Research article

Residence Heads as Intentional Role-Players in Promoting Student Success

Johan Groenewald* & Magda Fourie-Malherbe**

Abstract

Research evidence suggests that approaches to promote student success in higher education are becoming more holistic and integrated in nature. This implies that not only classrooms and laboratories, but also residences, as informal out-of-class learning environments, can potentially contribute significantly to promoting student success. The research question we sought to answer is: what is the preferred role and skill sets of residence heads that will enable them to promote student success? In order to answer this question, the study proposes a student success framework with five levels, and the role of the future residence head is explicated in terms of this framework. The findings of the study are significant as they suggest a practical skill set, underpinned by sound theory, for residence heads to contribute to student success.

Keywords

blended higher education roles; educational mindset; residence heads; residence heads' skill sets; student affairs; student success levels

Introduction

Massification and democratisation have become defining characteristics of higher education (HE) systems across the globe (Mohamedbhai, 2008; Schuetze & Slowey, 2002; Strydom, 2002; Teichler, 2001; Vaira, 2004). Widened access and the concomitant increasing diversity in student populations have, however, put student success under pressure. Improving undergraduate student throughput and completion rates has become one of the major challenges that HE education institutions are grappling with (Kuh, Kinzie, Buckley, Bridges & Hayek, 2007). Furthermore, our understanding of student success is evolving to the extent that it is increasingly being defined as more than the acquisition of classroom knowledge (Hamrick, Evans & Schuh, 2002). We now acknowledge that student learning occurs continuously and in different places (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005), leading to a more holistic view of student learning. This broadened notion of student learning and student success underpinned our study into the role of residence heads in promoting student success.

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Residence heads have traditionally been regarded as "house mothers" or "house fathers", playing an *in loco parentis* role (Blimling, 2015). This view of the role of the residence head – and of residences – personifies what we call "an accommodation mindset". Currently, the accommodation mindset that considers residence heads as merely managers of "beds where students sleep" is still the reigning one in HE in many countries, including HE institutions across Africa (Wahl, 2013). Hence, the potential educational role of residence heads is often overlooked.

Against this background, this article presents the findings of a case study done at one residential higher education institution in South Africa regarding the role that residence heads could play in promoting student success. The research question for this study was: what is the preferred role of and skill sets required by residence heads to promote student success? This problem is complex, systemic and equivocal; hence, Interactive Qualitative Analysis (IQA), which adopts a systems perspective, was selected as an appropriate research method (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004). This involved gathering data through focus groups and personal interviews with mostly purposively sampled populations of students and staff of the case university.

As backdrop for the empirical investigation, a brief overview of the background to the research problem is given. This includes massification of HE, particularly in Africa, and the development of residential education, together with a more detailed discussion of the residential education context of the case university.

Massification of Higher Education and its Impact on African Universities

The growth of HE systems from elite to mass systems has gathered momentum during the latter half of the 20th century (Dobson, 2001; Mohamedbhai, 2008, p. 6). In the 1970s, Trow (cited in Teichler, 2013, p. 309) distinguished three types of HE systems, depending on the participation rates of the 18- to 24-year-old age group: elite systems, serving up to 15% of the respective age group; massified systems, serving more or less 20–30% of 18- to 24-year-olds; and universal HE when student participation in HE surpasses 50% of the respective age group. Currently all three types of systems exist globally, with the USA, Japan and Western Europe having achieved universal HE, and many African countries, with low participation rates in HE, still having elite HE systems.

Whereas universities have traditionally been regarded as institutions of higher learning upholding high standards of academic excellence (Kivinen & Kaipainen, 2002), massification is posing challenges to these high standards and to the conception of student success in HE (Fraser & Killen, 2005). The increase in the number and diversity of students has led to various notions of student success. It has also led to diversification in the types of HE institutions required to address the varying learning needs of a more diverse student body.

Most African universities were established in the colonial era as elite residential HE institutions (Mohamedbhai, 2008). Currently, many of these residential universities have neither the capacity nor the resources to deal effectively with larger numbers of students

(Jansen, Pretorius & Van Niekerk, 2009; Teferra & Altbach, 2004). Mohamedbhai (2008) posits that the victims of massification in African HE are primarily the students themselves, and their success, or lack thereof, as they are often faced with overcrowded undergraduate facilities, including residential facilities.

Student Housing and Residential Education in South African Higher Education

South African universities, although in some cases better resourced, share many of the same problems as their counterparts on the African continent, including increasing enrolments, overcrowded facilities and lack of funding for infrastructure development. These difficulties often have a profound impact on student accommodation. Yet, a literature search revealed that research and published studies on student housing and residential education in South African HE are scant. A notable exception is the *Report on the Ministerial Committee for the Review of the Provision of Student Housing at South African Universities* (DHET, 2011). A shortage of student accommodation was clearly indicated in the report, which revealed that student accommodation capacity at HE institutions catered for around 20% of student enrolments. In addition, the conditions of student housing, especially at universities in rural and poor areas, did not meet minimum standards to provide accessible, decent and safe accommodation to students in order to foster academic success. This flies in the face of international research findings demonstrating that students in residences display greater persistence towards graduation than students in off-campus housing (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005); hence, the emphasis of the DHET report on the importance of sufficient and well-managed student accommodation. In addition, the report (DHET, 2011) recommended further research on the impact of residence life on students. Recommendations from this ministerial report led to the drafting of the 'Policy on the Minimum Norms and Standards for Student Housing at Public Higher Education Institutions' (*Government Gazette*, 2015). Amongst other things, this policy highlights the importance of the professional development of student housing staff, by indicating that "[t]he ongoing professional development of student housing staff must be encouraged by both universities and private housing providers" (*Government Gazette*, 2015, p. 9).

In addition to in-house professional development activities at the institutional level, at the national level, this policy expectation with regard to the ongoing professional development of student housing staff is currently being responded to by the Association of College and University Housing Officers – International South African Chapter (ACUHO-I SAC). This association plays a key role in addressing the demand for professional training in student housing in South African HE (Dunn & Dunkel, 2013), especially of residence heads. ACUHO-I SAC established the first Student Housing Training Institute (SHTI) in South Africa at Stellenbosch University (SU) in 2011. Since then the SHTI has been offering annual training sessions for the professionalisation and competency development of student housing officials, including residence heads. Between 40 and 60 professionals per annum have been trained since 2011 (Dunn & Dunkel, 2013).

At an ACUHO-I SAC forum in September 2010 chief housing officers from the majority of South African public universities completed a survey to determine the most important competencies needed in the South African student housing context. The top 10 competencies identified were:

(a) application of technology;
(b) budget development and resource allocation;
(c) facilities management;
(d) personnel management;
(e) strategic thinking and planning;
(f) policy development and interpretation;
(g) professional development;
(h) assessment of student needs and interests;
(i) knowledge of student affairs functions; and
(j) knowledge of student development theory (Dunn & Dunkel, 2013, p. 71).

Only two of the aforementioned competencies (assessment of student needs and interests, and knowledge of student development theory) actually focus on the educational role of the residence head. This is particularly disquieting, given the potential of student residences to contribute to student success, as research has shown that living in a residence contributes to retention of students (Pascarella & Terenzini, 2005). A paradigm shift amongst policymakers and student housing professionals alike seems to be required for an understanding of the importance of professional training of residence heads in order for them to promote student success holistically.

The acknowledgement of the contribution that student housing can make to student success, and the importance of well-equipped student housing professionals to facilitate this, supports the principles of Residential Education (ResEd). ResEd, which has been widely adopted at several universities in the USA, is a holistic approach towards intentionally promoting student learning and student success in residences (Blimling, 2015). In South Africa, Stellenbosch University (SU), having adopted a ResEd paradigm, has been acting on this imperative to utilise residential spaces for educational purposes for the past 11 years.

Residential Education at Stellenbosch University (SU)

The residential experience at SU has long been a major drawcard of the institution. The expansion in student numbers has, however, resulted in a decreasing proportion of the student body being accommodated in university residences: currently only about 24% of the student population are in university residences. This has made places in residences even more sought after.

An overview of SU residences (SU, 2019) reveals that the majority of residences are traditional, gender-specific residences, while the newer residences, such as Ubuntu House, Nkosi Johnson House and Russel Botman House, provide for more inclusive, multi-racial and multi-gender residence communities.

Since 2007, an intentional education engagement approach has been promoted in SU residences through the establishment of the ResEd programme. The aim of this

programme is to ensure that every activity in residences, whether sport, culture, or social in nature, contributes to nurturing healthy, values-driven student communities. The ResEd programme commences soon after the annual election of the various leaders in residences. During the next few months, residence heads engage with student leaders in activities such as individual and group conversations at leadership camps, and residence house meetings, to promote a values-driven student residence community approach (CSC, 2012a, 2012b, 2014; Kloppers, 2015; SU Vice-Rector Teaching, 2012). Furthermore, throughout the year, residence heads intentionally engage with students on their journey towards developing as well-rounded individuals and, through the activities and conversations within the residence, they assist students in building flourishing student communities.

However, the lack of sufficient scholarly literature and research data on residential education is a limiting factor in developing and implementing innovation and improvement in this field. There is a particular need for studies on the preferred role of the residence head in the South African context; hence, the importance of this research. The rationale for this case study research on the role of the residence head at SU in promoting student success, was that it could provide valuable insights into and guidelines towards promoting student success through residential education on a macro scale in South African HE.

Conceptual Framework

A comprehensive literature review on student learning theory, student success factors and residential education led to the development of a five-level student success framework as a heuristic, bringing together the educational skill set and theoretical knowledge required by residence heads to effectively play an intentional educational and leadership role that will optimise student success at each of the five levels. These conceptualised student success levels increase in depth and complexity as the levels progress, with Student Success Level 4 (see SSL4 in Table 1) being the ultimate and preferred Student Success Level (SSL). This conceptual student success framework is an attempt to assist residence heads in understanding the complexity of factors influencing student success, preparing them for their roles in optimising residence environments for promoting such success. The theories linked to each of the student success levels give further depth to the framework. These theories provide greater conceptual clarity, enabling residence heads to fully understand each student success level. Each of the theories in the framework has been extensively applied in previous studies.

However, for the purpose of this study, they were reorganised to form an integrated whole. The five proposed student success levels are:
- Student Success Level 0 (SSL0), which focuses on student access into HE;
- Student Success Level 1 (SSL1), which focuses on student retention;
- Student Success Level 2 (SSL2), which focuses on student persistence towards graduation;
- Student Success Level 3 (SSL3), which focuses on student engagement; and
- Student Success Level 4 (SSL4), which focuses on enhancement of graduate attributes towards employability.

Table 1: Educational skill set required by residence heads to promote student success at various levels (SSL)

SSL	Theory	Theoretical understanding required	Educational skill set required
SSL0	Validation (Rendón, 1994)	Validation increases the students' sense of self-worth and the conviction that they are capable of learning and can succeed.	Inspire: *using motivational speeches/conversations to create welcoming residential environments*
SSL1	Interaction (Tinto, 1982)	When students interact on a healthy basis, socially and academically, they integrate optimally into the student community and are more likely to succeed.	Mentor: *creating opportunities for students' social and academic interaction*
SSL2	Involvement (Astin,1984) Environmental causal (Pascarella, 1985)	When students are involved in the input to their learning experiences, taking their environment into consideration, the output in terms of learning is higher. Better persistence towards graduation is seen.	Manage: *deliberately structuring involvement opportunities*
SSL3	Student engagement (Kuh, 1995)	Engaging students in real problems that provide collaborative learning opportunities creates opportunities for deep learning resulting in student success.	Facilitate: *encouraging collaborative learning and multicultural conversations*
SSL4	Integrated and holistic learning processes (Bronfenbrenner, 1995)	For holistic development and learning students must engage and interact with their environment over a period of time to contribute to the attainment of appropriate graduate attributes.	Coach: *enabling student leadership through research and innovation*

The role of the residence head and the challenge in promoting success in each of the levels is explained as follows:

Inspire – Educational skill set required for SSL0: The residence head should continuously inspire and motivate students, regardless of their background or educational preparedness. For the residence head, being inspirational and assuming an intentional educational role on SSL0, the validation theory is presented as theoretical underpinning (Rendón, 1994). The challenge of this SSL is whether the residence head is able to inspire students. Understanding the validation theory will increase the residence head's capacity to inspire the students' sense of self-worth and the conviction that they are capable of learning and can succeed, especially in the case of first-generation students.

Mentor – Educational skill set required for SSL1: The residence head should provide mentorship and create networking opportunities for students to enhance healthy social and academic student interactions. The residence head should understand the interaction theory (Tinto, 1982) with a view to being a mentor to enhance student retention. Residence communities provide opportunities for social and academic integration which, in turn, enhance retention of students. Interactions are mostly on an informal basis, which allow for interpersonal and intrapersonal interaction. Residence heads should encourage and create opportunities for the student community to interact both socially and academically. Tinto (1982) indicated the importance of social integration before academic integration; the residence environment could be conducive to both kinds of integration. The challenge for the residence head on this level is time constraints. Many of these informal interactions take place after normal office hours. The challenge therefore is that residence heads do not always have the time to mentor towards SSL1.

Manage – Educational skill set required for SSL2: SSL2 focuses on student persistence. Understanding the involvement theory (Astin, 1984) and environment causal theory (Pascarella, 1985) will enable the residence head to structure involvement opportunities that will enhance persistence towards graduation. According to Astin (1984), students can incidentally interact socially or academically in the residence environment without really being involved. Astin (1984) proposed the student involvement theory as a theory for practical student development. According to the theory, involved students spend a substantial amount of time on campus, participate in student organisations and interact regularly with faculty members and other students. Achieving SSL2 student involvement could be challenging for residence heads seeing that residence structures are not all similar and optimal to enable such effective student involvement. Substantial research dealing with the influences within various student subcultures, such as the culture of roommate assignments, has been conducted within residence facilities (Pascarella, 1985, p. 29). Peer influence of students living in close proximity to one another has different effects on student learning and cognitive development. When residence heads understand the resulting indirect learning opportunities in residences, they can influence the structural and organisational characteristics of the residence by effectively placing mentors and other student leaders into those living environments who could assist the cause of student persistence towards graduation.

Facilitate – Educational skill set required for SSL3: Student engagement has two critical components (Kuh, 1995, 2003, 2009, 2010, 2011), the first of which is the amount of time and effort students put into their studies and other effective educational practices. The second component of student engagement is how HE institutions employ effective educational practices through, for example, organising their curriculum and other learning opportunities. To optimise the potential of informal learning opportunities in the residence, a residence head needs to understand

student engagement theory. Such understanding (Kuh, 2010) will assist the residence head in creating opportunities to engage students in real problems and in collaborative learning for deep learning. The challenge to achieving SSL3 would be the expertise of the residence head in structuring meaningful and effective educational engagement opportunities.

Coach – Educational skill set required for SSL4: Ultimately, acting as a coach for particularly more senior students will enable the residence head to demonstrate role-model leadership to students. Bronfenbrenner put forward an integrated and holistic learning process model (Bronfenbrenner, 1995, 1999) called a "bioecological model" (Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 2006, p. 795). The core of the model consists of four principal components with dynamic interactive relationships amongst these components. The four principal components are: process (Pr), person (P), context (C) and time (T). Residence heads aiming at enhancing graduate attributes towards employability should understand that for holistic development and learning, students (P) must engage and interact (Pr) within their residence environment (C) over a period of time (T) to contribute to the attainment of appropriate graduate attributes. This preferred role for the residence head should be a blended role of *being* a leader in the residence environment who is *doing* the educational role (enacting these educational skill sets) and in so doing, promoting the various student success levels with an integrated and holistic mindset. The challenge to achieving SSL4 is acquiring the competencies and finding the time to coach students.

The empirical study, which is explicated below, was done against the backdrop of the student success framework, while the framework at the same time served as the conceptual framework or theoretical 'lens' through which the research data was interpreted.

Research Methodology and Research Paradigm

The research was conducted within an interpretive research paradigm. As one form of qualitative research, interpretive analysis aims to arrive at a better understanding of the experiences of people interacting within a complex social context (Tuli, 2010). In such a context, the research participation of people close to the phenomenon supports the construction of mental models and meaning-making of experiences (Henning, Van Rensburg & Smith, 2004). Therefore, researchers working in an interpretive paradigm explore phenomena in order to gain an understanding of people's experiences and the deeper meanings of a phenomenon by optimising focus group discussions and personal interviews (Yin, 2014). Within an interpretive paradigm, IQA as an interactive method (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004, p. 44) was regarded as ideal for this research study. IQA is discussed in more detail below in the section on research method.

Research Design

The research design selected for this study was an embedded single-case study. Yin (2014, p. 51) argues that there are five reasons for selecting a single-case research design,

namely that it is a critical single case, a common single case, a longitudinal single case, an unusual single case, or a revelatory single case. The Ministerial Committee Report (DHET, 2011), referred to earlier, highlighted the comprehensive residential education practices at SU as an example of good practice. Exploring these comprehensive practices formed the rationale for a revelatory single-case study of SU residences. Moreover, the holistic nature of the residential education practices justified the exploration of this phenomenon at SU. The research design was therefore also explorative in nature. Explorative case studies focus on explaining a social phenomenon within a specific social context (Bleijenberg, 2010). This case study, as an explorative and revelatory embedded single-case design, had four embedded units (Yin, 2014) that formed the population for the study.

Population

It goes without saying that the SU residence heads formed the central population unit of this study. The second population unit of importance were the students. Given the institutional context of SU as a historically white university, that is slowly but surely transforming, we considered it appropriate to distinguish between first-generation students (FGS), and second- (and more) generation (traditional) students (S+GS) in this population unit. Lastly, senior institutional administrators as the creators and custodians of institutional policies were also regarded as an important population unit. Therefore, the four embedded units in this single case study were: residence heads, second-, third- or fourth-generation students (S+GS),[1] first-generation students (FGS)[2] and senior administrators. Because of the critical inputs of the members of each of these population units in the research results, they are discussed in more detail below.

Unit 1 consisted of the residence heads at SU. Each of the more than 30 SU residences has a residence head. The role of the SU residence head is a secondary position within the institution. This means a residence head already has another primary appointment at SU. The secondary role of the residence head is performed mostly after normal working hours. As residence heads are close to the phenomenon and the focus of this study, and have some influence and power over student success in residences, their experiences and insights were important for seeking answers to the research question of this study.

Considering the historical background of SU and where the institution currently finds itself on its transformation journey, we decided to differentiate between two units from the student population. Unit 2 denotes the traditional (second+generation) residential students (S+GS) of SU. For many years, S+GS have had the strongest influence on traditions within the SU residences (and to a large extent still do). More recently, though, S+GS have been influenced by the ResEd Programme, which has led to the re-thinking of long-held traditions within SU residences. Because of their influence on traditions and change, these S+GS formed an important population for this study. Unit 3 consisted of the residential

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1 S+GS are students whose parents, grandparents and even great-grandparents are or were SU alumni.
2 FGS are students whose parents did not study at a university.

first-generation students (FGS) of SU. A small but growing FGS population is currently accessing SU and is increasingly gaining placement in SU residences. Their experience of the residence environment, and of the broader university environment, differs substantially from those of S+GS – hence splitting them into two population units. Both FGS and S+GS are close to the phenomenon, are influenced by the role (power) of the residence head and were therefore important populations for the study.

Unit 4 included senior administrators who have the most power over the SU residence environment. Although they do not reside in residences, these administrators give strategic direction, take decisions, formulate policy and oversee policy implementation in the SU residences. The significance of their strategic role made the contribution of this population important in seeking to answer the research question for this study. Sampling for this single-case study occurred from each of the four units.

Sampling

By means of both purposive and convenience sampling, individuals in the four units were selected to participate in the study on the basis of their rich experiences, which would contribute to a deeper understanding of the phenomenon (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007, 2011). We purposively approached residence heads who had engaged with both FG and S+G students to send us the names and contact details of potential participants. We sampled 30 students (about 80 references were provided) and sent a personal email and WhatsApp invitation to each student. Eighteen students responded after a further personal telephone call. Of these, 10 were FG students and eight were S+G students. Furthermore, we purposively sampled residence heads, who in our observation were intentional residential educators. Eight of the 12 residence heads who were approached accepted the personal invitation.

Research Method

IQA takes as point of departure that people closest to a phenomenon or problem are able to provide appropriate solutions to the problem. Northcutt and McCoy (2004) acknowledge that IQA uses tools from various other research methods, such as observation from ethnographic research, focus group discussion from market research, and the concept of mapping. Furthermore, various theories influence IQA, such as grounded theory, field theory and, primarily, general systems theory (Du Preez & Du Preez, 2012; Hendry, 2005; Human-Vogel, 2006; Northcutt & McCoy, 2004, pp. xxi–xxiv; Von Bertalanffy, 1972).

As a rigorous qualitative research method, IQA (Bargate, 2014; Du Preez & Du Preez, 2012; Human-Vogel & Mahlangu, 2009; Human-Vogel & Van Petegem, 2008; Mampane & Bouwer, 2011; Smith & Leonard, 2005) has been applied for data gathering and data analysis in different fields of master's and doctoral studies such as curriculum studies (Robertson, 2015) and economic and management sciences (Nienaber, 2013). IQA has four distinct phases: phase 1, the research design phase; phase 2, the focus group discussion phase; phase 3, the interview phase; and phase 4, the report phase (Northcutt & McCoy, 2004, p. 44). The qualitative responses from the focus group discussions and the individual interviews were analysed by means of open and axial coding, from which themes

emerged which guided the researchers in answering the research question on what the preferred educational skill sets for residence heads would be in order to promote a holistic student success framework. What transpired from the analysis of the research data in many respects confirmed the educational skill sets required by the residence head as proposed in the student success framework (Table 1). How this emerged from the inputs of the four population units is illustrated below.

Findings

Residence heads concurred that the residence head who plays an educational role is pivotal in promoting student success. This population unit defined their educational role holistically, suggesting that it should contribute to student learning that reaches beyond degree attainment. During the IQA focus group discussion this educational role was defined by residence heads as "*guiding them [students] from the unknown [SSL0] to the known [SSL2] to them leaving res into the working world [SSL4] … cultivating a solid basis for the development of graduate attributes [SSL4]*". Furthermore, the personal interviews with residence heads and senior management highlighted the importance of the residence head possessing a variety of skill sets to perform this educational role, such as facilitation and coaching skills.

A residence head expressed the importance of facilitation skills [SSL3] as follows: "*… when you facilitate you need to mediate, and that really requires particular skill.*" Furthermore, senior management indicated the importance of coaching [SSL4] stating that the residence head "*is the coach of graduate attributes in the co-curricular sense*".

Although FG and S+G students experienced the SU residence environment differently, the research findings demonstrate considerable congruence in the expectations of these two groups of students regarding the educational role of future residence heads. All the students who were interviewed, indicated that the residence head should be a leader who, amongst others, should inspire [SSL0]: "*A residence head should be able to lead and be accountable for their decisions and inspire others to be leaders.*" Furthermore, the residence head should be "*someone you [student] can look up to for leadership, also for mentorship*" [SSL1]. As managers, residence heads should deliberately structure involvement opportunities [SSL2], so that residence heads "*are actively involved in the process maybe of [student] planning … being the liaison between the res and outside factors*". Further, the residence head as leader should adopt multiple and flexible leadership styles that enable student engagement and collaboration in teams with students [SSL3]. An FG student said: "*By doing this, it will help create more leaders, and build stronger leadership qualities. A residence head should be a team player by knowing when to lead and when to follow or engage with the students.*"

From the students' perspective, the optimal role of the residence head is that of *being* that leader. For the students, this *being* role as leader involves much more than managing the residence building but implies assuming an educational role. This educational role that emerged from the research showed that the residence head should be intentional in coaching [SSL4], facilitating [SSL3], managing [SSL2], mentoring [SSL1] and inspiring [SSL0] in the residence environment. This pivotal educational *doing* role is a blend of various skill sets, which could promote student success at various levels, as seen in the conceptual student success framework (Table 1).

Conclusion

Our research has shown that the residence environment provides manifold opportunities for rich out-of-class learning experiences to occur. For this to happen residence heads need to be leaders with an intentional educational mindset promoting the conceptualised holistic student success framework. The residence head's leadership skill sets as intentional educator should be to inspire, to mentor, to manage, to facilitate and to coach. These preferred skill sets are practical and will equip residence heads to promote student success at all levels. These preferred skill sets of the residence head should influence the job description and policies regarding the role of the residence head at universities. The significant finding of the study is that the preferred role of the future residence head is a blended one which comprises *being* a leader and *doing* an intentional educational role with the preferred educational skill sets, underpinned by theory, that will enable the residence head to promote student success.

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