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*Innovations in Research and Scholarship Feature*

# **“Pleasantly Unexpected”: The Nature and Impact of Resident Advisors’ Functional Relationships With Faculty**

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*Interacting with faculty has several benefits for students; however, little research has explored faculty-student interactions that are neither academic nor social, but occur within the context of students' work. This interpretive study reviews experiences of 73 resident advisors whose work responsibilities require interaction with faculty. Findings suggest required interactions can lead to more personal relationships and provide important pre-professional skills and outcomes, but are less closely related to mentorship and academic outcomes.*

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Higher education researchers and practitioners have touted the importance of student engagement with faculty members due to its positive connection to retention, learning, and career outcomes (Astin, 1993; Lampton, 1993; Pascarella, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). Although in-class interactions are important to student learning and often precipitate more enduring relationships (Tinto, 1993), the informal interactions with faculty outside the classroom are particularly influential (see Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005 for a comprehensive review) and were the focus of this study.

Researchers suggest the most influential out-of-class interactions are rooted in intellectual topics and exploration (Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005); however, there is limited understanding of relationships resulting from other out-of-class interactions. The current study addresses these relationships and explores a relatively unexamined form of faculty-student interaction: those required as part of students' work responsibilities. On-campus work is positively related to out-of-class interactions with faculty members (Furr & Elling, 2000; Umbach, Padgett, & Pascarella, 2010), potentially because these students engage with faculty members through work expectations. There is little understanding, however, of the nature of these faculty-student interactions or how they can translate to future engagement with professors, personal outcomes, or academic/professional development. This study explored the ways in which resident advisors (RAs) at a research university interacted with faculty members within the context of their work, as well as how their learning, professional development, and future relationships with faculty benefitted.

## Literature Review

Cox and Orehovec's (2007) typology of faculty-student interaction within a residential college at a large research university guides this work. They identified five forms of interaction on a continuum from most to least frequently observed: disengagement, incidental contact, functional interaction, personal interaction, and mentoring. While each form of interaction is distinct, the typology is fluid, accounting for the dynamic and often "erratic nature" (Cox & Orehovec, 2007, p. 350) of interactions between professors and students.

The most frequently observed form of interaction, disengagement, represents a lack of faculty contact in outside-of-classroom settings (Cox & Orehovec, 2007). Disengagement reflects a larger acknowledgement of and concern about the limited contact students have with professors (Cotten & Wilson, 2006; Zusman, 1999), speaking to both the absence of faculty from residence halls, as well as students and faculty members choosing not to interact, even when in close physical proximity. Comparatively, incidental contact is relatively superficial, with professors and students having largely unintentional exchanges of limited length and depth, such as saying "hello" in passing or talking briefly about a shared interest.

The third form of faculty-student interaction is functional, defined as contact linked to specific institutional purposes. Cox and Orehovec (2007) offered examples of functional interac-

tions that are largely academic in nature, where professors made themselves available to answer academic questions. Functional interactions are particularly important because they serve as a potential gateway to more enduring relationships, identified as personal interactions. When engaged in personal interactions, professors and students get acquainted on an individual level. Though rarely observed and challenging to define, Cox and Orehovec identified mentoring as the fifth form of interaction—a relationship where students have a faculty role model from whom they receive professional guidance and personal support.

This study was an exploration of functional interactions. Functional interactions are framed as largely academic within the Cox and Orehovec (2007) model, with no acknowledgement of functional interactions that might be nonacademic. Exploring nonacademically focused functional interactions creates new opportunities for understanding the ways students and faculty members engage. For example, while working off campus may leave students with little time to connect with faculty members outside of the classroom (Astin, 1993; Tinto, 1993), jobs on campus, particularly in academic departments or student services units, may require students to work with faculty members in an official capacity. These interactions are structured and outside of the classroom, yet not based on the sharing of personal interests or academic development. Thus, our application of the typology addresses functional interactions that are required as part of students' work responsibilities.

While many on-campus student employment opportunities require students to interact with professors, we focus on RAs. Unlike common RA requirements like programming and policy enforcement (Winston & Fitch, 1993), interactions with professors are not commonly required. However, institutions are increasingly developing residential communities with academic foci (e.g., living-learning communities), as well as programs designed to facilitate more faculty contact in the residence halls (e.g., Faculty-Fellows programs), which may require more RA-faculty collaboration to implement programming. In some cases, these activities supplement existing Faculty-in-Residence programs, where professors and their families live in the residence halls with students. In these cases, working with faculty members becomes a functional interaction: a requirement for RAs to involve professors in hall activities, included as part of the RA job description.

## Methods

While the interactions RAs have with faculty members may be primarily focused on facilitating positive outcomes for the residential students, this study aimed to demonstrate how this unique type of interaction also provides opportunities for RA development. Specifically, this study addressed the following questions: (a) How do RAs' functional interactions influence their engagement in other forms of faculty-student interaction, particularly those that are related to positive student outcomes (i.e., personal interactions and mentoring); and (b) What personal, pre-professional, and academic outcomes do RAs identify as resulting from their functional interactions?

This study was conducted as an interpretive case study (Merriam, 1998) at a large, research university. While data for this study were not collected from RAs active in a residential college, the Cox and Orehovec (2007) model offers an appropriate frame given its focus on residential rather than academic program components. Case study methodology is appropriate given its emphasis on understanding a phenomenon (faculty-student interaction) within a specific context (a residential environment that includes faculty interaction as a part of RAs' work responsibilities) (Merriam, 1998; Yin, 1994). The bounded system, or case, under examination is the institution where the RAs and faculty were employed. Studies of single cases offer rich, detailed understandings of individuals and their experiences within a context with clear boundaries (Merriam, 1998). Given the goals of the current study, to establish faculty-student interaction that has not been previously explored, a detailed analysis of one case is effective and more appropriate than comparisons across multiple cases. We do, however, recommend multi-case studies examining similar questions be conducted in the future. Further, the study is interpretive, integrating rich description to develop new understandings of outcomes associated with functional interactions.

## Study Site

This study was conducted at a large, highly selective, research institution in the Northeast. Approximately 6,000 undergraduate students live on campus in first-year, upper-division, or theme-based housing. The institution's residence life office employs 132 RAs. Of those RAs, 128 serve in halls where faculty fellows are assigned or there is a faculty in residence.

The primary purpose of both the faculty in residence and faculty fellows programs is to provide opportunities for student growth and development through interactions with faculty outside the classroom. Eight faculty in residence are housed in halls for first-year students. They coordinate programs, interact with the residence hall staff, and generally are expected to engage students in the halls. Faculty fellows are volunteers assigned to residence halls that house first-year students only, a combination of first-year and upper-division students, or only upper-division students. Generally, each hall is assigned one faculty fellow per 100 residents; at the time of study, there were 65 faculty fellows. Faculty fellows are asked to participate in hall events once per month, working with the RAs to develop social and educational programs.

In addition to their student supervision and community-building responsibilities, RAs work with their faculty fellows and/or faculty in residence (if they have one) on programmatic initiatives. They are expected to engage in functional interactions with faculty as part of their RA responsibilities. Some initiatives are developed by the RAs and involve professors as participants; other initiatives are faculty-driven and involve the RAs as collaborators, advertisers, and/or logistical coordinators. Residence hall directors (RHDs), who supervise the RAs, create a communication structure with the faculty members and the RAs that works best for all involved. For example, some RHDs identify one RA as the contact for all affiliated faculty, while other RHDs have each

RA contact and coordinate events with the professors. The structure of the faculty communication may be different in each hall; the expectations of professors and RAs, however, are consistent.

## Participants

Criterion-based selection strategies were used to recruit participants (LeCompte, Preissle, & Tesch, 1993). All participants were RAs in buildings with faculty in residence and/or faculty fellows. Sixteen halls or complexes have faculty in residence and/or faculty fellows, and the RAs in each hall or complex were invited via email to participate in focus groups with their own hall or complex staff so they could share individual and hall or complex-level experiences. Pseudonyms are used for all study participants and faculty members.

Data from 14 focus groups are presented in this study, with 73 (45 females and 28 males) out of a possible 113 RAs participating (65%). Focus groups were not conducted with two RA staff groups: One was not interviewed due to scheduling conflicts, and one RHD did not respond to the study request. Each focus group lasted less than one hour. RAs from eight first-year halls ( $n = 52$ ), one upper-division hall ( $n = 5$ ), and five theme-based halls ( $n = 16$ ) participated. Staff groups varied in size from 2 to 15, and focus groups varied accordingly, with the smallest consisting of two RAs and the largest having 11 participants.

## Data Collection and Analysis

Focus groups were scheduled during RA staff meeting times; and RAs were asked about their knowledge of faculty in residence and faculty fellows, the types of collaborative programs they developed, successes and challenges, and benefits they perceived for themselves and their residents resulting from interactions with faculty in residence and/or faculty fellows. All focus groups were audio-recorded and transcribed verbatim. Upon completion of transcription, data were organized through a systematic coding process. The analytic strategy developed was largely based on methods utilized in team-based studies conducted by the Centers for Disease Control (see MacQueen, McLellan, Kay, & Milstein, 1998 for details) and integrates both deductive and inductive processes. The deductive process led to the development of structural codes, which were informed by the Cox and Orehovec (2007) typology and interview protocol. A list of inductive codes also was developed, based on a review of transcripts and memos drafted by the researchers describing emerging themes. The researchers combined the inductive and deductive codes into one comprehensive codebook, including definitions and rules for usage. Consistent with methods outlined by Bogdan and Biklen (1998) and Merriam (1998), data were re-read and coded using ATLAS.ti™ software. The researchers then wrote memos, discussed the emerging narrative, and used coded data to support perceived patterns in the data and address the research questions.

## Trustworthiness

Several steps were taken to ensure the trustworthiness of the data and findings. Transcripts and preliminary observations from the focus groups were sent to the participants for member checking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985); four RAs responded with word corrections or comments. Trustworthiness was established through triangulation, with multiple researchers conducting focus groups and data analysis. Additionally, notes and memos were kept to complement the transcripts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The rigor and consistency evident in the development of the codebook and throughout the coding process increased the likelihood that data were understood similarly across the research team.

## Limitations

While this work offers important insights, there were several limitations. First, as a qualitative case study, which examines behaviors within a specific context, the findings are not generalizable and should certainly be explored in further study. Further, the findings of this study were based on student perception; there were no formal steps to capture the ways in which they engaged faculty members before and after serving as RAs. Not all RAs were available to participate in the focus groups, thus divergent perspectives may not be included. Finally, this study illuminates faculty-student relationships from the student perspective; faculty narratives were not obtained. Our research presents one interpretation of what students learned and gained from their functional interactions with faculty.

## Findings

"Inconsistent" might best define the nature of the functional interactions RAs had with faculty in residence and faculty fellows. Some described positive interactions, working closely on programming for their respective residence halls, but other RAs voiced frustration. Busy faculty schedules and a lack of clear expectations often challenged the ability of RAs and faculty to cooperate effectively. Some RAs also were unsure of how to engage professors and uncertain if they would feel comfortable participating in less formal programs like movies or game nights.

Despite these inconsistencies, several RAs identified outcomes resulting from their functional interactions with faculty. The sections below detail RAs' perceptions of how their interactions could lead to other relationships and their development. For some, these interactions served as precursors for the development of personal relationships and, rarely, mentoring relationships. RAs identified pre-professional and personal benefits they accrued through their interactions, while few noted intellectual gains and development.

## Functional Relationships Translating to Other Forms of Interaction

**Personal interactions.** Similar to Cox and Orehovec's (2007) arguments, students' narratives suggest functional relationships could lead to other forms of faculty interaction. In some cases, the exposure RAs had through repeated functional interactions with faculty provided opportunities to develop enduring personal relationships. While commenting on the sometimes distant connection between the residents and the faculty in residence, Xena highlighted the distinctiveness of her functional interactions and how they translated into a somewhat unexpected personal relationship. She explained, "I get along really well with our faculty in residence because I just have had a lot of individual conversations with them. I've gone and visited them in their apartment a bunch of times." When identifying benefits that she might experience through her work as an RA, Olivia described the close, personal relationship she developed with a faculty member:

I have actually been able to create some close relationships with some of the faculty members who work with [my hall]. I've gone to dinner to the [faculty member's] house, you know, a very informal thing, had nothing to do with being an RA. . . . Just because we met while we were working here.

Marilyn, similarly, described her experiences, recalling a time when she had Thanksgiving dinner at a faculty fellow's home: "We had a really nice Thanksgiving dinner at his house, and he showed us around. He has horses, and we talked about food, and we just sort of had weird, interesting conversations." While Marilyn had the opportunity to interact with the faculty member through her RA role, she especially appreciated the personal interactions they had, which appeared to be a consequence of getting to know one another during functional interactions. This dinner invitation allowed Marilyn to get to know this professor personally, discussing their backgrounds and interests in an informal context.

Tina mentioned that while students often did not attend the planned dinners hosted by faculty fellows in the dining halls, she enjoyed a more personal relationship with one of her instructors through her work on these programs:

Actually, my physics/astronomy teacher was a faculty fellow . . . he was a great conversationalist. He and his wife would come to dinner . . . unfortunately not a lot of students would go but it was great discussions and it was really nice for me to be able to get to know one of my professors, even though it was one of my worst classes.

Tina's quote is particularly interesting because she knew this faculty member, yet her early interactions with him were limited, perhaps partially because she was not performing well in his course. Cotten and Wilson (2006) highlighted the ways in which students' performance and interest in coursework can limit their desire to reach out to professors, fearing that they will feel more pressure to perform so not to disappoint them. The functional interactions Tina had with her professor through coordinating and attending this program allowed her to get to know her professor on a more personal level outside of academics and engage him more deeply.

These interactions may be particularly important for RAs who do not have other avenues to gain access to personal interactions with faculty. Carson described students in his major as rarely having opportunities to engage with faculty members, making his relationships with the faculty fellows that much more rewarding: "I think I learned a lot from both faculty fellows and faculty in residence because I'm in engineering and . . . most of my classes are big and I don't get that one-to-one interaction with professors." Beth addressed her limited opportunities to interact with faculty in her comments about working with faculty fellows, stating: "I've loved it. . . . I wish I had more of an opportunity to interact with faculty on an informal basis and get to know them as people. . . . I never feel like I get a chance to talk informally."

Working with the faculty fellows provided RAs with opportunities to interact with professors more informally within RA living environments. The structured interaction required by their RA role often resulted in ongoing, informal interactions, making these students more comfortable engaging with faculty who may have appeared distant and inaccessible otherwise.

**Mentoring interactions.** While rarely noted by participants, there were a few RAs who suggested that the functional interactions through their RA role created opportunities to develop mentoring relationships. While we acknowledge several different understandings of these relationships (Jacobi, 1991), Cox and Orehovec (2007) identified mentoring within the context of their study as including direct assistance with professional development, emotional and psychosocial support, and role modeling. Although it was challenging to determine whether all three components of the relationship were fully present, there were some examples of students whose relationships approached mentorship. Jerome had the opportunity to work in the research laboratory of a previous faculty fellow who he initially met and developed a relationship with while working as an RA. While it is unclear whether there was a psychosocial component to the relationship, working in a professor's laboratory has been linked to many positive outcomes (Nagda, Gregerman, Jonides, von Hippel, & Lerner, 1998; Pascarella, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), such as providing students with opportunities to learn more about careers in academia and observe professors as they engage in their work.

Claire explicitly referred to a faculty fellow as "a mentor at some point." In acknowledging the benefits that her residents obtained through the presence of and interactions with professors in the residence hall, she reflected on the relationship she built.

I feel like I really learned a lot from [Steve] in particular because . . . I have questions . . . just learning about what it's like as an adult in a working world by observing him . . . he can talk about anything, so learning about . . . whatever he's working on is really interesting.

While their interactions may have initially been more formal, Claire actively pursued these informal interactions, which ultimately became a mentoring relationship. She benefited from Steve's knowledge and experience in ways that may have been unavailable to her without their initial contacts through their functional relationship, coupled with her own initiative to extend the relationship and get better acquainted.

## Benefits and Outcomes Stemming from Relationships

**Pre-professional benefits.** RAs discussed benefits associated with their functional interactions, including a perceived increase in communication skills and comfort interacting in professional situations. RAs determined that they should demonstrate more mature behavior during their interactions with professors, giving RAs the opportunity to “practice” acceptable behaviors for future professional roles. Beth commented on her increased confidence as a result of working with faculty members through her RA responsibilities:

I just really appreciate getting to meet them informally. . . [Interaction with the professors] also makes me feel more competent in my ability to talk on a professional level with someone of that, you know, caliber. And so . . . it helps sort of professionally, too.

These functional interactions at times required that RAs step outside of their comfort zones, as acknowledged by Curtis:

I think I've definitely learned a lot about just kind of working . . . outside your comfort level a little bit . . . it can be sort of intimidating. But being able to . . . put yourself out there and plan with them and . . . work on programs with them . . . , I feel like that's really helped prepare me with . . . how I'll be working with people in the future.

The communication and collaboration skills that students gained speak to the unique benefits that can stem from functional interactions. Although researchers have identified how engaging with faculty in the classroom or in one's academic area can help with socialization to a field of study or profession (see reviews by Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Jacobi, 1991; Pascarella, 1980), our findings reveal general professional skills gained from engaging with faculty in residence and faculty fellows. These opportunities might not otherwise be available without serving in an RA position that requires functional interactions with faculty. Faculty members were regarded as high-status individuals whose presence and involvement suggested the need for skills and behaviors that some RAs did not believe they had mastered when they began their RA role. Over time, many RAs noted feeling less intimidated by faculty members as a result of these functional interactions, which resulted in greater willingness to approach and have conversations with the hall-affiliated faculty members and other professors on campus.

In some cases, faculty interactions resulted in networking and encouragement that provided further opportunities for pre-professional benefits. Beth benefitted from her faculty interactions by gaining a contact in her field.

In my conversations with both [Dr. Morgan and Dr. Carlson], they have a lot of professional insight. . . You know [Dr. Carlson] gave me the address of her brother who's working in [another state] who's a counselor, and I was like, “Oh, I really want to talk to him.” So she made the effort to ask her brother if it was okay, and then give me his contact information. So this is, it's also really good for networking and getting to, outside of your position as an RA, just get some professional and life advice.

Some RAs mentioned campus work experiences that resulted from their interactions with professors. Encouragement from a faculty fellow led Madeline to pursue a job using her language skills as a native speaker in the Japanese house, which was an unfamiliar role for her. In some cases, faculty provided professional support through either their connections or advice and encouragement that had an influence on students' development and decision-making.

**Personal benefits.** In addition to the professional benefits, personal benefits were cited frequently. While RAs recognized that balancing family lives with the faculty in residence and faculty fellow role could be challenging, they appreciated the opportunities to interact with professors' families. RAs experienced a "sense of home" when they visited faculty-in-residence apartments and interacted with faculty members' families. Citing the benefits of her personal experience with the faculty in residence and his family, Diana stated:

I've gained so much, beginning as a freshman in [another residence hall], having a family to go to and talk to and hang out with and make cookies with. . . . It's your family on campus. And it's really nice to feel so welcomed, and it has made my experience so much better here.

John, who lived on the same floor as the faculty in residence, commented on the appeal of programs involving his faculty in residence and her daughter: "And it's also nice, she brings her daughter Anna which kinda makes the atmosphere a little bit . . . more laid back and a lot more fun and it brings more people to the events, too." While most comments regarding faculty family involvement were focused on faculty in residence, some RAs in halls without faculty in residence also interacted with faculty families, having a holiday dinner hosted at the home of a faculty fellow or appreciating that one of the faculty fellows brought her children to programs.

Faculty members also provided an additional outlet for interaction that RAs valued. RAs appreciated having people in their living environments who could offer different perspectives based on experiences of community involvement and life in general. In addition to sharing that faculty members could help her see the community beyond her campus, Shanice appreciated the different perspective faculty members often brought to situations:

It gives you more perspective and it gives you a chance to talk to somebody who's at a different stage of life and who's . . . been through what you've been through but they really have a different outlook on things.

Similarly, Trey stated:

The thing with . . . the faculty in residence is that we live in a college residence hall and it's not just college students everywhere. It's also good to have a family living in an apartment . . . it's not just a college dorm.

In some ways, faculty seemed to provide a unique perspective and outlet for social interaction that many students valued.

**Faculty as “real people.”** When professors shared their outside involvements and interests, RAs increasingly saw the faculty members as people not terribly different from themselves, rather than as distant adults to whom they had little connection. Nikki’s statement highlighted her perceptions of professors:

It was nice for me to see that teachers are normal . . . in some ways, [you] look at them as kind of being so intelligent and kind of intimidating, so it’s nice to see them on just [a] normal level, you know? Eating dinner or doing something fun with them, so. It’s like they have a life, too, you know? . . . They’re not all about academic stuff.

Graham shared similar thoughts about having dinner at the home of a faculty fellow and his wife, noting how this experience made his professor more accessible and human in his eyes.

They invited all of the RAs and [the RHD] to go to dinner last year. . . . And it was great because they’re people, like all of us, and I know oftentimes you could look at professors as being higher up maybe on the food chain and that sort of thing. But you know, we have similar interests . . . and we’re able to just chat and learn about each other and what we like to do.

Much like the “pleasantly unexpected” benefits associated with working with professors that Melissa noted, Graham was surprised and pleased that faculty members wanted to have these informal interactions with students outside of class. Repeated suggestions that these interactions made faculty appear “more real” perhaps indicates that professors were not seen as real people with whom RAs could interact and build relationships. Functional interactions led RAs to dismiss this illusion and close the distance, to some extent, making these students generally more comfortable with faculty.

**Intellectual benefits.** RAs rarely commented on any academic benefits associated with their functional or ongoing interactions with faculty they met through their work. There were two students who noted that these interactions had the potential to expand their interests and foster their academic development. Jen stated her interest in taking a class with one of the faculty fellows based on their interactions with each other,

[Thomas Jones] is the only faculty fellow that I’ve actually programmed with. . . . I only know him as a faculty fellow . . . from the conversations I’ve had with him at dinner and stuff. . . . But knowing what I know about him as a person has made me curious . . . he’s a cool and interesting person and because I know that, I think it would be cool to see what he’s really interested in in a more academic setting.

Edward, somewhat similarly, remarked that knowing a faculty in residence or faculty fellow from a department outside of his made him consider broadening his academic horizons, noting that his interactions with a particular faculty fellow “opened up my academic development.” Thus, for some, functional interactions and pleasant conversations had the potential to heighten students’ interest in faculty as scholars. When faculty engaged students and made connections to their academic interests, it opened the door for some to new academic areas and interests, encouraging some

to explore academic areas outside of their comfort zone with a bit more confidence because they knew a professor connected to that academic area.

Only one RA described taking a course from a faculty fellow. Elizabeth, who was enrolled in a course taught by one of the faculty fellows for her building, said that she was more attentive to her classroom experience as a result:

I know that I can say that the difference from having a class with someone who didn't know me to having a class that did know me made an entire difference. I know when I was in class, I was more inclined to be called on, so more inclined to participate, to pay attention. . . . I'm sure I did better in the class because they knew me and they would call me out. . . . I'm sure if I was just a regular student I wouldn't have had the same experience in that classroom.

Elizabeth's extra effort in her course, as a result of knowing the faculty member as a faculty fellow, reflects Kuh and Hu's (2001) finding regarding positive educational effects resulting from student-faculty interaction. This academic effect, interestingly, was mediated not through an out-of-class interaction related to academics but through a functional interaction that made the faculty member familiar. Thus, perhaps there are multiple contexts within which student-faculty interactions can take place that would ultimately have a positive influence on student engagement in the classroom.

## Discussion and Implications

Higher education scholars and leaders have highlighted the importance of faculty-student interaction in relation to student outcomes, demonstrating the connections between exposure to faculty outside of the classroom and academic achievement, degree aspirations, campus integration, and sense of belonging (e.g., Astin, 1993; Kuh & Hu, 2001; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005; Tinto, 1993). To both promote these outcomes and address calls from students and their parents for closer contact with and more exposure to professors (Zusman, 1999), a variety of programs have been developed, such as first-year seminars and living-learning programs.

Although it is assumed that students participating in these initiatives stand to gain a great deal from close, informal interactions with faculty members, there is little understanding of whether the student paraprofessional staff facilitating these opportunities benefit from their work with faculty. While interactions between RAs and hall-affiliated faculty can be understood as "functional" because they are motivated by a requirement or institutional purpose, they are also distinctive from functional relationships described by Cox and Orehovec (2007). The RA position at the study site required RAs to interact, through programming requirements, with the faculty assigned to their halls. This expectation for RAs may constitute a new subcategory of functional relationship within the Cox and Orehovec model: interactions with faculty required as a component of one's work responsibilities.

According to Cox and Orehovec's (2007) model, functional relationships are particularly important because they serve as a gateway to more substantial interactions and relationships. Within their study, interactions rarely translated into "mentoring" relationships; many of the collaborative programming efforts were social or focused on community building rather than on faculty members' academic specialty areas. Many RAs shared how their functional interactions did in fact lead to beneficial personal interactions and relationships. Findings of this study suggest functional interactions are powerful because they expose students to faculty in new ways. This exposure fostered student comfort with engaging faculty and encouraged them to build closer relationships, which ultimately offered students opportunities to develop academically, professionally, and personally. These interactions demystified faculty, making them more relatable. Seeing faculty as "real people" led to more enduring relationships, with the potential to shape students' comfort with faculty in the future, perhaps leading to more frequent interactions. Both Cox and Orehovec (2007) and Cotten and Wilson (2006) note students avoid or often do not make the effort to interact with professors in informal contexts. But, interactions that take place while engaging in paraprofessional roles can pique students' interests and encourage them to explore other interactions with faculty, leading to the expansion of students' networks and enhanced development.

The findings of this study also add to understandings of the types of benefits that stem from faculty-student interaction. Researchers have largely highlighted the academic benefits (Astin, 1993; Pascarella, 1980; Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005); our study suggests that functional relationships hold potential for academic, professional, and personal benefits. Interacting with faculty to coordinate programs can be an added paraprofessional experience, which lessened students' intimidation in working with adults generally and fostered their ability to work in a professional context. As institutions are critiqued and asked by the business and professional world to better prepare students for the world of work (Bok, 2006), these findings suggest that intentional strategies are available beyond the classroom. While rarely listed among the benefits associated with student leadership roles in residence life, facilitating functional interactions with faculty in a paraprofessional context could be acknowledged as a benefit of serving as an RA, which would aid in promoting these types of benefits more widely.

## Implications for Practice

This study has implications for practice for residential programs, as well as other student affairs functional areas. First, beyond establishing faculty affiliation programs with the residence halls, creating structures for RA-faculty interaction can assist in promoting program goals. Establishing expectations for RA collaborations with faculty can provide a system for ensuring functional interactions. Helping students understand best practices in engaging faculty may be particularly important. RAs who developed deeper relationships with faculty and benefitted most from interactions noted that they were made more comfortable through these interactions and interested in knowing faculty better in academic and social contexts. These interactions and interests are

not always the case, as students can find faculty schedules difficult to manage, perceive faculty as inaccessible, or become frustrated if they are less responsive to communicate via phone and email. Providing appropriate training and support for RAs interacting with faculty, suggesting best practices in scheduling events that align with faculty schedules, explaining the nature of faculty work, and making recommendations on the best forms of contact may increase the likelihood that their functional interactions are positive

Sharing the potential benefits of these interactions with both RAs and faculty is also recommended. RAs typically viewed the benefits of the faculty programs as intended for the residents and rarely acknowledged that they, too, were residents who could benefit from the programs and were positioned to interact with the faculty in ways that their residents were not. As such, highlighting the benefits that RAs may experience because they have this special opportunity to interact with the faculty could encourage them to take advantage of this role in more intentional ways that go beyond merely meeting programming expectations, encouraging them to join a faculty dinner discussion or activities that another RA planned. Informing the faculty members of benefits RAs potentially incur from their interactions, despite the lack of faculty rewards for such involvement, may encourage them to consider the dual influence they can have within the residence. Faculty may find the relationship they share with the RAs to be distinct from those with residents and gain uniquely positive outcomes from these interactions. Highlighting the important role professors can play for both the residents and the RAs, and perhaps addressing the importance of being open and willing to engage students on a personal level, would be important to address during faculty training sessions for residence life roles.

Opportunities for professors and students to engage within the context of student work or cocurricular activities have generally gone unexplored, and the findings of this study suggest that they hold great potential to promote positive student outcomes. Similar benefits may be experienced by student leaders who interact with faculty advisors to student organizations, peer mentors in learning communities with faculty supervisors, peer educators who have specific contact with faculty structured into their roles, students who work in academic departments, and students who sit on committees with faculty members. Because these students interact with faculty through a paid position or volunteer endeavor, they are positioned to experience functional interactions and potentially benefit from faculty exposure. These functional interactions in different contexts could have the same effect, making faculty more accessible and relatable in ways similar to those described by the RAs in this study and opening the door to more enduring relationships and positive student outcomes. We suggest supervisors, committee chairs, institutional leaders, and faculty be mindful of and intentional about facilitating high-quality functional interactions. In addition to making participants in these activities more aware of potential benefits through continued interactions with faculty during work, cocurricular activities, or service, faculty in these roles should be encouraged to communicate openly and build relationships with students they meet in these venues.

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