

Technology and Resident Assistant Training: Utilizing (Likely) Already Available Software to Improve R.A. Training and Cut Costs

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Introduction

Staff and faculty at colleges and universities across the country are likely hearing similar tunes being sung by their president or budget officer: freezes, losses, and cuts (oh my). Student affairs divisions are not immune to the fiscal problems that face the entire institution and likely will be forced to cut many functions yet be expected to provide similar services.

In Residence Life, depending on the size of staff, after operations and professional salary, a large cost can be associated with training for professional and paraprofessional staff. Training typically can last 2 days and could cap at 2 weeks (Twale & Muse, 1996). Meals alone could easily cost tens of thousands of dollars. Being able to cut one or two days of training can save between \$1,000-\$4,000 in meals alone, depending on the size and type of the staff. For example, at Ithaca College, an entire day's worth of meals can cost between \$1,440 and \$2,250 depending on venue and number of staff attending. Typically, cutting days included cutting valuable, and needed, sessions and/or jam packing those sessions into back-to-back, rigorous and exhaustive days.

Where Technology Plays a Vital Role

Ithaca College is faced with this dilemma—how do you provide a valuable, consistent, and meaningful training while still making sure you are being fiscally responsible in these challenging economic times. While required training depends on campus size, facilities, staff dynamics, and risk management, it can be greatly assumed that some of the key sessions never change from year to year, such as duty expectations, policies and procedures, and student development theory (Van Brunt & Ebbeling, 2008). Some institutions continue to honor the “RA Class” which includes pre-service training and an on-going educational opportunity over the course of a semester or year (although, delivery of this course greatly differs from pre-service to during-service) (Twale & Muse, 1996).

At Ithaca College, we were charged to brainstorm various ways to cut operating costs in preparation for budget discussions that were looming and inevitable. Instead of seeing this as a negative, we viewed this as an opportunity to be creative. Over the course of a few (short) months, the R.A. Training Committee, along with a staff member with ambition to infuse technology to improve effectiveness and efficiency, the “Blackboard” taskforce was created to implement a new delivery format for Resident Assistant Training.

Ithaca College typically has 5 days of returning RA Training and 7 days of new RA Training in the winter; 7 days of returning RA Training and 10 days of new RA Training in the summer. Costs of meals could peak at, or even exceed, \$20,000. Cutting one day of each training could save anywhere between \$4,000 and \$7,500 per academic year. However, we were not satisfied just to cut training and

jam pack the existing sessions into the remaining days or compromise the integrity of training. Instead, we utilized Blackboard as an alternate delivery format for new Resident Assistants.

Blackboard & Other Classroom Management Systems

Most colleges and universities are utilizing online methods to deliver, either fully or partially, online academic courses or classroom coursework components. For instance, in 2005, Blackboard reported that “150 of the 239 schools included in the 2005 U.S. News & World Report ranking of top tier national universities and liberal arts colleges rely on Blackboard software to create a networked learning environment” (Blackboard.com). However, other systems, such as Moodle, WebCT, and many others, are also available to provide online data delivery.

Course Management Systems (CMS) allow instructors to post material for student viewing, allow students to submit assignments, and enable students to actively engage other students through discussion boards and online forums. The uses are limited only to the specific limitations of the CMS. Some colleges and universities, including Binghamton University, Elmira College, and Ithaca College, utilize CMS to fully deliver online courses in off-terms; many online colleges only utilize these forums. If the academic side of campus can do it, Student Affairs can use the already available, licensed software for their purposes as well. Ithaca College contacted the Information Technology department who created a course “shell” for us to design and manage.

New Resident Assistant Online Training

In November 2008, the group created the basic outline for the online training. Using a “module” format, where one broad topic/goal contains multiple smaller objectives, we created a Blackboard menu that was easily navigable and utilized assessments to ensure comprehension. In our pilot program, for January 2009 training, we utilized two modules:

- “Roles and Responsibilities of the Resident Assistant” where we provided PDF documents of the R.A. contracts and agreements, introductions to all professional staff members, and links to the online resource www.residentassistant.com. For an assessment, new Resident Assistants were asked to introduce themselves on a discussion board, provide a summary of the three more important parts of the R.A. job in their opinion (based off the residentassistant.com article), and complete a quiz on aspects of their position (i.e. GPA requirements, alcohol expectations, etc.)
- “Floor Preparation” where we provided a PowerPoint presentation that included the multiple tasks RAs should complete to prepare their floors, including bulletin boards and door tags. We included links to www.residentassistant.com for examples of creative boards and tags. For an assessment, new Resident Assistants were asked to brainstorm bulletin board ideas and then respond to three of their fellow RAs with suggestions on how to improve their bulletin board idea.

This format allowed for eager Resident Assistants to begin training prior to their actual January 2009 training date and complete the modules on their own timeline (as long as they were completed by the start of on-campus training). In addition, it promoted online interactions through the discussion boards and allowed them to get to know staff prior to arriving. The taskforce identified two “module instructors” (Residence Directors) to create and monitor the modules, including utilizing the Gradebook feature to mark completed assessments. The beauty of an online system is that, depending on a school’s CMS, one can simply re-use the already created modules in the future; therefore, much of the creation of the system was a one-time effort sans yearly updates and/or revisions.

For the summer training, we planned on cutting one day from new RA training as well and utilizing the New RA Online training through Blackboard. We added three other modules, including “Housing and Operations,” “Policies and Procedures,” and “Programming” (more informational, lecture based sessions) to our online modules. The online module became available in April and is available throughout the summer so that students can complete it on their own time. Module Instructors grade each module’s assignments (that are not automatically graded by the system) and respond to students’ questions, providing a connection before the job even begins.

Implementation and Supervision

Of course, creating the course “shell” is a significant project; but, typically a one-time project. For most CMS, creating modules is like creating a folder and simply putting documents inside the folder; it is also similar to creating a navigable webpage. Luckily, most institutions that have CMS have a training program. After the one-time creation, revisions and updates could be done yearly in preparation for the summer orientation. At Ithaca College, it was helpful to have one person coordinate the actual Blackboard design.

Ithaca also utilized “Module Instructors” to provide oversight to each individual module. They were responsible for overseeing each module, which included reviewing their module for revisions, grading any assessments that were not automatically graded by the CMS (typically discussion boards), and answering any questions posted to the discussion boards. If the Module Instructor left mid-course, the responsibility could easily be assumed by someone else. Typical workload could be about an hour a week.

The End Product

The end product was very successful for our January 2009 participants and, as mentioned earlier, has already been expanded for our summer 2009 training. Based on our course survey, participants felt prepared and excited to start training, felt the course material was understandable, workload was manageable and convenient (“I liked being able to do it in my pajamas!” was an actual comment), and enjoyed being able to reference outside resources like RA.com. Similarly, it allowed RAs to be home for one additional day, which was a boon to them and us, saving one day’s worth of meals (for our 33 staff members [23 new staff and 10 professional staff], approximately \$600).

While RAs will likely need a brief review of the information covered, the review could be more discussion based and situational, allowing for lectures and informational sessions to become more interactive. Utilizing a pre-training program, such as an online course, allows training coordinators to spend more in-training time on developing and honing the necessary interpersonal skills to be a successful Resident Assistant.

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References

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