% train in an individualized manner, meaning that the majority of training is staff-specific with few joint sessions. 39.2% use an even division of both training styles (Figure 7). It should be noted that the schools that employ only 1-10 student staff is the only group to completely

training centrally. The results show that on average, at schools housing more than 5000 residents, student staff training is at least 11 days, where as for all other size schools, the majority fall into 8-10 days. Ironically though, the size of the RA/CA staff did not affect the training period length.

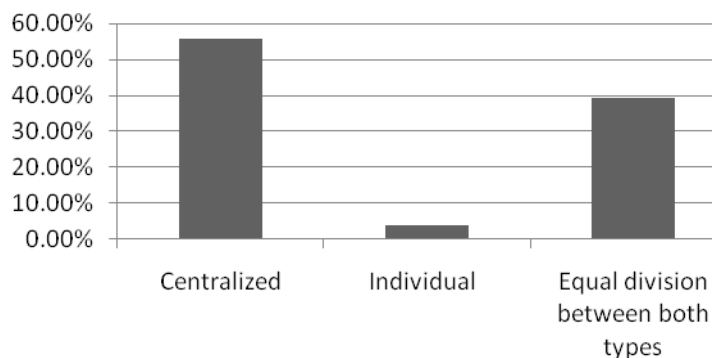


Figure 7. RA/CA Training

By far, professional staff (Hall Directors) conduct the training efforts (48.1%). Although 41.8% of staffs are trained by a combination of professional staff, central staff, and student staff members. For just over half of the institutions responding (53.2%), there is no special training for returning RAs/CAs. For those that do have special returner-training, some of these topics include: expectations about being a returner, more advance tracts of basic topics, first-aid, mentoring, and avoiding burnout. Additionally, 58.2% of schools do have special training for new staff members. Some of these topics include: Behind Closed Doors, confrontation, resource utilization, advance communication, programming, and adapting to the position.

### *Retention & Compensation*

Many things can be taken into consideration when focusing on retention techniques. First is the potential of having a rehiring process. An overwhelming majority of institutions (94.9%) utilize some sort of rehire process. This can include anything from re-applying in the overall pool, re-interviewing, and a review of their evaluation, to submitting a performance portfolio of their accomplishments thus far. The schools using a reapplication/reappointment process have a lower overall retention rate. The average retention rate for schools with a reapplication/reappointment process is 41-50%, while those schools without a process (5.1% of respondents) have 51-60% of their student staff members return for an additional year.

81.0% of schools allow their RA/CA staff to request transfers amongst the residence halls. Much of this occurs as part of their re-application and interview process, and all are seen as requests. The results also show that there is no change in the percentage of RAs/CAs that choose to return to staff when given the opportunity to transfer residence halls.

Of the 79 schools completing the survey, just under half (49.4%) grant extra compensation to returning RAs/CAs. This extra compensation comes as bonuses such as bookstore credits, increase in stipend, or scholarship monies. On average, the retention rate does not change based on whether there is increased compensation. The highest average retention rate is 41-50% and is seen by 36.7% of the institutions. Interestingly, the results of this question resulted in a near-perfect bell-shaped curve from 0-100%. Interestingly though, there is little to no change in the retention rate when looking at whether institutions utilize active retention initiatives.

Another topic of discussion of late is whether or not RAs/CAs should have roommates. 62.0% state that their staff member never have roommates, while 12.7% state that they do sometimes –

depending on the circumstances. The majority (54.8%) of these circumstances include occupancy need, while 35.5% of RAs/CAs choose to have a roommate on their own (and this very often does not affect compensation).

### **Discussion**

Hiring, training, and retaining, a qualified student staff is critical to the success of any housing and residence life program. The results of this survey support the perceived trend of a decreasing number of students applying to be RAs or CAs. Quite often, the results showed no difference between what public or private schools do, what small or large schools do, or that varying styles of recruitment or selection make a difference in the process.

While limited, there were a couple things that stood out. For example, private schools on average had 1-1.9 female applicants per opening vs. 2-2.9 per opening at public schools. There is no change for the male applicants. While this could potentially be significant, it is not clear what would cause the applicant pool numbers to alter. Also interesting was the finding that larger residential operations (more than 5000 occupants) tended to have longer RA/CA training periods. Ironically though, the size of the student staff did not affect the length of training. Additionally, the schools with a reapplication/reappointment process had a lower retention rate. The average retention rate for schools with a reapplication/reappointment process is 41-50%, while those schools without a process (only 5.1% of respondents) had a retention rate of 51-60%. What would be interesting to determine is if the “quality” of RAs/CAs returning is different as a result.

Future research can include digging deeper into what our students are looking for, or expect, from the RA/CA position. Is it monetary? Is it career development? Is it a sincere interest in building community or giving back to an already strong environment? Knowing what drives those that apply could assist the profession in developing recruitment and training efforts. Additionally, it would be interesting to survey student staff members that have completed two years of service. What kept them in the position? What, if anything, did they feel was missing? Were they encouraged or allowed to transfer residence halls to try new experiences? Were they encouraged to consider the student affairs (or residence life) field as a profession?