EAB

Residence Life Operations

Departmental Organization, Staffing, and Student Programming at Large Research Institutions

Student Affairs Forum

Student Affairs Forum

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Table of Contents

Executive Summary **4**
Key Observations 4
1) Organization and Staffing **5**
Organizational Structure 5
Student Staff 6
Professional Staff 10
2) Student Programming **12**
Program Offerings 12
Program Development 14
3) Research Methodology **16**

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Executive Summary

Key Observations

Residence life departments operate as ancillary units at most profiled Canadian institutions, while Residence Life departments at profiled U.S. institutions and Institution A do not operate as ancillary units. This structural difference impacts the funding and reporting structures at the profiled institutions. Residence Life departments that operate as an ancillary unit, such as those at **Institution B** and **Institution G**, fund their residence life programming through students' room and board fees. These departments also operate further removed from Student Affairs and central institutional leadership than the Residence Life departments at profiled U.S. institutions, including **Institution H**, which report directly into the Dean of Students or a similar administrator. Central institutional budgets typically fund residence life functions at profiled U.S. institutions.

Across all profiled institutions, Resident Assistants (RAs) live on campus and serve as a primary point of contact for residential students. RAs provide a main source of support for students in residence, both at the hall and building level. RAs' responsibilities typically revolve around community-building, programming, and student support. They respond to a wide range of issues, including mental health crises and academic concerns. At all profiled institutions, administrators compensate RAs by covering their room and board costs, paying them an annual stipend, or providing some combination of both benefits. Given the complexity of the RA role, the RA application process evaluates each candidate's ability to respond to crises, direct students to campus resources, and act as a leader among their peers.

Provide RAs with ongoing training opportunities to regularly build their professional skillset. Training for RAs at profiled institutions begins during the summer and continues over the course of the academic year to guarantee that RAs are prepared to respond to common student issues. Online summer courses precede in-person RA training at some profiled institutions, including **Institution B**. However, other institutions, such as **Institution A**, begin RA training during a 10-day in-person orientation before classes begin in August. While a diverse array of campus leaders (e.g., directors of wellness, public safety, and teaching and learning) facilitate summer onboarding sessions, senior residence life staff typically lead additional trainings during the academic year. Administrators design and schedule ongoing training sessions to respond to shifting RA needs over the course of the year.

Residence life teams vary in the degree to which they rely on centralized curricula to guide student programming. Institutions that do not use centralized curricula, such as **Institution D**, prefer to prioritize student autonomy in planning residence life events. Other profiled institutions, including **Institution F** and **Institution E** operate under a hybrid model, where administrators define a set of broad monthly programming expectations and RAs develop specific programming within those set frameworks. At **Institution B** and **Institution J**, administrators define specific programming for RAs to implement. Administrators at these institutions prefer to standardize the residential programming experience across campus and unburden RAs from the program development process.

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1) Organization and Staffing

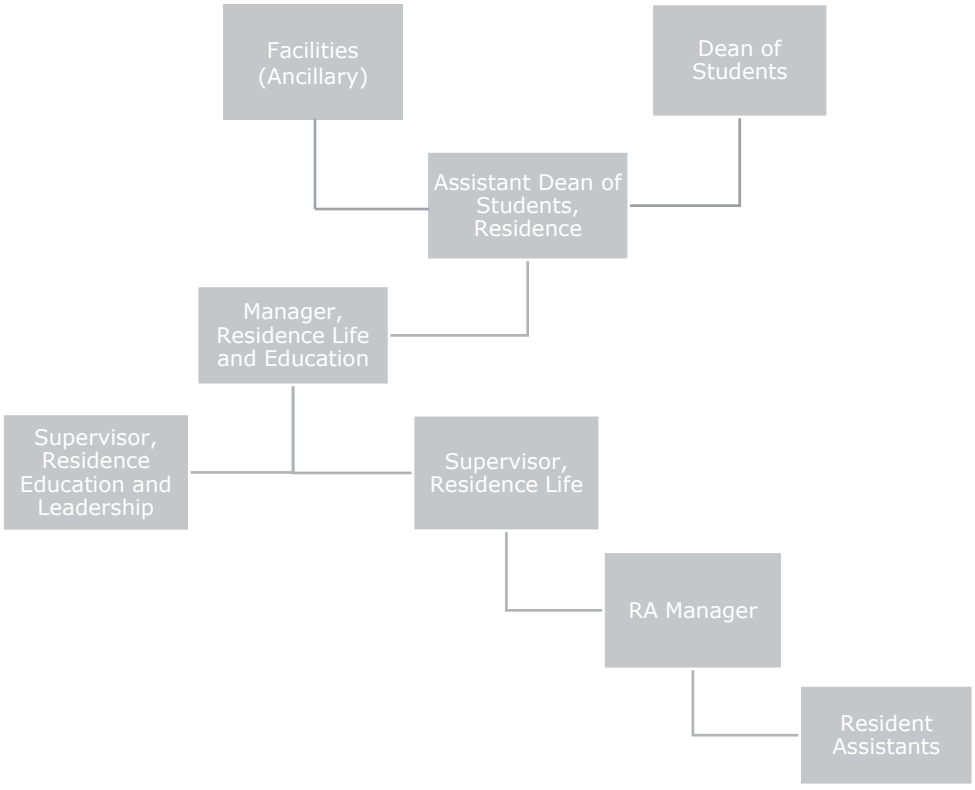
Organizational Structure

At Most Profiled Canadian Institutions, Residence Life Operates as an Ancillary Service

At **Institution F**, **Institution B**, **Institution E**, **Institution G,** and **Institution I**, residence life departments report to an administrator in charge of ancillary services. Organizationally, this individual is either below or at the same level as the Dean of Students. In contrast, residence life teams at profiled U.S. institutions and **Institution A** do not operate as ancillary services. At all profiled institutions, Directors of Residence Life oversee Resident Assistant (RA) Managers, who then oversee the RAs. Profiled residence life teams consist of about 100 total staff members, on average.

At **Institution B** and **Institution F**, residence life teams receive oversight from multiple higher-level departments, such as student life, administration, and facilities. Contacts at these two institutions report that this dual reporting structure increases the amount of support that residence life teams receive and diversifies the type of expertise that residence life teams can access.

Residence Life Reporting Structure at *Institution F*



Residence life teams' organizational structures in turn impact residence life funding mechanisms at profiled institutions. In instances where residence life operates as an ancillary unit, residential students' residence-related fees cover the costs of residence life operations. In instances where residence life operates more centrally, teams

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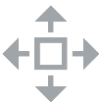
receive funding from broader institutional budgets (and, at **Institution H**, from a residence life-focused endowment fund).

Residence Life Funding at *Institution H*

Ten years ago, administrators sold naming rights for new campus residential halls. Half of the money raised funded an academic college of the donor's choice, while the other half funded a Residential Experience Endowment.

The interest on the Residential Experience Endowment pays for all student programming and can be used for any student life-related initiatives at the institution.



The Director of Residential Education allocates the endowment interest to each residential college based on the number of students in each college. Funds also support initiatives such as alternative break trips and meals for students on campus during Thanksgiving.

At **Institution B**, students' room and board fees cover residence life costs such as staff salaries, facilities maintenance, and student programming. RAs and staff members request funding from the Director of Residence Life to cover programming costs, which the director allocates on a request-by-request basis. Instead of fielding individual funding requests, administrators at **Institution E** budget for and allocate program funding to RAs based on previous years' funding levels. RAs at **Institution E** typically spend $100 to $200 (CAD) on programming annually.

Institution G's approach to funding allows for additional flexibility and breadth of programming. As with all profiled Canadian institutions, building-wide events receive funding from student's room and board charges. However, **Institution G** charges an additional activities fee to fund floor- and community-based events (i.e., events for all students overseen by the same RA). This fee, paid by each student in residence, allows for activities and programming that go beyond what residence life would be able to fund solely through room and board fees. The activities fee also covers salaries of elected students who oversee campus-wide social programming. These elected student representatives do not have any responsibilities within the residential halls, nor are they necessarily a point of contact for individual students in need. Instead, the student representatives primarily lead social events with the intention of fostering community at the building and campus level.

Student Staff

RAs Oversee On-Site Student Support and Community-Building

RAs' responsibilities typically revolve around community-building, programming, and student support. Across all profiled institutions, RAs live on campus and serve as a primary point of contact for resident students. RAs respond to a wide range of issues, such as facilities incidents, mental health crises, and academic concerns. Administrators either classify RAs as student employees or non-employee student leaders.

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RA to Student Ratios at Selected Profiled Institutions

Institution	Average Ratio of RAs to Students
Institution B	1:30
Institution C	1:35
Institution D	1:37
Institution E	1:35
Institution F	First year communities: 1:25 Upper year communities: 1:35
Institution I	1:25

At profiled institutions, including **Institution E** and **Institution A**, RAs help guide students to available campus resources and develop residence life programming for students. Administrators at **Institution E** emphasize the program development facet of the role, in which RAs structure programming around the institution's Community Development Model pillars of community-building, resilience, and academic success. In contrast, when ranking the responsibilities of the RA position, administrators at **Institution A** prioritize the RA's role as a knowledgeable campus resource advocate over their community-building and program development work.

RA Unionization Improves RAs' Work-Life Balance

RAs at **Institution A** and **Institution F** operate as unionized groups.

At the **Institution F**, the unionized role establishes RAs as hourly employees. Administrators report that this hourly structure helps improve RAs' work-life balance, since they can more clearly delineate between working hours and non-working hours. This contrasts with the traditional RA role, where administrators provide RAs with compensation at a single point in time (i.e., free housing provided at the beginning of the year) and RAs are thus expected to always respond to student needs, pressing or otherwise.

Some profiled institutions, including **Institution J**, **Institution D, Institution F** and **Institution G**, also offer a Senior RA (SRA) position for qualifying RAs. The selection process includes a truncated application and series of interviews. Only past RAs with demonstrated strong professional performance can apply. Institutions that offer SRA roles typically provide compensation to these student leaders that exceeds compensation provided to RAs.

SRAs at **Institution F** focus on supporting and coordinating the RAs rather than direct student interactions. Leaders at **Institution F** leverage the SRA role to provide a further leadership opportunity for students interested careers related to student affairs.

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RA Compensation at All Profiled Institutions

Institution	RA Compensation
Institution A	• Room and board (taxable benefit) • Weekly stipend
Institution B	• Room and board (taxable benefit)
Institution C	• Grant to offset housing (average of $10,000 (USD) per semester) • Grant to offset food (average of $2,500 (USD) per semester)
Institution D	• Room and board • RAs paid a $1,500 (USD) annual stipend • SRAs paid a $3,000 (USD) annual stipend
Institution E	• Room and board • Full meal plan
Institution F	• Hourly compensation
Institution G	• Room and board (taxable benefit) • RAs in first year communities receive a meal plan
Institution H	• Room and board
Institution I	• Room and Board • Annual stipend
Institution J	• Room and board • SRAs receive higher quality rooms and $500 USD in additional meal points.

Prepare RAs for Unique Challenges of the Role with Training Opportunities Before and During the Academic Year

Given their vast responsibilities and the unpredictable nature of their jobs, RAs require robust training programs to achieve professional success. Across all profiled institutions, training programs for RAs begin over the summer and continue over the course of the academic year. While a diverse array of campus leaders facilitate summer onboarding sessions, senior residence life staff members typically lead the ongoing trainings during the academic year.

Administrators at **Institution B**, **Institution C**, **Institution E** and **Institution G** begin trainings with online summer sessions to guarantee that RAs arrive with a foundational knowledge of key topics that do not require in-person instruction, such as fire safety and accessibility services.

All profiled institutions onboard RAs in the weeks leading up to the academic year to familiarize RAs with campus resources, campus leaders, and their managers. These sessions also use role-playing exercises and group discussions to teach RAs how to respond to common student issues.

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Institution G begins in-person onboarding in the two weeks before students arrive on campus. Guest speakers, including members of campus security, a campus substance use advisor and a sexual violence support advocate, facilitate many of these sessions to familiarize RAs with campus resources. At **Institution G**, elected student representatives join the RAs during the second week of trainings to plan student programming collaboratively. Contacts at **Institution G** stressed the importance of providing RAs with guidance on setting boundaries, self-care, and compassion fatigue. According to these contacts, the RA position is uniquely demanding on both individuals' time and emotional energy, so providing the RAs with ways to support themselves over the course of the year preempts burnout in the long run.

Trainings throughout the year tend to be more flexible and responsive to changing RA cohort needs, compared to trainings at the beginning of the year. At **Institution A** and **Institution G**, residence life administrators survey RAs to guide the selection of topics covered in future professional development sessions. At **Institution A**, residential life leaders survey the RAs each day during their two-week long kickoff training, while at **Institution G**, administrators survey RAs during the second month of the academic year.

RAs at **Institution F** also receive training on lesson plan development, which gives them the necessary skills to plan and execute residence life programming.

Similarly, **Institution F** provides 90 hours of paid training to their RAs over the course of the academic year. Staff members in the Educational Leadership Office develop the training curricula, focusing on key learning outcomes such as community-building, directing students to resources, and first aid/first response training.

Institution H's RA training also includes a winter student development training before the beginning of the spring semester. These peer-led sessions reinforce and refresh lessons learned during the fall trainings. In addition, administrators at the **Institution H** pay for some RAs to attend a student leadership conference hosted by the Western Association of College and University Housing Officers (WACUHO) each fall. This conference provides RAs with an opportunity to learn from their peers from across the region.

Diversify Evaluation Methods in the RA Application Process to Assess Candidates Holistically

The RA application and selection process at all profiled institutions contains an initial online application along with group interview activities. **Institution E**, **Institution H**, **Institution F**, and **Institution D** also employ a one-on-one interview.

At **Institution G**, **Institution J**, **Institution H** and **Institution D**, applicants must have a GPA of at least 2.5 (on a 4.0 scale). In contrast, RAs at **Institution C** must have a cumulative GPA of at least 3.0 (on a 4.0 scale). Additionally, across all profiled institutions, RAs typically must have lived on campus for at least one year. At **Institution D**, transfer students can apply if they have lived on campus for at least one semester. In addition, students on probation will not be considered for the RA position at **Institution D**.

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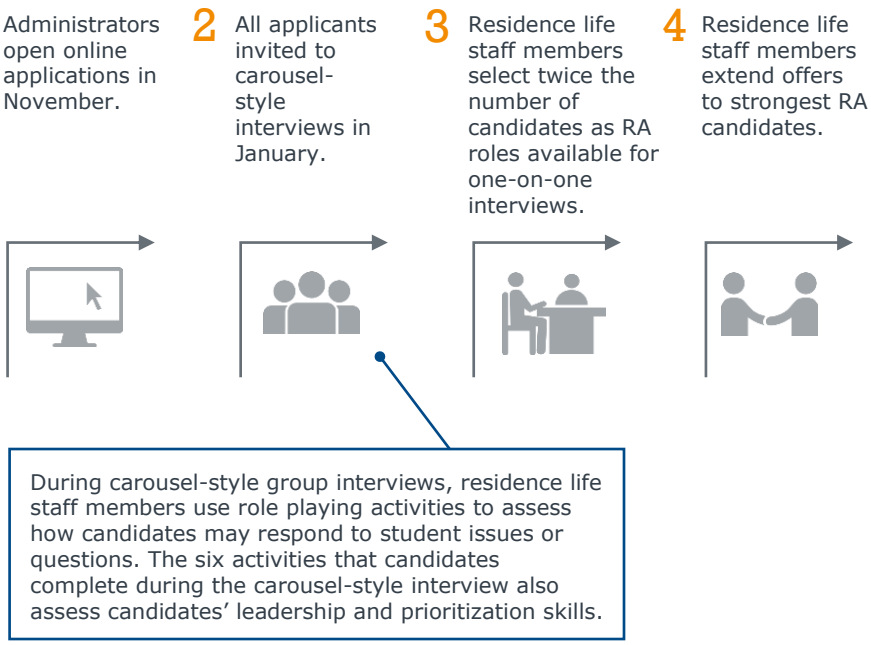
RA Application Process at *Institution A*



Administrators at some institutions, such as **Institution H**, may eliminate the group interview from the selection process since they believe it unfairly benefits more extroverted candidates. In contrast, administrators at **Institution G** prefer to rely on in-person group activities that uniquely enable administrators to evaluable key RA skills, such as teamwork and interpersonal communication. These administrators use candidates' written applications for the information that they would hope to gain in a one-on-one interview.

At all profiled institutions except **Institution D**, residence life leaders simply select RA candidates for RA roles as an overarching group. However, each year at **Institution D**, the residential life team creates a Student Staff Selection Committee composed of Resident Directors from different residential areas across campus, who "draft" RAs for their respective areas (i.e., a group of residential buildings managed by a single RA Manager). In addition, the committee creates a list of "alternates," who receive offers if first-choice RA candidates decline their offers. This committee also markets and advertises open positions, designs the application process, reviews online applications, and facilitates candidate interviews.

Professional Staff

RA Managers Serve as a Connection Point Between RAs and Broader Residence Life Staff

At all profiled institutions, RA Managers (or similarly titled roles) act as the RAs' main source of professional support and act as liaisons between RAs and residential life leadership. Managers host meetings with their direct reports either once a week or every other week, and communicate frequently with their own manager, typically the Director of Residence Life.

RA Managers at **Institution A** meet with the Director of Residence Life weekly as a group and individually once every two weeks. The Director of Residence Life uses these meetings to increase collaboration and develop strong relationships with and among RA Managers.

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All RA Managers at **Institution G** and **Institution D** live on campus. In addition to working a typical work week, RA Managers at **Institution G** also serve as RAs' emergency on-call point of contact for one week out of every six weeks. Similarly, RA Managers at **Institution D** fulfill a monthly week-long on-call assignment, where they respond in-person to student issues and crises. In contrast, administrators at **Institution A** do not want to use their RA Managers primarily as first responders to student issues. As a result, administrators allow RA Managers to either live on or off campus. Administrators recognize that in the event of an emergency, on-campus RA Managers can provide necessary RA support immediately.

Competitive candidates for the RA Manager role typically hold Master's degrees and have a background in residential life or student affairs, but some RA Managers at **Institution F** have backgrounds in social work and corrections as well. As professional staff, RA Managers have access to similar professional development resources as other campus employees, in addition to professional development sessions led by the Director of Residence Life.

Provide RA Managers with Role-Specific Professional Development Opportunities

In addition to formal, institution-led professional development at **Institution A**, the RA Managers also take time each semester to host peer-led discussions and presentations on topics of their choosing. These collaborative sessions develop managers' professional skills and build community among the RA Managers.

For further training, select members from **Institution A's** Residence Life department also attend the annual Association of College and University Housing Officers – International (ACUOH-I) conference.

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2) Student Programming

Program Offerings

Profiled Institutions Use Residence Life Programming to Build Community and Ensure Student Wellbeing

Across all profiled institutions, residence life programming encourages students to develop an affinity for and sense of belonging at the institution. RAs work toward these goals through a variety of one-on-one conversations and larger floor- and building-based group events. Other common goals of residence life programming include building inclusive communities, encouraging personal growth, and supporting health, wellbeing, and community engagement.

For example, RAs at **Institution B** develop a strong sense of community among their residents through the institution's Community Conversations program, where RAs discuss pertinent issues one-on-one with students.

Community Conversations at *Institution B*

	RAs must schedule one-on-one conversations with each of their residents four times each year. Professional residence life staff members develop a templatized conversation guide to direct these conversations.
	Topics of conversation vary based upon the time of year. For example, the first session in the fall discusses topics such as school traditions, study skills, and homesickness. Later sessions recap the semester and discuss future off-campus housing options.
	RAs take notes from the conversations, which residence life staff members aggregate to track any trends in student wellbeing. Given the semi-confidential nature of these conversations, leaders can still address more acute student needs immediately.

At **Institution G**, larger-scale events for entire halls or buildings include social activities such as pizza parties and study nights. Even within these more informal structures, administrators require RAs to incorporate some type of educational component into each large-scale event.

Encourage Positive Faculty-Student Relationships through Faculty in Residence Programs

Faculty in Residence programs, in which faculty members live in apartments within student residence halls, provide students with opportunities to develop strong relationships with faculty members through formal and informal programming. Among profiled institutions, only **Institution D** and **Institution H** use Faculty in Residence programs.

Faculty in Residence foster mentor-like relationships with their students. At **Institution H**, faculty in this program host a minimum of three events per semester

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and otherwise interact with students informally for about six hours per week. Since administrators provide faculty participants with free housing and a dining stipend, many faculty members organize these student interactions over meals or in their institution-provided housing units.

To encourage a more active role in student programming, administrators at **Institution D** have Faculty in Residence design and implement academic, intellectual, cultural, educational, and social activities that support the institution's residential experience. Each participating faculty member works with an RA Manager to plan weekly student programming to supplement more informal gatherings hosted in institution-provided faculty apartments. Each faculty member spends about 10 to 12 hours per week interacting with their residential area's students.

At both **Institution H** and **Institution D**, administrators select Faculty in Residence using a formal application and multiple rounds of interviews with various campus stakeholders. Administrators at **Institution H** begin the selection process during the preceding fall semester. The selection committee includes some current Faculty in Residence, the Senior Director for Residential Education, and the two Associate Directors of Residence Life. This committee leads a three-hour interview with each candidate. The candidates then meet with other residence life staff members, RAs, and other student leaders. The committee provides hiring recommendations to the Provost, who gives the final approval for each new member of the program.

Similarly, applicants at **Institution D** submit a CV and cover letter and interview with current students, other Faculty in Residence, and residence life staff members. The Division of Student Affairs and the Office of the Provost jointly make final hiring decisions. Unique among profiled institutions, **Institution D** provides Faculty in Residence an annual monetary stipend in addition to housing and meal vouchers.

Living Learning Communities Facilitate Specialized Programming for Select Students

While no profiled institutions organize their residential communities through a formal commons system, **Institution B**, **Institution E**, and **Institution J** use Living Learning Communities as a way to offer students a residential experience tailored to their academic or personal interests.

At **Institution B**, half of the students in residence apply to live in a Living Learning Community, with 30 to 40 percent accepted into these communities each year. Some of these residential communities are theme-based, focusing on topics such as health and wellness or women in leadership, while others are focused on an academic discipline, such as engineering. The RA-led programming in these communities corresponds to the Living Learning Community's area of focus.

Institution E's eight Living Learning Communities are similarly in very high demand and focus on an academic discipline or an interest area, such as the creative arts or active living. The RAs in these 25-student communities create an enhanced learning experience. RAs frequently partner with campus leaders to offer additional programming within the community's area of emphasis.

Most students at **Institution J** live within one of the institution's 10 Learning Communities. These communities are built around a common theme, encourage faculty engagement, and offer opportunities for academic engagement outside the classroom.

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Use Specialized Student Roles to Plan Both Small-Scale and Large-Scale Residence Life Programming

Several profiled institutions create additional leadership opportunities for students interested in residence life programming, aside from the RA role. By offering several programming-related roles, administrators increase the number of students engaged with residence life programming and provide students with an opportunity to specialize within a particular type of programming.

For example, **Institution A**, **Institution G**, and **Institution D** divide program development responsibility between RAs (who oversee small-scale programming) and other groups of student leaders (who oversee larger-scale programming). Specifically, **Institution A** uses RAs to develop floor-level and building-level programming, while student staff Facilitators each manage development of campus-wide programming on a different topic (e.g., environmental sustainability, student equity).

Similarly, RAs at **Institution G** facilitate student programming within the residence halls, while elected student representatives organize campus-wide social events. To avoid student leaders duplicating programming efforts, RA Managers at **Institution D** advise both RAs and the Programming Board, which develops programming for each undergraduate college.

Structure Residence Life Curriculum Development Process to Reflect Institution-Specific Residence Life Priorities

Profiled institutions vary in how much autonomy administrators give to student leaders in developing residence life programming. At some institutions, administrators provide RAs with a relatively standardized programming curriculum in order to ease the workload on these student leaders. At other institutions, administrators encourage RAs to develop their own programming to protect RAs' independence and encourage unique programming across campus.

Methods of Residential Program Development at Profiled Institutions

Centralized Program Development	Decentralized Program Development
Institutions such as **Institution H** use a centralized residential education curriculum to standardize the residential experience and decrease RAs' workloads.	Institutions such as **Institution E** opt not use a centralized residential education curriculum to encourage student staff autonomy over residential programming.

Institutions that develop residential programming curricula centrally do so to standardize the residential experience, control quality of the content, and unburden the student staff of program development responsibilities.

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For example, leadership at **Institution H** recently instituted a centralized curriculum model for their residential programming after they found that RAs generally felt overwhelmed and burnt out. Under the new model, RAs do not have to create new programs; instead, they solely focus on the implementation of predetermined programs. In response to these changes, contacts report that returning RAs miss the opportunity to develop programming, but new RAs appreciate the additional time they now have to focus on informal community-building and on their own personal wellness.

In contrast, some profiled institutions prefer to preserve student leader autonomy over the program development process. Administrators at **Institution F**, **Institution B**, and **Institution E** all provide broad parameters to guide more specific programming developed by RAs.

Administrators at **Institution F** adopt a Community Plan at the beginning of each academic year to guide the focus of programming in each residential community on campus over the course of the year. However, the RAs still have autonomy over the actual content and structure of each educational and social event.

Professional staff at **Institution B** developed a centralized Residence Life program facilitation guide to guarantee consistency across RAs. Programming thus revolves around a uniform set of educational priorities (inclusive communities, health and wellbeing, personal growth, and community engagement). By adopting centralized programming priorities, Residence Life leaders at **Institution B** ensure that all residential students engage with these key topics during their time on campus.

At **Institution E**, RAs plan events and activities around the three pillars of the Community Development Model: sense of belonging, resilience, and academic success. RAs plan one large-scale event around each of these pillars during their eight-month term. However, under a new model, the programming and content would be created by a Manager of Education and implemented by the RAs. Leadership hopes that this will guarantee consistency of student experience across all RAs, as well as equitably distribute responsibilities among residence life staff.

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3) Research Methodology

Research Parameters

The Forum interviewed administrators managing residence life departments at urban research institutions in both Canada and the United States.

A Guide to Institutions Profiled in this Brief

Institution	Location	Total Enrollment Range
Institution A	Quebec	25,000-50,000
Institution B	Ontario	25,000-50,000
Institution C	Mid Atlantic	50,000-75,000
Institution D	Midwest	<25,000
Institution E	Ontario	<25,000
Institution F	Alberta	25,000-50,000
Institution G	Alberta	25,000-50,000
Institution H	West	25,000-50,000
Institution I	Ontario	<25,000
Institution J	Northeast	<25,000

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