

Best Practices in the Recruitment and Retention of Entry-Level Live-In Staff

Summary of Findings

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Having competent, knowledgeable, and skilled professional staff in residential facilities is essential to promoting student learning and development on campus (Belch & Kimble, 2006; Belch & Mueller, 2003). These professionals have substantive student contact and significant responsibilities for the learning and welfare of students. However, many campuses face increasing challenges in filling these positions with well-qualified staff while others demonstrate success in recruiting and retaining staff.

Several key factors converged to create these challenges for some institutions in their ability to hire and retain staff: a) more employment options exist for those entering the field; b) the quality of life associated with living in; c) the complexity and severity of student issues, and d) some master's graduates express no desire to live in.

In 2005, a team of three researchers, supported by an ACUHO-I grant, designed a study to answer the following questions:

- 1) What institutions in the United States are considered to have achieved best practices in the recruitment of entry-level live-in professional staff in housing and residence life?
- 2) What institutions in the United States are considered to have achieved best practices in the retention of entry-level live-in professional staff in housing and residence life?
- 3) What specific practices do these identified campuses engage in that are perceived to be successful?

A Delphi method of inquiry was selected to identify the institutions with best practices in these areas because of its applicability to utilizing an expert panel to collect informed judgments on a specific issue (Reid, 1988) and it is particularly useful in determining solutions to existing problems (Uhl, 1983). This research methodology is a consensus building approach and as such collects the perspectives and opinions of a group of experts. The expert panel was drawn from ACUHO-I's Leadership Assembly and Small College Network.

The panel ultimately identified 11 campuses with best practices: five in recruitment, three in retention, and three institutions identified in both areas. Members of the research team were assigned to individual campuses and conducted site visits in the spring of 2005. Data sources included focus groups, individual interviews, document analysis, and observation

The research team conducted over 75 interviews to learn what campus officials do to staff those critical positions from both a recruitment and retention perspective. This study identified successful and innovative recruitment and retention strategies and activities that focused on the following:

Policies: Best practices campuses had policies and practices related to pets, domestic partnerships, respecting living space, collateral assignments, professional development support, flexible scheduling/work hours, and contract length.

Processes: Best practices were characterized by: a) ongoing communication with candidates; b) attention to the individual candidate; c) involved other staff in decision-making; and d) offered a broad approach to professional development.

Perks: Best practices campuses: a) focused on making living space a home (e.g., external entrance, washer/dryer, decent furniture, wooden cabinets); b) provided a meal plan; c) had a departmental plan to address amenities within the department's scope and ability) and communicated it to staff; and d) offered access to degree programs.

Personalities: Best practices campuses had strong leaders and supervisors who: a) cared; b) had a vision; c) exhibited genuine enthusiasm for their work; d) were willing to change; d) worked intentionally to create staff ownership; e) encouraged/expected professional development through words, actions, and resources; and f) acknowledged the importance of fit for the live-in staff and the institution.

Further, this study also identified several key factors for successful recruitment and retention of entry-level live-in staff. Important elements for recruitment include: a) a dedicated person responsible for recruitment; b) attention to detail; c) professional visibility and involvement; d) candidate access to the decision maker; e) use of employee "alumni" to recruit. Factors identified as central to successful retention of staff included: a) staff feel valued; b) attention is given to professional development needs; c) willingness to personalize professional development experiences; d) good, strong, capable supervisors who cared; e) possibilities for promotion, and f) staff were asked to stay.

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