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Fostering Sustainable Wellness Practices Through Programming For Residential Education Staff at the University of San Diego

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Staff at the University of San Diego

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to focus on supporting staff at the University of San Diego (USD). This includes resident assistants, community directors, and graduate students taking on the role of assistant community directors to develop resilience in the form of tangible tools and resources to provide recommendations for office policies and procedures to prevent burnout. The department of residential education (ResEd) is primarily student facing at the USD, so my goal was to focus on the residential life staff experience who directly manage communities of students residing in on-campus housing. I found residential life jobs have a high turnover rate due to the amount of responsibilities that come with the role. The primary objective of this action research study was to address the different challenges of residential education staff and create intentional programming in an effort to support staff, develop resilience, and ultimately produce recommendations for office policies and procedures to prevent burnout.

Keywords: resilience, burnout, intentionality

Fostering Sustainable Wellness Practices Through Programming for Residential Education

Staff at the University of San Diego

Due to the wide range of impact and residential education (ResEd) being student facing at the University of San Diego (USD), I wanted to focus on the residential life staff experience who directly manage communities of students living in on-campus housing. Residential life jobs have a high turnover rate (Belch, 2009) due to the amount of responsibilities that come with the role, so this is an effort to support staff, develop resilience, and recommendations for office policies and procedures to prevent burnout. Although there is research about burnout and student affairs, there is a lack of research specific to residential life live-in staff that provides tangible solutions. As the literature discusses, those who go into careers in student affairs have a high turnover rate and it is further shown through the limited number of years professional staff in ResEd are able to renew their contact. In our specific institution, community directors can only stay in their role for a total of 4 years. A common reason individuals take on positions in ResEd is to get their foot in the door. It is considered an entry level position, allows you to gain transferable skills, and make connections with various departments on campus. These positions require you to live among or in close proximity to the residents you manage, be readily available for any potential incidents that may happen, and consistently build community. As an individual who lived on campus throughout my undergraduate years and someone who continued to live on campus as an assistant community director, I noticed, even with the change in positionality, the policies regarding living on campus did not change. I could see how as a team and as a department we could be proactive and give our staff the tools needed for them to be successful in their role. The purpose of my study is to see if implementing practices centered around well-being can create a sustainable way to hold space for the specific needs of someone working in residential life. As a

first step, I wanted to have a background outside of personal experience. I wanted to know what the experience was for other residential life or ResEd staff and then gain insight on the main components of the mission, vision, and purpose of a ResEd at USD. In the future, I hope to see similar self-care practices implemented throughout the department and across campus, especially in student-facing roles. If we expect our professional staff and student leaders to help other students navigate their experience, we have to make sure everyone has the necessary tools.

Background

Belch et al. (2009) dives into the background of hiring practices and what kinds of people tend to apply for these positions in student affairs. They are entry level positions targeted at new professionals trying to get their foot in the door in higher education. The pay is usually low, but what makes up for this are benefit packages can include free housing, meal plans, 401K, health insurance, life insurance, and other institution specific perks. Hiring committees hire outgoing and driven people who are likely to be "fresh" and "team players" which means they will be willing to accommodate their schedules and be labeled as flexible. Although these individuals have full-time employment and are expected to work 40 hour work weeks, they are salaried employees which means in this specific role, their hours can vary from week to week. On the other end of the spectrum, we have assistant community directors paid hourly and can only work 20 hours per week, and resident assistants (RA) who work for room and board. With each role, you run into potential long hours and uncompensated work.

Villanueva's (2018) research speaks about the RA role by stating, "In Residential Life, we encourage RAs to mentor and support the students on their floor while living on campus" (p. 6). The purpose of an RA is to be an individual readily available to assist anywhere from 30 to 60 residents on their floor and a constant resource throughout the year. This means they are to be

able to speak on their experience as a student, be knowledgeable of resources on campus, and be readily available for check-ins and follow ups as they come up. Villanueva stated, "The RA position is something that is stressful, time-consuming, and tedious but if students are genuinely invested, it is also impactful and transformative" (p. 40). This led me to ask about how the role impacts these individuals because their primary identity is a student who navigates the college experience themselves. As a whole, there are no well-being centered practices implemented in the university unless the individual seeks them out. There are wellness resources students and some staff have access to if they are in need; for example, the counseling center and wellness related activities throughout testing time. Our culture is based on productivity, and this is what we see in the various roles of the department of residential education. If a staff member wants self-care or places importance on well-being, it is something they personally have to do on their own time with the exception of a doctor's appointment.

The main themes identified across the board were time constraints, work overload, and engagement (Demerouti et al., 2001; Henning et al., 201l; Maslach, 2003). When discussing the live-on staff experience, the recurring obstacle impeding well-being or work life balance was a lack of resources due to these individuals being overlooked with an ever increasing responsibility which would impact the themes mentioned above. The autonomy over your time is no longer yours and instead belongs to students and departmental needs. Additionally, because these roles require you to live on campus among the communities you manage, the clear boundary between personal life and professional life is further blurred which in most cases leads to work overload. The main aspect of residential life is crisis management and therefore everything is handled with urgency. According to Rankin and Gulley (2018), their study on boundaries describes the extent to which residential life professionals must go to achieve work life balance. This in itself

becomes another job these individuals must take on to be successful in the role. This is why on average, ResEd positions only go for about 2 years and then you must transition over into a new institution. Specifically for the student staff, there is a strong correlation between a sense of belonging and success. This sense of belonging stems from increased involvement and strong campus life. If a student felt like their presence was valued and had an important role to play, they were more likely to be invested and create a sense of community (Kilgo et al., 2016). As an RA, this is exactly what you are doing because the role comes with a rewarding component to it. This also puts into question why at USD only half of their resident assistants come back and return for an additional year. Using this literature as my background, I will see how implementing well-being into our department's fall training will impact the overall experience of our respective staff. Although there was research done on resident assistants and student affairs respectively, there was not much on creating sustainable and actionable steps to mitigate the heavy responsibility that comes with the role.

Context

I conducted my research through my department in ResEd at USD which is a private, Catholic institution in Southern California. As a professional staff member myself, I experienced challenges with the position. I wanted to be able to know what was expected from the department, the challenges this role places on all levels of staff, and bring light to the experiences of those who are at the forefront with students. I am an Assistant Community Director for a community of about 700 students. I directly supervise four RAs out of the 17 on our team. Part of my role is to oversee programming throughout the area and advise all 17 RAs on creating programs that align with our department's cocurricular learning outcomes. Our department is made up of a director, seven community directors, and three assistant community directors.

Although we are all divided across campus, we work closely together through committee work, weekly meetings, and in-person campus emergencies. It is important to note my positionality in this organization influenced how the messaging was received, and due to this, the data was skewed and my participants were not as representative due to the amount of participants with a focus on USD. The department is housed under the associate vice president for strategic initiatives and programs in residential life, but is specifically under residential education. Many roles overlap in ResEd; see Figure 1 for our organizational chart:

Figure 1

*Residential Life Organization Chart*
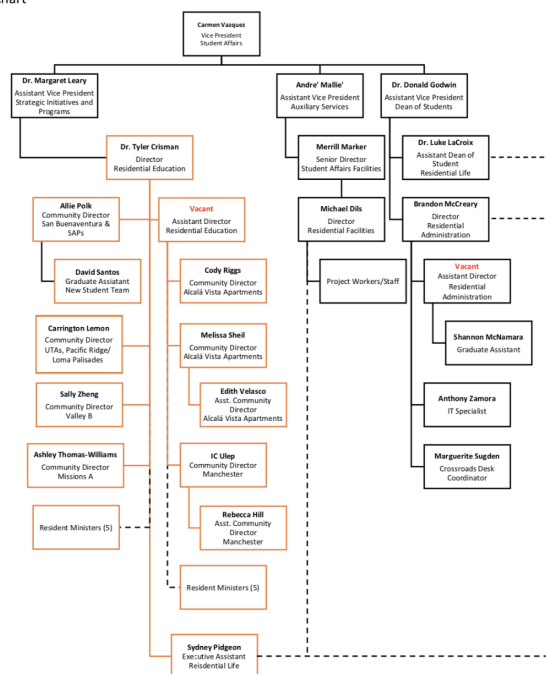
Although there is research done with student engagement and well-being of students living on campus, there is a need for more on implementation and tangible practices because it is an ongoing topic in student affairs. Although I tend to strive to create safe spaces through my role, based on how the university responded to the COVID-19 global pandemic, it created

distrust. There was unclear communication and a constant change in messaging. As a live-on staff member, many did not know what campus closure meant for them.

Most of the individuals that hold these roles were tasked to be the face of the university when talking about residential students and were tapped to build community, promote engagement, and be present in their respective areas. If they need resources for well-being, this was something that had to be sought out on their own and not something incorporated into it. The aim of this research was to incorporate practices centered around well-being and mindfulness into the role of staff members with a focus on sustainable implementation.

Figure 2

Action Research Model: Margaret Riel, 2007
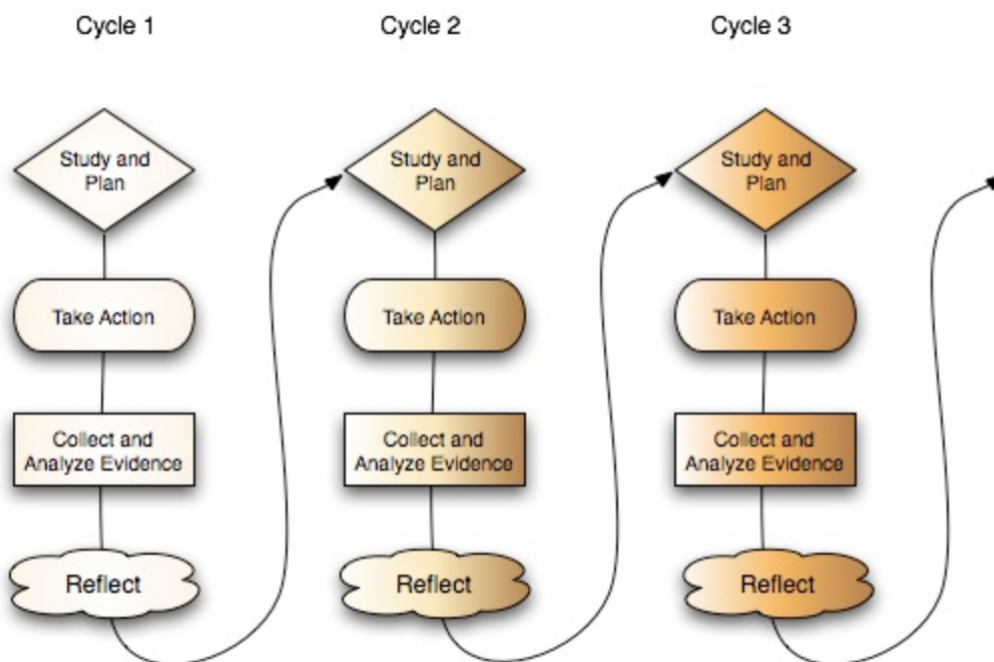
Methodology I

The action research method I chose was based on Riel's model (Riel, 2007). This research model aims to study and plan, take action, collect and analyze evidence, and then reflect. What made the stages of the cycles appealing was it provided me with an opportunity to reflect to reevaluate. I chose this approach because there are many moving parts to having a role in ResEd, so I needed a methodology that would be able to adapt and be modified as staff needs evolve. Especially with the COVID-19 global pandemic the university is dealing with, I wanted a method where I would be able to change my approach so the research would remain centered. Throughout the process of understanding what action research is and seeing the purpose is not to prove or disprove a hypothesis, I wanted to set myself for success. They state the uses for action research can take place in the workplace, non-work based relationships, in the family, or in the community (McNiff & Whitehead, 2011). This was important because I tried to capture the ResEd experience in a holistic manner and showcase the intersectionality other research is missing.

Although my goal was to ultimately create and implement programming specifically with ResEd staff at the forefront of the conversation, my outcome slightly changed to addressing burnout in a more systematic way. After my initial focus group, I found the needs varied across individuals and I needed to approach this through multiple methods. I wanted something that would provide me with freedom to be able to change and take my research in another direction which is what this research method gave me.

Although using this method set me up for success, the main challenge was recruitment and retention due to time constraints because our department's spring semester tends to be busy with our recruitment and selection cycle. The point of my research was to create and implement something that did not take time out of the work day and readily accessible. This was done with

the intention of making practices of self-care and well-being a part of the role they were already doing. Finding staff that fit the requirements for my participants was not a challenge but finding those who had additional time was a challenge. In my consent form, I disclosed how many minutes the study would take, but at face value, 160 minutes seemed like a big commitment. Another challenge I expected and came across during my study was getting buy-in from other community directors in our department. Although there have been other graduate assistants who have done research in this area before, the aim of my research was to implement staff focused programming in established busy timeframes and would add an additional virtual meeting because San Diego County is not able to hold in person gatherings. Community directors have autonomy of their respective teams and over their schedules, so any new initiatives are met with hesitancy if it is something that will cut into their time. It was important I was able to emphasize the need and benefits of putting this practice in place. These experiences do not just stop with our department; there is a lack of implementing well-being, self-care, and mindfulness across multiple departments, so I hoped these experiences would be able to capture that universality.

Needs Assessment

I realized there was a need for the implementation of practices around mindfulness, well-being, and self-care when I onboarded. I started during July, and in the month of August, we had RA training. The days were packed with back to back training, activities, and presentations with breaks being used to complete additional tasks by the end of the week. The one activity designated to self-care was at the end of a long day and it was optional. Then throughout the semester, a "self-care" activity would be held but it would only consist of playing ice breakers. Although I got glimpses of the challenges resident assistants and professional staff were facing through my advising and weekly leadership meetings, it was not until I was in a one-on-one

setting they opened up about challenges affecting their mental health and overall well-being not being addressed. These challenges were present in RAs but the impacts were magnified with those in professional staff roles who managed entire communities.

Permission for my research was granted by the director of ResEd because these will be the participants in my study. Through our numerous conversations about the team, we have both discussed a need for something that helps with burnout and helps our team succeed. The department's mission and vision (Residential Education, 2010) in our unpublished handbook reads:

> Residential Education fosters the holistic development of members within the USD residential community. Our residential communities cultivate and enrich students by integrating learning, engagement and development. We contribute to students' success by offering student-centered programs, services and environments that foster student involvement, responsibility, leadership, and wellbeing. (Residential Education, p.1)

Although our mission and vision discusses holistic student development through environments that foster well-being, outside of training, our department does not offer staff-centered programming throughout the year. This is an area lacking when it comes to the ResEd staff as a whole.

Data Collection

Throughout my research process, I wanted to make it as anonymous as possible because the department of ResEd is relatively small. I initially collected my data via an anonymous survey. This survey was sent to all RA's which at the time was roughly 80 in total and 10 professional staff members. In this survey, I asked questions about well-being and job satisfaction. This is why my precycle was beneficial to incorporate because the discussions

during this stage helped form the foundation of what my survey would look like. In cycles one through four, I had the opportunity to observe and reflect the department's needs and personal experiences in the role and be able to provide intentional and targeted programming.

My initial participants were made up of a team of 10 professional staff which included community directors and assistant community directors. In addition to this, it was also open to an RA staff of 16 from a 2nd year housing area. They were all sent an introductory email explaining the nature of the study along with the initial survey which they had the option to complete or not. Then, I proceeded to mention the study during our team meetings in the form of a general announcement and had a flyer posted behind the front desk. They only used assigned participant numbers while in their focus groups and throughout my research. Those that supported me through this process included my supervisor who I worked closely with to ensure the implementation portion of my study and fellow graduate assistants (GAs) who worked in ResEd or residential life because they had the most insight on the dynamics of the department and served as my validation group.

Methodology II

I used a mixed methods approach while gathering my data through an initial survey and then a series of focus groups. The main challenges were time and recruiting participants. Because this was my second year in this role, I established a presence in the department and with the returning RAs. This helped me build the rest of the relationships needed to get buy-in from these individuals. Based on my needs assessment, I conducted at least three cycles of research based on Riel's (2007) action research cycle. Next, I describe my thought process in the form of a precycle reflection and outline my cycles.

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PreCycle Reflection: Review of Preexisting Sentiments

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The following is a reflection of my experiences and thought process that led me to form my cycles and frame my research. I wanted to focus my energy on an initiative that would make an impact while also being feasible. I could see potential in critically looking at our training and hiring practices, but knew these initiatives were already in the process and would not be fully developed by my research. During an informal interview held in October of 2019, the ResEd staff expressed concerns over work life balance and "mental exhaustion" in their role. This interview was classified as informal because this was prior to forming the topic of my research. Based on this exchange, I determined the focus of my research was the experience of first-generation resident assistants at USD. I wanted to highlight the experiences of these students, the responsibility of being a student leader, and being a leader in their home life as well. This all changed on March 13th during a training session when we were told USD would be going remote. With such a short turn around and looking forward to many unknowns, the concept of having student participation did not seem feasible anymore. Many students, including RAs, were upset with this decision and the lack of foresight on the university's part; asking for their participation seemed like a daunting task. At that moment, all I could think of was "how am I going to change my research project?" I knew I would still be working closely with the rest of my team, and it was in April of 2020 I decided to focus on wellness practices for our staff. I saw what the COVID-19 global pandemic did to our department. We were tasked to be at the forefront of student interaction and serve the students who had remained on campus. With many of our colleagues working from home, we also did tasks outside of our job descriptions to fill in the gaps. I was expected to support students when I myself did not feel supported. It was important to me to capture our experiences because everything we experienced was not new; it was simply magnified by the pandemic. The precycle began with an informal interview with

professional staff and a climate assessment pen to the 90 individuals who make up our department. This survey was based on the Minnesota satisfaction questionnaire and the subjective happiness scale. The survey was created on December 10th and launched January 21st. From this survey, I created my guiding questions and the essence of what my research would be. The questions were:

1. What does sustainability currently look like for residential education staff?

2. What are ideal wellness practices that should show up in the role?

3. What does successful programmatic integration look like?

4. Would wellness centered programming be helpful?

In February of 2021, with the intention of getting more insight, I actively participated in scheduled discussions with the department's vice president of student affairs to voice my own concerns and the concerns of others on the team regarding the impact of COVID-19 on our roles and learn what the day-to-day role would be like for the department moving forward. During this discussion, I noticed my colleagues were hesitant to share their concerns openly due to their own positionality while others expressed disinterest from lack of change in past experiences. I saw that although there was hesitancy throughout the discussions, there was still authentic engagement and vulnerability shown by the group. Being part of these discussions brought a lot of insight to this research. It provided me with a starting point and opportunity to reflect on how the values of an institution align with the needs of its staff. There seemed to be a discrepancy with just accounting for Maslow's needs instead of taking on a holistic approach which was further magnified by the COVID-19 global pandemic and lack of funding USD had going into the first full academic year of virtual learning.

Cycle 1: Observation and Reflection on Surveys

I sent out an introductory email in December. This email contained a survey I created regarding happiness, overall satisfaction with their respective role in the ResEd team, and how well-being played a role in their day-to-day life. This served as an overall benchmark for the study because I was able to get a relative idea of the climate of the group.

Subcycle 1.a Plan

I based my questionnaire on the subjective happiness scale and the job satisfaction survey (Spector, 1997). This would allow me to look at the department as a whole and serve me as a pulse check or climate survey. I planned to share this survey through a mass email and during weekly team meetings to ensure a greater response rate.

Subcycle 1.b Act

I completed this survey in December of 2020 and distributed it among 90 individuals. I initially sent the survey as a mass email, promoted it through team leadership via community directors, and a final individual reminder. The survey was open until February 2021 and out of 90 potential participants, I received 11 responses.

Subcycle 1.c Observe

Based on the survey data, I found overall happiness was high but questions regarding rewards and job performance tended to be on the negative side. I chose these two surveys because I wanted to have a benchmark of the climate in the department. I wanted to know how my potential participants viewed themselves and viewed themselves in relation to the role. If the participants expressed dissatisfaction in their lives and in their roles, this could be seen as consistent and not necessarily telling of the work environment. The survey consisted of two sections and 36 questions. When focusing on the happiness portion of the survey, 45.5% expressed being content with their lives and 63.7% expressed being proud of their achievements.

The second part of the survey focused on job satisfaction had different results. About 54.6% of individuals who took the survey do not see a direct relationship between the amount of work they do, compensation, and the same amount are dissatisfied with how policies are implemented. We see individuals who are happy and satisfied with their lives overall, yet show dissatisfaction in their work environment.

Figure 3

Climate Assessment Survey Results
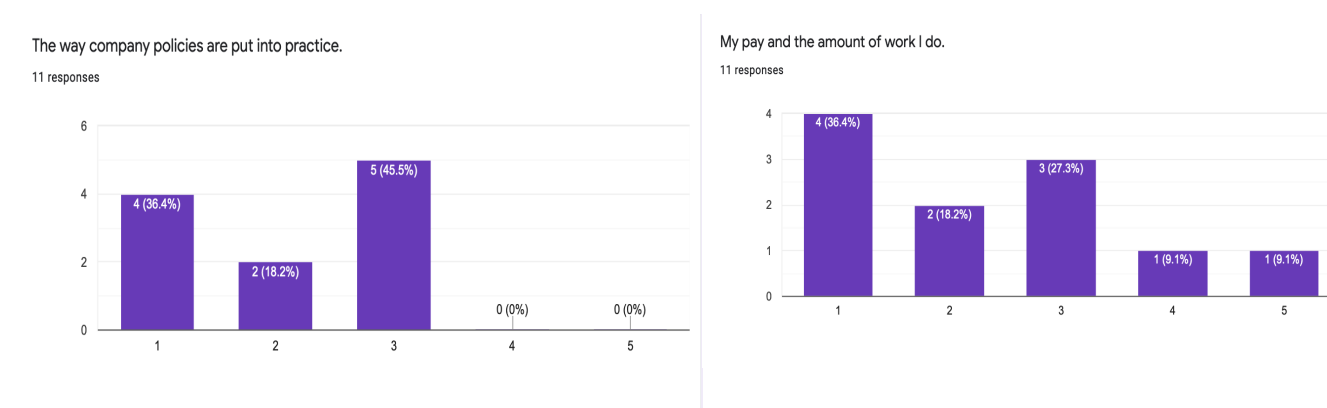
Subcycle 1.d Reflect

The observation at the forefront of this cycle was a lack of engagement. There were multiple reminders, sufficient time to complete the survey, and it was made available on various platforms. As I reflected on the first cycle, I noticed that although there were popular responses, the participants in the survey had varying answers to each of the questions and that their variance could be tied directly to the role that they held. For example in figure A1, it asks about the relationship between work and compensation. In our department, the amount of compensation and benefits vary from room and board to a salary and health care benefits in addition to room and board. Because this survey was sent to the entire department and I wanted to get a holistic

view of where the department was at, I removed any identifiers, including roles and that this would need to be a change moving forward. What I was able to conclude from my initial findings was that the next cycle would have to focus on their specific experiences in their role to further flesh out the results of the survey.

Cycle 2: Focus Group I

Subcycle 2.a Plan

The purpose of the first focus group was to learn from the respective staff groups how they viewed their experience at the University of San Diego. This was going to be the first session in which a group would come together and I wanted to put together something that would help keep these individuals as anonymous as possible. The plan for this focus group was to have guiding questions but also have the freedom to change direction. I wanted to make sure that I was not imposing my own beliefs and biases and that I would be able to capture their genuine experiences.

Subcycle 2.b Act

This was a space to be free to express any struggles or frustrations that they experienced through their role or through their day to day and their relationship to well-being. The session was an hour long and made up of 11 questions that served as container setting and trust building with one another. Similar to the survey, the focus group sessions were open to everyone in the department. From the pool of potential participants, I got a total of seven participants. Due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I held the first focus group via Zoom. The participants were made up of a director, an assistant community director, and five community directors. To keep anonymity, I asked everyone to turn off their cameras and rename themselves to an assigned number prior to joining the Zoom meeting. I greeted each by their numbers and then reminded everyone that the

session would be recorded and have closed captioning for anyone that may have needed it. An added precaution I took to ensure that participants felt comfortable to share their experiences as honestly as possible, was to separate any direct supervisors from the individual or individuals they supervise. Because their experience and input provided a different perspective from the rest due to positionality, I changed their sessions from focus groups to interviews using the same questions. Based on the participants I had, the only individual that had to be separated was the director because they directly supervised many of the individuals participating.

Due to COVID-19 significantly impacting their roles, I wanted to touch on how the pandemic affected their workload, mental health and their view of leadership. I wanted to understand how COVID-19 had impacted their roles while isolating personal struggles that might have added to their overall challenges. The big theme here was work life balance and the overall concept of balance. Many felt consumed by the pandemic and their roles because they all live on campus and are considered frontline workers. With many faculty and staff members working remotely and campus housing being at 50% capacity, those on campus were tapped to respond to COVID related issues, such as quarantine and isolation coordination and policy enforcement, food distribution, etc. Because my research revolved around well-being, wellness, and burnout, my priority was to understand what these words meant for my participants. To do so, I transcribed my session, using the transcription feature on Zoom and then reviewed it for mistakes and to group themes that arose.

As I reviewed the transcription, I asked the following questions: How did they define well-being? What does work-life balance look like? What does success look like in their role? What is success in life and do they see themselves as successful in their role? From these questions, I was able to come up with the overarching themes of my research because all of the

responses went back to how my participants defined success in their role and what they determined wellbeing to be. Based on their responses, success was being holistically invested in the job. All described various attributes that would aid in this success, such as being single, having friends in the department, checking emails regularly, participating in undergraduate extracurricular activities in the form of a mentor or club advisor, and leading at least one committee.

When asking the participants about their perception of their own success in relation to the role, all of them responded with a sense that they were lacking. Many aimed to achieve "success" but they also wanted balance which did not fit the definition. It was important to code success, wellbeing, and work-life balance in this succession because these were the buzzwords that came up frequently. Because I knew I would have to codify these words, I used the focus group session to ask each of them follow up questions when using these terms. I would ask what success meant to them, what well being looked like in and out of their role. What wellness meant to them and to explain work-life balance.

Subcycle 2.c Observe

I received feedback that indicated work-life balance was the main concern for staff because they work where they live and making distinctions between being "on-duty" and "off-duty" are usually blurred. One of the questions asked about well-being and its relationship to their role. The overall consensus was that it depended on the day because there were times where well-being and self-care could be implemented but during the busy times it would be "on the back burner." One of the participants even referred to their relationship as being "up and down." Participant 3 states, "I like to think that I prioritize well-being in my life. I meditate, try to get enough sleep, will turn off my phone on Sundays… but if I know that we are busy [in

Residential Life], I'll try to be available so that the team knows I'm someone they count on."

Participant 2 went further and said:

> during recruitment and selection time or during training, boundaries go out the window. I know I won't be here forever and I want to make sure that my co-workers don't have a bad impression of me. People's emotions run high during the busy times and sometimes that's what people remember you by. It's not the best method, like to sustain yourself but you gotta do it cause it's reality. Being successful in this job means not having a personal life. You need to be the role and anything else means you aren't prioritizing enough.

Subcycle 2.d Reflect

What I saw was frustration and a sense of having to put themselves on hold. Based on this conversation, I created and implemented optional programming at three different times of the day. The programming was available before, after and during lunch of a typical work day. Because work-life balance and stress was an overall theme, I would create a series of 10 minutes guided meditations and Ted Talk lunch discussions that would take place from February to March of 2021. These programs would account for a mental break that would be needed during this time and the Ted Talk would serve as a setting similar to the focus groups that I was conducting. Being in community was something that was impactful and there was a lack of and therefore I saw it as being an important aspect to include.

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Cycle 3: One-on-One Interview

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Subcycle 3.a Plan

During this cycle, the plan was to engage deeper in the conversation around COVID-19 and the impact it had on their current role with a focus on sustainability. It would provide space for them to openly share about specific needs that would help them succeed in the department

and how the department is not meeting those expectations. The one-on-one interview served as a space for individuals who did not feel comfortable in the larger group to share and provided me with data that tended to be less guided. Because the interview would only consist of one person, the conversation was steered by only that individual and their experiences.

Subcycle 3.b Act

It was important for me to continue with the same participants so that the sessions could build on themselves and so that I could build trust with these individuals. Because this was an interview, my session lasted 45 minutes and consisted of nine questions about their experience. Due to COVID-19 significantly impacting their roles, I wanted to build upon the previous discussion we had had during the first session. I wanted to continue asking about their perception of work life balance and their overall role satisfaction. Did they see themselves in their current role long-term prior to COVID and currently? Did they see upward mobility and growth? What determined satisfaction in the role and what challenges were present that prevented the role from being long-term? This was a session that required individuals to be vulnerable, share personal experiences and honest feelings about the department so I provided a safe space for them to openly discuss. I started the session by letting them know that the interview would be recorded, that I would refer to them by the assigned number provided during the first session, and that at any point during the interview, they had the ability to stop the interview or pass on any questions they were uncomfortable answering. Because the focus shifted, it provided me with insight which helped me gather tangible action steps to create workshops and programming. I transcribed the interviews through Zoom and proofread them afterwards. As I proofread, I looked for concepts and themes that came up in the interview individually and as a group. Again,

it was necessary to identify any terms that could be subjective and make sure that their definition made sense for all of their interviews.

Subcycle 3.c Observe

My observations were that although individuals would fondly look back at their experience pre-Covid, they would not state that they were satisfied with their role as it currently stands. The themes that arose were a lack of balance, experiencing burnout, and using the concept of being "a team player" as a way to instill guilt. The participants were asked to do things outside of their job description because university leadership "was keeping job security as the forefront of decision making." These individuals in our department felt as if they were being reminded that they "should feel lucky they have employment during the pandemic and cantt complain because of it." At one point or another they each received messaging about being a "team player", using other individuals as an example. Instead of the university hiring people to deal with the challenges of having people on campus, individuals slightly higher in the organizational chart would explain that specific people from our department were working "more than they should and it should be their responsibility to step up and take some of that burden off." The responsibility was given to ResEd when this was an issue bigger than the department. Although many of the individuals felt grateful to have a job and be able to work from home, they also expressed feeling taken advantage of. It was shortly after this session that a few members of the department announced their intent to leave. Both found new opportunities outside of higher education and left before the year was complete. As an Assistant Community Director, the role is a two- year commitment at the University of San Diego and a 4-year commitment for community directors.

What I observed was that one of the individuals left half a semester early before completing their full amount of time here while the other was only able to complete a year and half. It was not that everyone was perfectly satisfied before and that there were foundational changes being made to the department, the issue was that COVID magnified the issues already there. The participants explained how working in ResEd was rewarding and how working for the university had perks. The problem with this, is that once the university was in a crisis and student development was not a focus, the fulfilling aspects of the job and the perks were no longer applicable. With a role that requires you to live on campus and a pandemic that requires people to stay indoors, other issues around housing policy and the inequities of these policies were something that came to light. Participant 2 states:

> I'm frustrated because we are employees who are required to live here and we don't have an option to have a roommate unless we're married. We're not allowed to have a pet unless we disclose medical information to our employers, and to top it off, the university puts policies in place that puts us in harms way because of our culture of care.

Some of these policies were the main issues that impacted them on their day to day and it all came back to the idea of being seen. Participant 4 recalls the first days of when the pandemic officially began and the department had to move people out, they say:

> it was a scary time, we were tasked with calming people down, yet instilling a sense of urgency so that people would leave campus as soon as possible. It was hard to tell students that had nowhere else to go that they had to leave because at that point, the university still hadn't communicated their action plan with us. We didn't even know if us as professional staff would have a place to stay once the university closed.

Subcycle 3.d Reflect

There were already issues in how housing in Student Affairs treats their employees but COVID-19 magnified this. The reason for exhaustion of the "up and down" in regards to wellness is due to increased responsibility with little pay off. Most of the policies are the same as the ones undergraduate residents abide by. This includes guests, cohabitation, and pet policies. In addition to this, many benefits were cut due to COVID-19 and therefore led to job satisfaction being overall low.

Cycle 4: Focus Group II

Subcycle 4.a Plan

The purpose of the second focus group was to evaluate programming from those who attended and those who did not and discuss the limitations or improvements of future programmatic efforts. The time between this session and the rest was the longest at a month due to the optional programming that I created and implemented in the department.

Subcycle 4.b Act

Similar to the first focus group, I had the same participants to aid with continuity. I started off my session with a reminder that the focus group would be recorded, that their cameras had to remain off and that they were to only address each other by the assigned numbers they received during the first focus group session. I presented the group with a set of six questions revolving around the optional programming I implemented a month prior to the session. The programs and workshops I created were specifically catered to the group of participants based off of the survey data and the interview. We discussed the things they saw that were well executed but mainly spoke about improvements in terms of accessibility, messaging around the programs, and overall interest. Although the session consisted of feedback, it also addressed how the challenges brought up in Focus Group 1 and the interview need to be approached with various

methods. As I reviewed the transcription, I was able to see how the participants felt "seen" and had their experiences "validated" through this study. They liked that this was not a "band aid" approach.

Subcycle 4.c Observe

Based on the feedback, my Action Research study was something that the participants looked forward to and participated in because it was not presented as a quick fix. My intervention and action was to implement workshops and programming but the reason it made an impact was not because I created something my department had an interest in. This made an impact because I was engaging with the department during a time where none of them felt heard. A lot of decisions were made to deal with challenges that COVID-19 came with from people higher in the organizational chart. When concerns came about in the department, the concerns were discussed but there were not ever concrete solutions. With this research I created a space for my participants to openly discuss concerns and hear each other's struggles in the role. Based off of the sessions, I was also able to create intentional programming and content which took place during a busy and stressful time of the year. They saw that someone was keeping them in mind and was actively looking for solutions.

Due to my position as an Assistant Community Director, I initially assumed that community directors and the director would not want to participate or buy into this. I made this assumption because I have less experience as a student affairs professional and because in our organizational chart, I am below these individuals. This was proven to be incorrect when I asked about who they would prefer to lead this type of work. I noticed that throughout this session, they brought up the importance of "creating from within." They preferred that I was an Assistant Community Director and not a campus partner from another department. One participant stated,

"we know our [department's] challenges because we live them." As I observe this time, I am able to see how and why there are high turnover rates. At this point of my Action Research it was announced that by the start of the new school year five new individuals would be hired to replace five that intended to leave. This one year of COVID changed the outlook of not just a long-term housing job but a long-term role in student affairs.

Subcycle 4.d Reflect

The direct feedback I received during this cycle, informed my recommendations and methods in which to incorporate similar initiatives in the future. Because people want to attend something established and slowly implemented, this is something that one of the department's committees will have to take on. Most of my participants weren't able to attend the scheduled programs due to it being a busy time in ResEd but other individuals from the department were able to participate which also made me look further into my methods.

Limitations

The limitations I faced when conducting my study were a limited pool size, department turnover, participant buy-in, and mid-semester implementation. Due to the nature of my research study and the size of my department, my pool size was limited to 90 participants in total with 24 professional staff members including resident ministers. Out of this pool, I had a total of 11 participants who took part in completing my initial climate assessment and seven to have completed with. There were a number of reasons I had a low turnout rate. Part of it was to do with timing in the context of a pandemic along with a lack of incentive. When I did outreach, my research was one of many updates after receiving COVID related news. This research also did not provide an incentive and in the middle of a pandemic where students and staff alike are required to sit at their computers for an extended amount of time, there was little to motivate

these individuals to commit to additional time. Due to this, I found that both my Qualitative and Quantitative data was subjective. It was made up of one small department and many of the participants had previous relationships with each other. To try and adjust for this, I opened up the study to everyone in the department and separated them by role to prevent supervisors and supervisors from interacting in a cycle and impede authentic conversations. For my initial survey, I made it anonymous and used multiple- choice options and thematic analysis when going over responses. Aside from the logistic limitations, I also struggled with departmental buy-in in regards to my programmatic elements. My programs and workshops were implemented during our recruitment and selection process which made the programs I created relevant and useful but also another event that our staff did not want to sit through after hours of interviews. I purposefully created optional activities so that I could see what would organically produce interest and be self-sustaining in the long term but after engaging in discussion about what impeded participation, they vocalized disregarding programs unless they were mandatory. This, along with our department losing four community directors in a matter of months and onboarding two new individuals added onto the change in our team's dynamic and structure

Recommendations

The needs of each group of staff members will vary from person to person and due to the changing nature of residential life and ResEd the environment is bound to change as well. This is why my recommendations are not content focus and instead protocol centered. Something that was overwhelmingly clear was that change in policy was a change that needs to be had because this directly impacts professional staff's well-being. Two policies in particular are the cohabitation and pet policies. At USD a professional live-in staff member may not cohabitate unless the individual is a spouse. While this makes sense at an undergraduate level due to room

occupancy, as a professional staff member you have an apartment for yourself. The reason USD has this policy is due to the Catholic identity but this leaves out all cohabitation including family members and puts a strain on the autonomy of live-in staff who are required to live on-campus. The second policy is our current pet policy for professional staff which requires them to disclose mental illness and is only available to those who have access to mental health specialists who are able to provide access to an emotional support animal outside of the university. My recommendation for this is that these policies be reviewed because they have the potential to impact an individual on a day to day basis and have the professional staff sign an agreement where they are responsible for a pet or person living in their space. Because I know the policy change is something that requires time, my tangible recommendations are as follows:

1. Intervention should be implemented through the Residential Development Committee

    a. Intervention would include:

        i. Staff climate circles where Resident Assistants, Assistant Community Directors, and Community Directors each discuss their experiences in their role, their goals, and needs for the academic year

        ii. Programming geared to student and professional staff that is formulated based on the needs they expressed during the climate circle that would be implemented throughout the academic year

Final Reflection

To have sufficient time to get through my cycles and make adjustments, my precycle began in December of 2020 which went through January of 2021. Then, the first cycle began in mid-January of 2021 with a survey intended to collect data on the specific needs and attitudes around well-being that was sent to everyone on my staff. This will serve as a benchmark to see

the overall attitude and mindset around well-being and satisfaction. Once I got into February I held a focus group revolving on their overall experience. This session's purpose was to build trust in the group and be able to provide a safe space to share their authentic experience. After this I began implementing optional programming at various points throughout the week. Some were in the morning before the work day, after the work day, and during lunch hours. For my third cycle I held one-on-one interviews specifically focusing on the impact the role has had and how that has changed with COVID-19. During the beginning of March, I held the final focus group with a focus on programming and the impact on their experience at the University of San Diego and on their specific role. Mid-March, I was able to finish up my findings and conclude. From my research I hope to create a sustainable practice of programming centered around well-being for ResEd staff. By creating programming that is catered to them, and is available at multiple times throughout the day, self-care will be something that is an integral and accessible part of the role.

I will know I was successful if I see this practice adopted by the ResEd department and is implemented throughout all levels of staff which includes resident assistants, assistant community directors and community directors. Another way of knowing is if those participating in my focus group have an increased sense of satisfaction overall and in their role. ResEd are the ones who are at the forefront and are required to live amongst students so they are one of the most impacted with burnout. If their overall satisfaction is able to increase, we can expect for the department's overall satisfaction to increase as well.

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Appendix A

Climate Assessment Survey Questionnaire

Ask yourself: How satisfied am I with this aspect of my job?

5 = Extremely Satisfied

4 = Very Satisfied

3 = Satisfied

2 = Somewhat Satisfied

1 = Not Satisfied

1. Being able to keep busy all the time.

2. The chance to work alone on the job.

3. The chance to do different things from time to time.

4. The chance to be "somebody" in the community.

5. The competence of my supervisor in making decisions.

6. Being able to do things that don't go against my conscience.

7. The chance to do things for other people.

8. The chance to tell people what to do.

9. The chance to do something that makes use of my abilities.

10. The way company policies are put into practice.

11. My pay and the amount of work I do.

12. The chances for advancement on this job.

13. The freedom to use my own judgment.

14. The chance to try my own methods of doing the job.

15. The working conditions.

16. The way my co-workers get along with each other.

17. The praise I get for doing a good job.

18. The feeling of accomplishment I get from the job.

Instructions: Choose one response for each statement to indicate how much you agree or disagree.

1. "I like most parts of my personality."

2. "When I look at the story of my life, I am pleased with how things have turned out so far."

3. "Some people wander aimlessly through life, but I am not one of them."

4. "The demands of everyday life often get me down."

5. "In many ways I feel disappointed about my achievements in life."

6. "Maintaining close relationships has been difficult and frustrating for me."

7. "I live life one day at a time and don't really think about the future."

8. "In general, I feel I am in charge of the situation in which I live."

9. "I am good at managing the responsibilities of daily life."

10. "I sometimes feel as if I've done all there is to do in life."

11. "For me, life has been a continuous process of learning, changing, and growth."

12. "I think it is important to have new experiences that challenge how I think about myself and the world."

13. "People would describe me as a giving person, willing to share my time with others."

14. "I gave up trying to make big improvements or changes in my life a long time ago"

15. "I tend to be influenced by people with strong opinions"

16. "I have not experienced many warm and trusting relationships with others."

17. "I have confidence in my own opinions, even if they are different from the way most other people think."

18. "I judge myself by what I think is important, not by the values of what others think is important."

Appendix B

Focus Group 1 Script

Session outline

I. Purpose

■ To discover, clarify and record themes regarding staff perception of and reaction to wellness and their role.

II. Opening activity

■ Pair discussion: "If you could say one thing today about the relationship between well-being and your role, what would that point be?"

III. Rules

■ The facilitator is neutral.

■ Everyone participates.

■ When referring to one another, you will refer to each other using assigned participant numbers

■ Listening is as important as talking.

■ Disagreement and differences of opinion are good.

■ Common courtesy is exhibited at all times.

■ The discussion will be recorded

IV. Discussion

■ Presentation of question.

■ Individual review (two minutes).

■ Discussion.

Questions

- If you could say one thing today about the relationship between well-being and your role, what would that point be?

- What are the main aspects of your current role?

- What are the biggest challenges in your current role?

    - Why?

- How has COVID impacted your role?

- Do you feel as though the Residential Education Department provides you the tools/resources to be sustained in your role?

    - If yes, what tools/resources are you provided?

    - If not, what tools/resources do you need from your department?

- Do you, as an individual, have practices in order to sustain yourself in this role?

    - What do you do as an individual in order to sustain yourself in this role?

    - What challenges do you face that prevent you from sustaining yourself in the role?

Appendix C

Interview Questions

Session outline

I.   Purpose

   A. To discover, clarify and record themes regarding staff perception of their role

II. Rules

   A. The Interview Will Be Recorded

   B. I will only refer to using an assigned participant number

III. Discussion

   A. Questions

   1. What gives you satisfaction in this particular role?

   2. What motivated you to seek out the role/position you are currently in?

   3. What causes you to feel dissatisfied on the job?

   4. How do you define success within your role?

   5. Is it clear to you what your role demands in meeting departmental
       objectives?

   6. Do you see yourself in your role long term?

       a) Why or why not?

7. What would make your role long term?

8. Do you see growth within your role?

9. Are you satisfied with your job overall?

    a) Why or why not?

Appendix D

Focus Group Script #2

Session outline

I. Purpose

■ To discover, clarify and record themes regarding staff perception of and reaction to wellness and their role.

II. Opening activity

■ Pair discussion: "If you could say one thing today about the relationship between well- being and your role, what would that point be?"

III. Rules

- ■ The facilitator is neutral.

- ■ Everyone participates.

- ■ When referring to one another, you will refer to each other using assigned participant numbers

- ■ Listening is as important as talking.

- ■ Disagreement and differences of opinion are good.

- ■ Common courtesy is exhibited at all times.

- ■ The discussion will be recorded

IV. Discussion

- ■ Presentation of question.

- ■ Individual review (two minutes).

- ■ Discussion.

Questions

- What is your general feedback regarding the programs or workshops you've attended
  thus far?

  - What are your perceptions of the programming content?

    - Is this relevant to your role or experience?

    - What kind of content would you like to see in the future?

  - If you have not attended, what has been a barrier you've experienced?

- Is the programming accessible?

  - If not, how can it be improved upon?

- Do you see optional programming throughout the academic year being a sustainable
  practice?

  - How do you see this being improved moving forward?

- Does your experience change depending on who is delivering the content of the program?

  - Would you like to see someone in particular take the lead on programs/workshops
    such as these? (supervisor, peer, wellness professional, etc.)

- Did these programs or workshops have an impact on your role or experience at the
  University of San Diego?

  - If so, please explain how.

<center>

Appendix E

Adult Consent Form

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University of San Diego
Institutional Review Board
Research Participant Consent Form

For the research study entitled:
Fostering Sustainable Wellness Practices Through Programming For Residential
Education Staff at the University of San Diego

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I. Purpose of the research study

Edith Alejandra Velasco is a student in the School of Leadership and Education
Sciences at the University of San Diego. You are invited to participate in a
research study he/she is conducting. The purpose of this research study is to
implement practices into the roles of Residential Education staff that promote
well-being and reduce burnout rates

II. What you will be asked to do

If you decide to be in this study, you will be asked to:
Complete a questionnaire that ask you questions about your role, role
satisfaction, and your well-being
Participate in two focus group discussions about your role and the impacts
COVID-19 have made.
Participate in a private interview about your experience of being a staff member
in Residential Education which will be audio recorded

Your participation in this study will take a total of _____160__ minutes.

III. Foreseeable risks or discomforts

**Sometimes when people are asked to think about their feelings, they feel
sad or anxious. If you would like to talk to someone about your feelings at
any time, you can call toll-free, 24 hours a day:**
San Diego Mental Health Hotline at 1-800-479-3339

IV. Benefits

While there may be no direct benefit to you from participating in this study, the
indirect benefit of participating will be knowing that you helped researchers better
understand best practices in order to create sustainable work environments in
Residential Education and reduce burnout.

V. Confidentiality

Any information provided and/or identifying records will remain confidential and
kept in a locked file and/or password-protected computer file in the researcher's
office for a minimum of five years. All data collected from you will be coded with a
number or pseudonym (fake name). Your real name will not be used. The results
of this research project may be made public and information quoted in

professional journals and meetings, but information from this study will only be reported as a group, and not individually.

The information or materials you provide will be cleansed of all identifiers (like your name) and may be used in future research.

VI. Compensation
You will receive no compensation for your participation in the study.

VII. Voluntary Nature of this Research
Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. You do not have to do this, and you can refuse to answer any question or quit at any time. Deciding not to participate or not answering any of the questions will have no effect on any benefits you're entitled to, like your health care, or your employment or grades. **You can withdraw from this study at any time without penalty.**

VIII. Contact Information
If you have any questions about this research, you may contact either:

1) Edith Alejandra Velasco
Email: evelasco@sandiego.edu

2) David Karp
Email: dkarp@sandiego.edu

I have read and understand this form, and consent to the research it describes to me. I have received a copy of this consent form for my records.