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### Title
UC Berkeley ResLife made me “pay-back” my bereavement time. This summer I did research on how the department treats their RA’s.

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# *UC Berkeley ResLife made me "pay-back" my bereavement time. This summer I did research on how the department treats their RA's.*

*"[A residential life program] "really does bring comfort and home and love and support and everything beautiful that comes when you build community with residents [...] it's just really sad to see how ResLife professional staff can't give the adequate support to their resident assistants" - Unnamed Gold RA*

At the start of my sophomore year during Resident Assistant (RA) training, my father passed away. This was also the year I was introduced to the RA role. I wish I had the opportunity and safety nets to take time off school to grieve. However being a low-income, first-generation student supporting myself, quitting the job that provided my housing and meals was not an option.

As an RA I was expected to become a support system for almost 40 people. It was clear to me that UC Berkeley Residential Life (UCB ResLife) held the expectation that despite my need to grieve, that I had to prioritize my residents and my other RA responsibilities over my needs. When I requested bereavement to travel to Ethiopia for my fathers burial, I was told I could go -only if I made up any missed work. This meant I would have to complete all my night duty shifts, have 4 events completed, and hold all my resident one-on-ones (Bear Chats) without accommodations.

There was no written policy on the books for me to claim time off-nor was I directed to campus HR. If you go to UCB ResLife's page on Resident Assistants, you won't be able to find any resources for RAs nor are any of the worker contracts published[1].

I agreed to "pay-back" or makeup the bereavement time I took to go to Ethiopia and put my fathers soul to rest. At the time

[1] https://reslife.berkeley.edu/about-us/resident-assistants/

I did not have the capacity to identify this as an injustice- nor did I want to risk being labeled a “problematic” RA.

RAs who fail to fulfill their responsibilities or cause issues can be fired with little opportunity to counter the decision, on the part of the RA. Additionally, when you're fired, UCB ResLife has the authority, with little oversight, to cut off your access to housing and food. I didn’t want to be in that position, especially going through the hardest semester of my life.

The night before I had to travel over 24 hours to Ethiopia, I worked a night shift and hosted an event for my residents -to ensure I was on track to fulfill my semesterly responsibilities. I was told that receiving accommodations to make my responsibilities more manageable wouldn’t “be fair to the residents”, according to my supervisor. During my end of Fall semester review, my supervisor praised me for “not using my [your] grief as an excuse to not get [my] work done”. By the end of the semester, I had worked 353 hours, far above the 273 hours I was contracted to.

Looking back, I wonder if I should have pushed harder for accommodations. But at the time, I was just trying to survive. After spending time thinking about my situation of not receiving bereavement time and talking to my fellow RAs about their experience with the department, I realized that UCB ResLife does little to actually support their student-workers. And at worst, exploits students like myself, who are low-income and new to the professional world to staff their department.

In response to my own personal experiences, I spent the summer researching how RAs experience their role. I conducted interviews with RAs who cover all the different types of RA positions that exist (Blue RA, Gold RA, Senior RA). In total I conducted 6 interviews. As a disclaimer, all the RAs who were interviewed for this project no longer work for the department.

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The results of my qualitative research left me with several findings that identify workplace practices that put RAs at UC Berkeley in vulnerable positions. Here, I will discuss three of my  major findings which include: RA’s feeling unsafe at work, RA’s being limited in their ability to self-advocate, and lastly, that RAs are being underpaid every year they return to the position, despite taking on additional responsibilities.

Interviewees explained how UCB ResLife has required RAs to work night duties which require responding to calls outside of the building they live in-often forcing them to walk through Southside -a notoriously dangerous area[2]-at night.

*“Were you ever worried for your safety fulfilling any of your responsibilities” - Melaku*

*“Yes. Yes!” - Previous Summer RA*

[2] UC Berkeley parents hire private security amid crime concerns

One RA explained that, due to limited staff in the summer, the department decided to reduce the total number of night duties per RA. To achieve this, they regularly assigned only one RA to handle night calls for multiple Southside housing facilities, including Panoramic Apartments, Martinez Commons, and Enclave, which required the RA to travel alone at night between buildings and put their safety at risk.

This was not the only time RAs mentioned feeling unsafe at work. Other RA's explained how difficult it was to roleplay as students in distress for training purposes. Returning RA's are expected to support training sessions that help incoming RAs learn how to handle emergency situations.

*"[The What-Would-You-Dos]...felt just in poor taste...with Gold RAs roleplaying being depressed..." - Unnamed Blue RA*

Several of the RA's explained there was a need for some sort of scenario-training, since RA's can end up dealing with an array of different resident issues. This is because RAs are designated as the first-stop for short-term and long-term support for residents struggling with any range of personnel, academic, or living issues. RAs are sometimes the first person an incoming freshmen may tell about an incident that has happened to them or will come to their RAs in crisis. One RA explained that since the support they provide is so holistic, the work can sometimes put them in a position of serving as a community social worker.

To ensure first year RAs are prepared to handle these situations, the ResLife department asks all the 2nd and 3rd year RAs to roleplay residents during "What-Would-You-Do's (WWYDs)" training sessions. In these sessions RAs may be asked to, repeatdely, act out roles such as a student struggling academically to a student who has just come from a situation of sexual assault.

Interviewees have reported feeling unsafe completing both of these tasks, even though they are both requirements of the RA role. When I asked these RAs why they did not reach out to the People & Cultures Department[3] on campus or communicate to their supervisors their discomfort- most said that they fear retaliation.

*"I had always been scared or intimidated by the idea of a PAM [Personnel Action Meeting] because that's kind of the way that the department makes it seems because there's [a known] attachment between a PAM and the likelihood of whether or not you would rehired the following year" - Unnamed Gold RA*

Every RA is assigned to a team called a small staff which is led by a Resident Director. Resident Directors are full-time professional staff, that are not undergraduates, that also work and live on-campus. All 6 RAs I interviewed cited having at least one supervisor they had a negative relationship with.

[3] Central Services | People & Culture

While RAs are contracted to work part-time and be the first-stop to support for residents, the assumption is that Resident Directors would handle more severe resident situations and support RAs to make their roles manageable. However, these RAs felt that the support from Resident Directors at UCB ResLife was inadequate. Some citing the fact that Resident Directors refused to take lead in supporting residents when RA's were at capacity with school or felt like they could no longer support a resident.

Moreover, several interviewees explained how a RA's relationship with their Resident Directors can indicate how likely that RA will be rehired the following year. Essentially, Resident Directors play a key role in determining the job-security of an RA.

Additionally, Resident Directors also have the power to initiate the process leading to an RA's firing. A "PAM" or- Personnel Action Meeting- is the official means of holding an RA accountable at UCB ResLife. So when a Resident Director determines there is a perceived issue with an RA, the Resident Directors will send an email to an RA letting them know they are being called for a PAM.

Resident Directors will have a conversation with their RA and bring the contents of the conversation to department leadership to choose from four post-PAM actions.. The following actions to a PAM can include: no action, a warning, conditional employment, and release from employment. There is no clear and cut rule on what action can land an RA with any of the four PAM results. Department leadership has the right to make any determination they feel necessary.

Because of this ambiguity, RAs are put in a position where they do not want to risk a PAM at all. This is particularly concerning for RAs, since they are unable to have an advocate with them while navigating the PAM process -nor are they sent information on how to contact campus HR office (also known as the People & Cultures department). All of the RAs cited never having known there was a HR on campus they could reach out to.

Relatedly, another theme that came up in the interview was the sense of being undervalued.

Generally, there are three types of RA: Blue (1st year), Gold (2nd year), and SRA (3rd year). Each year an RA returns, they are required to apply to a "returner" role, which are the Gold and SRA roles. Blue RAs, generally, are responsible for one floor in the traditional dorms like Unit 1. When an RA returns as a Gold RA, they are expected to take on two floors, which is generally double the residents to be responsible for. If a RA returns as a SRA, they may only have one floor, but have additional administrative responsibilities in managing a team of RAs.

UCB ResLife compensates all Blue, Gold, and SRAs in housing and a meal plan. Despite the increase of work-and by extension hours- returning and more experienced RAs are compensated the same as first-year RAs.

I interviewed two previous SRAs, who explained that they found the experience of being an SRA challenging and depleting. One SRA explained how, since many of the Resident Directors tend to be new, SRAs who have worked in the department for several years will have to train their supervisors on top of their work as team leader, night-duty scheduler, and RA to a floor of residents. This is all on top of a full course load, and other extracurricular activities.

*"And then moving up to a SRA [3rd year RA] role, it's completely different from the Gold [2nd year RA] role. You're trying to navigate how to be an SRA, and on top of that now you have to help the [incoming] RAs navigate their training process. So it's very hard to balance the added responsibilities, and I think there's no account of that..." - Unnamed SRA*

One SRA who had been in the department for three years explained that seeing how ResLife blatantly undervalued their returning and seasoned RAs, informed how they felt towards advocating for themself as a student-worker. There was an understanding that the system toward RA's was unfair. This belief was solidified to this SRA because on the one occasion they spoke to department leadership about concerns they had with their Resident Directors, a department personnel told them: "No matter what, the department is going to take the side of the Resident Directors".

This was in response to a new Resident Director initiating the termination process for several of the RA's on their small staff.

This SRA was concerned about the capacity of the remaining RAs on the team, who had to take on additional residents and night duties without any additional compensation.

*"You know, there's no way that they [ResLife Professional Staff] didn't know that they were supposed to be doing certain things to support their RAs [...] And I was like, what can I say that's going to change it? You know?-I risk my housing security, and it's probably not going to do anything, especially because a lot of the resident directors know how they all are treating their RAs " - Unnamed SRA*

The RA role is a unique type of on-campus employment. A student-worker's access to housing and food are directly linked to job performance, and at UCB ResLife, to a student's relationship with their supervisor. This reality shapes how comfortable RAs are in advocating for themselves when being asked to fulfill responsibilities that feel unsafe. And for RAs who return to the role, they are left to withstand uncomfortable situations but also provide more labor for the same level of compensation.

These findings have led me to conclude that UCB ResLife exploited undergraduate's need for affordable housing and food, to staff their department.

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I briefly want to thank all the former RA's who participated in this research and took the time to share their experiences with me. Often students who acquire

on-campus employment are told to be grateful since job opportunities can be scarce. However the need to find on-campus employment is largely driven by need for income.

43% of student-workers in the United States come from low-income backgrounds and tend to struggle with time-constraints from balancing employment and coursework[4]. Not all the RA's interviewed came from low-income backgrounds, but all were driven by a need to acquire affordable housing to attend the university.

It's an awkward position to be in, working and going to school at the same institution. As students, we are promised a high-quality learning opportunity. But then as workers, can be treated as disposable or less important than the professional staff who are meant to support us.

I do not have the answer as to how to better support RA's with the current department leadership. What I do know, is that RA's as students and as workers, deserve to study and work comfortably at this institution. Students should not feel that just because they have to work, that they will - as a result- be overworked or treated poorly.

[4] Balancing Work and Learning: Implications for Low-Income Students - CEW Georgetown