

THE INFLUENCE OF A COMMUNITY ORGANIZING PROJECT  
ON RESIDENT ASSISTANT'S UNDERSTANDING OF LEADERSHIP, GENDER  
INEQUALITIES, AND LONG TERM CAREER DEVELOPMENT

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## ABSTRACT

RAs are arguably the most important set of student leaders on a college campus. The RA establishes the tone for the residential building, enforces university policy, and acts as a counselor, mentor, and friend. For many first year students the RA is the first person they meet when they move in and the person who will most likely influence their decision making during their first few weeks on campus. This phenomenological case study explored the experiences of resident assistants at Mid-Atlantic Private University who participated in the Community Organizing Pilot Project. Social capital theory and organizational change and development theory provided the conceptual framework and lens by which to understand how and in what ways participation in the community organizing project changed the participants own understandings. The main method of data collection was the use of 21 semi-structured interviews of RA participants.

Study results indicated RAs experienced their leadership role by understanding and experiencing the influence that using community organizing practices had on their residential community and university community in regards to relationship building and enhanced communication. RAs used community organizing tenets to build strong relationships with and amongst their residents. These strong relationships led to increasing the social capital of some of the residents. The utilization of community organizing tenets gave quieter students and concerned students a voice and a medium by which to speak their thoughts, and the safe space and positive foundation to speak with the RA if concerns arose. Additionally, RAs who approach their current profession from a community organizer lens are finding that the techniques learned are applicable to their current profession and personal life.

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The community organizing skills, specifically the one-to-one meetings and concept of building a community of shared interest, permeated these young professionals' career development and interconnection of their own network. This was significant as the literature available on the use of community organizing practices in higher education is very limited. This study holds implications for college student affairs practitioners.

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## **Chapter 1:**

### **Introduction**

Resident assistants (RAs) are students, most often undergraduates, who are hired by colleges and universities to provide a host of services related to helping and counseling the students who live in college residence halls (Blimling, 2010). RAs are arguably the most important sets of student leaders on a college campus. The RA establishes the tone for the residential building, enforces university policy, and acts as a counselor, mentor, and friend. For many first year students the RA is the first person they meet when they move in and the person who will most likely influence their decision making during their first few weeks on campus. RAs are trained to address a myriad of issues that may arise including but not limited to homesickness, alcohol use or intoxication, roommate conflicts, relationship issues, and how to access campus resources. The RA serves as a first responder for their area/group of residents and as a programmer. Resident assistants serve many roles, one of which is as a paraprofessional or peer counselor (Blimling, 2010). Multiple departments within universities rely on RAs to support the overall university mission.

Student Life professionals are continuously evaluating and re-imaging the role of the RA to better serve the communities in which they live, while supporting and enhancing the experience of the RA. Since the Middle Ages, universities have provided some form of oversight and assistance to students (Cowley, 1934). In the 13<sup>th</sup> century when universities were forming in Europe, a need was identified to provide student housing and within the housing it was necessary to provide a degree of oversight to the student residences (Cowley, 1934; Rudolph, 1990). Since this early discovery for the need for supervision, to the current position of resident assistant,

many changes have taken place. Not only have the demographics of student populations changed, so too has the role of the RA.

Arguably the resident assistant position has become increasingly difficult in recent years. Dodge (1990) states that officials at several institutions say a few resident assistants quit each semester because the job becomes too trying. Taking this information into account, Mid-Atlantic Private University has redefined the position of the resident assistant. By undertaking a pilot project that utilized community organizing and asset theory as the framework, RAs were provided a new lens by which to approach their position.

This phenomenological case study examined the experiences of resident assistants at Mid-Atlantic Private University participating in the new structure, specifically the Community Organizing Pilot Project. Social capital theory and community organizing theory provided the conceptual framework and lens by which to see how this new RA role impacts the university, the student population, and most importantly, the RA.

### **Purpose**

By engaging resident assistants (RAs) and other members of the college community in community organizing activities, Mid-Atlantic Private University aimed to increase levels of developmental assets among participants and, in turn, reduce their health-risk behaviors. The purpose of this dissertation research was to understand the effect of participation in the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community Organizing Pilot Project on the RAs. Individual RAs were interviewed to explore if any changes in their own knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs resulted from participating in this project. I was interested as to whether RAs developed a growing sense of agency, desire and/or capacity to initiate change, an increased intentionality about choices, and the capacity for self-reflection.

At Mid-Atlantic Private University, the colleges are the center of residential life and offer an array of academic and social programs that enhance the undergraduate experience. The Community Organizing Pilot Project attempted to utilize a unique framework to change the role of the RA and in-turn enhanced the lived experience for residents. To fully understand the potential effect and relevance of this phenomenological case study, it was important to be aware of the framework, background, and expectations of the Community Organizing Pilot Project. Mid-Atlantic Private University attempted to change the traditional way in which resident assistants think about their role. By conducting this phenomenological case study, I hope to understand the impact of this new model on the participating resident assistants.

### **Framework of the Pilot Project**

The Community Organizing Pilot Project was grounded in the 40 Developmental Asset Framework (Search Institute, 1997) and community organizing theory. Developmental assets are the positive attributes, experiences, and attitudes that have been deemed essential for successful psychosocial development. Research on developmental assets reveals that youth who possess more assets are more likely to engage in thriving behaviors and less likely to engage in high risk behaviors, including alcohol and other drug use, sexual risk behavior, unhealthy eating behaviors, depression and suicidal behavior, and violence (Search Institute, 1997). Mid-Atlantic Private University further tailored the external assets to its own institution and clustered them into six constructs: social connectedness, positive residential college climate, engagement, social competencies, positive identity, and positive values/character.

The main programmatic activities of the Pilot Project included RA training in community organizing (i.e., self-assessment, power mapping, individual meetings, facilitated group meetings) and asset-building techniques; professional staff training on asset development; RA-

resident individual meetings; RA group standard-setting contracts; mini-grants program for asset-building activities; and advanced opportunities for RAs to practice community organizing skills in the community. Essentially, these activities were meant to transition RAs and other community members at Mid-Atlantic Private University from just problem-solvers for individual residents to builders of participatory residential communities (Castle, Towey, Carolina, & Trent, 2009).

The Residential College Community Organizing Pilot Project was innovative in that it strove to leverage community assets to advance the health and collegiate experience of Mid-Atlantic Private University first year students. The residential college system creates a network of interactions that uses students to inspire and influence each other, creating a unique and self-established community. The Pilot Project was designed to maximize intentional student engagement in the residential college community, ensuring healthy thriving behavior under the guidance and influence of other students, including the RA. By emphasizing the valuable roles of the students, the university hoped to minimize direct intervention and allow the natural capabilities of the students to mature and grow.

### **Background of Pilot Project**

Like many universities, Mid-Atlantic Private University has identified as a goal the reduction of high-risk drinking among its undergraduate student population. To that end, the university created, in December of 2007, an Alcohol Coalition Committee (ACC) charged with developing a strategic plan to organize campus efforts. The ACC's plan, released in May of 2008, identified, among other areas for attention, the institutions and environment that shape student experiences and influence the drinking culture. The University had also recently created new opportunities for improving the institutions and environment encountered by students by

transforming its residential college system. By training resident assistants in the skills of community organizing, the Pilot Project hoped to increase levels of civic engagement and social responsibility among participants and promote healthy behaviors, specifically those related to mental health and alcohol use (Castle & Trent, 2008).

### **Activities of the Pilot Project RAs**

The main programmatic activities included:

1. *RA Training:* While RAs at Mid-Atlantic Private University had traditionally been seen as problem-solvers for individual residents, Pilot Project participant RAs were expected to serve as builders of participatory residential communities. Pilot Project participant RAs were trained during pre-orientation on community organizing techniques, including: conducting individual meetings and group norm-setting meetings; understanding power to facilitate making change; moving groups from ideas to action; and teaching others all of these skills. The goal of the training program was to enable RAs not only to serve as leaders in the colleges but also to encourage leadership from among their residents (Castle & Trent, 2008).
2. *RA-Resident Individual Meetings:* Each RA supervised a group of 30-40 residents. RAs needed to hold 30-60 minute individual meetings with each of their residents in the first few weeks of the academic year. Individual meetings in this context went beyond traditional RA-resident meetings in their reciprocity, depth of conversation, and action-oriented approach. Individual meetings require both participants to be self-disclosing, probing, intentional, trusting, and honest, and at the end of the meeting both participants needed to have clearly identified next steps they would take to advance their common interests or achieve a shared asset-based vision for their community. The emphasis on follow-up actions augmented community bonds through mutual accountability. These meetings followed the format used



by community organizers as they sought leaders and members for effective community organizations. The goals of these meetings were to help the RAs understand their residents individually and as a collective; to convey to the residents that their voices and views were valued; and to discover areas of shared concern and interest among the residents that might form the basis for collective work to improve one or more communities (i.e., the advisee group, the residential college, and beyond) (Castle & Trent, 2008).

3. *Group Norm-Setting*: RAs held norm-setting meetings of their resident groups, which gave residents an opportunity to participate in determining the conditions under which they would live and allowed them to begin forming a public culture within their residential environments. RAs adopted an organizing approach to their resident group meetings by facilitating group processes on a consensus or collective action model; this model explicitly valued inclusion and leaves each resident with a clear understanding of how he or she would work with others to achieve a shared vision for their community (Castle & Trent, 2008).
4. *Mini-Grant Program*: RAs were expected to create or take advantage of additional opportunities to build assets among residents throughout the year. RAs actively promoted an environment in which diverse students could discover ways to work together to improve their residential communities, the campus community, and communities beyond the boundaries of the campus. The mini-grant program supplemented RAs' current programming budget to encourage the development of greater engaged learning opportunities. Building on networking skills learned from community organizing, RAs used the mini-grant program to connect students to each other and to opportunities for engagement in which they were invested (Castle & Trent, 2008).

5. *Additional Engaged Learning Opportunities for RAs:* So that RAs could hone their newly acquired community organizing skills beyond the Mid-Atlantic Private University campus, they were connected to partner organizations in neighboring communities outside of Mid-Atlantic Private University. RAs had the option to support and learn from the work of expert organizers engaged in ongoing community-based campaigns (Castle & Trent, 2008).
6. *Engage All Segments of College Life in Asset-Building:* All members of the Pilot Project residential college communities, including professional staff, graduate students, faculty advisors, and upper-class students, were educated on community-organizing principles and the benefits of the asset-based approach. This education allowed for transparency of project goals, helped to strengthen buy-in from residential college members, and developed a common language on which to base consistent messaging to students. The project team worked with these partners to create and implement strategies so that all were engaged in contributing to an asset-based community (Castle & Trent, 2008).

Resident assistants have the potential to significantly shape the collegiate experience of their residents. Utilizing community organizing practices in a residential community is an innovative approach to shape those experiences for the better. By applying those principals to a university setting, RAs at Mid-Atlantic Private University were given the tools to help create a more supportive, community-oriented residential community for first-year students. In Chapter Two, research on community organizing and social capital theory was explored to provide a framework by which to make meaning of the community organizing case study at Mid-Atlantic Private University.

## CHAPTER 2:

**Literature Review & Conceptual Framework**

This phenomenological case study explored the experiences of resident assistants at Mid-Atlantic Private University who participated in the Community Organizing Pilot Project. To conceptualize my research, the researcher drew on literature of community organizing and social capital theory. This literature provided a framework and lens by which to see how this new RA role influenced the university, the student population, and most importantly the RA. It informed my research lens—framing my research agenda, my research methodology, and my overall meaning-making of the entire research process.

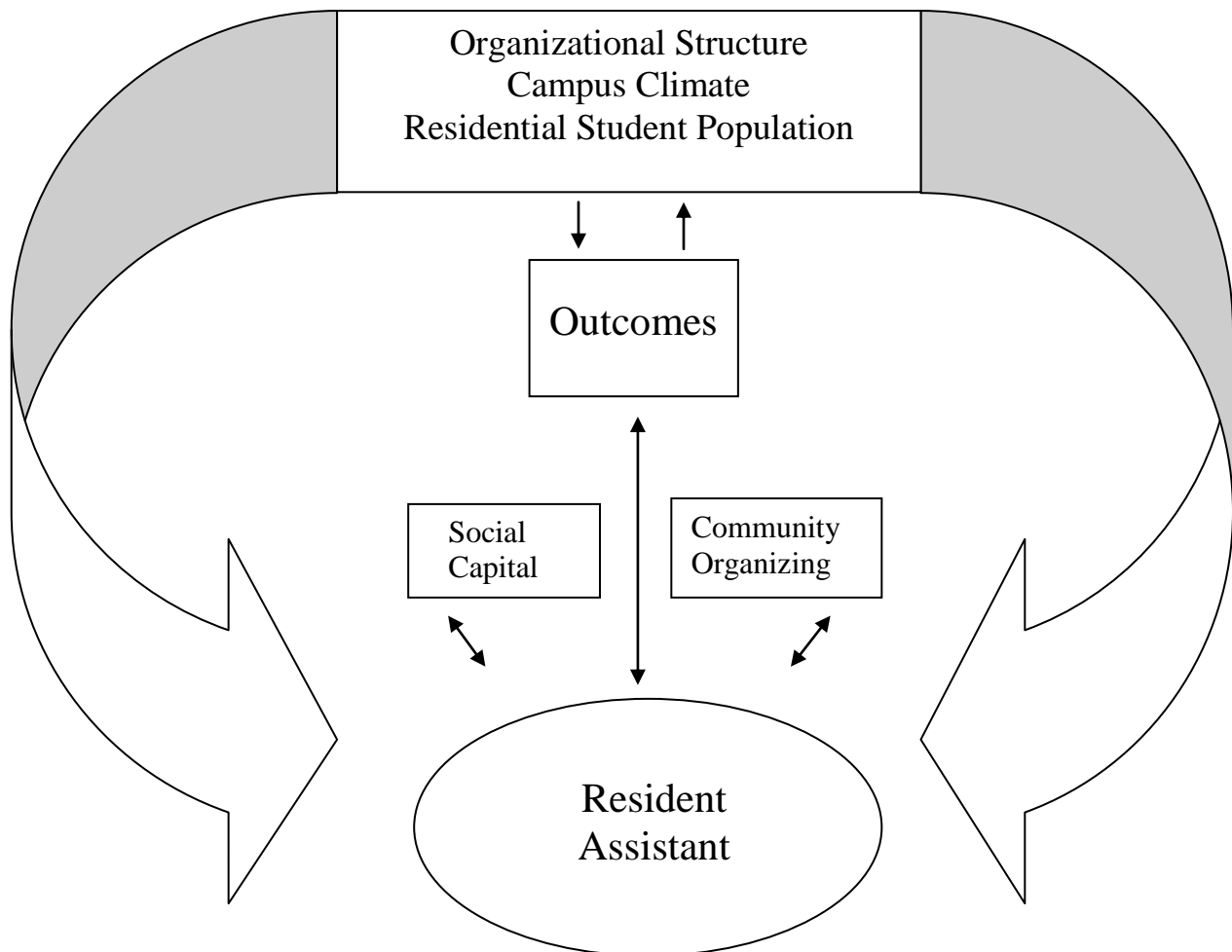


Figure 1. Conceptual Framework. This figure illustrates the conceptual framework of the Community Organizing Pilot Project.

Colleges and universities exist to educate students. Departments within a university strive to educate students through both a curricular academic approach and a co-curricular student life approach. This researcher believes that for most college students, the learning that occurs outside the classroom is not a conscious quantifiable academic educational moment, but rather a collection of teachable moments that slowly change and define the student.

King and Baxter Magolda (1996) have asserted, “A successful educational experience simultaneously increases cognitive understanding and a sense of personal maturity and interpersonal effectiveness” (pp. 163-4). In *Greater Expectations* (AAC&U, 2002), the Association of American Colleges and Universities posits three key learning outcomes that are fundamental to the development of intentional, lifelong learners in the twenty-first century: Students should become empowered through the development of many intellectual and practical skills; students must take responsibility for their own learning and their participation in the civic processes of our democracy; and students must become informed about conditions that affect their lives in the US and as citizens of many wider communities. In a different formulation, Magolda (1999) identifies four dimensions of learning that specify desired outcomes: cognitive competence, intrapersonal competence, interpersonal competence, and practical competence. Using this as a foundation framework, the experience of the resident assistants participating in the Community Organizing Pilot Project can be explored.

Student development is one interpretation of human development in adulthood. Mezirow (2000) describes development in adulthood “as a learning process - a phased and often transformative process of meaning becoming clarified through expanded awareness, critical reflection, validating discourse, and reflective action as one moves toward a fuller realization of agency” (p. 25). Students are continuously receiving information, processing it and applying the

information to their frame of reference or life experiences. In some cases the information will reframe their thought processes as circumstances continue to change.

### **Organizational Change and Development**

This researcher argues that learning occurs in conscious and unconscious ways as people acquire information, process it and apply it in multiple ways. To more fully understand the experiences of the resident assistants who participated in the Community Organizing Pilot Project, it may be helpful to think of Mid-Atlantic Private University as an integrated system. The purpose of that system is to support learning in various contexts throughout campus.

Kuh (2003) notes that “organizational theory is a window through which to view the behavior of individuals and groups in the context of complex organizational structures” (p. 270). Kuh (2003) contrasts the conventional view of organizations, which views them as “individualized, top down, and control focused on predictability,” with post conventional organizations, which are “interdependent, unpredictable, less-structured, relationship centered, ever changing, and ambiguous” (p. 270). Other authors agree with Kuh’s sentiment and call for institutions to broaden their scope to meet the changing needs of a twenty-first century world (Allen & Cherrey, 2000; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen & Allen, 1999; Senge, 2006). This paradigm shift recognizes learning as intentional, contextual, and relational, occurring through dialogue and collective reflection (Howton, 2011). Organizations, therefore, are called to develop and maintain structures and systems that facilitate such learning and subsequently develop “communities of practice.”

The term “communities of practice” was first used by Lave and Wenger in their 1991 book *Situated Learning*. Wenger (1997) argued that “learning is the engine of practice, and practice is the history of that learning. Consequently, communities of practice have life cycles

that reflect such a process” (p. 39). Peck (1987) defined a learning community as “a group of individuals who have learned to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure...and who delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own” (p. 59). Learning communities are fostered by organizations that value “democratic accountability, a reconception of the role of the individual in organizations, and an acceptance that change starts at the individual level, with individuals taking responsibility for the collective outcomes of their own and the organization’s practices” (Preskill & Torres, 1999, p. 15). Preskill and Torres (1999) further describe the behaviors of learning communities: that they pursue issues of common interest and practice; seek consensus in decision-making processes; are empowered to act; rely on one another for information and learning; see themselves as part of the larger whole (more than the sum of their individual relationships); support the sharing of divergent ideas; respect each other’s gifts; engage in self-examination; engage in critical reflection; provide opportunities to hear dissenting opinions; and create a spirit of cooperation rather than competition (Preskill & Torres, 1999).

Specific to the institution of higher education, Kuh (2003) views “colleges and universities as complex, open systems, influenced by external events and changing environments....encouraging the sharing of information within, across, and beyond organizational boundaries” (p. 276). Applying this concept to higher education, one can argue that departments within colleges and universities should understand and leverage relationships to facilitate individual and organizational, internal and external development (Howton, 2011). This is true also in regards to the role of the resident assistant. One can argue that student affairs professionals and resident assistants should also be able to understand and leverage relationships to facilitate individual student learning and university priorities. By training the RAs in

community organizing practices, Mid-Atlantic Private University attempted to provide the framework for a community of learning. After students' "masks of composure" are removed, true dialogue may occur, which may be facilitated by an RA.

To improve organizational effectiveness in higher education, Allen and Cherrey (2000) offer this directive for organizational effectiveness in higher education: departments should foster trusting and learning environments; develop emotional intelligence; share information; boundary span; create relational charts; offer communities of solutions; learn to accept the complexities of the system; and use new forms of cohesion that help organizations retain direction without control. Arguably, student affairs, in this conceptualization by Allen and Cherrey (2000), is integral to the learning process because of the opportunities it provides students to learn through action, contemplation, reflection and emotional engagement as well as information acquisition. For example, each resident assistant is provided learning opportunities for themselves and provides learning opportunities for their residents. Serving as an RA provides a student the opportunity to develop and hone leadership skills, public speaking skills, crisis management skills, communication skills, and collaboration and also builds self-confidence.

### **Community Organizing**

Community organizing has historically been used to organize and rally people for change. It is truly a grass-roots, people-driven method for change. Although the concept of community organizing may conjure images of 1960's radicals using confrontational tactics to demand changes from a company or institution, consensus-driven organizing is now a mainstream strategy for facilitating involvement, establishing trust, and building consensus among all key stakeholders with vested interests in social problems (Eichler, 1995). Blackwell & Colmenar (2000) state that community organizing principles focus on starting where the

people are and addresses issues that are relevant to the constituency. Simply defined, community organizing is a process by which diverse community stakeholders determine issues to be addressed and identify strategies to effectively create positive changes to achieve an agreed upon common goal. The strength of community organizing lies with focusing on the people of the community; active participation; skill-building; the ability to promote individual and community capacity as community members assess needs; planning strategically; and implementing action steps (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2005).

Consensus-driven community organizing focuses on developing a shared public purpose by bringing people together to identify problems, generate solutions, and motivate decision makers to make change (DeSouza & Briggs, 2003). Consensus building and consensus organizing skills are essential for fostering partnerships on all levels, which can be applied to the Community Organizing Pilot Project. Participants need to bring the community of residents together to identify issues of concern or importance to the residents, by facilitating discussions, building relationships, performing administrative tasks, and resolving conflicts.

Zakocs et al (2008, p. 240) found that staff members with consensus-based organizing skills were better able to carry out the important tasks of partnership building. Other researchers studying community organizing have found that staff with community organizing skills, such as RAs, are better able to build community capacity (Zakocs & Guckenburg, 2007) and these staff members are viewed as effective project directors (Alexander, Zakocs, Earp, & French, 2006). As such, resident assistants participating in this project should have a strong ability to build capacity and be effective project directors. These findings are congruent with recommendations of experienced college personnel to hire a community organizer to facilitate partnerships because they possess requisite skills for working with stakeholders and negotiating politics such as town-



gown relations (Major & Workman, 2006). Zakocs and colleagues clearly argue that based on their multi-site case study, colleges should look to hire applicants with community organizing skills and experience if the job responsibilities include facilitating partnerships (2008, p. 240).

Community organizing also relies heavily on participation by the community members for the benefit of the community in an environment in which all individuals feel empowered as they work together to problem-solve. Newer conceptualizations of community organizing embrace these principles while focusing on community growth and change from within. This is achieved through increased group identification; discovery, nurture, and mapping of community assets; and creation of a critical consciousness. It is important that community organizing acknowledges the larger systems in which communities are functioning. By building relationships with external resources, organizations can be more effective (Blackwell & Colmenar, 2000).

Lawrence Wallack (1993, p. 5) argued that “contemporary public health is as much about facilitating a process whereby communities use their voice to define and make their health concerns known as it is about providing prevention and treatment.” Utilizing community organizing techniques in health education is an innovative and effective way to create change. In the United States many community-based organizations have developed and mobilized to educate against HIV/AIDS, domestic violence, smoking, alcohol abuse, and lack of health care (Minkler, 2007). These projects employ cross-collaborative cooperation and high-level public participants to create change (Norries & Pittman, 2000). The concepts of empowerment and community participation, defined as the “twin pillars” of the new health promotion movement (Robertson & Minkler, 1994), are essential concepts to apply to the community organizing project in which the RAs are participating.

Traynor argues for a “new process of community organizing – one relying less on issue based mobilization and more on community education, leadership development and support, and building local sustainable organizations” (1993, p. 22). By educating the RAs and adapting community organizing ideas to the university setting, change is possible.

According to Minkler (2007, p. 41), “a major limitation of most community organizing and community building efforts has been a failure to address evaluation process and outcomes adequately.” Minkler further explains that this lack of formal evaluation and the failure of many community organizing projects to write up and publish their results makes it difficult to amass a literature of successful and unsuccessful programs and the hallmarks for each. More current initiatives have begun to include evaluative process, but the body of literature in this area is unfortunately shallow.

However, the literature on community organizing is extensive in regards to neighborhood capacity building and programming. In regards to education, research is emerging that shows community organizing, when utilized well in a district over time, is positively related to improvements in student outcomes. Schools engaged with community organizing had higher student educational outcomes, including higher attendance, test score performance, high school completion, and college going aspirations (Warren & Mapp, 2001). Interesting programs across the country are utilizing community organizing to empower neighborhoods and positively influence school reform in their communities (Bryk, 2010).

Although there is a robust research base regarding neighborhood community organizing, there has been little in regards to RA/college community organizing. Avila (2013) speaks to her experience of creating a community organizing model at Occidental College. For Avila, the community organizing practices employed focused on bringing about long-term social and

cultural transformation through a slow, reciprocal, relational process (Avila, 2010, p. 39).

Participants in the Occidental partnerships experienced a strengthening and broadening of community as well as collaboration, shared ownership and development (Avila, 2010, p. 53).

Although the Occidental research occurred across community and university, these are essential components of a strong community organizing initiative.

The goal of the Occidental Center for Community Based-learning (geared at improving math education in community schools) was to utilize strategies including: relationship building through one-to-one meetings; building a collective of shared leaders to strategize and make decisions; making informed decisions based on an analysis of power dynamics; evaluating and reflecting on progress; and deciding to redirect or change strategies (Avila, 2010, p. 58).

Utilizing this framework, Occidental College was successful in partnering local schools with Occidental math professors, student teachers, and service learning participants to strengthen the math curriculum and create programs that inspired and educated children in the community.

Avila (2010) provides another example of a successful community organizing strategy. While working with a group of parents in the local school, researchers discovered that parents' and teachers' responses were aligned in regards to college success and a safe environment for learning. The gap analysis, however, revealed that parents just wanted to know who the teachers were. By focusing on relationship-building, a stronger sense of community was established and student success increased. Translating this to the university setting, it is important for the RA to engage in relationship building in a way that allows residents to know RAs personally.

Additionally, through community organizing practices a broadening and strengthening of community, as well as collaboration, shared ownership, and personal development, can occur.

Community organizing at the higher education level has been employed as an environmental strategy to prevent college alcohol-related problems (Zakocs, Tiwari, Vehige, & DeJong, 2008). Zakocs and colleagues found that staff members who used community organizing skills and tools were the most effective in the role of facilitators in building successful campus community partnerships. Additionally, for the program to be successful at the institution of higher education, the program needed a high-level administrator to serve as a champion. Using a multi-site case study approach, Zakocs and colleagues selected five colleges and observed their campus-community prevention partnership from Fall 2004 to Summer 2006. Their findings showed that higher-developed partnerships were built by college staff who worked like community organizers; they focused substantial efforts on establishing strong relationships with stakeholders and on building structures and processes that allowed for active stakeholder involvement (2010, p. 237). This was accomplished by personally reaching out to community leaders, meeting often, and being actively involved with the community.

Community organizing on college campuses may present unique challenges because of their complex organizational, social, and cultural structures. In the cases of partnerships with the local community, the existing relationship with the community (town-gown relations) and the political issues embedded in the community may present challenges. Although not all university partnerships are successful, Gebhardt, Kaphingst, and DeJong (2000) explained how a campus-community coalition in New York was able to decrease reports of consequences of off-campus student drinking by increasing enforcement in targeted areas and working with the community members to create a hotline to report student drinking and other off campus issues. Wagoner, Rhodes, Lentz and Wolfson (2010) utilized a grounded theory approach to explore and

characterize the authentic process of community organizing used by university based community organizers.

Although there is extensive research involving the relationship between students and the outside community (Zakocs 2008; Wagoner et al, 2010), this Community Organizing Pilot Project aimed to change the relationship between students from within their place of residence. Community organizing occurs within the dynamics of a community and subsequently a community leader (CO) is needed to organize and spur action. The organizer needs to thoroughly understand the community and power dynamics and have the ability to ignite positive action to improve upon issues of concern (Alinsky, 1971; Minkler & Wallerstein, 2005; Wagoner et al, 2010). The RAs are already in the position of community leader, and they could easily be trained with basic community organizing skills.

### **Social Capital and Sense of Belonging**

The role of the resident assistant is multi-layered. Within their position, the RA works closely to foster a sense of belonging among the residents, not only a sense of belonging within the residential community but also within the university culture. Scholars most often cite the sense of belonging construct (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990; Hurtado & Carter, 1997) as a potential alternative concept for understanding how students may develop a sense of membership in the university (Braxton, 2000). The sense of belonging construct was originally designed to measure a felt sense of social cohesion within a university, city, or country (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990). By applying this concept to the experience of resident assistants, one can see how an RA experiences a sense of social cohesion of their community. While social integration implies an alignment with one predominant set of organizational norms, social cohesion and sense of belonging entail multiple possibilities for forming affiliations with a larger community (Hurtado

& Carter, 1997). Perceptions of racial climate and connections with external communities (including family, social, geographic, and religious communities outside the college) have been found to be significant predictors of sense of belonging and other measures of a successful adjustment to college, such as academic motivation and psychological health (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Hurtado & Carter, 1997).

Gittel and Vidal (1998, p.13) argue that there is an increasing recognition of the potential role of social capital and networks in community development. This not only applies to enhancing conceptual understanding but also strengthening practice. Additionally they argue that organizations, or in the case of higher education, administrators, have a responsibility to cultivate supportive local networks. Hornburg and Lang (1998) surmise that building social capital may give people and communities the connectedness they need to succeed. For researchers in the field of community organizing, defining social capital includes the incorporation of “civic capacity” and “community building.” This allows community organizers to frame community organizing and the concept of social capital in terms of “the capacity of communities to act” rather than in terms of “need” (Gittel & Vidal, 1998, p.14).

The concept of social capital has developed within the theoretical debate and throughout literature. Bourdieu (1997, p. 51) defines social capital as “the aggregate of the actual or potential resources which are linked to possession of a durable network of more or less institutionalized relationships of mutual acquaintance and recognition...which provides each of its members with the backing of collectively-owned capital.” By taking the concept of social capital even farther, one can apply the concept to community organizing in an educational setting. Social capital and community organizing combine to solidify the social position of any particular person or group. By utilizing community organizing in a community, the members of

the community may collectively benefit from each other and the shared experiences, knowledge, and resources. Although this conclusion can be drawn, Bourdieu is cautious in over utilizing the “capital” concept.

Social theorist James Coleman used the concept of social capital to understand the relationship between educational achievement and social inequality (Baron, Field, & Schuller, 2000). Coleman developed his notion of social capital based on the research he did of sophomores in high school. Within the educational context, Coleman defined social capital “as the set of resources that inhere in family relations and in community social organization and that are useful for the cognitive or social development of a young person or child” (Coleman, 1994, p. 300). Coleman illustrated a casual link between social capital and access to resources by arguing that the powerful remained powerful by virtue of contacts with other powerful people. Both Bourdieu and Coleman discuss concern that social capital can be a source of educational advantage.

Putnam (2000, p. 56) offers a more succinct definition of social capital: “by ‘social capital’ I mean features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives.” In his book *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam (2000) argues that our economy and democracy, and even our health and happiness, depend on having adequate stocks of social capital. Putnam argues that women are instrumental in creating and sustaining stocks of social capital (2000). Community organizing is one method by which to create and sustain social capital in marginalized people or those who may not otherwise had an opportunity to have their voice heard.

Within the academy a “curious silence” (Lowndes, 2000) exists in regards to gender and social capital, and much of the literature appears to be “gender blind” (van Staveren, 2002).

Gender inequalities and asymmetries in power and how this affects the accumulation and investment of social capital is a valid and fascinating question. The researcher hoped to discover the ways, if any, that utilizing community organizing techniques can address gender inequalities and asymmetries in power through this research. Hall (1999) found that women are more likely than men to undertake voluntary work related to health, social services, and education. Raising one's social capital is based on assumptions that are inherently deeply gendered. According to Vivien Lowndes (2006), the differences in men's and women's networks not only reflect gender inequalities but are a means by which they are perpetuated.

Both Putnam (1996) and Narayan (1999) discuss ideas of "bridging social capital" and "bonding social capital." Bonding social capital refers to the links between like-minded people or the perpetuation and reinforcement of homogeneity. In contrast, bridging social capital refers to the building of connections between heterogeneous groups. Bonding social capital builds strong ties, but in doing so the "bonded communities" put up a strong and potentially impermeable barrier to those who do not meet the criteria. The connections in bridging social capital may not be as strong, but are probably more likely to foster social inclusion. Baron, Field, and Schuller (2000) provide the example of an American college fraternity as a community with bonded social capital. The fraternity is a male organization that excludes females and thus puts up a strong barrier. According to Halpern (2005, p. 10), social capital is composed of three parts: a network; a cluster of norms, values and expectations that are shared by group members; and sanctions such as punishments and rewards that help to maintain the norms and network. Halpern illustrates this point by applying these components to a neighborhood. Residents of the neighborhood form a network with a shared set of expectations and formally and informally enforce the rules of the neighborhood. By applying Halpern's (2005) framework of social capital



to a university residence hall the residents of the building, or a “zone” in the jargon of Mid-Atlantic Private University, form a network of friends and resources which are used to expand social circles, provide opportunities for inter-disciplinary discussions, and offer potential future networking opportunities after graduation. With a shared set of expectations or ways in which students are expected to act, levels of mutual respect are formed and a desire to conform to the expectations the university culture is perpetuated. Not only do students share a set norms and values, they have expectations set by the university administration and perpetuated by the student culture.

When applied to education, the importance of social capital is illustrated. Participation in education, not only in the classroom but also in clubs and organizations, residence halls, and informal friendships, creates a network of people from which students can draw upon. Inherent within the American school system is a cluster of norms and expectation of how students should behave, including the importance of citizenship, and the lessons taught there are valued by society and perpetuated through education. Finally, using Halpern’s framework, schools, including universities, are sites in which sanctions are carried out that maintain the norms of the network. For example, women may be more likely expected to have the position of secretary, treasurer, or social coordinator whereas it may be expected that men will have the position of president.

One issue that Mid-Atlantic Private University confronted was the role of women in leadership. In 2009, the president formed the steering committee on Undergraduate Women’s Leadership at Mid-Atlantic Private University. This committee was charged with looking at the experience of women at the university and specifically the positions of leadership they choose to pursue and the lack of women in certain positions of power. This is believed to be applicable to

the concept of social capital and subsequently gender capital. A person's social capital can be traced through to the networks and associations they have and the value or perceived value of these associations. According to Lowndes, gendered processes of inclusion and exclusion further to limit the benefits women derive from social capital (2006). For women, networks can be limited to all female and thus perpetuate their status. If females are viewed as having less gender capital than males, participation in an all-female association will be perceived as not increasing a woman's gender capital. Additionally, many women use their social networks to obtain jobs or access to careers, but many female social networks are female-only social networks, thus perpetuating the level of achievement for women. Although these social networks provide access for women that may otherwise have been unattainable, they also place a self-imposed glass ceiling on women. Gender capital could be a means by which to reinforce power differentials and perpetuating patterns of inclusion and exclusion in already existing networks.

Social capital in the university setting might indicate the degree to which students perceive social cohesion in the university and feel that their connections with social networks are supportive (Bourdieu, 1986; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). From this perspective, sense of belonging can be thought of as a form of social capital because it can involve a feeling of "emotional and moral support" from communities, which is one form of social capital (Stanton-Salazar, 2004). Broadly speaking, within the higher education context, social capital can be defined as the capacity for social networks to facilitate educational advancement (Bourdieu, 1986; Stanton-Salazar, 2001). Studies have suggested the idea that sense of belonging contributes to a student's intention to persist in the institution during the first year of college (Hausman, Schofield, & Woods, 2007) and to longer-term persistence in college (Allison, 1999). In regards to this phenomenological case study, one function of capital is access to networks, which provide

resources, knowledge, and insight into various opportunities (Mullen et al., 2003). Relational trust, norms of mutual obligation produced by social capital, across the residential community may be an essential “social lubricant”; trust between RAs and residents can facilitate cooperation around learning opportunities, make for less contentious decision making, and ease operations (Bryk & Schneider, 2002; Ishimaru, 2013).

Ishimaru (2013) found three aspects of the role of social capital in organizing approaches to school leadership development. Ishimaru examined the perceptions and experiences of the principals of three small autonomous schools initiated by a community organizing group in California. The perspectives of the principals highlighted the foundational role of relationships and further support the studies indicating social capital between educators and parents can be leveraged as a social resource for school reform (Bryk et al., 2010; Bryk & Schneider, 2002). Additionally, the findings suggest leadership can be shared with parents when principals build relationships with them as a foundation for engagement. This is consistent with what Warren and colleagues (2009) identify as a relational approach to parent engagement. For example, instead of starting with intense educational programming or a fundraising service project, a relational approach focuses on developing relationships with residents to understand their priorities, concerns, and personal goals.

Ishimaru (2013) adds the critical role of the principal in relational approaches to parent engagement and demonstrates how careful listening and relationship building can foster a sense of ownership over the school and its success. The study also illustrates how the benefits of bonding and bridging social capital can converge when people from different perspectives “engage in a process that attends to unequal power dynamics and enables them to work toward a common goal” (Ishimaru, 2013, p. 42). Despite differences of race, culture, and socio-economic

status, the participants built bridging social capital that was akin to bonding social capital as they struggled together to achieve common goals. The school communities were compared to families and the sense of community was imperative for student success. Finally, the student further illustrated the importance of school leaders' own social capital in coping with role conflict.

### **Summary**

In this section, the research on community organizing and social capital theory was explored to provide a framework by which to make meaning of the community organizing case study at Mid-Atlantic Private University. A social capital theoretical lens illuminates the potential benefits of this experience for participants and provides a way to understand the different types of relationships and the potential benefits, particularly regarding the role of women in leadership positions. Drawing on social capital theory, RAs use community organizing practices to build both bonding and bridging relationships with their residents in their residential communities. This study adds the critical role of the RA in relational approaches to engagement and articulates how community organizing practices, including careful listening and relationship building, effects the RA.

## **CHAPTER 3:**

### **METHODOLOGY & RESEARCH DESIGN**

#### **Introduction: Methodology**

In this section, I describe the research methods I employed to collect and analyze data on the experience of RAs participating in the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community Organizing Pilot Project. Minkler (2007) believes that although scales and tools have been set into place to evaluate many new community organizing type initiatives, there are limits to their efficacy. As a result it is important to employ qualitative approaches to enhance the understanding of the context, dynamics of change, changes in policies, breadth of participation, and other factors (p. 42). A case study's unique strength is its ability to deal with a full variety of evidence such as documents, artifacts, interviews, and observation (Yin, 2003, p. 8).

By utilizing a phenomenological case study design, the researcher was able to understand the effect that participation in this community organizing project had on RAs at Mid-Atlantic Private University. My goal was to explore what changes, if any, in RAs' knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs resulted from participation in this project. I was curious as to whether RAs were developing a growing sense of agency, desire and capacity to initiate change, an increased intentionality about choices, and the capacity for self-reflection. I explored the social capital gained or used by the students and what role that played in their experience.

#### **Purpose**

The purpose of this study was to use a phenomenological case study research design to understand the effect of participation in the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community Organizing Pilot Project. A growing interest in community-based participatory research (CBPR) in health and related fields has brought community organizing principles into the domain of

research, challenging both positivist notions of knowledge and traditional top-down processes of academia (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2003). As such, this is timely and relevant research.

Additionally, the body of research available which specifically utilizes community organizing techniques by students in a residential setting is minimal to non-existent. The literature on community organizing is extensive in regards to community-based initiatives, but not as applied to a college setting. My dissertation research on the Community Organizing Pilot Project therefore has the potential to begin filling in the gaps in existing research.

### **Research Questions**

1. How and in what ways has participation in the community organizing project changed the participants own understandings?
  - a. How did participants experience their leadership role within the broader Mid-Atlantic University Community?
  - b. How and in what ways did utilizing community organizing techniques address gender inequalities and asymmetries in power? How did participant's gender influence their role as a community organizer?
  - c. What if any long-term effects have RAs experienced as participants in this project?

### **Rationale for Qualitative Research**

I utilized a qualitative research approach, specifically a phenomenological case study approach to carry out this research project. Qualitative research is not confirmatory research like quantitative research where a hypothesis is being tested, but is rather inductive or exploratory in that it attempts to understand how or perhaps why something happens (Ellis, 2011). Additionally,

qualitative research is holistic, allowing for dynamic phenomena (Shirley & Christensen, 2000; Ellis, 2011).

This research used a qualitative phenomenological case study approach. Case studies are the preferred strategy when “how” and “why” questions are being asked and when the focus is on a contemporary phenomena within some real-life concept (Yin, 2003, p. 1). The purpose of a phenomenological approach is to understand the issue or topic from the everyday knowledge and perceptions of specific respondent subgroups (Lindgren & Kehoe, 1981). In a qualitative phenomenological case study approach, researchers have initial knowledge about the topic and are interested in developing a more in-depth understanding or in clarifying potentially conflicting or unclear information from previous data. It is not primarily concerned with explaining the causes of things but attempts instead to describe how things are experienced first-hand of the everyday world by those involved (Denscombe, 2004).

In this case, I, the researcher, have knowledge of the Community Organizing Pilot Project. By conducting this research I gained a more in-depth understanding from the lens and perspectives of the RAs who participated in the Community Organizing Pilot Project. Stake (1995) stresses the benefits of qualitative case study methodology arising from its emphasis on the uniqueness of each case, and the educator’s subjective experience of that case. For the RAs who participated, this Community Organizing Pilot Project was a unique experience. Although surveys and experiments are strong data collection methods, in this case they were not the appropriate form of data collection. A case study takes into account the multiple variables of interest relying on multiple sources of evidence (Yin, 2003). A case study inquiry was appropriate because it allowed the researcher to examine a phenomenon -- in this case the experiences of RAs participating in the community organizing pilot project -- in detail, while also taking into account the context in which that phenomenon occurs (Yin, 2009).

**Research Participants**

For this research project sample I used purposeful sampling, drawing from the resident assistants who participated in the Community Organizing Pilot Project.

Purposeful sampling case studies are a substantive method of qualitative research. As Patton (2002, p.40) articulates, purposeful sampling is used because it is “information rich” and illuminative; that is it offers useful manifestations of the phenomenon of interest. Sampling, then, is aimed at insight about the phenomenon, not empirical generalization from a sample to a population. Purposeful sampling is important because this research required individuals who participated in the Community Organizing Pilot Program. For this research in particular, a combination of criterion and convenience sampling were used (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). The criteria were participants who participated in the Community Organizing Pilot Project while serving as RAs. Participants need to have adequate experience with the phenomenon of interest to speak in-depth about the experience (Creswell, 2007).

**Participant Recruitment**

I recruited participants for this study during January of 2014. To gain access to the participants, I contacted the Associate Dean in the Office of the Dean of Students at Mid-Atlantic Private University for a comprehensive list of RAs who participated in the Community Organizing Pilot Project. This number was approximately 50. I then contacted all the participants via email with a participant recruitment letter (see Appendix A) to explain the purpose of my research and explain the requirements for participation. Participants indicated their willingness by returning the Recruitment and Contact Information Form (see Appendix B). The form required participants to acknowledge their desire to participate, their residential college, and number of years they served as an RA. The form also requested their preferred form of contact:



N	Name	College	Gender	Race/Ethnicity	Sexual Orientation	Career	Years as RA	Participate as first year
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e-mail, home phone, cell phone or Skype. Resident assistants who were interested in participating were given an informed consent form (see Appendix C). Participants were reminded that the research study would be conducted in the spring of 2014 and that they would be asked to participate in one 45 to 60 minute interview that would be audio-recorded with their permission. Participants were reminded that there were no costs associated with participation and no monetary compensation for their participation. I explained to the participants that the research is confidential and communicated the measures in place to protect the data and the participants' confidentiality.

After interested candidates responded, a combination of criteria and convenience sampling were used to select the interviewees. My goal was to interview ten (n=10) resident assistants who participated in the community organizing pilot project. For my dissertation research, I found 21 participants to interview for my phenomenological case study. I tried to choose a sample that was representative of the resident assistant staff by interviewing at least five from each residential college.

### **Participant Profiles and Description**

The following 21 former resident assistants who participated in the community organizing pilot project were interviewed for the study. A pseudonym was assigned to each individual by the researcher. These pseudonyms are provided below along with a brief description of that participant's background as deemed relevant to the presentation of study results. Participants are profiled below in the order in which they were interviewed.

1	Monica	Berry	Female	Asian American	Heterosexual	Business	2 years	Yes
2	Marion	Berry	Female	White	Heterosexual	Medicine	2 years	Yes
3	Andy	Berry	Male	African American	Heterosexual	Business	2 years	No
4	Annie	Lincoln	Female	White	Unknown	Medicine	2 years	No
5	Rachel	Berry	Female	Multi (W & B)	Heterosexual	Law	2 years	Yes
6	Marie	Berry	Female	Asian American	Heterosexual	Medicine	2 years	Yes
7	Joe	Lincoln	Male	Latino	LGBT - Gay	Education	1 year	Yes
8	Suzanne	Lincoln	Female	African American	Heterosexual	Education	2 years	No
9	Ginger	Berry	Female	White	Heterosexual	Law	2 years	Yes
10	Aiden	Berry	Male	Latino	Heterosexual	Education	2 years	Yes
11	Elizabeth	Berry	Female	White - Jewish	Heterosexual	Education	2 years	Yes
12	Catherine	Berry	Female	White	Heterosexual	Medicine	2 years	No
13	Barbara	Berry	Female	Intl. African	Heterosexual	Medicine	2 years	No
14	Shirley	Berry	Female	African American	Heterosexual	Medicine	2 years	Yes
15	Scott	Berry	Male	White	Heterosexual	Education	2 years	Yes
16	Christopher	Berry	Male	Latino	Heterosexual	Medicine	2 years	No
17	Addison	Berry	Male	White	Heterosexual	Education	2 years	No
18	Kayla	Lincoln	Female	Asian American	Unknown	Education	2 years	Yes
19	Ralph	Lincoln	Male	Intl. Asian	Unknown	Business	2 years	No
20	Melissa	Lincoln	Female	White	Heterosexual	Business	2 years	No
21	Jim	Lincoln	Male	Latino	LGBT - Gay	Business	2 years	Yes

Table 1 Participant backgrounds

Interviews were conducted with a total of 21 resident assistants who participated in the community organizing pilot project. Of those 21 participants, 13 identified as female and eight identified as male. Fourteen of the participants had resided in Berry College whereas seven had

resided in the Lincoln community. For categorization purposes, I have divided the career path of the participants into Medicine, Law, Education and Business. Of the seven former resident assistants pursuing a career in medicine, four are currently enrolled in medical school, one is enrolled in a joint M.D. and Ph.D. program, and two former resident assistants are pursuing post-baccalaureate programs in pre-med while applying to medical schools. Additionally, five participants are working in business; including sales, information technology, consulting, engineering, and finance. Two former resident assistants are enrolled in law school. Finally, seven participants are involved in the education field; three are currently classroom teachers, one is pursuing an advanced degree, one is working at a youth empowerment program, one is working as an education coordinator for a museum, and one is the coordinator of teen education services in a library.

Monica is an Asian American first generation college student who participated in the program as an RA during her junior and senior years. She identifies as a heterosexual woman. She was the RA for approximately 45 residents of both women and men, representing first year residents through seniors in Berry Residential College. After graduation, Monica taught English--both academic reading and writing--at the university level in Central Asia in a classroom of 18-22 year old students. She currently resides in New York City and works in the financial sector. Monica participated in the community organizing program as a first year resident and as an RA.

Marion identifies as a white heterosexual woman. She is originally from the west coast and is currently living in NYC pursuing a post baccalaureate program in medicine with the expectation of enrolling in medical school in the fall. She was an RA both her junior and senior year of college at Berry Residential College. As a junior, her residential community consisted of 20 first year students. In her senior year, her residential community consisted of 44 residents; 20

first year residents and 24 second, third, and fourth year residents of both women and men. As a first year student, Marion participated in the community organizing program, and she cites this experience as instrumental in her decision to become an RA.

Andy served as an RA for two years, his junior and senior year at Berry Residential College. Andy identifies as a black heterosexual male. Andy's residential community was comprised of approximately 25 first and second year residents of both women and men. Andy participated in the program his senior year, the first year of the pilot project. Upon graduation, Andy entered corporate America and currently works in sales and marketing in Richmond, Virginia.

Annie served as an RA for her junior and senior year at Lincoln residential college. Her residential community was comprised of first and second year students, who were both women and men. Annie identifies as a white woman. Her sexual orientation is unknown. She is currently a medical student nearing graduation. Annie summed up her collegiate experience with these six words: "Run, run, run. Stop, breathe. Laugh."

Rachel identifies as a multiracial (White and African American) heterosexual woman. She served as an RA in Berry residential college for her junior and senior year of college. During her junior year, her residential community was comprised of approximately 20 first and second year residents whereas in her senior year her residential community was comprised of approximately 60 residents ranging from first years to seniors. Her communities included both women and men. Rachel currently lives in Boston with her fiancé and is working at a law firm while applying to law schools.

Marie served as an RA for two years in Berry Residential College. She self identifies as an Asian American heterosexual woman. As an RA during her junior year, Marie had 16

residents all of whom were first year students. The group was evenly divided with 8 female residents and 8 male residents. In her senior year Marie was responsible for 50 residents; 16 first year residents and the rest were an even mix of second year, third, and fourth year residents. The gender break down was relatively evenly split between women and men. As a first year student, Marie participated in the community organizing project and remembers well her one-on-one meeting with her RA. Marie is currently enrolled in medical school in Georgia.

Joe self identifies as a Latino gay male. He served as an RA for one year in Lincoln College. His residential community was comprised of approximately 30 first year and second year students, including both women and men. As a first year student Joe participated in the community organizing program by having a one:one meeting with his then RA. Joe shared that during this first meeting he came out to his RA. This interaction set the tone for his first year of college. Joe currently works as a middle school teacher in California.

Suzanne served as an RA for two years in the Lincoln college community for approximately 20 first and second year residents, who were both women and men. She is originally from New York City and self identifies as a heterosexual African American woman. After leaving Mid-Atlantic private university, Suzanne taught in Chicago through the Teach for America program. She currently works with a mentoring college preparation education program in NYC.

Ginger served as an RA in the Berry Community for her junior and senior year of college. Originally from Boston, Ginger has returned to pursue her Juris Doctorate at Harvard Law School. She has worked as an intern in the U.S. Department of Treasury. Ginger self-identifies as a heterosexual white female. As an RA, she oversaw a group of approximately 30 residents who were both women and men, and varied across their class year.

Aiden self-identifies as a Latino heterosexual male. During both his junior and senior years, he served as an RA in the Berry Community for approximately 30 residents of all class years, who were both women and men. Aiden received a Master's in Education after graduating from Mid-Atlantic Private University. He currently works as a teacher at a private school in Connecticut.

Elizabeth served as an RA in the Berry College community for two years. She was responsible for approximately 54 residents: 16 first year residents and 36 upper class students. She was in a building that served both women and men. Elizabeth identifies as a White-Jewish American heterosexual woman. Born and raised in New York City, she returned to the city after college and completed a Master's degree in Science. She currently works in New York City as an education program coordinator.

Catherine self identifies as a white heterosexual woman. Originally from the Philadelphia area, she returned to Philadelphia to pursue an advanced degree in medicine. At Mid-Atlantic Private University she was very involved with the community organizing project. She articulated that participating in this program positively influenced her experience as a resident assistant. Actively engaged in health education as a student leader, community organizing had immediate, real life applications for her. Catherine returned to Mid-Atlantic Private University the year after she graduated to present to the new RAs about the program, the requirements, and how utilizing community organizing influenced her personally. This was very beneficial for the resident assistants to hear from a peer and understand how the community organizing techniques were applied in the context of a residential community. Catherine served as a resident assistant at Berry residential college for two years during her junior and senior year of college. She oversaw a residential population of approximately 40 residents, both women and men, and various class

years. She has found she utilizes the community organizing techniques learned in regards to her patient interactions and building patient rapport.

Barbara served as a Berry College resident assistant for two years, her junior and senior year of college. Her residential community comprised of 22 residents of both women and men. Barbara self-identifies as an international student who immigrated to the U.S. fleeing oppression in her native country in Africa. Living in the United States since middle school, she considered herself an African American with an international student lens. Currently Barbara is attending medical school at Yale University. Unique to Barbara's residential community was the agreed upon lifestyle choice of the residents. Barbara's community was "substance free." All the residents that chose to live in this residential community agreed to live substance free. The following guidelines were in effect for those choosing to live in substance-free housing:

- 1) No alcohol, illegal drugs, tobacco products or incense may be in a room designated as substance-free. Whether the substances have been used or consumed will not matter in the assignment of disciplinary action if these items are discovered.

- 2) Residents of the substance-free area are responsible for their guests obeying the guidelines contained herein.

- 3) Residents of the substance-free area who are of legal age may drink alcoholic beverages or use legal tobacco products elsewhere on campus as long as the effects of the substances do not disturb the other residents of this housing area. Behaviors resulting from substance use that will be deemed disturbing include, but are not limited to, causing a commotion in the hallways, entries, common spaces, bathrooms or student rooms in the substance-free housing area or its vicinity; leaving a mess in the bathroom or hallway and not cleaning up after one's self; smoking or using smoke producing products in this

housing area; and violating the spirit and intention of the substance-free housing area.

(Mid-Atlantic Private University Substance Free Housing Agreement, 2010, p. 2)

Shirley self identifies as an African American heterosexual woman. As a member of the Berry College residence life staff for two years, she was responsible for 39 residents, 17 of which were first year students: 13 male and four female first year students. The additional 22 residents were both women and men of mixed class years. As a first year student, Shirley participated in the community organizing project through a one to one meeting with her resident assistant. She remembers this first in depth conversation as a positive experience. Shirley currently works at a hospital gaining firsthand experience while pursuing a post baccalaureate educational experience with the goal of enrolling in medical school.

Scott served as a resident assistant for two years in the Berry College community. He self identifies as a white heterosexual male. Currently, Scott resides in Baltimore working in the education field. He is responsible for educational programming for the teen/young adult population at a library. As a resident assistant, Scott's residents were predominately first and second year students both women and men. Living in a substance free residential community, his residents bonded and related over shared life decisions and beliefs.

Christopher self-identifies as a Latino heterosexual male. Originally from Florida, Christopher is pursuing a dual M.D. and Ph.D. degree in New York City. Originally living in a different residential college, Christopher joined the Berry community as a junior when he became a residence life staff member. He did not participate in the residential community organizing program as a first year student. For both his junior and senior years Christopher



served approximately 40 residents, 12 of whom were first year students, equally women and men. The upper-class students were both women and men, and sophomores through seniors.

Addison served as resident assistant in the Berry college community for one year. He was placed in a unique building architecturally. The building has no common entry ways into the building but rather individual entry doors accessing 4 rooms each. In the basement a vast shared single sex bathroom connects all the entryways and serves as the only common space for all the residents. Single-sex housing is an option available to residents who desire to do so. Addison's building housed 39 male residents: 33 first year students and six second-year students. Addison served as a resident assistant for one year, and then chose to not reapply in order assume the very prestigious presidency of his student group. Upon graduation, Addison moved to the West coast and obtained a master's degree in education. He currently works as a high school teacher on the East coast. He self identifies as a white heterosexual male. Addison attributed his community organizing program experience with influencing his graduate course work and utilizes these techniques in his current profession.

Kayla served as a resident assistant for Lincoln College for both her junior and senior years. She has a unique lens of the collegiate experience as she entered college when she was just 16 years old. Originally from Pennsylvania, after graduation she moved to California and is currently pursuing her Ph.D. in Biology at the University of California - Berkeley. She identifies as an Asian American woman. As a resident assistant, Kayla supervised a residential community of first year and second year students. She also participated in the community organizing pilot project as a first student. Kayla articulated that she did not enjoy her first meeting with her RA. The time allotted was only 20 minutes and she felt it was not a positive experience. She

attributed this negative experience as a catalyst for applying to be a resident assistant herself, since she believed she could do a better job.

Ralph identifies as an internationally born Asian American male. As a resident assistant at Lincoln College for his junior and senior year, Ralph was responsible for a residential community comprised of both women and men; first and second year residents. After graduation, Ralph attended Columbia University where he obtained a joint J.D. and M.B.A. degree. He currently works in the business field with information technology.

Melissa currently works as an engineer in a nuclear power plant in the Mid-West. As a student at Mid-Atlantic Private University, Melissa served as a resident assistant for two years in the Lincoln college community, overseeing between 30 and 40 first and second year students, who were both women and men. She self identifies as a white heterosexual woman. Melissa believes that by participating in the community organizing pilot project she was more engaged with her residents and aware of what was going on in the building.

Jim served as a resident assistant at Lincoln College for both his junior and senior years of college. His residential community was comprised of approximately 35 first and second year residents, who were both women and men. As a first year student, Jim resided in Berry residential college and participated in the community organizing program through a one to one meeting with his resident assistant. Jim self identifies as Latino (Puerto Rican) gay male. He spoke openly about his experiences as an out male working in an internationally respected consulting firm. He has used the community organizing techniques he learned to build strong relationships at work, secure funding for LGBT functions, and bring issues forward to his supervisors.

## **Data Collection**

Creswell (1998) recommends that qualitative writers consider how they plan to substantiate the accuracy of their methods and findings. By employing multiple methods, grounding the procedures in practice, and presenting in the report how the study meets standards of quality within qualitative research methods, the researcher actively participated in a reflective process.

According to Yin (2003), evidence for case studies may come from six sources: documents, archival records, interviews, direct observation, participant observation, and physical artifacts. I employed various forms of data collection including semi structured interviews; collection of supporting data from the Community Organizing Pilot Project; focus groups data; and questionnaires. The main method of data collection was semi-structured interviews of RAs who participated in the Community Organizing Pilot Project. As Patton (1990) says. “The fundamental principle of qualitative interviewing is to provide a framework within respondents can express their own understandings in their own terms.”

21 individual, one-time, 19 via telephone and 2 via Skype, interviews were conducted in the spring of 2014. Each interview lasted from 60 to 90 minutes and was guided by a semi-structured interview protocol. I asked respondents about their experiences as an RA and their thoughts about participating in the community organizing pilot project (see Appendix D). The interviewer used an interview guide method to ensure that all the interviews included the same general material. The interview guide created the framework for the interview and ensured that all interviewees are asked the same basic questions. Additionally, the interviews were semi-structured, allowing the interviewer to blend the informal conversational interview with the general interview guide approach (Patton, 2002, pp. 341-347).

Kahn and Cannell describe interviewing as “a conversation with a purpose” (1957, qtd. in Marshall & Rossman, 2006, p 101). By guiding the interviewing while simultaneously allowing the participants to articulate and guide their telling of their experience, I hoped to expand the breadth and depth of information gathered. With the participants’ consent, the interviews were audio-taped and later transcribed verbatim.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis occurred via the constant comparative method (Glaser, 1978), which highlights a “research design for multi-data sources, which is like analytic induction in that the formal analysis begins early in the study and is nearly completed by the end of data collection” (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003, p. 66). The steps of the constant comparative method, according to Glaser (1978), are: (1) begin collecting data; (2) find key issues, events, or activities in the data that become main categories for focus; (3) collect data that provide many incidents of the categories of focus; (4) write about the categories explored, keeping in mind past incidents while searching for new ones; (5) work with the data and emerging model to discover relationships; and (6) sample, code, and write with the core categories in mind. The steps of the constant comparative method occurred simultaneously during data collection until categories are saturated and writing begins. I utilized Glaser’s steps in data analysis, along with the framework of capital provided by Bourdieu (1977).

Although case study data collection follows a formal plan, as a researcher one must review the evidence and continually ask why the facts or events appear as they do (Yin, 2003). After the interviews were completed, transcribed, and coded, a review of the data occurred including the writing of analytic memos. By creating memos of the emerging themes the researcher is able to see the multiple themes as they became known. This is indicative of the

strength, richness and depth of qualitative research. Reliability and trustworthiness of data collection was enhanced through member checking. Participants provide member-checks wherein I verified emergent themes with the participants after the interviews were conducted. If the participants confirm these themes, additional trustworthiness was provided around the findings.

After recording and transcribing all the interviews and systematically recording interview notes, the researcher categorized the data first by coding all the interview transcripts using broad “etic” codes based on emerging themes, relationships, experiences, or observations. I then coded the data in another round using more specific “emic” codes. All materials were kept confidential. This research is stored in a secure location and remains confidential. Confidential means that the research records only include non-identifying information, such as years of experience as a resident assistant. Participants’ names and the name of the residential college were removed from interview transcripts and notes. All audio recordings, transcripts, and notes will be destroyed at the conclusion of the successful defense.

According to Marshall and Rossman (2006), interviewing does have limitations and weaknesses. Although utilizing audiotapes and videotapes is beneficial for accuracy and prosperity, the researcher may benefit from coupling the interviews with an additional form of qualitative research such as observations, shadowing, or focus groups. Marshall and Rossman (2006) emphasize that background data particular to the context will help shape the research project; therefore, data was collected from all available sources that I felt may prove beneficial to my analysis and conclusions. With this in mind, I strengthened my data collection by utilizing data from focus groups that were conducted in conjunction with the pilot project. Additional sources of data included Mid-Atlantic Private University printed material, including RA job

description, RA manual, RA training schedule, university websites, university policies, and departmental mission and vision statements. I also gathered training materials and written expectations for RAs who participated in the Community Organizing Pilot Project.

### Summary

Chapter 3 has summarized the methodology and rationale for this phenomenological case study. A qualitative method was chosen as the best method to address the research question because the data being sought could only be accessed through the lived experience of each participant.

The research question *How did participants experience their leadership role within the broader Mid- Atlantic University Community?* emerged as a result of the oversight of the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community Organizing Pilot Project in exploring the effect of participation from the lens of the resident assistant. Additional research questions included: How and in what ways did utilizing community organizing techniques address gender inequalities and asymmetries in power? How did participant's gender influence their role as a community organizer? What if any long-term effects have RAs experienced as participants in this project?

Purposeful sampling was used to identify 21 participant for this study. Each participant was presented in the context of their role as an RA at Mid-Atlantic Private University. As described, data were collected through the use of in-depth, one-on-one interviews. Following data collection, the data were transcribed, hand coded, interpreted, and analyzed. From thick, rich descriptions of the lived experiences of each participant, themes emerged to contribute new knowledge to the understanding of the use of community organizing.

## **Chapter IV**

### **Findings**

#### **Overview**

This study explored undergraduate resident assistant student experience in the community organizing pilot project at Mid-Atlantic Private University. Using the Community Organizing Pilot Project as the structure, the experiences of the resident assistants was explored.

To answer the study's research questions, data were collected through interviews of 21 resident assistant participant interviews, and a review of the documents produced through the community organizing pilot project including residence life manuals, training materials, and feedback from the community organizing pilot project

These data sources were analyzed and hand coded by the researcher. Emerging patterns or concepts became themes reflected in responses to research questions. These responses are presented below.

#### **Presentation and Analysis of Data**

Chapter 4 provides the findings of this study by presenting the major themes and subthemes identified during the data analysis of the interviews. Specifically, this chapter presents the thoughts, perceptions, and lived experiences of the 21 participants who took part in the phenomenological case study research of the Community Organizing Pilot Project. The purpose of this study was to explore the experiences of the RAs who participated in the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community Organizing Pilot Project and understand the effect of that participation. This research explored how participants experienced their role within the broader Mid-Atlantic University community and whether any changes in their own knowledge, attitudes, behaviors, and beliefs resulted from participating in this project.

## Themes

During this research, multiple themes emerged. These themes represented the most extraordinary (or recurring/prominent) themes and subthemes that emerged during the data analysis. These major themes were: (a) relationship building by utilizing community organizing techniques; (b) influence on power and gender; and (c) long term legacy.

The theme *relationship building by utilizing community organizing techniques* consists of subthemes that can be recognized in research on programs that utilized community organizing outside of the higher education arena. These major subthemes were also recognized in this qualitative investigation, which supports their validity. The subthemes include: (a) importance of a strong initial meeting; seeing beyond stereotypes; (b) creating lasting connections; (c) enhanced communication; and (d) the effect on discipline and accountability. The theme *power and gender* includes the subthemes (a) giving students a voice; (b) individual meeting opportunity to link people; and (c) gender dynamics.

While coding the data to answer the question of what, if any, long term influence the RAs experienced as participants in this project, the theme *long term legacy*, the ways in which participants utilize community organization techniques after completion of the pilot project and graduation, clearly surfaced. The final theme *long term legacy*, the utilization of community organization techniques after completion of the pilot project and graduation, includes emergent subthemes that were uncovered through the data analysis of the participants' transcribed interviews. The subthemes include: (a) use in medicine, business, law and education; (b) being comfortable with silence; and (c) networking and mentoring. These emerging themes were unexpected by the researcher and have not been mentioned in previous research about the utilization of community organizing in higher education. This makes these themes even more



valuable for understanding the long term influence of utilizing community organizing techniques in a higher education setting.

These key themes are detailed in Table 2, Summary of Themes.

THEMES	SUB-THEMES
I. Relationship Building by Utilizing Community Organizing Techniques	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Importance of strong initial meeting</li> <li>2. Seeing beyond stereotypes</li> <li>3. Creating lasting connections</li> <li>4. Enhanced communication</li> <li>5. Effect on discipline and accountability</li> </ol>
II. Power	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Giving students a voice</li> <li>2. Individual meeting opportunity to link people</li> <li>3. Gender dynamics</li> </ol>
III. Utilization of community organizing techniques outside of pilot project	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Use in medicine, business, law and education</li> <li>2. Being comfortable with silence</li> <li>3. Networking and mentoring</li> <li>4. Use beyond pilot project</li> </ol>

Table 2 Summary of Themes.

### **Participants' experience of their leadership role**

Participation in the Community Organizing Pilot Project was a unique experience for many of the RAs involved. As an RA, students participated in extensive training for approximately 45 hours over the course of nine days covering such topics as community building; community caretaking and safety; health and wellness; and university resources (Mid-Atlantic Private University RA manual, 2010).

Training for the Pilot Program was an additional four hours, and framed the position and the experience for the RAs from a different perspective. Multiple follow up workshops and discussions were also held throughout the course of the year. The 21 participants who partook in this research experienced their leadership role within the broader Mid-Atlantic University community in different ways, with certain similar themes emerging.

### **Relationship Building**

An RA is trained to build relationships across their residential community and help to foster students' transition to collegiate life. As Gittel and Vidal (1998) argue organizations – or in the case of higher education, administrators – have a responsibility to cultivate supportive local networks. RAs at Mid-Atlantic Private University are also charged with the responsibility to build supportive local networks, which in practice means to build relationships and a sense of community in their residential communities.

RAs experienced their leadership role by understanding and experiencing the influence that using community organizing practices had on their community in regards to relationship building and enhanced communication. RAs used their knowledge of residents gained through individual meetings, one-to-one meetings, to connect people across the college campus to each other and individuals with similar interests and resources. The one-to-one meeting is Mid-Atlantic Private University jargon for individual meetings held by the RAs with each of their residents in the first few weeks of the academic year. These meetings followed the format used by community organizers as they sought to build relationships with and amongst members of the residential community. The goals of these meetings were to help the RAs understand their residents individually and as a collective, to convey to the residents that their voices and views were valued, and to discover areas of shared concern and interest among the residents.

**Relationship Building by Utilizing Community Organizing Techniques**

The theme of *relationship building by utilizing community organizing techniques* contains subthemes that can be recognized in research on programs which utilize community organizing outside of the higher education arena. The subthemes which emerged include: (a) the importance of a strong initial meeting; (b) seeing beyond stereotypes; (c) creating lasting connections; (d) enhanced communication; (e) and the effect on discipline and holding students accountable.

RAs who participated in the Community Organizing Pilot Project were actively involved in shaping their own learning experience and developing practical skills while also facilitating a positive experience for their residents. The Association of American Colleges and Universities (2002) believes that students should become empowered through the development of many intellectual and practical skills; students must take responsibility for their own learning and their participation in the civic processes of our democracy. RA participants were empowered through the use of the community organizing techniques. Participants developed practical skills such as communication and self-confidence by conducting the individual meetings with their first year residents. Understanding and applying the tenets of community organizing taught the RAs the importance of engagement with and fostering of community. For many RAs, the most influential way in which they experienced their leadership role within the Mid-Atlantic Private University was through the use of individual one-to-one meetings (referred to as 1:1 meetings).

**Strong Initial Meeting**

The most influential community organizing technique RAs learned and utilized was the individual one-to-one meeting. Part of the foundation of community organizing, the individual meeting is a targeted purposeful conversation between the organizer and the participant. The

AmeriCorps VISTA training program defines a one-to-one meeting as “a purposeful conversation with an individual to learn about their concerns, interest level, and resources. Focus on getting commitments to specific actions” (2010, p. 11). Essentially, individual meetings are similar to any conversations one might have with acquaintances or strangers in daily life: meeting someone for coffee, or lunch, or in some other setting such as in the RA’s room or common space, and getting to know a little bit about them. The difference is in the “getting commitments to specific actions” part, which lends the conversation more of a specific focus than other getting-to-know-you conversations one might have. In regards to this specific program, the individual one-to-one meetings were a deeper, more intimate conversation about the new student’s fears, goals, areas of interest, and general rapport building. The RAs used community organizing to help the new student explore their goals for their collegiate experience, and support them as they strived to achieve said goals.

Out of the over 100 RAs a year at Mid-Atlantic Private University, approximately 30 participated each year in the Community Organizing Pilot Project. This is important to note as some participants commented on how they experienced their leadership role in comparison to their perception of peer RAs not participating in the program. Monica articulates this perspective: “I definitely felt like I was at an advantage to RAs in other colleges. I knew my advisees better, and on a much more personal level, than many of my peers at other colleges, simply because of the one-to-one meetings”.

Monica further discussed that the individual meeting helped to strengthen her relationship with not only her first year students but also her upper-class residents. She explained that, in her experience, the individual meeting set the groundwork for meaningful relationships to come. She felt she was able to establish a bond with her residents and create a comfort zone. Additionally,

Monica felt that the individual meetings also allowed her to start a dialogue with upperclassmen, who often did not feel as included in the community as they should have been, as some residents felt out of place in the residential college. Because of these initial meetings, Monica felt she had a much better grasp of the diversity of residents' needs, and could tailor group activities and events to address concerns across the board.

Clearly, for many RAs the individual meetings were able to set a strong foundation for a relationship built on trust and open communication. Marion explained that most of her one-on-one meetings lasted much longer than she anticipated because once a safe space was established, the conversation became organic. She explained that she asked students about their background, goals, and hopes for the semester, and greatest fears and worries about starting freshman year. Marion explains that "I thought that these were possibly the most important part of the RA responsibilities since it helped everyone get to know each other better and then if they did have a problem later, or an issue that they needed advice on, or wanted to know how to handle living with very diverse groups of people there was not that initial fear of having to bring something up."

Sharing information about oneself, especially personal topics such as goals, fears, and worries can be stressful for some people. It is important to respect where a person is emotionally and developmentally. Blackwell & Colmenar (2000) state that community organizing principles focus on starting where the people are and addresses issues that are relevant to the constituency. Simply defined, community organizing is a process by which diverse community stakeholders determine issues to be addressed and identify strategies to effectively create positive changes to achieve an agreed upon common goal. The strength of community organizing lies with focusing on the people of the community; active participation; skill-building; the ability to promote

individual and community capacity as community members assess needs; planning strategically; and implementing action steps (Minkler & Wallerstein, 2005). Marion's use of the community organizing tenets in her residential community embody the definition of Community Organizing that Minkler and Wallerstein put forth (2005).

The strength of the individual resident meetings was starting where the student (resident) was emotionally and developmentally and moving forward together, as a team comprised of the RA and resident to strategically address concerns and achieve goals. Where a mutual trust and bond were formed early, it was a more fulfilling experience for participants. Catherine explained that being an RA was probably one of the most meaningful experiences that she has ever had. As she was processing her experience with the individual meetings, she reflected that she came through it with the belief that everyone has something that they have struggled with, and it is very special when someone shares that with you. She states that it felt "like a very powerful form of intimacy". Catherine was a strong advocate of the individual meetings and realized their potential in building a strong community by building a deeper understanding of and connection with residents. Catherine also developed her own leadership skills and established her place in the community through her role of facilitator. Catherine felt she was a community organizing facilitator, enabling intentional dialogue and promoting relationship building in her residential community. Upon reflecting about her experience as a facilitator, Catherine shared that the responses she got from residents during the individual meetings were usually very profound. With practice, the RA participants were able to hone and polish their individual facilitation skills. A small number of RA participants even shared that approximately half of their first year residents actually cried during the individual meetings held at the beginning of the school year.

Catherine articulates that, “I think the techniques were really very powerful for getting to know someone and their motivations at their deepest core.”

Mastering the individual meeting was a learned skill, which many of the RAs honed over time. Once mastered, some RAs felt confident and enjoyed their experiences. For other RAs, such as Aiden, the individual meetings were hard to do, but the skills learned were invaluable. The experience strongly shaped how he experienced his leadership role at Mid-Atlantic Private University. For Aiden, engaging in the individual meetings forced him to look everyone in the eye, to speak to everyone and be truly invested. It showed him how to take an interest in his residents individually and create a community. Aiden reflected that it took practice to sit and just listen. He would not always have an answer, and the student might not always want an answer. It was a hard skill to learn and harder to master. Aiden felt that he may not have truly mastered the skill, but knowing when someone “just wants to talk” or when they are asking for advice, or even what is proper advice to give, all stems from an individual meeting. This was a profound realization for Aiden, which was evident to this researcher by the way he spoke and the moments of reflective silence as he processed his own thoughts. For Aiden, and many of the RA participants, speaking with the researcher was the first time they reflected on their experience and quantified in words their thoughts, reactions, and the overall experience. Becoming proficient at the individual meeting set the foundation for the RA/resident relationship.

For Elizabeth, the individual meetings with residents were very beneficial because they also encouraged multiple residents to come by her room later, as they already had a relationship. Elizabeth articulated that it became the norm, “it wasn’t kinda weird” for her residents to knock on her door and say “I want a 1:1 meeting.” Additionally, Elizabeth felt that the utilization of community organizing techniques shaped her leadership role in the community. Upon reflection,

Elizabeth shared that the experience of conducting the individual meetings definitely changed the way she interacted with her residents. It helped her to know them better at an earlier stage on an individual level and helped to inform what kind of programming she wanted to do. Elizabeth explained that the individual meetings benefited not only her residents, but herself also:

It gave them a forum to just say whatever they wanted without their new roommates hearing them and judging them. And I think it gave me an opportunity to be myself more ... I felt like on a one on one basis for me even I could see how they were responding to what I was saying and how I could adjust the part of my personality, or how much I was showing of me. To see if they would react positively or not to the way I was interacting with them. This was good because it not only helped them but in a selfish way because I am still friends with some of them. I managed to get myself to be more comfortable with them as well in that experience.

For some RAs, the individual meetings helped build strong relationships with deeper and more meaningful connections. For Scott, these individual meetings made him think more carefully about his residents as individuals rather than just as a group. This was not only the experience of Scott, but also Joe. It was an “eye-opening experience” to see how the individual meetings could set the foundation for the students’ collegiate experience and their relationship with the RA. According to Joe he would start the meeting by saying: "It's just you and me." This set the tone for the meeting and helped to create a safe space for the student to speak candidly and freely. Joe further reflected on his experience by explaining that he was really digging deep



with the new students; within approximately 15 minutes, Joe felt he was able to get some solid information from whomever he was speaking with. For Joe, ‘digging deep’ meant learning about the student beyond the typical superficial level ice-breaker questions about favorite color and favorite cartoon character. This ‘solid information’ included fears, trepidations, passions, and transformative life experiences that shaped the way the residents experienced Mid-Atlantic Private University. According to Joe, this illustrated for him how important some of these conversations were and “how deep you can really go and how much that will shape the experience of students at a university level.” Joe felt that the individual meetings formed a bond between the RA and the resident that was strong because of the topics discussed, the safe space to share, and the shared experience of the Mid-Atlantic Private University culture. This bond, and sense of belonging, effected the student and their university experience. This is unique in that community organizing is not typically associated with a university level experience.

This was also true for Christopher’s experience. Christopher reflected on his participation from the lens of the perspective it provided. As an RA participant, Christopher thought it was fascinating to see that the individual meetings “gave you a pretty interesting perspective on all these different residents, and like where they’re coming from, how different – both in terms of who we are and where we were coming from.” He explained that this perspective was with respect to what goals both the RA and the resident had for that immediate year or the future, lessons from both participants from the past and how life essentially shaped each to be who they were now, and further getting to know each other in a deeper way.

The relationship building experience was fostered between the RA and the resident. For instance, Christopher consciously worked to create mutually beneficial relationships. It was important for Christopher as a leader to employ the use of community organizing techniques to

foster a balanced relationship. He clarified this by explaining to the researcher that that the individual meetings allowed him to establish “better relationships with students, and then relationships that were more mutually beneficial, instead of ones that were maybe more –were looked upon as being less symmetric.”

Suzanne also worked to build cross community relationships. As a leader within the Mid-Atlantic Private University community, she experienced her leadership role as a community builder by understanding her residents and making connections to others in the residential community. Suzanne explained that she was very mindful and targeted in her questions with the residents. She focused on trying to get a sense of who was in the building. Suzanne attempted to “start to really build this community thing in the building.” She was able to then refer a first-year student to a sophomore if they had a particular question. She found that many times as an RA, utilizing the lens of a community organizer, she would tell a resident “So-and-so would actually be a good resource for that” and make connections. Suzanne had a unique perspective on the pilot program, since she participated in it during its first year. Suzanne served as an RA one year before the program was implemented and one year under the program. In regards to trying to figure out what kind of study break to hold or what activities the residents might do together, Suzanne articulated that she felt she had a much better sense her second year than she did her first year as an RA, because “I had actually spoken to everyone and really in a much more strategic way.” Not only did Suzanne have the ability to get to know her residents, but they also got to know who she was as well.

The individual meetings helped to build community; they also helped Suzanne to create more powerful relationships. Suzanne felt that utilizing the skills to the best of her knowledge at the time with the resident was very rewarding. Suzanne reflected that she believed there were

residents that she connected with in a way that she may not have otherwise, and it made conversations throughout the year much more meaningful. This was because Suzanne was able to relate or think about things differently because residents felt like “I had their back. Or like I really cared about who they were, which I did. I think my role overall was pretty exciting for me that year.”

### **Dual Lens of Individual Meetings**

For 12 of the participants, the experience of the individual one-to-one meeting was two-fold. These participants shared their experience with the individual meeting as a first year student (interviewee) and RA (interviewer). It was a unique lens that significantly influenced how these RAs conducted their meetings. It was either a positive or negative experience that served for many as a catalyst for becoming an RA or a pivotal interaction that set the tone for their collegiate experience. The experience of participating in an individual meeting as a first year student and conducting individual meetings as an RA shaped how participants experienced their leadership role within the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community.

### **Importance of individual meeting as a first year student**

The role of the resident assistant is multi-layered. Within their position, the RA works closely to foster a sense of belonging among the residents, not only within the residential community but also within the university culture. Scholars most often cite the sense of belonging construct (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990; Hurtado & Carter, 1997) as a potential alternative concept for understanding how students may develop a sense of membership in the university (Braxton, 2000). RAs fostered a sense of belonging through strong individual meetings, which set the foundation for positive experiences for both the RA and the residents. Additionally, for the RAs who participated in individual meetings as both a first year resident and an RA, there was a

greater sense of belonging and connectedness to their community and the university. This enhanced sense of belonging further influenced the way these participants experienced their leadership role within the broader Mid-Atlantic University Community.

The sense of belonging construct was originally designed to measure a felt sense of social cohesion within a university, city, or country (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990). By applying this concept to the experience of the resident assistants, one can see how an RA experienced a sense of social cohesion within their community. With the individual meetings focused on relationship building, the sense of belonging increased not only for residents, but also for RAs. RAs were able to make lasting connections with their residents and facilitate those strong connections between residents. RAs who participated in individual meetings as both a first year resident and as an RA experienced an even stronger sense of belonging.

This strong sense of belonging was articulated by Marion. Her dual lens experience shaped how she approached her position and how she experienced her leadership role within the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community. Marion shared:

I have two different perspectives of community organizing, as a freshman, and then again as an RA my junior and senior year. Starting out as a freshman I remember we all had one-on-one meetings with our RA. This helped me feel like I had someone that I could go to in a time of need and could really trust because I felt like I got to get to know her a bit better than what she told us in her first email... this gave me a chance to tell her my interests and goals, my background and where I was coming from, and what I was nervous and excited about from student government to

sororities to premed classes. My experience with my freshman year RA had a tremendous influence on my first year, and I wanted to help others like my RA had done for me.

Feeling a sense of belonging and safe enough to remove the “mask of composure” was very important for first year residents. RAs who experienced the individual meeting from both roles were more cognizant of this important experience. For Joe, his individual meeting was not a superficial discussion, but rather a very deep and introspective discussion. Joe shared that one of the things that most stands out from his one-to-one individual meeting as a first year student was “actually, it was through my first conversation with my RA that I actually came out to my RA. And during that time, I was dealing with my sexuality and so having that one-on-one with my RA really kind of opened the door for a more intimate conversation.” Joe’s experience was not an isolated experience. For many of the RA participants, very personal information and experiences were shared during the individual meetings. RA participants commented that they discussed such topics as sexuality, addiction, sexual assault, death, self-harm, and refugee experiences, to name a few.

Although for some RAs the individual meeting as a first year student was a positive and reaffirming experience, for others such as Kayla, it was not. Kayla experienced a negative individual meeting as a first year resident, which was one of the reasons why she chose to become an RA. Kayla explained to the researcher that although she had communicated via email with her RA in the beginning of the year with questions in regards to moving in and the things she needed to bring with her, she had not really established a personal connection with her. When she had her individual meeting, it was very awkward; Kayla remembered the RA asking if she had any problems. Kayla was struggling academically at the time, but did not mention any of

this to her RA because “Well, it was not really – do you have any problems, more asking me to admit to problems and I've been the top of my class, all that sort of thing in high school. So, coming to college and asking for help is not something that I was immediately prepared to do.”

Additionally for Kayla, the RA had set up the individual meetings in 20 minute intervals, which was not conducive to relationship building. Kayla's experience, including how the questions were asked and the format of the meeting, influenced how she experienced her future leadership role within Mid-Atlantic Private University. Kayla reflected that the RA asked questions that could usually be answered as a yes or no, rather than asking open-ended questions. Kayla admitted that if the question for example had been, "So, what's the hardest thing for you here?" she might have answered that more than, "Do you have any problems?" Kayla further admitted that the type of questions and the way they were asked kept her quiet. Lack of time was also a factor that played into Kayla having a negative individual meeting experience as she was conscious of the fact that the RA only allotted her 20 minutes and someone was coming in right after.

### **Seeing Beyond Stereotypes**

Additional unique themes emerged when the RAs reflected on their own individual meeting experiences. Joe, a self-identified gay male who describes himself as nerdy and non-athletic, realized that the individual meetings provided a means by which to explore his own biases and the stereotypes he held of others. The individual meetings required that he meet with all residents, regardless of his assumptions about people. The individual meetings helped him to critically analyze how others may perceive him and the stereotypes they may have about him as a person and student leader. The relationship building that occurred as a result of the individual

meetings broke down barriers and shaped how he experienced his leadership role within Mid-Atlantic Private University. In Joe's words:

I feel like it brought strong awareness, like strong self-awareness.

I needed to understand how I was being perceived in this role and it really did help in making sure that I kind of got over some of my angst around like, "Oh well, this is my perception of who you are and so we might not relate," but having again, like I keep going back to these conversations because I feel like that played such a crucial role in really, really executing my job as an RA because it allowed me to have these conversations in a formal way, in a structured way and had our set of tools to kind of pull from... So, I feel like it definitely made me much more confident in my ability to connect with people across differences.

The confidence that Joe speaks to, is a form of social capital that the use of community organizing tenets instilled in him. By conducting the individual meetings in a structured way Gabe built a strong connection with his residents which helped to break down any preconceived or real barriers.

### **Accountability**

Rule enforcement can potentially be a difficult component of the RA position. Many of the RA participants in this study indicated that because of their strong foundation with their residents, which was forged during their individual meetings, it was easier to enforce university policy. This ability to address issues made it easier to perform their responsibilities as an RA and shaped how they experienced their leadership role within Mid-Atlantic Private University.

For Joe, it was easier to discuss issues with residents as a mentor and guide facilitating the learning experience, or teachable moment. Joe elucidated his experience by explaining that in his experience because of the individual conversations, “you were able to then say, ‘Hey, we’ve related on a personal level here,’ so now I can kind of step forward and say, ‘Because I know you, I can hold you to this standard and I can step in and make sure that you’re holding yourself accountable.’” For Joe, this helped to blur some of the strict dichotomy between authority figure and friend. He was able to navigate both areas as a true mentor and he felt that was very helpful in strengthening the relationships that he built with his residents during that year.

Marion also experienced her leadership role through a strong sense of community and a sense of social responsibility. Marion explained that due to the positive results of utilizing the community organizing structure in her residential community, everyone in her residential living community “looked out for each other” and respected the common spaces such as the shared kitchen, study room, and lounge more than if they did not care who else was going to be using the lounge after them. A collective sense of accountability for the residential community formed amongst the residents. Consequently, less trash was left in the lounge and common spaces and the communal kitchen was kept relatively cleaner. Marion felt this aided in reducing those types of issues significantly, and believes it fostered a healthy living environment where everyone could thrive. Additionally, residents from other residential colleges asked Marion to be “faux residents,” to participate in her community, the programming, and be included in communication even though they did not live in her residential community. This illustrates that this positive community was noticed and membership desired by residents outside her residential college, who wished they had that kind of experience. This is another example of how the experience was



different for the RAs and residents who participated in the community organizing project versus those that did not.

Similar to Marion's experience, Catherine found that her strong relationship with residents allowed rule enforcement to be easier. This was not only related to rule enforcement but also to the strong connections formed through the individual meetings. One example Catherine shared of having to address a difficult situation involved her residents having a party that included alcohol, during which some damage was done to the interior of the building. When she returned to her building she saw that damage had been done to the fire exit sign and ceiling. She reflected that although she had no proof or evidence of what occurred, she believes because she knew them so well she was able to approach her residents and have a candid conversation about the incident. She told her residents she would appreciate it if someone would come forward and take responsibility for what had happened. Rather than blowing her off, they came forward and took responsibility: "And they did that solely because they respected me. And I think the reason why they respected me was because I took so much time to get to know each of them and their motivations and things like that." This speaks to the strong connection and trust built between Catherine and her residents. This was a major accomplishment since the university judicial office had no documentation or proof of who had been involved in the vandalism. Catherine also reflected on accountability by sharing that other students also felt accountable for their own actions and would consult with Catherine. This included students struggling with alcohol consumption addiction and eating disorders. Catherine believe that the community organizing tenets and skills utilized "gave me some leverage to help them the best way I could."

The community organizing practices and the individual meetings made it easier for the RA to broach difficult issues with residents or address problematic behaviours. For Marie,

participating in the Community Organizing Pilot Project was a positive experience and shaped how she experienced her leadership role with in Mid-Atlantic Private University. While serving as an RA, Marie made strong connections with her residents, but she did not realize the long term influence she had on her residents until later. Marie alluded to an experience during her senior year with a couple of residents who were in fraternities. Although Marie chose not to disclose the details of the situation because of confidentiality concerns, she labelled this experience as a defining moment for her and an illustration of the effect of utilizing the community organizing tenets. Marie believed that because of the fact that she had these individual conversations at the very beginning of the year, “it was easier for me to approach them about more difficult topics like that or they were also comfortable coming to me to talk about it.” To further illustrate the long term influence, when one of those young gentleman graduated this past year, he emailed Marie and said, “Thanks for being able talk about that, and going through that period with me.” From Marie’s perspective, it had more of an influence than she realized at the time: “I think the power is that it’s kind of opening up the potential for communication of deeper things later on, too. I think that will be the thing that I stress the most about how it’s influenced me going through it.” The communication from the former resident that Marie describes occurred four years after the individual one to one meeting and her time serving as the RA for the resident.

### **Changed Way RAs Did Their Job**

Upon reflection of their participation in the Community Organizing Pilot Project, many RAs commented on how utilizing community organizing practices changed the way they did their job.

As Suzanne describes, participating in the community organizing pilot project pushed her and made her think critically about the way she spoke to her residents. As someone who admits to being shy, participation in the pilot project and witnessing the positive influence of the individual meetings made her more persistent in meeting with everyone. She was very conscious of how she first introduced herself and it made her more critical in the way she thought about her role as RA and her community. The community organizing training made her connect people in her mind whereas in her first year as an RA she talked to everyone and definitely tried to get a sense of who they were, but really not as much in terms of creating a community. She admits that although she thought she was creating a community in her first year, in retrospect she does not believe she succeeded. According to Suzanne, during her second year it was a much more conscious effort to link people, whether she was connecting the first year residents with each other or connecting them with the second year residents in the building. Suzanne explains that “I was much more mindful. I was much more excited about my job and that came across my second year.”

### **Opportunity for residents to be involved in decision making**

Minkler and Wallerstein (2005) argue the strength of community organizing lies with focusing on the people of the community and allowing for active participation by community members. This in turn provides skill-building opportunities for community members and the ability to promote individual and community capacity as community members assess needs. Community members are able to plan strategically and implement action steps. Kayla learned a valuable lesson in self-realization and a way to build on the strength of community organizing. Kayla shared that as a second year student she was chair of the program board and found that it was a stressful and unfulfilling experience. After being trained on the principles of community

organizing and the techniques, her experience as an RA was very different and thus shaped how she experienced her leadership role within the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community. As Kayla articulates:

I'm very authoritative and so making less of the decisions myself and inviting participation from others, like learning how to ask other people to participate was a very important part of the training and so in the end, I think people ended up a little bit happier with whatever we had because if I had just been calling all the shots or basically I guess I was trained to be more conscious of other people's opinions and how to get them to express their opinions which I appreciated because I think everyone ended up just a little bit happier.

Kayla realized that by allowing her residents to be active participants in the formation of their own community, both she and her residents were happier and had a more fulfilling experience. The residents also gained new skills by being involved in the planning process and implementation of programs.

Additionally, for many of the RAs, utilizing community organizing strategies and techniques helped to foster and develop a strong close knit residential community. For example, Shirley describes her residential community as pretty tight, "a little wacky" in terms of fun and pretty diverse, but a close group. As a community, many would get together and watch *Glee*, have a snowball fight, or just sit and talk about something happening on campus or something that they read that they wanted to pick each other's brains about: "It was pleasantly dorky... it felt like there was definitely a strong community of really bright people who just got along. It

wasn't perfect by any means but it was a close group." When pushed to reflect on her actions as a community organizer in the fostering of that community, Shirley shared that the individual meetings played a role because all the residents knew she was asking similar questions to everyone so they felt comfortable answering them. Shirley took the information discussed in the individual meetings and made the connections that Stanton-Salazar (2004) describe as essential components of a sense of belonging, which is one form of social capital. As Shirley further elaborates: "And in asking the questions sometimes I would be like "would you be comfortable if I spoke to so and so or introduced you to this person." She would ask students what kind of idea they had for a group activity; students felt like their voices were heard and that she took their opinions seriously. Shirley framed it nicely by explaining, "It wasn't about me. I could ease out of it and it was really just about the larger group. I was just kinda facilitating conversations, or getting the group together if you will, so I do think that some people who may not have spoken to each other or been friends otherwise were able to do so because they had the opportunity to through the conversation." This example also serves as an illustration of the concept of bridging social capital.

The strong communities formed by the RAs using community organizing practices illustrates Kuh's post conventional organization concept. Kuh (2003) notes that "organizational theory is a window through which to view the behavior of individuals and groups in the context of complex organizational structures" (p. 270). Kuh (2003) contrasts the conventional view of organizations with post conventional organizations, which are "interdependent, unpredictable, less-structured, relationship centered, ever changing, and ambiguous" (p. 270). Other authors agree with Kuh's sentiment and call for institutions to broaden their scope to meet the changing needs of a twenty-first century world (Allen & Cherrey, 2000; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-

Pedersen & Allen, 1999; Senge, 2006). The implementation of community organizing techniques by resident assistants is a unique method that institutions of higher education can adopt to broaden their scope and connect students across differences. This paradigm shift recognizes learning as intentional, contextual, and relational, occurring through dialogue and collective reflection (Howton, 2011). Organizations, therefore, are called to develop and maintain structures and systems that facilitate such learning and subsequently develop “communities of practice.” RAs who participated in the Community Organizing Pilot Project worked to foster communities that were supportive through dialogue and relationship building. One strength of the Community Organizing Project and influence for RAs was the focus on relationship building.

Avila (2010) provides another example of a successful community organizing strategy. While working with a group of parents in the local school, researchers discovered that parents’ and teachers’ responses were aligned in regards to college success and a safe environment for learning. The gap analysis, however, revealed that parents just wanted to know who the teachers were. By focusing on relationship-building between parents and teachers, a stronger sense of community was established and student success increased. Translating this to the university setting, it is important for the RA to engage in relationship building in a way that allows residents to know RAs personally. The individual meetings created lasting connections that carried through to career and life. Through the individual meetings the RAs were able to get to know their residents on a personal level and in turn the residents had an opportunity to get to know the RAs personally.

**Residents developed lasting connections to their RAs**

The strength of utilizing community organizing practices in a residence life setting can be seen in the strong bond and lasting connections that the RAs formed with their residents. It provided the opportunity for RAs to connect with residents on a very deep level.

**Long term relationships and connections to residents, even years later**

Catherine experienced some of the strongest lasting connections through the use of the community organizing practices. She was able to intentionally connect with her residents on an individual level. She truly came to know her residents as people and earn their trust. She still hears from some of her residents every once in a while. Catherine believes that through the connection made she will always know them very deeply as a human being: “And that’s something that I credit to those individual meetings that we did.”

Catherine explained that by utilizing community organizing practices, specifically the individual meetings, “it just made [relationships with students] into something that’s really very lasting. I still, to this day, feel like I know -- I haven’t seen some of them in years, and I still feel like I know them very, very well.” This connection is not only something felt by the RA but also demonstrated by the actions of the residents. As Catherine further explains, she was back to campus approximately a year ago, and she saw some of her former residents at dinner. They came and sat down with her. At first they were making small talk for a while, but then all of a sudden the former residents just start telling her things like, “I don’t really know what I’m going to do with my life,” and “I think I’m going to apply for this,” and “That sounds like a good idea.” It seemed to Catherine to progress into a very intimate conversation very quickly: “And I think that that’s something that is not superficial, and I think it’s because of that lasting deeper connection.”

**Strong connection to the community and positive sense of self**

When exploring how RAs experienced their leadership role within the broader Mid-Atlantic Private University, community it is important to explore the sense of belonging felt by the RAs, the positive sense of self, and the social capital gained by the RAs. Catherine explains her positive lens. By participating in the community organizing pilot project and utilizing community organizing practices such as the one to one meeting:

I think in a sense that it made me feel very -- it made me feel very important and very valued. It made me feel like what I was doing everyday really mattered. And so, I conclude that when you feel really good about who you are and what you're doing, I think that that does carry over to every aspect of your life. But I think that I felt very good about who I was as a person because I did all of these individual meetings, and I think that that had nothing but positive things for every aspect of my life.

The positive experiences of the RAs, such as Catherine, support studies that have suggested that a sense of belonging contributes to students' retention during their first year (Hausman, Schofield, & Woods, 2007). It is also congruent with Allison's (1999) findings that a sense of belonging also influences a student's long-term persistence in college. If a student or RA feels like they belong in the community, are valued, and connected to one-another they will be more likely to stay at the institution.

The residence hall and the Community Organizing Pilot Program built a "community of practice." As the RAs used community organizing practices to change the status quo, new ways of practicing or functioning emerged. For some RAs this carried into their personal relationships.



**Influence on personal relationships**

By utilizing community organizing practices RAs not only supported their residents and built a strong residential community, but were also influenced personally in how they interacted with peers and experienced their leadership role. While reflecting on her experience, Catherine shared “I can only imagine it made me a better listener and better at asking questions, which probably opened and made me a better friend.” She reflected on her friendships with people outside of her residential community. She felt she was more engaged and connected to her friends.

Suzanne shared that utilizing the community organizing practices changed how she spoke with her friends: “I think I started to think about my friendships a little differently actually particularly in the way I started asking questions of my residents.” Suzanne came to the realization that she hadn’t actually ever had these kind of conversations with her friends. Suzanne noticed that interactions with her friends changed in a slightly deeper way. In addition to building relationships by utilizing community organizing techniques, RAs also experienced enhanced communication with their residents. This was seen through a shared jargon and understanding that the RA was a resource for the resident and community. Additionally, RAs found that their residential communities were supportive of each other through language and actions. Lastly, by having strong initial one to one meetings, RAs established an open door comfort zone.

**Power and Gender Dynamics**

In exploring the utilization of community organizing techniques to address gender inequalities and asymmetries in power within the larger Mid-Atlantic Private University community and each residential community, the experiences of the RAs were varied and their

interpretation divided. The RA culture within Mid-Atlantic Private University is to foster equal and inclusive communities for all members. The Mid-Atlantic Private University RA Manual (2010) articulates that resident assistants play an integral role in fostering a safe, inclusive, and engaging community for all residential college students. RAs were responsible for promoting safety, citizenship, and civic responsibility among college residents and for maintaining an environment in which all members of Mid-Atlantic's diverse campus community felt comfortable. RAs held individual meetings with each of their residents in the first few weeks of the academic year to foster this level of comfort.

Community organizing is one method by which to create and sustain social capital in marginalized people or those who may not otherwise had an opportunity to have their voice heard. As Howton (2011) argues, by building strong relationships within the residential community, communities can use relationships to foster individual and organizational, internal and external development. RAs used community organizing tenets to build strong relationships with and amongst their residents. These strong relationships led to increasing the social capital of some of the residents. Putnam (2000, p. 56) offers a more succinct definition of social capital: "By 'social capital' I mean features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives." Although Putnam (2000) further argues that women are instrumental in creating and sustaining stocks of social capital, the interviews with RA participants were divided in this regard.

### **Community Organizing Gave Students a Voice**

The goals of the individual meetings were met by helping the RAs understand their residents individually and as a collective. Through these individual meetings RAs conveyed to the residents that their voices and views were valued. Additionally, RAs discovered areas of

shared concern and interest among the residents. Within the framework of Putnam's (2000) concept of social capital, Mid-Atlantic Private University's students' health and happiness depended upon adequate stocks of social capital. RAs used community organizing tenets to bolster social capital in their residents. Community organizing is one method by which the RAs were able to create and sustain social capital; not only their own, but also within their residents who may have otherwise been marginalized or not had an opportunity to have their voice heard. The individual meetings created the opportunity for all residents to be heard.

The utilization of community organizing tenets gave quieter students and concerned students a voice and a medium by which to speak their thoughts, and the safe space and positive foundation to speak with the RA if concerns arose. Specifically from Elizabeth's lens, the community organizing techniques gave women the opportunity to talk and leveled the playing field. When asked to reflect on how and in what ways utilizing community organizing techniques addressed gender inequalities and asymmetries in power, Elizabeth believed the most effective way was through the use of the individual meetings. By having the individual conversation everyone had the opportunity to share and have their voice heard equally without judgment. For the quieter students or the students who were embarrassed and worried about coming off as "nerdy" or "not smart enough," the individual meetings provided a safe space to discuss these concerns. Elizabeth believes that for many women, her female residents specifically, the individual meetings gave them an opportunity to talk about feelings such as peer pressure or the need to perform well academically. Although Elizabeth is personally very strong-willed in her opinions and does not get flustered with having a room full of one gender, she was conscious that this was not the case for all her residents.

The individual meetings addressed asymmetries in power effectively by providing the opportunity for a conversation. The conversation may or may not particularly address gender inequalities but it leveled the playing fields automatically because everyone had their own opportunity to speak with the RA privately without the hindrance of having to worry about someone else judging them in the room. Elizabeth did admit that, “Of course I could have missed the fact that they may have been thinking I was judging them. But there is only so much you can do.”

The individual meetings also created a space to validate students for who they are and empowered them in their own sense of self. For Catherine, the process of having an individual meeting and spending 45 minutes getting to know somebody and “why they tick” served to validate that person as an individual and who they were. She shared the example of one student who was really struggling with his spirituality and together they discussed that further. For another student, the validation of his self, permitted him to come to terms with the fact that he liked other men, and further empowered him to be comfortable with his gay identity. The individual meetings served as a method of “validating any person on their personhood,” and served as a method by which to empower all people to believe that they are “worthy of attention and respect and love, actually.”

Individual meetings and the implementation of community organizing practices were effective tools for RAs to address power imbalances in clubs and organizations. As President of a large and influential student organization, Addison used the tenets of community organizing to ensure that all the members felt included and validated. He used the concept of the individual meetings to hear what his members needed and work toward mutual goals. As team captains, RAs used community organizing to empower student athletes to be comfortable in their athletic

role and on the team. By working to have all teammates' voices heard, a more cohesive team was formed. The community organizing techniques worked on addressing imbalances of power between first years and seniors, or new athletes versus returners.

### **Gender Dynamics**

When exploring how and in what ways utilizing community organizing techniques addressed gender inequalities and asymmetries in power and how participant's gender influenced their role as a community organizer the findings were varied. Some participants felt that it was easier for the female RAs to ask the emotional questions and dig deeper during the individual meetings, whereas Aiden stated that there were "no power dynamics that I saw. I didn't see any struggle of power." For many, there was a sense that gender may have influenced the relationship, but not as much as shared experiences. These shared experiences created a bonded level of social capital, which refers to the links between like-minded people (Narayan, 1999). Bonded social capital formed by matriculation as a Mid-Atlantic Private University student and a member of the specific residential college. For Andy, the utilization of community organizing techniques gave everyone a sense of connectedness which gave them "the power to unite when things got tough." This was a "stark difference" from Andy's first year in which he felt that his students were much more isolated.

Although not as much as gender, age was also a factor that influenced the power dynamic of the relationship, such as the social capital that came with being a senior working with first year students. On the other hand, sexual orientation, more than gender, was also perceived as a contributing factor to the power dynamics and relationships built within the residential community. Community organizing techniques were viewed as methods of giving everyone a voice and leveling the playing the field, subsequently influencing the power dynamics within the

residential community. By utilizing the individual meetings to build rapport and trust, some RAs did not come across power or gender issues within their residential community. For these RAs the use of community organizing techniques leveled any potential power dynamics and created an equal foundation of power from the onset. From Christopher's lens the community organizing techniques fostered an environment that was "pretty welcoming" regardless of gender or even power roles. For one RA, the use of community organizing techniques, specifically the individual meetings, gave the RA power and helped them to do their job better. The RA had power because they had an inside perspective on the strengths, weaknesses, fear, and goals of each resident.

By conducting the individual meetings and making the connections between residents who may not have otherwise connected, RAs built relationships amongst their residents and fostered "bridging social capital" (Putnam, 1996). The connections in bridging social capital fostered social inclusion. RAs utilized the community organizing tenets to cultivate a strong close knit group and raise the social capital of the residents. The residents formed a network of friends and resources for each other which resulted in both bonding social capital and bridging social capital.

### **Influence of Gender**

As a male, Scott thought that it was easier for the guys on his hall to come hang out in his room, and they did so more often than female residents. Scott admitted that this may be just because it was more of a comfortable thing for male residents to "just hang out" with another male in the room, a possible influence of his gender. Scott did not think that the girls would have been uncomfortable hanging out in his room, as they occasionally did so. He reflected an uncertainty whether this was a product of gender or the way that his female residents chose to

socialize. Through further exploration, Scott reflected that his gender influenced his style of interacting with people in ways that he admittedly may not fully understand. This may have manifested itself in the type of programming that he coordinated in contrast to the programming of his female RA co-workers

For Joe as a male, he felt he needed to be more conscious about gender when he was talking to fellow males. Joe shared that “honestly for me, gender has less of an effect on me than my sexuality does.” Joe, a self-identified gay man, had trepidations about his interactions with his white male residents. Being uncertain and not knowing how his white male heterosexual residents were going to perceive his sexuality, Joe found the potential interaction scary. Additionally, Joe was uncertain and conscientious of how his residents were going to perceive him as a Latino. From Joe’s lens, “Power dynamics definitely play into that when you're talking about like minority, majority relationships.” Joe admitted to having less of that angst with his female residents. Going back to the importance of the individual meetings, Joe felt that because of the structured time of the individual meetings, he was able to get to know residents beyond face value or stereotypes associated with areas of interest that he did not share, such as athletics or being in a fraternity.

For some RAs, there was an awareness of their gender, but it was a struggle to verbalize the experience in regards to gender. For multiple RAs it was the perceived or factual experience that as a woman, it might have been better received or easier to ask some of the emotional questions and dig very dig into fears and concerns. Catherine shared that this was potentially the most prevalent way in which gender influenced her individual meetings. Catherine explained that she had not reflected on the role gender played until asked by the researcher. From Catherine’s lens, “As a result of gender imbalances and gender stereotyping, 'for better or worse' some

people do feel for whatever reason more comfortable speaking with women.” During her first year as an RA, Suzanne was much more aware being a female RA and wanting to “assert kind of more power.....especially because many of my zees were male athletes.” Although she was concerned about her role as an RA and whether the residents would take her seriously being a female, Suzanne felt that her residents did do so. Aiden believed that some of his female residents may not have opened up as much as they may have wanted to because he was a male, although he was uncertain to what extent.

### **Individual meetings as opportunity to link people**

The individual meetings provided an opportunity for RAs to take the information garnered from their residents in regards to interests, concerns, and goals and link them to resources. These resources included administrators, and offices, but more often involved the RA linking the resident with someone with the same interest who was already established in the Mid-Atlantic Private University community. Coleman (1994) illustrated a causal link between social capital and access to resources by arguing that the powerful remained powerful by virtue of contacts with other powerful people. The RAs used the individual meetings as a means to connect residents to “powerful” contacts within Mid-Atlantic private university to increase their social capital and elevate them in power status.

Shirley used the individual meetings to link up first year students in her residential community with seniors in an informal mentoring relationship. By making the connections between the first year students and the seniors, the first-year students were empowered. First year students were able to have someone to turn with questions about classes, social life, and clubs and organizations. The seniors embraced the first-year students and connected them with their network. These connections and shared information served to inflate the first year student's



social capital. Shirley served as one example of the ways that the RAs created these type of formalized connections. Shirley made connections predominately between first-year female students interested in majoring in engineering and seniors in the major. Jim utilized the information gathered during individual meetings to connect first year students interested in pre-med or the sciences with current seniors in the major. One successful pairing was between a female first year student and a senior female in the field. For Jim, this was a conscious intentional pairing of two women.

Jim utilized the information learned through individual meetings to connect people and from his lens “address an inequality.” Jim shared that during his senior year he had a “sweet and very creative” resident who was rejected from the Mid-Atlantic Student Design Club, a highly selective student group that designed the posters and marketing materials for many student groups and campus events. This was very upsetting for this resident as some of the first-year student’s in her friend group were accepted to the club. This was a very difficult time for the resident. As a result of an individual meeting between Jim and the resident, Jim reached out to a friend of his who was very creative and active in a theater group. Both students benefitted from their mutual relationship, and even chose to form a new student club focused on marketing. In regards to this dissertation, one function of capital is access to networks, which provides resources, knowledge, and insight into various opportunities (Mullen et al. 2003)

### **Summary of Chapter**

Traynor argues for a “new process of community organizing – one relying less on issue based mobilization and more on community education, leadership development and support, and building local sustainable organizations” (1993, p. 22). The RAs who participated in the Community Organizing Pilot Project experienced their leadership role within the broader Mid-

Atlantic Private University in a unique way. They benefited from leadership development and created a sense of support within their residential community. The use of the individual meetings enhanced the relationships that they built and enhanced communication within their residential communities. By educating the RAs and adapting community organizing ideas to the university setting, change is possible. RAs who used community organizing practices, specifically the individual meetings, felt that they were more effective in the role of facilitator and building a sense of community in their residential community.

By utilizing community organizing practices, RAs were able to build their social capital and in turn the social capital of their residents. Hornburg and Lang (1998) surmise that building social capital may give people and communities the connectedness they need to succeed. For researchers in the field of community organizing, defining social capital includes the incorporation of “civic capacity” and “community building.” This allows community organizers to frame community organizing and the concept of social capital in terms of “the capacity of communities to act” rather than in terms of “need” (Gittel & Vidal, 1998, p.14). Translating this framework to the Community Organizing Pilot Project, RAs cultivated supportive networks by facilitating strong individual meetings which fostered the growth of their residential community into a supportive local network.

Through the individual meetings, RAs made strong personal connections with residents. Peck (1987) defined a learning community as “a group of individuals who have learned to communicate honestly with each other, whose relationships go deeper than their masks of composure...and who delight in each other, make others’ conditions our own” (p. 59). In a way the RAs were fostering unique learning communities, not in the traditional definition of the concept but rather in a new way. These new communities were shaped by the individual

meetings and strong connections formed. By incorporating community organizing practices and techniques, RAs were redefining their residential community and reshaping how they experienced their leadership role within Mid-Atlantic Private University.

Preskill and Torres (1999) further describe the behaviors of learning communities: that they pursue issues of common interest and practice; seek consensus in decision-making processes; are empowered to act; rely on one another for information and learning; see themselves as part of the larger whole (more than the sum of their individual relationships); support the sharing of divergent ideas; respect each other's gifts; engage in self-examination; engage in critical reflection; provide opportunities to hear dissenting opinions; and create a spirit of cooperation rather than competition (Preskill & Torres, 1999). Through the use of individual meetings RAs were able to support all residents, hear different perspective, and create a sense of cooperation within the residential community, a community built around strong communication and positive relationships.

Specific to the institution of higher education, Kuh (2003) views "colleges and universities as complex, open systems, influenced by external events and changing environments....encouraging the sharing of information within, across, and beyond organizational boundaries" (p. 276). Applying this concept to higher education, one can argue that departments within colleges and universities should understand and leverage relationships to facilitate individual and organizational, internal and external development (Howton, 2011). This is true also in regards to the role of the resident assistant. One can argue that student affairs professionals and resident assistants should also be able to understand and leverage relationships to facilitate individual student learning and university priorities. By training the RAs in community organizing practices, Mid-Atlantic Private University attempted to provide the

framework for a community of learning. After students' "masks of composure" are removed, true dialogue may occur, which may be facilitated by an RA. The individual meetings facilitated by the RAs were genuine and influential – not only for the RA but for the resident as well.

## **Chapter V: Long Term Legacies**

### **Using Community Organizing Beyond Pilot Project**

The long-term legacy and use of the community organizing techniques after graduating or outside of the pilot project has been profound for many of the resident assistant participants. All 21 RAs who participated in the community organizing pilot project employed the use of community organizing techniques and skills either consciously or unconsciously in their career or graduate training programs. For categorization purposes, the career paths of the participants were divided into medicine, law, education and business. Of the seven former RAs pursuing a career in medicine, four are currently enrolled in medical school, one is enrolled in a joint M.D and Ph.D. program, and two are pursuing post-baccalaureate programs in pre-med while applying to medical schools. Additionally, five participants are working in business, including sales, information technology, consulting, engineering, and finance. Two former RAs are enrolled in law school. Finally, seven participants are involved in the education field; three are currently classroom teachers; one is pursuing an advanced degree; one is working at a youth empowerment program; one is working as an education coordinator for a museum; and one is the coordinator of teen education services in a library.

RAs who approach their current profession from a community organizer lens are finding that the techniques learned are applicable to their current profession and personal life. Similarly, Zakoc and colleagues' multi-site case study showed that higher-developed partnerships were built by college staff who worked like community organizers; that is, by focusing substantial efforts on establishing strong relationships with stakeholders and on building structures and processes that allowed for active stakeholder involvement (2010).

**Utilization of Community Organizing after Graduation/Post-Project**

**Use of Community Organizing in the Education Field.** Not only were the individual meetings the most profound community organizing skills for RAs, but past participants resoundingly spoke of the incorporation of the individual meetings skills, strategies and goals into their professional careers. Just as the role of the resident assistant is multi-layered, within their current careers, the RA participants worked to foster a sense of belonging among their co-workers, students, and community. This sense of belonging construct (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990; Hurtado & Carter, 1997) applies as a potential concept for understanding how former RA participants may develop a sense of membership in their educational community (Braxton, 2000). This sense of belonging construct was originally designed to measure a felt sense of social cohesion within a university, city, or country (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990). By applying this concept to the experience of resident assistants, one can see how the RA participants experienced a sense of social cohesion of their residential community at Mid-Atlantic Private University and subsequently used that framework to foster a sense of belonging in their career. Social cohesion and sense of belonging entail multiple possibilities for forming affiliations with a larger community (Hurtado & Carter, 1997); this was seen extensively in the field of education. Perceptions of racial climate and connections with external communities (including family, social, geographic, and religious communities outside the college) have been found to be significant predictors of sense of belonging and other measures of a successful adjustment to college, such as academic motivation and psychological health (Hurtado, Carter, & Spuler, 1996; Hurtado & Carter, 1997). Unconsciously or consciously, the RA participants strive to create a sense of belonging to foster successful adjustment for their students in the education field, and create a space for growth and self-awareness.

Joe, a middle school teacher in California, provided an explanation of how he uses the individual meetings in a strategic and beneficial way in his career. He is able to build a strong relationship with parents and children. It is not only helpful for him, but also the process of education. Joe explained that, in his opinion, an RA acts as a teacher. As a current teacher, he uses a great deal of the community organizing skill set when it comes to building relationships. He incorporates the one-on-one conversations within his practice as a teacher and during his meetings with individual students and with parents as well. Joe says the use of individual meetings and the community organizing techniques are helpful in building a positive momentum and investment in him as the teacher, in the school, in the subject and content matter, in the students, and in the parents. Joe believes the process of education benefits simply from having a base of understanding of everyone's frame of lens, who they are, and what they bring to the table. This is just one example of the cohesive interconnected way in which the use of the community organizing techniques impacts a former RA's career.

In regards to utilizing the skills learned, Monica carried them across the world to Central Asia. Monica, currently employed in the financial sector, utilized community organizing techniques overseas as an educator. Monica taught English (academic reading and writing) at the university level in Central Asia, where she was given a classroom of 18-22 year olds. Monica utilized the community organizing techniques when trying to discover how to maintain authority in a classroom of thirty students, half of whom were older than she was. She used the skills that she had learned to develop group review sessions, to assign writing buddies and to create a cohesive classroom.

An additional use of the community organizing skills was by Aiden. Aiden pursued his Ed. M in Education after graduation and currently works as a teacher at a private school in the

Northeast. Aiden explained that utilizing the community organizing techniques “really showed me how to develop a camaraderie that I definitely use now.” Within his teaching career, Aiden explained how the classroom is a community,

If the kids realize it or not at their age. And the big part is making sure that they all have their own voice. Listening to them each as an individual. I take every opportunity to take them aside, whether to congratulate them or ask them what is wrong, and give each one the moments to let them know they are being heard as an individual. Also make sure to have those times that I am speaking to the class as a whole. How are they fitting in the community? Do I need to step in to make it a more positive community or sit back and let them experience it for themselves? Let them figure out ways to improve their situations, if that is positive reinforcement or to work together if they want X, or you know if one person falls then everyone falls, or individual prizes as well.

Aiden elaborated that he uses the skills not only in education, but also “in everyday relationships, making sure that I am aware of the other person I am talking to as a person with their own problems coming in with their own ideas and their own thoughts, their own feelings and really making sure that I am taking the time to appreciate that and allowing them to share their side and their life.”

Based on the interviews with RA participants, utilizing the skills has become incorporated in the way they do their job on a daily basis. As such, there is not always a cognizant recognition that they are doing it. Scott, who currently works in a library overseeing



the education programming for the teen/young adult population, acknowledges his use of the skills he learned. But he also realized that it has become second nature to employ the community organizing techniques. He unconsciously used them, and only realized he did so after thoughtful reflection. Scott feels that while working at the library with the young adults and seeing how they interact with each other, he has consciously made a point of speaking to each of the young adults as often as he can. His intention is to get a sense of what roles each person plays in the group and what type of support or things the young adult may need from him.

Scott provided the example that in regards to the library he works, the young adult section is situated in “a very echo-ey” location and so the young adults are frequently blamed when “there’s a ton of noise” in the library. He acknowledged that the noise usually is their fault. Scott further explained that he “tries to think of them as individuals and tries to address the problems that the group has created by working with them one-on-one.” While discussing this, he came to the realization that he was holding mini individual one-to-one meetings with the young adults, although he had not specifically labelled his interactions in that manner. By engaging the young adults in the library, he is fostering a sense of community, a sense of belonging, and a sense of ownership for the young adults to feel both welcome and responsible for their actions in the space.

After completing an advanced degree in social work, Suzanne returned home to work in the education field supporting young adults. She is currently responsible for creating a pilot project for young adult mentees who are going to college; one component is building a strong rapport with the young adults, accomplished by getting to know them and know their needs. Additionally, it is crucial for Suzanne to get to know their families and their communities. Suzanne critically evaluates and reflects upon her role in supporting the young adults during this

time of transition in their lives. By utilizing the community organizing tenets, specifically the individual meetings, Suzanne was supporting the students as they negotiated how they play a part in the transformation of their own lives through education. This is similar to Paolo Friere (1970), who argued that the student should be a co-creator of knowledge in a mutual approach to education framework.

Suzanne explained that while it is not the same as being an RA in charge of a group of residents, it was definitely about creating a smaller community within the mentoring community and supporting the young adults, especially around what they feel they needed. The process of getting to know her participants, creating a cohesive group of young adults and creating a sense of community mirrored her work at Mid-Atlantic Private University as an RA utilizing community organizing techniques. Suzanne reflected that similar to her experience at Mid-Atlantic Private University, over time her confidence has grown in the way that she asks questions, the way people relate to her and even the way “I push people a little bit.”

### **Use of Community Organizing in Medicine**

**Enhancing patient care.** One of the most profound ways the RA participants used the community organizing skills after graduation was in the medical profession. Of the 21 participants, seven are pursuing a career in medicine. With five currently in medical school and two in post-baccalaureate programs with the intention of pursuing medicine, it was fascinating to learn the multiple ways in which the community organizing skills are transferable in the medical profession.

**Meaningful intentional connections.** Christopher, an M.D./Ph.D. student in New York City, attributes participating in the community organizing pilot project with learning to establish meaningful intentional connections with patients. As Christopher explained, being able to

communicate effectively was an essential component of his job: “In medical school a lot is predicated on your ability to speak with a patient and be able to connect with them and help foster a good, you know, physician-patient relationship.” Christopher further explained that if a doctor builds a positive relationship and communicates effectively during a history and physical (H&P) –essentially an individual meeting in which the doctor asks for the medical history and perform a base line physical of the patient – he could gain “a lot of useful information that you can use from a medical perspective” In Christopher’s experience,

By having a patient feel comfortable enough that he will tell you,  
"Oh, you know, I think I might have contracted a sexually  
transmitted disease because I have – you know, I'm a male who has  
sex with other men." Being able to establish a – albeit brief but  
good lines of communication with the patient, and from an -- from  
early on, can really go a long way as far as helping you out in  
getting information that maybe he wouldn't have given.

This experience and perspective was not unique to only one participant. Catherine, a medical student in Philadelphia, explained how participating in the project provided her with useful skills for “talking with people. And I really like the idea of trying to get at what an individual person is driven by. It’s something that I build on. I do use it in my practice in becoming a doctor.”

For Marie, a medical student in Atlanta, the community organizing skills helped in her relocating and starting a new school. She felt confident walking up to individuals and having meaningful strategic discussions during orientation and the first few weeks. She attributed the community organizing skills with helping to ease her transition to the new school and city.

Marie further explained that she anticipates using it in the medical profession. Her view was unique in that she was no longer the person in a position of power as when she was an RA. She does use the skills to try to find and make connections with others: "I'm not as much in the driver's seat, I guess, when you're using it outside the RA position because you're not the one connecting people so much but you're still trying to find connections between yourself and people and probably still making connections without realizing it." Upon further reflection, Marie shared that "I'm sure it'll come up again when I start working with patients more in having to work within a team of people and knowing how to interact with patients versus a doctor and then, like what the commonalities are between the two would probably draw on the skills from the organizing project." This conscious awareness of the use of community organizing skills was not realized by all participants as some described their current career and through reflection came to the realization the unconscious ways in which they were utilizing community organizing techniques.

Shirley, currently attending a post-baccalaureate program and working at a hospital in patient care, stated that participating in the community organizing pilot project "colors pretty much every interaction that I have, especially at work." The experience taught Shirley the importance of cohesiveness in a community and the fact that communities themselves have layers, a large community which is comprised of smaller communities. She learned the importance of connecting the members of the smaller communities to each other and to the larger community as a whole. She learned to listen to people's interests, connect them in her mind and strategically introduce them to strengthen the community and each person's sense of belonging. By connecting the community together she was unconsciously building their individual and

community social capital. This also helped facilitate discussions between employees and supervisors.

Shirley felt that the community organizing skills she gained have helped her tremendously to de-escalate situations, by learning what makes a “patient tick and what their ins and outs” because of the way she learned to listen to people, hear what they want and need, and what they are implying but are not directly saying. Additionally, she uses this information to improve patient care, patient satisfaction, and the overall patient experience.

**Use of Community Organizing in the Business Sector.** Five former RA participants are currently employed in the business sector. Congruent with the findings of Alexander, Zakocs, Earp, and French (2006), participants with community organizing skills view themselves as effective project directors and attribute, in varying degrees, their success to the community organizing skills learned through participation in the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community Organizing Pilot Project. This concept of feeling connected, a sense of belonging, was also explained by Jim and the affinity groups he formed within his company. Jim works in the business sector of a governmental agency. In his current position, he interacts with a significant number of employees who are close to his age, recent college graduates who are entering the workforce. Within this cohort Jim identified a significant number who identify as members of the LGBT community. As a self-identified member of the LGBT community and fairly new member of the workforce, Jim created a peer affinity group at his place of work. He sends emails to the new analysts and invites them to learn more about what is called a “business resource group,” an affinity group based around race, gender or sexual identity for people of the same age to get together, network, and find support with. Although the affinity groups are not usually overly structured, Jim did find that he utilizes the community organizing skills while

networking and acclimating to the culture. Because Jim was reaching out specifically to people who identified as LGBT, he found that he ended up having sit-down one-to-one meetings with individuals. He attributed this to the fact that he was being brought together with a new person by one specific issue, and ended up speaking about concerns in regards to navigating being LGBT while in federal government related work. This affinity group and the individual meetings foster a sense of belonging for the new members of the community and all members of the affinity group.

Additionally Jim participates in a mentorship program in which he was paired up with an older, more experienced “LGBT practitioner.” When he was asked to meet with his new mentor, he fell back on the framework of the one-to-one community organizing meetings. To maximize the impact of the mentorship relationship, Jim was open and honest to speak about his goals and fears. The community organizing meetings prepared him to be uncomfortable. Jim “felt okay being uncomfortable because I had grown used to this feeling and that sort of very intense one – on-one interaction before” Jim further explained that he even utilized his community organizing skills to secure funding for the affinity group and non-work related community building activities. He related this back to the mini grant program providing funds for community building in his residential community.

Melissa found that she utilized community organizing practices at work, specifically within teams that are working on a new project. It has influenced the way in which she gets to know people, both in the group setting planning project or working through a project. Additionally, she used community organizing techniques to build a sense of belonging in the way she mentors interns. This was similar to Monica who used the community organizing techniques in the financial sector to foster new colleagues’ sense of belonging and support her

work as a mentor. The most powerful technique that Ralph used, was to acknowledge people and let them know they are being heard. He has found in the private business sector that personal private conversations have been his most successful negotiating tool.

**Use of Community Organizing in Law.** Other participants indicated that the use of the community organizing techniques were hard to specifically pinpoint but rather permeate day-to-day relationships, not only in the workplace but also in the way they interacted socially with new people. For those participants in the field of law, the use of community organizing practices permeated daily interactions and relationships. Rachel, a law student and employee at a law firm, felt that her experience with the program and utilizing community organizing skills helped to make her “a really good listener.” She also found that the confidence gained through being a community organizer, facilitating multiple one-to-one meetings, and building community helped her feel comfortable to ask for alone time with bosses or colleagues to clarify responsibilities, express confusion or concerns, and seek clarity. Many new professionals may find themselves intimidated, but Rachel had found she “is not scared as much to go talk to an authority figure.” Although the roles were reversed from when she served as an RA, by having the experience of the meetings, Rachel valued seeking out individual meetings.

Ginger, a full-time law student at an elite institution, found that she utilized the community organizing techniques in a variety of ways. One way she used them is to focus on consensus building and establish trust as a volunteer at on a local campaign in Boston. She explained how she felt her experiences were very helpful in this context, especially as she went door-to-door in the community. Additionally, Ginger found the skills useful in the context of her involvement with the negotiation program. This program focused on learning about an area of interest and developing agreements between parties that involved those interests. As an intern in

the program, the community organizing background and skills were very useful. The community organizing skills built on and increased her theory towards focusing on consensus building and interest-based negotiations. Ginger hoped to pursue the application of these concepts in her legal career.

**Silence.** Barbara, currently a medical student, reflected on her current use of silence in comparison to the way she experienced it while conducting her individual meetings at Mid-Atlantic Private University. In her opinion, silence was a key skill that needs to be implemented effectively in the medical profession regarding patient interactions. According to Barbara, silence was utilized when speaking with patients, especially when delivering news that is “not quite uplifting.” It was important to Barbara to sit back and give patients space and time to think, being able to deal with silence.

Elizabeth, a museum educator, also reflected on the effective use of silence. Elizabeth found utilizing silence during her individual meetings was an effective tool as an RA. Since leaving Mid-Atlantic Private University, she has learned to be comfortable with silence. One example she provided was framed around her colleague’s actions while in a departmental staff meeting in her place of employment and a period of silence occurred. According to Elizabeth, “Nowadays in meetings I see myself at work being totally chill with silence while other people click their pens, twirl their hair and freak out.” In addition to being comfortable with silence, Elizabeth shared that in her opinion the biggest legacy was the fact that she has grown into a person who was comfortable speaking one-to-one in situations with people and knowing how to ask the right questions to keep someone talking. These skills have helped her directly interview candidates in her office. Elizabeth eloquently stated it is the “minimizing of yourself and focusing on the other person and making them feel comfortable to tell you things you want to



know.” She utilized this in the hiring process for her office, and additionally in evaluating her programs. Situated in the city, she has had significant interactions with the local community, local gardening programs, and donors. Being able to listen in a one-to-one situation and take into consideration the needs of the community members and embrace them to achieve a common goal was merely one example of the long-term effect of the community organizing project.

### **Use of Community Organizing Skills outside of Pilot Project**

For some RAs, utilizing community organizing skills occurred not only after graduation in the workforce and graduate school, but also during their time at Mid-Atlantic Private University. Examples included using community organizing in extracurricular organizations and using community organizing skills during service learning trips.

Marion discussed her use of the community organizing skills within her Mid-Atlantic Private University collegiate experience outside of the community organizing project. Marion stated: “I feel like I’ve used community organizing skills in almost everything.” She explained the ways in which she incorporated community organizing tenets in practices with her team, which helped the underclassmen be more cohesive. Marion believed that establishing that everyone is valued and important was vital to forming a more cohesive and well-functioning group. As a Mid-Atlantic Private University student representative and now as an officer of the Premedical Association, which is the student government for the post-baccalaureate program, Marion utilized community organizing practices to build a sense of community among her fellow members. She also carried these skills forward to her extracurricular involvement in her post-baccalaureate program. Melissa also served as captain of her athletic team and found that she used community organizing to ensure that each member’s voice was heard and that all team members felt like they were part of the community. When she sensed an athlete struggling or

withdrawing she would conduct an individual meeting to explore the situation and find the root of the problem. She found it an effective tool to dig deep with her teammates and create a sense of community and belonging on the team.

One RA participant, Christopher, led a spring break immersion trip as group leader to D.C., to look at the presence of disparities of HIV and AIDS patients. Christopher shared that he had not anticipated the ways in which the community organizing skills permeated his work as group leader. Participating in the trip required a significant amount of time focused on speaking with individual students about how they were feeling, what was important for them to experience on the trip, and strategies to make a difference.

Kayla, a graduate student in California, has utilized her community organizing skills gained at her new institution. As a member of a student health advisory committee, the discussion focused on concerns people have relating to health services provided by the university. In this situation, Kayla explained that she does not assume the role of organizer, but rather that of a participant in a community where people are trying to accomplish specific goals. In this situation, the topic is usually something about improving the services provided by the university or addressing a particular problem; in that case, the whole committee is all about listening to what other groups have to say about their experiences and talking through possible solutions. Although Kayla was more of a participant than an organizer in this context, her experiences as an organizer and what she learned in regards to the role that all participants play affects how she participates in this group.

For Addison, participation in the Community Organizing Pilot Project engendered in him an interest in community organizing as a whole. Addison served as president of a socially popular organization on the Mid-Atlantic Private University campus. In this capacity, he had to

facilitate a sense of community among a large membership. Addison was cognizant of getting to know the new members who were second year students. He was charged with identifying the people who might feel disenfranchised, or ignored, by his organization at large and tried to make them feel as though they were each a vital member of the community. He utilized the community organizing practices to make people feel as though they had a voice. This was to facilitate the member feeling as if they could “talk with rather than at the officers” and have their opinion equally valued. Although Addison did not conduct individual meetings, he used the foundation and his conceptual framework regarding community organizing to support the membership. Going back to Addison’s root interpretations of community organizing, he utilized the tenets of community organizing in coaching and teaching by helping individuals form a cohesive unit where everyone feels equally heard and equally respected. Additionally, Addison found that he employed certain tenets and skills learned through the community organizing pilot project in graduate school.

### **Additional Ways Community Organizing Skills Are Used**

**Networking Skills.** In multiple ways, these RAs communicated that by participating in the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community Organizing Pilot Project, they feel empowered with the skill set to have meaningful conversations either with students in schools, patients in a doctor’s office, stakeholders in business, or clients in the law profession. The community organizing skills, specifically the one-to-one meetings and concept of building a community of shared interest, permeated these young professionals’ career development and interconnection of their own network. Joe observed, “I also view it as a really strong networking skill because if in a matter of 30 minutes, you’re able to kind of dig deep, there’s almost like a connection that maybe would not exist if you didn’t have that skill set.” Howton (2011) argued that departments within

colleges and universities should understand and leverage relationships, and the RA participants are doing just that in the medical, education, business, and law field.

Andy attributed participating in the community organizing pilot project with teaching him how to network. He explained that he utilized his skills and the community organizing mindset to network with the intention of making both participants better, rather than just trying to promote himself. He also used this mindset of networking professionally get to know colleagues on a deeper level. When colleagues felt connected to each other, a sense of unvoiced responsibility emerged that helped everyone feel accountable to and supportive of one another. Additionally, Andy used these skills with his friends to help them understand their interests and connect them with other friends of similar backgrounds or interests.

**Mentoring.** For Monica, Melissa, and Jim, participating in the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community Organizing Pilot Project fostered a sense of awareness and sensitivity to issues of mentorship. Monica, a first-generation college student and a first-generation American, mentioned that she wished she had personally had the kind of mentor relationship that she tried to develop with her residents. At the same time, for Monica “it was kind of amazing to see the transformation that my residents induced in me. Mentorship goes both ways I think. Sometimes we can learn more than we can teach.” The power and importance of mentorship was also reflected upon by Melissa, who mentored new employees in her company, and Jim, who participated in a work mentoring program.

### Summary

The long-term results from participating in the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community Organizing Pilot Project were realized and interpreted differently by each RA, since each person had their own unique lens and experience. It was clearly communicated through the

21 participant responses that although they may not have labeled their actions in community organizing jargon, the skills learned and experience gained was invaluable and pervades their daily interactions, personal and professional relationships, and professional career in a multiple of ways. For Suzanne, “It changed me in my thinking and how I started to see systems, even in what my values were, and I think it made me a bit more sensitive to the people around me. I think it changed me, really changed me in terms of my mindset, and even in my confidence for the better. It changed me overall for the better.” For Shirley, participation in the project fostered a sense of value for community more so than previously believed. Additionally, she believed that participation in the program and the training promoted a confidence boost. This self-awareness and belief in her abilities provided the opportunity for self-reflection. As Shirley explained, “I think I thought about who I was more because I would then have to relate to other people. I thought how can I do that if I don’t have a clearer grasp of who I am or who I am trying to present myself as. I definitely have become more and more self-aware as time has moved on.”

As previous research established (Zakocs et al, 2008), RAs and staff members with consensus-based organizing skills were better able to carry out the important tasks of partnership building. Similarly to other researchers studying community organizing who have found that staff with community organizing skills are better able to build community capacity (Zakocs & Guckenburg, 2007), the participants in this pilot project and dissertation were able to build strong working relationships and communities with their professional sphere of influence.

Research shows that staff members with community organizing experience are viewed as effective project directors (Alexander, Zakocs, Earp, & French, 2006). Resident assistants participating in this project had a strong ability to build capacity and be effective project directors, specifically in the business sector. This dissertation confirmed that RA participants

were able to build strong relationships in their place of employment, negotiate with patients, colleagues, and clients, and navigate political climates. These current findings are congruent with recommendations of experienced college personnel to hire a community organizer to facilitate partnerships because they possess requisite skills for working with stakeholders and negotiating politics such as town-gown relations (Major & Workman, 2006).

## **CHAPTER VI:**

### **Discussion**

The purpose of this qualitative phenomenological case study was to explore the effect of community organizing practices when utilized by resident assistants participating in the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community Organizing Pilot Project. Specifically my research explored how and in what ways participation in the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community Organizing Pilot Project changed participants own understandings. This research examined the ways in which RAs experience and make meaning of their participation in the community organizing pilot project. Building on the research results presented in the previous chapters, this chapter will discuss the research findings and related conclusions. Implications of these conclusions, recommendations for professional practice and future research, and limitations will follow.

The study's first research question explored how participants experienced their leadership role within the broader Mid-Atlantic University Community. RAs experienced their leadership role by understanding and experiencing the influence that using community organizing practices had on their residential community and university community in regards to relationship building and enhanced communication. The RAs used the individual one-to-one meetings held with each resident at the beginning of the school year to gain knowledge about their residents and use that knowledge to connect people across the college campus to each other and individuals with similar interests and resources. The meetings were framed in the tenets of community organizing and were an intentional method of building relationships amongst members of the community. For many RAs, the most influential way in which they experienced their leadership role within the Mid-Atlantic Private University was through the use of individual one-to-one meetings. The

strength of utilizing the community organizing tenets is the ability to focus on issues relevant to the people in the community (Blackwell & Colmenar, 2000). The individual meetings provided the medium for RAs to learn what issues were important to their residents and gear their personal interactions and programming around these issues.

Through the use of individual meetings RAs were able to foster a sense of belonging amongst the residents. Scholars most often cite the sense of belonging construct (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990; Hurtado & Carter, 1997) as a potential alternative concept for understanding how students may develop a sense of membership in the university (Braxton, 2000). RAs fostered a sense of belonging through strong individual meetings, which set the foundation for positive experiences for both the RA and the residents. Additionally, for the RAs who participated in individual meetings as both a first year resident and an RA, there was a greater sense of belonging and connectedness to their community and the university. This enhanced sense of belonging further influenced the way these participants experienced their leadership role within the broader Mid-Atlantic University Community.

The “sense of belonging” construct was originally designed to measure a felt sense of social cohesion within a university, city, or country (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990). By applying this concept to the experience of the resident assistants, one can see how an RA experienced a sense of social cohesion within their community. With the individual meetings focused on relationship building, the sense of belonging increased not only for residents, but also for RAs. RAs were able to make lasting connections with their residents and facilitate those strong connections between residents. RAs who participated in individual meetings as both a first year resident and as an RA experienced an even stronger sense of belonging.



Many of the RA participants in this study indicated that because of their strong foundation with their residents, which was forged during their individual meetings, it was easier to enforce university policy. This ability to address issues made it easier to perform their responsibilities as an RA and shaped how they experienced their leadership role within Mid-Atlantic Private University. Additionally, a shared sense of accountability formed within the community, and a personal accountability for actions and behaviours was seen in residents.

Minkler and Wallerstein (2005) argue the strength of community organizing lies with focusing on the people of the community and allowing for active participation by community members. This in turn provides skill-building opportunities for community members and the ability to promote individual and community capacity as community members assess needs. RAs who implemented community organizing tenets allowing residents to be active participants in the formation of their own community, found that both residents and the RA were happier and had a more fulfilling experience. The residents also gained new skills by being involved in the planning process and implementation of programs.

The strong communities formed by the RAs using community organizing practices illustrates Kuh's post conventional organization concept. Kuh (2003) notes that "organizational theory is a window through which to view the behavior of individuals and groups in the context of complex organizational structures" (p. 270). Other authors agree with Kuh's sentiment and call for institutions to broaden their scope to meet the changing needs of a 21<sup>st</sup> century world (Allen & Cherrey, 2000; Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen & Allen, 1999; Senge, 2006). The implementation of community organizing techniques by resident assistants is a unique method that institutions of higher education can adopt to broaden their scope and connect students across differences. This paradigm shift recognizes learning as intentional, contextual, and relational,

occurring through dialogue and collective reflection (Howton, 2011). Organizations, therefore, are called to develop and maintain structures and systems that facilitate such learning and subsequently develop “communities of practice” (Lave & Wenger, 1991). RAs who participated in the Community Organizing Pilot Project worked to foster communities that were supportive through dialogue and relationship building.

The positive experiences of the RAs, and strong relationships formed with and amongst residents, support studies that have suggested that a sense of belonging contributes to students’ retention during their first year (Hausman, Schofield, & Woods, 2007). It is also congruent with Allison’s (1999) findings that a sense of belonging also influences a student’s long-term persistence in college. If a student or RA feels like they belong in the community, are valued, and connected to one another they will be more likely to stay at the institution.

The study’s second research question explored how and in what ways utilizing community organizing techniques addressed gender inequalities and asymmetries in power, particularly how participants’ gender influenced their role as a community organizer. Community organizing is one method by which to create and sustain social capital in marginalized people or those who may not otherwise had an opportunity to have their voice heard. As Howton (2011) argues, by building strong relationships within the residential community, communities can use relationships to foster individual and organizational, internal and external development. RAs used community organizing tenets to build strong relationships with and amongst their residents. These strong relationships led to increasing the social capital of some of the residents. Putnam (2000, p. 56) offers a succinct definition of social capital: “By ‘social capital’ I mean features of social life – networks, norms, and trust – that enable participants to act together more effectively to pursue shared objectives.” Although Putnam

(2000) further argues that women are instrumental in creating and sustaining stocks of social capital, the interviews with RA participants in this research study were divided in this regard.

The utilization of community organizing tenets gave quieter students and concerned students a voice and a medium by which to speak their thoughts, and the safe space and positive foundation to speak with the RA if concerns arose. The individual meetings addressed asymmetries in power effectively by providing the opportunity for a conversation. The conversation may or may not particularly address gender inequalities but in general it leveled the playing field automatically because everyone had their own opportunity to speak with the RA privately. The individual meetings created a space to validate students for who they are and empowered them in their own sense of self. Individual meetings and the implementation of community organizing practices were effective tools for RAs to address power imbalances in clubs and organizations such as addressing imbalances of power between first years and seniors, or new athletes versus returners.

When exploring how and in what ways utilizing community organizing techniques addressed gender inequalities and asymmetries in power and how participant's gender influenced their role as a community organizer the findings were varied. By conducting the individual meetings and making the connections between residents who may not have otherwise connected, RAs built connections amongst their residents and fostered "bridging social capital" (Putnam, 1996). The connections in bridging social capital fostered social inclusion. RAs utilized the community organizing tenets to cultivate a strong close knit group and raise the social capital of the residents. The residents formed a network of friends and resources for each other which resulted in both bonding social capital and bridging social capital.

The individual meetings provided an opportunity for RAs to take the information garnered from their residents in regards to interests, concerns, and goals and link them to resources. These resources included administrators, and offices, but more often involved the RA linking the resident with someone with the same interest who was already established in the Mid-Atlantic Private University community. Coleman (1994) illustrated a causal link between social capital and access to resources by arguing that the powerful remained powerful by virtue of contacts with other powerful people. The RAs used the individual meetings as a means to connect residents to “powerful” contacts within Mid-Atlantic private university to increase their social capital and elevate them in power status. RAs worked to make connections between residents with similar interests or experiences which resulted in both students benefitting from their mutual relationship. In regards to this dissertation, one function of capital is access to networks, which provides resources, knowledge, and insight into various opportunities (Mullen et al. 2003)

By utilizing community organizing practices, RAs were able to build their social capital and in turn the social capital of their residents. Hornburg and Lang (1998) surmise that building social capital may give people and communities the connectedness they need to succeed. For researchers in the field of community organizing, defining social capital includes the incorporation of “civic capacity” and “community building.” This allows community organizers to frame community organizing and the concept of social capital in terms of “the capacity of communities to act” rather than in terms of “need” (Gittel & Vidal, 1998, p.14). Translating this framework to the Community Organizing Pilot Project, RAs cultivated supportive networks by facilitating strong individual meetings which fostered the growth of their residential community into a supportive local network.

The study's third research question explored what if any long-term effects RAs experienced as participants in the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community Organizing Pilot Project. The theme *long term legacy*, the utilization of community organization techniques after completion of the pilot project and graduation, includes emergent subthemes that were uncovered through the data analysis of the participants' transcribed interviews. The subthemes include: (a) use in medicine, business, law and education; (b) being comfortable with silence; and (c) networking and mentoring. These emerging themes were unexpected by the researcher and have not been mentioned in previous research about the utilization of community organizing in higher education. This makes these themes even more valuable for understanding the long term influence of utilizing community organizing techniques in a higher education setting.

RAs who approach their current profession from a community organizer lens are finding that the techniques learned are applicable to their current profession and personal life. Similarly, Zakoc and colleagues' multi-site case study showed that higher-developed partnerships were built by college staff who worked like community organizers; that is, by focusing substantial efforts on establishing strong relationships with stakeholders and on building structures and processes that allowed for active stakeholder involvement (2010).

By applying the sense of belonging construct (Bollen & Hoyle, 1990; Hurtado & Carter, 1997) to the experience of resident assistants, one can see how the RA participants experienced a sense of social cohesion of their residential community at Mid-Atlantic Private University and subsequently used that framework to foster a sense of belonging in their career. Social cohesion and sense of belonging entail multiple possibilities for forming affiliations with a larger community (Hurtado & Carter, 1997); this was seen extensively in the field of education.

Congruent with the findings of Alexander, Zakocs, Earp, and French (2006), participants with community organizing skills view themselves as effective project directors and attribute, in varying degrees, their success to the community organizing skills learned through participation in the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community Organizing Pilot Project.

In multiple ways, these RAs communicated that by participating in the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community Organizing Pilot Project, they feel empowered with the skill set to have meaningful conversations either with students in schools, patients in a doctor's office, stakeholders in business, or clients in the law profession. The community organizing skills, specifically the one-to-one meetings and concept of building a community of shared interest, permeated these young professionals' career development and interconnection of their own network. Based on the experiences and career success of the 21 RAs who participated in the community organizing pilot project and the multiple and effective ways that the use of community organizing skills has permeated their professional careers, hiring and admission committees should strongly consider hiring and admitting candidates with community organizing experience. This dissertation confirmed that RA participants, by utilizing community organizing practices, were able to build strong relationships in their place of employment, negotiate with patients, colleagues, and clients, and navigate political climates. These current findings are congruent with recommendations of experienced college personnel to hire a community organizer to facilitate partnerships because they possess requisite skills for working with stakeholders and negotiating politics such as town-gown relations (Major & Workman, 2006). One way to apply these findings specifically in higher education would be through university departments such as Career Services. Career services departments would benefit from creating

workshops or trainings introducing students to community organizing practices and illustrating how community organizing knowledge and skills can potentially benefit their career.

Student life programs would benefit from training their resident assistants and student leaders in the tenets of community organizing. Although some residence life programs may already conduct individual resident meetings, based on the research of this dissertation it could strengthen the resident/RA relationship if a community organizing framework is employed. This research found that by applying the community organizing framework to individual meetings, RAs developed a strong awareness of self and others. The individual meetings provided a medium for RAs to get to know someone and their motivations in a very personal and intentional way. The individual meetings also opened the door for an intimate conversation and fostered a safe relationship that allowed students to share personal thoughts and concerns.

Within the residential community, the use of the community organizing tenets fostered a collective sense of accountability for both the living space and personal actions. A collective sense of accountability also increases a student's sense of belonging, which has implications for judicial affairs practitioners, health and wellness practitioners, and facilities or housing staff in regards to damages. If residence life programs utilized the tenets of community organizing in framing the expectations of the community, a reduction in vandalism and high risk behavior may occur. If residents have a personal accountability for their actions, it may assist RAs in meeting the requirements of their position more effectively.

The use of the individual meetings provided all residents with equal access to the RA, the person in a position of power and authority in the community. This served as a way to give all students an equal voice and platform to share without judgment. The individual meetings utilized community organizing techniques as a means to connect across difference, which fosters

a sense of belonging. By utilizing these techniques, RAs were able to build their social capital and in turn the social capital of their residents. Hornburg and Lang (1998) concluded that building social capital may give people and communities the connectedness they need to succeed. This has implications for admissions departments in reference to retention and completion rates. Additionally, students who feel a sense of belonging within their university community are going to be more likely to excel academically as a result of the social capital gained and connections made within their community of learning. Finally, student life departments can benefit by understanding the implication of this research and the sense of belonging fostered. Students who are connected to the university are going to engage more with clubs and organizations. By understanding the tenets of community organizing and applying the skills when possible, student leaders will likely be more effective.

### **Credibility of the Study**

The participant pool varied by gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, and career field which adds strength and credibility to this study. As a result of the Community Organizing Pilot Project, Mid-Atlantic Private University adopted the use of individual one to one meetings by all RAs across all residential colleges. After the completion of the program in 2011, Mid-Atlantic Private University adopted the use of the one-to-one individual meetings by all 90-plus resident assistants in all residential colleges and incorporated specific training sessions in to RA Training.

### **Recommendations for Future Research**

Future research should further examine the role of utilizing community organizing tenets within the higher education arena. Although the results of this dissertation are intriguing, the conclusions are formed on the lived experiences of 21 resident assistants at one institution, Mid-Atlantic Private University. Further research could include replicating this study at an alternative



institution type or applying the community organizing framework and skills to a department other than residence life within a college or university. Additionally, the relationships between community organizing and race/ethnicity should be further explored, as well as a further exploration of the experience of LGBT participants and the role that community organizing can play in their collegiate experience. Further research could also evaluate the way international students experience the use of community organizing practices in the academy.

### **Researcher Role**

My desire to engage in this research was a result of my personal experience with the Community Organizing Pilot Project. While serving in the role of administrator at Mid-Atlantic Private University, I was fortunate to work on this grant-funded collaborative pilot program and saw how and in what ways the dynamics of the residential community was transformed by the use of community organizing. When analyzing the data for the grant, our research team could see the positive influence that participation had on the residents, but it failed to examine the implications for the resident assistants. The pilot program and grant research concluded and I am no longer affiliated with Mid-Atlantic Private University. As a former RA and supervisor of RAs, I had a vested interest in examining this approach to community building and possible use at other institutions.

### **Limitations**

Community organizing can be a challenging and difficult process at times. Applying community organizing practices that work within communities was not easy when working with a group of college-aged students who may or may not have chosen to fully engage with the process. The study was limited to 2 residential colleges in one university. Additionally, the ideas

and concepts of community organizing did not always easily transfer to the higher education setting.

One limitation of this study was the need for RAs to actively engage with utilizing community organizing techniques as they fulfilled the responsibilities of their position. Additionally, interviews were contingent on participation by the RAs. As Mid-Atlantic Private University draws students from all over the country and world, one limitation faced was access and ease for former RAs to participate in an interview. The pilot program concluded and none of the participants are currently enrolled at Mid-Atlantic Private University.

Another limitation was that participants were not always willing or comfortable sharing extensively about their experiences. RAs were privy to personal information, including the hopes and fears, disciplinary infractions, and personal issues of their students. Some RAs restricted the candor of their responses to the researcher in fear of breaking confidentiality.

Finally, although I am no longer affiliated with Mid-Atlantic Private University, I was involved as an administrator with the Community Organizing Pilot Project; participants may have been hesitant to communicate negative experiences or feelings out of concern for the researcher's feelings.

### **Limitations of Methodology**

Phenomenological research, although an excellent approach to gathering rich, substantive and in-depth information, has its weaknesses, as does any type of research. Qualitative phenomenological research involves data gathering and data analysis, which is performed and interpreted by the researcher. Therefore, there is a high risk of researcher bias. To reduce this risk, I followed Patton's (2002) recommendation that the researcher "explore one's

predispositions, making biases explicit, to the extent possible, and engaging in mental cleansing processes” (p. 553).

As the researcher, I was conscious of the obstacles that case study methodology presented. The case study approach has been criticized for researcher bias and lacking generalizability. Yin (2003) addresses these issues by stressing the importance of researcher responsibility and by explaining that a single case may face the same problems as a single scientific experiment.

Although in-depth face-to-face and phone interviews were highly effective for exploring the experiences of RAs who participated in the Mid-Atlantic Community Organizing Pilot Project and uncovering a variety of variables that influenced this particular phenomenon, they were extremely time-consuming. Additionally, interviews as a data collection method may increase the risk of participant bias and prevent disclosure of personal information.

Recording the data from an interview was also a limitation to this methodology. Some participants were intimidated by having their comments audio-recorded and felt uncomfortable discussing personal information during the interview. As a researcher I was also cognizant that the transcribed notes from the audio recordings did not capture the facial expressions, tone, and pitch of the words and the body language of the interviewee.

### **Significance of this Research**

The major benefit of this research study is that it serves as a form of assessment of student learning. This research study provides a qualitative review of a phenomenological case study. Specifically, it provides assessment of a student affairs developed program. This research assessed the effectiveness and lived experience of resident assistants who participated in a pilot project and provided a unique opportunity to lead and participate in the comprehensive,

systematic, and consistent assessment and evaluation of student learning in regards to resident assistants learning by participating in this program. This researcher hopes to use the findings to help institutions set priorities, allocate resources, and work to enhance student learning within the residential setting.

The Community Organizing Pilot Project adds to the literature available on community organizing in the college setting, specifically enhancing the literature on the resident assistant experience. There is a negligible amount of current data available on the use of community organizing practices in the higher education setting. This research addresses those gaps and additionally provides insight and guidance for future research in the areas of community organizing, residential education, and higher education.

### **Conclusion**

While this research project focused on a particular phenomenological case study -- the Mid-Atlantic Private University Community Organizing Pilot Project -- it contributes to the very sparse literature on the use of community organizing practices by resident assistants and the effect of the usage of community organizing practices by resident assistants. This research examined the ways in which RAs experience and make meaning of their participation in the community organizing pilot project. The development and implementation of meaningful evaluation is the key to continued strengthening of the residential education literature and student affairs field.

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## APPENDIX A:

[Date]

Dear Student:

I am writing to invite you to participate in a research study. I am a Doctoral candidate at Rutgers Graduate School of Education. As part of my dissertation research, I am currently working on a research project to document the experiences of RA's within the Community Organizing Pilot Project.

I am inviting you to participate in this study. This research involves audio-taping conversations, in addition to conducting interviews with you. I need written permission from you to participate in this study. If you consent to this study, you are agreeing to have me quote you in future writing or presentations that evolve from this project. Your name will not be used in any publications or presentations. The audiotapes will not be shared in their entirety with anyone outside the research team. This research will be stored in a secure location and remain confidential. Confidential means that the research records will only include non-identifying information. Your name and the name of your residential college will be removed from interview transcripts and notes. All audio recordings, transcripts, and notes will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

You may choose not to answer any question or questions with which you feel uncomfortable. Your participation in this research study is completely voluntary. You may withdraw from the study at any time.

If you have any questions or concerns about this project, please feel free to contact me directly by phone at 732-687-6927 or by e-mail (mindy.andino@gmail.com) or my advisor Dr. Catherine A Lugg at 732-932-7696 (ext. 8220) or by e-mail ([Catherine.lugg@gse.rutgers.edu](mailto:Catherine.lugg@gse.rutgers.edu)). If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Administrator at Rutgers University at:

Rutgers University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects  
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
3 Rutgers Plaza  
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559  
Tel: 732-932-0150 ext. 2104 / Email: humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu

Please read and sign the attached permission slip and return it to me. You may keep this copy for your files.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in dark ink that reads "Mindy S. Andino". The signature is written in a cursive style with a large, stylized 'M' and 'A'.

Mindy Suzanne Andino

Ed.D Student

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey



## APPENDIX B:

## RESIDENT ASSISTANT INFORMED CONSENT &amp; CONTACT INFORMATION FORM

**Title of Study**

Influence of Community Organizing Pilot Project on Resident Assistants

**Contact Information****Principal Investigator**

Mindy Andino  
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 Middlesex, NJ 08846  
 Tel: (732) 687-6927  
 Email: [mindy.andino@gmail.com](mailto:mindy.andino@gmail.com)

**Additional Contact Person**

Catherine A. Lugg, Ph.D.  
 19 Graduate School of Education  
 10 Seminary Place  
 Rutgers, The State University of NJ  
 New Brunswick, NJ 08901  
 Tel: (732) 932-7496 x8220  
 Email: [catherine.lugg@gse.rutgers.edu](mailto:catherine.lugg@gse.rutgers.edu)

- ☐ I am interested in being interviewed in the above-named research study related to the community organizing pilot program.
- ☐ I would agree to the use of a digital audio recorder for the interview process.  
 (Please note that the purpose of recording your responses is to ensure accuracy and avoid misrepresentation. However, you do not have to agree to be recorded to participate in this study.)
- ☐ (if applicable) I would be willing to participate in a follow-up interview, if necessary.  
 (Please note that the purpose of a follow-up interview would only be to confirm my understanding of your earlier responses and/or to request additional information.)

\_\_\_\_\_  
 (Your Name)

\_\_\_\_\_  
 (E-mail address)

☐ Cell ☐ Home (Number I may contact you at) \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_  
 (Residential College)

\_\_\_\_\_  
 (Years Experience as an RA)

Please return this form to the principal investigator named above no later than [date].

Thank you.

APPENDIX C:  
INFORMED CONSENT FORM

**Title of Study**

Influence of Community Organizing Pilot Project on Resident Assistants

**Contact Information****Principal Investigator**

Mindy Andino  
PO Box 265  
Middlesex, NJ 08846  
Tel: (732) 687-6927  
Email: [mindy.andino@gmail.com](mailto:mindy.andino@gmail.com)

**Additional Contact Person**

Catherine A. Lugg, Ph.D.  
19 Graduate School of Education  
10 Seminary Place  
Rutgers, The State University of NJ  
New Brunswick, NJ 08901  
Tel: (732) 932-7496 x8220  
Email: [catherine.lugg@gse.rutgers.edu](mailto:catherine.lugg@gse.rutgers.edu)

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**Introduction**

You are being asked to participate in a research study. Before you agree to participate in this study, you should know enough about its purpose, the possible risks and benefits of being in the study, and what you will have to do if you decide to participate. If there is something you do not understand, you should ask me. You should be satisfied with the answers before you agree to participate in the study.

**Background/Purpose**

The purpose of this study is to develop a better understanding of the impact of participating in the Community Organizing Pilot Project. More specifically, this study will explore how and in what ways participation in the Pilot Program influenced Resident assistants.

**Description**

Participation in this study will involve one or more of the following:

- Interviews of approximately 45 minutes about your personal experiences with the Community Organizing Pilot Program. These interviews will be recorded using a digital audio recorder. If you feel uncomfortable with any question, you do not have to answer it. If at any time you would like me to turn off the audio recorder, I will.
- Review of documents generated in preparation for, during, and at the conclusion of the pilot program.
- Follow-up interviews of no more than 45 minutes

**Cost & Compensation**

There are no costs associated with participating in this study. There is no monetary compensation for participating in this study.

**Alternatives to participation**

Your participation is voluntary, which means you can choose whether or not to participate. You may choose to withdraw at any time during the study without any penalty to you. In addition, you may choose not to answer questions with which you are uncomfortable.

**Risks**

The risks associated with this study are minimal, however you may experience embarrassment or discomfort with a specific question. If you feel uncomfortable during any part of an interview, you may choose to not answer that question. Should you require counseling due to participation in this study, you will be referred to the Psychological Clinic of the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.

**Benefits**

Participation in this study may not benefit you directly. However, some people enjoy talking about and sharing experiences. Your participation may indirectly improve resident assistant experiences and community organizing practices by helping us to better understand what works and what could be improved.

**Confidentiality**

This research is confidential. This means that the research records will only include non-identifying information, such as your residential college and years of experience as an RA. Your name and the name of the University will be removed from interview transcripts and notes, and you will not be identified by name. The information gathered during this study will remain confidential in a secure location during this project. Paper data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Audio recordings, transcripts, and notes will be stored on my password-protected computer. The Institutional Review Board at Rutgers and I are the only parties that will be allowed to see the data, except as may be required by law. If a report of this study is published, or the results presented, the information will remain confidential.

**Contact**

If you have any questions at any time about the research or the procedures, you may contact me or the faculty advisor for this project. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Administrator at Rutgers University at:

Rutgers University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects  
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
3 Rutgers Plaza  
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559  
Tel: 732-932-0150 x 2104  
Email: humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu

**Participation & Freedom to Withdraw**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decline to participate. You may decide to withdraw at any time without penalty to you.

**Consent to Participate**

Sign below if you agree to participate in this study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

---

*(Participant's Signature)*

---

*(Printed Name)*

---

*(Date)*

Mindy S. Andino  
(Researcher's Signature)

Mindy Andino  
(Printed Name)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

**Consent to Audio Record**

Sign below if you agree to the use of an audio recorder for the interview process.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Participant's Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Printed Name)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

## APPENDIX D:

### INTERVIEW PROTOCOL

Date of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_ Time of Interview: \_\_\_\_\_

Location: \_\_\_\_\_ Method: In Person \_\_ via Telephone \_\_ via Skype \_\_\_\_\_

Interviewer: \_\_\_\_\_ Interviewee: \_\_\_\_\_

Residential College: \_\_\_\_\_ Years as an RA: \_\_\_\_\_

#### **Introduction**

- Thank you for taking the time to speak with me to discuss your experiences as an RA participating in the Community Organizing Pilot Project. I understand that you are very busy, and so I greatly appreciate the time you're taking to contribute to this research project. The purpose of this interview is for you to share your experiences. The purpose is not to evaluate the community organizing pilot program nor the individual participants and the leaders who administered the program. When the audio recording is transcribed, your name, other RA names, administrators' names, the name of the school, and the names of students will be changed to pseudonyms. The only information that will be retained in the transcripts will relate to your residential college, and length of your experience as an RA. All research will remain confidential and destroyed at the conclusion of the study. Before we begin, do you have any questions?

#### **Demographic Information: Background, Education, and Experience**

- Please tell me about your educational knowledge and experience of community organizing.
- For how long were you an RA?
- What residential college were you employed at?
- What was the class year and gender of your residents. How many residents did you oversee?
- Did you participate in the Community Organizing Pilot Project as a first year or second year resident?

#### **Experience**

- How would you describe your participation in the Community Organizing Pilot Project
- What was it like being an RA participant in the pilot program?
- Do you feel the Community Organizing practices changed the way you did your job?
- Do you feel the Community Organizing practices changed your relationships with your residents? How and in what ways?
- Do you feel the Community Organizing practices changed you? How and in what ways?
- Do you feel participating changed your academic experience? How and in what ways?
- Do you feel participating changed your social experience? How and in what ways?
- How would you describe your residential community?

- How and in what ways did utilizing community organizing techniques address gender inequalities and asymmetries in power?
- How did your gender influence your role as a community organizer?
- Have you used the community organizing skills learned in other situations? How and in what ways?
- What if any long term impact did participating in this pilot project have on you?
- Have you utilized community organizing since you left the university?

**Closing**

- Is there anything you would like to add?
  - Thank you for your contribution to this research project. Your honest responses will be invaluable in developing an understanding of the experience of RAs participating in the Community Organizing Pilot Project. Thank you again for your involvement.
-

## APPENDIX E:

## MID-ATLANTIC UNIVERSITY PERMISSION

[Date]

[Name of Dean]  
Mid-Atlantic University  
[Address]  
[Address]

Dear [Name of Dean]:

I am writing to request your assistance in a research study. I am a Doctoral candidate at Rutgers Graduate School of Education. As part of my dissertation research, I am currently working on a research project to document the experiences of RA's within the Community Organizing Pilot Project at Mid-Atlantic Private University. I am requesting your permission to review and utilize the documents generated in preparation for, during, and at the conclusion of the pilot program from the Community Organizing Pilot Project for my dissertation research. These materials include for example training manuals, hand-outs, reports, and focus group data.

The purpose of my research is to explore how and in what ways participating in the Community Organizing Pilot project impacted the Resident assistants. Using a phenomenological case study research design my goal is to explore the first-hand experiences of the Pilot project participants in order to strengthen the residential education literature and student affairs field. The study of this study requires me to conduct 30-45 minute interviews with pilot project resident assistant participants. The interviews would be recorded using an audio recorder. Participants may choose to not answer any question or questions with which they feel uncomfortable. Teacher participation will also be voluntary, and they may withdraw at any time.


This research will be stored in a secure location and remain confidential. Confidential means that the research records will only include non-identifying information, such as years of experience as a Resident Assistant. Participants' names and the name of the Residential College will be removed from interview transcripts and notes. All audio recordings, transcripts, and notes will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study.

If you have any questions or concerns about this project, please feel free to contact me directly by phone at 732-687-6927 or by e-mail ([mindy.andino@gmail.com](mailto:mindy.andino@gmail.com)) or my advisor Dr. Catherine A. Lugg at 732-932-7696 (ext. 8220) or by e-mail ([Catherine.lugg@gse.rutgers.edu](mailto:Catherine.lugg@gse.rutgers.edu)). If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Administrator at Rutgers University at:

Rutgers University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects  
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
3 Rutgers Plaza  
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559  
Tel: 732-932-0150 ext. 2104 / Email: humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu

Please see the attached sample letter to assist you in writing your letter of permission.

Thank you.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Mindy S. Andino". The signature is written in a cursive, flowing style.

Mindy Suzanne Andino

Ed.D Student

Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey



## APPENDIX F:

## MID-ATLANTIC PRIVATE UNIVERSITY DEAN CONSENT LETTER SAMPLE

[Date]

[To Whom it May Concern]

Rutgers University

[Address]

[Address]

Dear [Name]:

I am writing to grant permission to Mindy S. Andino, a Doctoral candidate at Rutgers Graduate School of Education to review and utilize the documents generated in preparation for, during, and at the conclusion of the pilot program from the Community Organizing Pilot Project for her dissertation research. These materials include training manuals, hand-outs, reports, and focus group data. I understand that this is a research project to document the experiences of RA's within the Community Organizing Pilot Project at Mid-Atlantic Private University.

Please do not hesitate to contact me with any questions or concerns that you may have.

Good Luck,

Name

Title

Mid-Atlantic Private University

Appendix F:

IRB APPROVAL FROM RUTGERS UNIVERSITY

**Alternatives to participation**

Your participation is voluntary, which means you can choose whether or not to participate. You may choose to withdraw at any time during the study without any penalty to you. In addition, you may choose not to answer questions with which you are uncomfortable.

**Risks**

The risks associated with this study are minimal, however you may experience embarrassment or discomfort with a specific question. If you feel uncomfortable during any part of an interview, you may choose to not answer that question. Should you require counseling due to participation in this study, you will be referred to the Psychological Clinic of the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.

**Benefits**

Participation in this study may not benefit you directly. However, some people enjoy talking about and sharing experiences. Your participation may indirectly improve resident assistant experiences and community organizing practices by helping us to better understand what works and what could be improved.

**Confidentiality**

This research is confidential. This means that the research records will only include non-identifying information, such as your residential college and years of experience as an RA. Your name and the name of the University will be removed from interview transcripts and notes, and you will not be identified by name. The information gathered during this study will remain confidential in a secure location during this project. Paper data will be stored in a locked filing cabinet. Audio recordings, transcripts, and notes will be stored on my password-protected computer. The Institutional Review Board at Rutgers and I are the only parties that will be allowed to see the data, except as may be required by law. If a report of this study is published, or the results presented, the information will remain confidential.

**Contact**

If you have any questions at any time about the research or the procedures, you may contact me or the faculty advisor for this project. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Administrator at Rutgers University at:

Rutgers University Institutional Review Board for the Protection of Human Subjects  
Office of Research and Sponsored Programs  
3 Rutgers Plaza  
New Brunswick, NJ 08901-8559  
Tel: 848-932-0150 x 2104  
Email: humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu

**APPROVED**

DEC 13 2013

Approved by the  
Rutgers IRB

**Alternatives to participation**

Your participation is voluntary, which means you can choose whether or not to participate. You may choose to withdraw at any time during the study without any penalty to you. In addition, you may choose not to answer questions with which you are uncomfortable.

**Risks**

The risks associated with this study are minimal, however you may experience embarrassment or discomfort with a specific question. If you feel uncomfortable during any part of an interview, you may choose to not answer that question. Should you require counseling due to participation in this study, you will be referred to the Psychological Clinic of the Graduate School of Applied and Professional Psychology at Rutgers, The State University of New Jersey.

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**Contact**

If you have any questions at any time about the research or the procedures, you may contact me or the faculty advisor for this project. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you may contact the IRB Administrator at Rutgers University at:

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Email: humansubjects@orsp.rutgers.edu

**APPROVED**

DEC 13 2013

Approved by the  
Rutgers IRB

**Participation & Freedom to Withdraw**

Your participation in this study is voluntary. You may decline to participate. You may decide to withdraw at any time without penalty to you.

**Consent to Participate**

Sign below if you agree to participate in this study. You will be given a copy of this form to keep.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Participant's Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Printed Name)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

Mindy S. Andino  
(Researcher's Signature)

Mindy Andino  
(Printed Name)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

**Consent to Audio Record**

Sign below if you agree to the use of an audio recorder for the interview process.

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Participant's Signature)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Printed Name)

\_\_\_\_\_  
(Date)

**APPROVED**

DEC 13 2013

Approved by the  
Rutgers IRB