

5 Lessons from a former RA

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Resident Assistants (Resident Advisors or RAs) get a bad rep. Often seen as the “fun” police, they’re the last people you want to find knocking on your door at 12 am on Saturday when you’re loudly jamming out to EDM music with your friends during quiet hours. Or nagging you to stop zooming on your skateboard down the hall during finals week. Or even lecturing you on dorm rules and policies about picking up after yourself after eating in the common study lounge.

All that aside, I get it. But, hear me out on what I’m about to say.

RAs have it tough, and as a former one myself, I can say RAs deal with *a lot* of difficult situations on the job. However, because of the complex circumstances they often find themselves in, they end up taking away some valuable life lessons.

So without further ado, here are five lessons that I’ve learned from my time as an RA (that you can apply to your life too!):

1. Bureaucracy is Everywhere

When you’re an RA, something you learn really quickly is that you’re at the bottom of the housing personnel pyramid. Above you, there are Assistant Resident Directors and Resident Directors, and above them are the Assistant Directors, and above them is the Associate Director, and so on. As a result, you often lumber through each level if you want to find out particular information or get the inside scoop on housing/student affairs. Moreover, because you’re at the bottom, you realize you’re easily dispensable. And if you lose your job as an RA, you lose your housing, your meal plan, and the small biweekly stipend you get (among other things).

Knowing that you’re part of a larger organization makes you realize that if you really want to be noticed, you have to add value to the system. For RAs, this is two-fold: they have to fulfill their responsibilities as per their job description and their performance is also evaluated by their bosses and their residents. So to really be memorable, they have to exceed expectations in all of these areas. And if they want to go into student affairs later on, it’ll give them a leg up in the hiring process.

While realizing that you're just another cog in the larger machine sounds disheartening, it does make you more mentally prepared to face similar bureaucratic environments in the future. In order to thrive in a hierarchical setting (whether that is a role in the government or even in the corporate world), you have to understand what is the criteria for success and be prepared to exceed it. Only then can you ultimately reap the rewards.

2. You Don't Know Everything

This one sounds obvious, but yet it's not always so. A hard pill to swallow is that if you want to survive as an RA, you need to know how to ask for help. It's kind of funny that even though your job is to assist students in navigating their university experience, you too still need help. After all, RAs *are* still students.

This takeaway is especially important when you're faced with a resident experiencing a serious mental health crisis at two in the morning. You want to be the one who can help them and solve their problems, but you can't because A) you're not a trained mental health professional, and B) you don't know everything. Even though it's hard, you have to help connect them to someone who can better understand their situation and provide the support they need.

Recognizing the limitations of your knowledge is a crucial part of self-awareness, and can ultimately help you better advocate not only for yourself, but also for others.

3. Why You Should Stay Informed

As an RA, we're trained to know all the available resources on campus so we can direct students to them should they need it. During my training, I learned so much: I got a behind-the-scenes look at how referring students to CARE/CAPS works, what services Health and Wellness offers, among many others. Most UCSB students learn about these departments and resources during orientation and/or through required online modules discussing them. However, a lot of students skip over them, don't pay much attention to them, or simply forget the information altogether.

While it can be a pain to go through these modules or orientations, I strongly recommend students stay informed about resources they have on campus or whatever communities they are a part of. There were situations where I had residents who struggled in a particular class and were close to failing, and they didn't know what to do or who to turn to. I then recommended resources that helped me when I was in a similar situation my freshman year, and also directed them to the departments that could most effectively help them.

Knowledge is power, and you only have to gain if you keep tabs on the information and resources available to you.

4. Boundaries, Boundaries, & More Boundaries

If there's one lesson I want you to take away from this whole list (even though all of them are super important), it's this one. Bold it, highlight it, underline it, do whatever you need to do for this point to be engraved in your mind: boundaries are key.

I'll be honest--at the beginning of my time as an RA, I was terrible at setting boundaries. I tried so hard to be friendly and available to everyone that I felt utterly exhausted at the end of each day. Furthermore, as an omnivert (fun fact: it's someone who displays both the traits of an extrovert *and* an introvert but only at specific times), I need to recharge my social battery after long periods of socializing. Soon enough, I burned out within the first few months of my job.

After feeling like I was dragging myself through each and every day of work, I finally opened up to my coworkers and bosses about how I was feeling. The unanimous pearl of wisdom that I got was to set boundaries. In other words, I was told it's okay to say no to things. It's okay to not always be "on" and it's okay to take time for yourself. It's okay to state your needs and advocate for yourself. It's also okay to say if something makes you feel uncomfortable. No one but you is entitled to you or your time. Setting boundaries is one of the most fundamental aspects of self-care and maintaining mutually respectful and appropriate relationships.

5. There are Many Worlds Out There

The last message I want to leave you with is this: there are many worlds other than your own. Now, we all know NASA and physicists have pointed to other existences, but that's an entirely different matter altogether. In this case, I'm talking about lived experiences.

Growing up in a traditional, wood-fence-lined, suburban neighborhood, I wasn't exactly exposed to much diversity. The town I lived in was quaint and relatively peaceful, and overall the most "dangerous" thing that ever happened was property crime. Sure, it was boring at times, but at least it was predictable.

Going into college, I experienced a culture shock. As an RA, that experience was even more pronounced. I would often be so baffled sometimes by how people acted or talked about different subjects, and there were times I couldn't even wrap my head around how they

arrived at certain conclusions. Yet at the same time, I was privy to hearing some of the most intimate stories and witnessing students' vulnerable moments.

Looking at someone's world through the telescope they provided you is a humbling experience. In the moment that you peer through the eyepiece, you realize that each person has infinite constellations of memories and experiences shaping them, and you realize that their world is larger than you ever could have imagined. You realize that all the planets surrounding them in their cosmos have led them to have certain attitudes, beliefs, and values. Most of all, you realize that not everyone sees life the same way as you do—multiple realities and worlds can exist alongside yours and that, is utterly beautiful.

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I do want to note that this isn't a comprehensive list of takeaways from being an RA. In fact, I could write a whole paper on this subject. But for the sake of brevity, I decided to keep it to five main ideas so that you, as the reader, can mull them over. Hopefully, you carry these lessons with you as you go about your life. Whether you apply them to your personal or professional interactions, I hope you use these ideas to help you grow into the person you aspire to be.