

ABSTRACT
TRAUMA EXPOSURE AND RESIDENT ASSISTANTS:
A STUDY OF MEANING MAKING

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Resident assistants are at the front line of crisis management within college campus residence halls. As such, it is imperative that student affairs professionals consider the specific needs of this paraprofessional group and build networks to guide these student leaders through the traumatic occurrences to which they respond through their roles. This dissertation studies the impact of resident assistants' exposure to traumatic occurrences and the meaning-making that happens following these experiences, in an effort to expand a knowledge base that will support future student development practices.

This dissertation employs a phenomenological approach to qualitatively understand the impact of trauma exposure on resident assistants and the individual meaning making that takes place for resident assistants related to this trauma exposure. The main research question guiding this dissertation is *how do resident assistants make meaning of their exposure to trauma?* By qualitatively examining narratives of current resident assistants, this research develops student affairs professionals' understandings of the ways that individual resident assistants experience the shared phenomenon of trauma exposure – thus allowing for changes in training, support, and response. This research also extends knowledge on the impact of trauma exposure for college student resident assistants.

Findings of this study are presented within a framework of understanding the phenomenon of trauma exposure, including the types of traumatic situations to which resident assistants respond, the context of the resident assistant experience, including the institutional paradigm within which their positions take shape, and how resident assistants make meaning of their exposure to trauma, including the learning, reflected growth, and changes that research participants shared as outcomes to their experienced trauma exposure.

Implications for research, along with suggestions for support and training for resident assistants, are included. A movement toward trauma-informed student affairs practices is briefly reviewed. These suggestions offer myriad opportunities for consideration, including future research topics, additional training opportunities, staffing practices, and more.