



# Living, Learning, & Leading in Residence Life: A Research Study

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## Residents Assistants' Leadership Efficacy

Brayden J. Roberts & Krista M. Soria

Resident assistants play an indisputably important role in college and university housing as they help to connect residents with campus resources (Servaty-Seib & Taub, 2010), socialize and develop relationships with other students (Manata et al., 2017; Roland & Agosto, 2017), and integrate within the greater college community (Blimling, 2010).

Resident assistants also promote greater university outcomes by facilitating students' engagement and retention through programming (Soria & Taylor, Jr., 2016), imparting university values, and promoting student learning outcomes (Healea, 2006).

Yet, while much is known about how resident assistants contribute to their institutions, little is known about the developmental outcomes resident assistants gain through their experiences (Martin & Blechschmidt, 2014). Specifically, even though leadership is often an implicit expectation or explicit requirement in resident assistants' position descriptions (Benjamin & Davis, 2016), little is known about the potential for resident assistants to develop leadership outcomes from their paraprofessional training, interpersonal interactions or relationships, and leadership experiences.

Researchers have left breadcrumbs pointing toward the potential impact of serving as a resident assistant on students' leadership efficacy; however, there is still a void in terms of understanding whether serving in a resident assistant capacity itself is associated with leadership efficacy. The purpose of this paper is to examine whether resident assistants have a significantly different leadership efficacy compared to their peers who are not resident assistants.

## Methods

We utilized data collected as part of the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership (MSL), which was administered at eight of the 14 Big Ten Coalition universities in spring 2018. The MSL is an international research program that examines the influence of higher education on undergraduates' leadership development. Each institution invited 4,000 randomly-selected students to participate in the survey. The response rate was 22.81% ( $n = 7,298$ ). We narrowed our sample of students down ( $n = 452$ ), with half who were resident assistants ( $n = 226$ ) and half who were not resident assistants ( $n = 226$ ).

We used propensity score matching techniques to match resident assistants in the "treatment" condition with undergraduate students who were not resident assistants in the "control" condition. We also used a variety of covariates in matching, including high school leadership experiences, pre-college leadership efficacy, campus residency status, academic majors, self-reported grade averages, and additional measures of leadership participation (e.g., frequency of holding a leadership position or involvement in off-campus communities).

We also included demographic covariate measures including students' self-reported gender, age, race/ethnicity, transfer status, and students' first-generation status. Our dependent measure included students' leadership efficacy, which we measured through student confidence in leading others, organizing a group's tasks to accomplish a goal, taking initiative to improve something, and working with a team on a group project. We used factor analysis to develop the pre-college leadership efficacy variable. Finally, we examined the relationship between serving as a resident assistant and our dependent variable using least squares ordinary regression.

## Results

The results of the analyses suggest that students who serve as resident assistants have significantly higher leadership efficacy ( $\beta = .265, p < .001$ ) than students who were not resident assistants.

## Discussion & Limitations

The results of our analysis suggest that resident assistants have significantly higher leadership efficacy compared to their matched group of peers who did not serve as resident assistants. Resident assistants had significantly higher confidence in their ability to lead others, organize a group's tasks to accomplish goals, take initiative to improve something, and work with a team on a group project.

We hypothesize that some of the effects could be attributed to the intensive mentorship with student affairs professionals that often takes place in resident assistant positions (Early, 2016).

We also believe that consistent opportunities to engage in leadership tasks, resident assistant training, and feedback also contributed to increased leadership efficacy (Gist & Mitchell, 1992).

The results of this study have several implications for housing and residence life staff. Housing and residence life staff can highlight the potential benefit of increased leadership confidence to better name potential learning outcomes and contribute to potential resident assistants' understanding of the value of the role. Naming leadership efficacy as a developmental outcome, housing and residence life staff can also provide feedback on students' development and draw attention to additional opportunities resident assistants have in increasing their leadership efficacy (Benjamin & Davis, 2016).

## Recommended APA Citation

Roberts, B. J., & Soria, K. M. (2021). *Living on campus: Resident assistants' leadership efficacy*. University of Minnesota Office of Institutional Research, Assessment, and Policy Analysis.

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## About the Study

The Principal Investigator for this project is Dr. Krista Soria ([ksoria@umn.edu](mailto:ksoria@umn.edu)) and the Research Assistant is Brayden Roberts. The research is sponsored by the [Association of College and University Housing Officers-International](#), the [ACUHO-I Research & Education Foundation](#), and [National Association of College and University Residence Halls](#).