

# The Why and How of Starting a Residence Hall Association



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## Introduction

Most universities have some form of Student Government that essentially serves as the collective voice of the student body to the university administration, the community, and to other students/organizations. Many campuses also have cultural organizations that represent minority groups, honors societies, etc. But not every campus has a Residence Hall Association (RHA), which serves as the collective voice for students who live on campus. There are infinite positive benefits that can come from the development of an RHA on your campus. But starting this organization from scratch can be extremely challenging; there are so many things to consider as you establish the foundation.

- How do you gain the support of your residence Life Department?
- How can you recruit and retain members?
- Where will you obtain funding?
- What will be the purpose and mission of your RHA? How will you go about accomplishing said goals?
- How will your organization involve Resident Assistants and other housing staff members?
- What resources are available to you on your campus?
- What resources are available to you from the state, region, and national levels?
- Where can you get help?
- Exactly what role should your RHA adviser play?

All of these questions, and many others you may have, are perfectly legitimate. With dedication, patience, and a little help from some friends, every one of those questions can be answered. The following manual is by no means a comprehensive explanation of every procedure you must go through, as things vary per campus. The Florida Association of Residence Halls (FARH) would simply like to give you a manual that can guide you during the early stages of establishing your own RHA.

## Benefits of a Residence Hall Association

### *Service to Residents Through Representation and Programming*

An RHA serves many purposes, with a major focus on providing service to the residents through representation and programming. On-campus students are rich in diversity with varying family, ethnicity, religious, geographic, and socioeconomic backgrounds. The one thing that all residents have in common is obviously that they live in the residence halls. The job of an RHA is to unify on-campus residents and to provide them with the opportunity to develop a sense of community on their floor and in their halls.

Freshmen who come to college are faced with the daunting task of transitioning from a high school environment, where they lived at home and knew almost everyone, to college, where they become a face in the crowd. Providing freshmen with a sense of belonging can be extremely difficult, especially when they are suddenly surrounded by different types of people from all over the country and world whom they are suddenly forced to live with peacefully for an extended period of time. For many students, it is difficult to grow accustomed to this lifestyle. The community environment created in residence halls provides many opportunities for students to grow outside of the classroom. It is a common misconception among incoming freshmen that a dorm room is simply a place to sleep, shower, and change...oh, and occasionally study in; when in fact, the residence halls are where on-campus students spend the majority of their time. Thus, an RHA nurtures to this student's needs.

RHAs can promote community among different types of students, for instance, by hosting social and educational programs that allow on-campus students an opportunity to interact in a supportive environment. Social programs allow students to have fun and meet new people. It also provides an alternative to the club and party scene, which is too hectic for many students.

Examples of social programs:

- BBQ
- Late-Night Breakfast
- Pool Parties
- Game Nights
- Karaoke Nights
- Talent Shows

Educational programs do not have to be dull presentations that not even you would want to attend. Make them fun, but still get the message across. Educational programs are an opportunity to create awareness in many areas. Further explanations of examples of these programs can be found in the NACURH Resource File Index (RFI).

Examples of educational program topics:

- Rape Awareness
- Alcohol and Drug Awareness
- Cultural Celebrations
- Sexual Orientation Awareness

On a more basic level, RHAs represent the needs of residents to the campus administration (i.e. the housing department). Residents may have concerns about the cost of rent, cable service, quality of toilet paper, services of their front desk, etc. The RHA should be the strongest voice the residents have to express these concerns and more to the proper individuals. Anything the RHA can do to make the residential environment more comfortable will lead to a happier

student body (and, of course, further promote your organization's power). Campuses with well-established RHAs often find their housing departments request their opinion on almost every issue.

*NOTE:* The following is a non-comprehensive list of issues that an RHA can represent for on-campus residents

- Quality of furniture in the rooms
- Cost of living
- Availability of computer services
- Quality of cable television/phone services
- Quality of custodial/maintenance services
- Procedures for assigning roommates/rooms
- Availability/Approachability of housing staff
- On-campus parking issues
- Quality of food in campus dining facilities
- Rules and Regulations for students in residence halls
- Guest policies
- Needs of incoming first year residents
- Co-Programming with Greek Life

### *Leadership Development*

Another goal of many RHAs is to maintain an organization that helps develop student leaders. For on-campus residents, what better organization to get involved in than one that directly affects their living environment? After recruiting and retaining members, residents will have a nurturing environment to learn leadership skills such as time management, conflict resolution, goal setting, maintaining a positive attitude despite the odds, etc. RHAs can put on workshops or leadership seminars for their members to provide them with effective training on such skills. This is in addition to the on-going training and experience they constantly receive through their involvement.

Although most freshmen were involved in extracurricular activities in high school, it is surprising how few of them have attended seminars on leadership development. RHAs can be a place where these student leaders do not feel intimidated to become involved and can receive the training and experience necessary for becoming a good leader. The title of a good leader, however, is more comprehensive than simply understanding time management or conflict resolution; it means making decisions based on a strong sense of character with pure/unselfish intentions. This type of leadership is prevalent in an RHA because it is necessary for the betterment of the campus as a whole.

# Establishing the Foundations of a Residence Hall Association

## Stage 1: Getting support from your Office of Residence Life

Obtaining support from your housing office is vital in establishing the foundation of your RHA, especially since they will provide most of your funding and support. It is a good idea to meet with the person in charge of your housing office in person. The majority of your initial support will probably come from RAs and other housing employees, so it is important to develop a good working relationship with them.

The following are some of the goals you should pursue during this meeting:

1. **Establish a general purpose** – To create a foundation for your RHA, it is important that students and the housing office are on the same page. Sit down and create a clear mission statement for your association. Have an open discussion about the benefits of having an RHA and exactly what role the organization would play on your particular campus. This will ensure that your chief housing official is supportive of your intentions.
2. **Discuss specific issues** – It is best to have specific issues to discuss; it will show that you have given your RHA a lot of thought and will likely get you the answers you need. You may want to discuss how willing your housing office would be to provide funding for your organization to put on preliminary programs and advertise until you have established fundraising and a budget.
3. **Obtain preliminary approval** – At the end of this meeting, it would be beneficial to obtain approval from your housing office to continue with more specific plans. It is important to show them your dedications and willingness to oblige to their guidelines.

## Stage 2: Establishing a committee with specific goals and structure

Okay, you have support from your housing office to do more research, but now what do you do? Establishing a structured committee with specific goals and structures makes the path to developing an RHA much smoother.

1. **Make your goals/intentions public** – Begin talking to housing employees about your desire to start an RHA. Speak with those in charge of finances, assignments, individual halls, etc. If your housing office has a newsletter, see if you can publish an article expressing your intentions. If you ask for interested individuals to contact you, there may be people willing to help you in ways you did not even conceive. In fact, you can maximize your publicity opportunities by putting in

plugs with RAs and directors of halls as well as presidents of other organizations (i.e. Student Government). By making your intentions public, the support for your cause will be more forthcoming. The more support you have from a variety of individuals, the more well rounded the diversity of opinions for your RHA will be.

2. **Establish the committees** – Whether it is a committee of just students or just RAs or a combination thereof, assemble a group of people among which you can divide the issues to further research. This division of labor will make it easier to obtain more thorough information. For example, one group could research different ways of obtaining funding and establishing how that funding could be handled. Another could be in charge of resources and call state, regional, and national associations, as well as RHAs in nearby schools to obtain documents like constitutions, finance manuals, etc. (This will help your committee compare the structure of different RAs as a basis.) While another could be a campus liaison that would inform the rest of campus administration, student organizations, etc. about your developments. Other topics to handle are facilities (where are you going to hold your meetings, can you get an office on campus or can you share an office with another organization) and publicity; remember, issues to research vary per campus. Allow a few weeks for this research and have weekly meetings for updates to ensure that each person is working towards the same goal. It would be wise to establish a set list of goals and a timeline so the committees do not lose focus; make an overall list for your RHA together and then have each committee make their own. A retreat involving social activities would encourage a positive and fun environment to work in while promoting unity and bonding among the committee members (who are the core of your new organization). Finally, when all the information has been researched and the best options for your RHA are established, it is time to form the organization.

### Stage 3: Putting it all together

You have the support, the basic structure, and the facilities. Now, all you need to do is fill your organization with enthusiastic, dedicated student leaders who will help it develop its permanent foundation.

1. **Finding Interested Students** – Although this may prove difficult, the key is to target incoming freshmen and utilize RAs to arouse interest. Incoming freshmen, as previously discussed, will be looking for an organization that gives them a sense of belonging. Knowing that the organization is just developing and that they would be an intricate part of the process will encourage them to join, especially since they would little to no impact in an already established organization.

RAs are also a valuable resource for finding interested students. Since most campuses have RA per floor or section, this network can be the primary way to reach out to residents. Have a meeting with the RAs and discuss the possibility of having them help recruit members; thus, helping take the burden off your shoulders.

Another option is to host a highly publicized program that would also serve as an interest meeting (i.e. a BBQ or dance). You could pass around a list for interested students to sign (make sure you get their full name and at least their school phone number, a cell number, mailbox, email address or screen name). After obtaining contact information, follow up with them less than a week later so they don't lose interest.

- 2. Establishing An Organizational Purpose and a Mission Statement** – Sure you may have already established a general mission statement a purpose, it is important that you finalize it with the group of interested students; give them a voice, a sense of ownership so they will want to stay involved. It will also establish a sense of unity among your group. Invited professional housing staff to provide insight into establishing a purpose for your organization, and consider their comments when finalizing your mission statement. Remember, you do not want to alienate the housing staff nor give them the impression that you are powerful enough without them, because then they won't be there when you need them most.

There are many things you can include in your mission statement, such as a statement about serving the residents, programming for the residents, providing leadership development, working to benefit the quality of residence life, creating a cohesive and unified resident community, and establishing a forum for residents to be represented to their housing staff and campus administration. However, these are merely suggestions; it is important that your mission statement reflects the needs of your residents on your campus.

After the wording is established, make copies and distribute them to all housing staff and interested students so that everyone is constantly reminded of the purpose of the organization. Seeing that mission statement finalized could also be a great motivating factor for your committee: Just a little more work and the dream of an RHA will be a reality.

- 3. Writing a Constitution** – Probably one of the most dreaded parts of stating an organization is writing the constitution. Unfortunately, this tedious task is an integral part in establishing the structure of your organization, so you'll just have to grin and bear it. You can utilize all the information pooled by the committees and work with all interested individuals to hammer one out.

Some things to consider while drafting your constitution:

- How will the executive board be structured? Will you have a President, Vice-President, Treasurer, Secretary, and National Communications Coordinator (NCC)? Any other positions?
- What will be the duties and responsibilities of your executive board as a whole and per position? What will be the requirements to serve in each position?
- Will they get paid/a stipend?
- How will funding and budgets be passed in front of the organization?
- What will be the role of RAs and other housing officials? Will they be allowed to vote or just have speaking rights?
- Will your RHA be like an umbrella organization for each individual hall or housing areas? Will the individual halls or housing areas have representatives at meetings? Will they be funded through RHA or have to obtain their own funding? Will there be hall or area organizations with an executive board structure?
- Will your RHA have committees (i.e. publicity, community service)?
- What will be the voting membership of your RHA? What will be the requirement for retaining voting seats?
- How will elections run? Will you just have appointments to positions?
- How will your RHA fulfill the mission statement and organizational purpose?
- How will your RHA handle the removal of officers who are not fulfilling their constitutional duties? How will they be replaced?
- What will be the procedure for running meetings: *Robert's Rules of Parliamentary Procedure* or another format?

Establishing the wording and structure of your constitution will be difficult and time-consuming, but a collective effort by all those interested will result in a quality document to be proud of. A recommendation would be to reference constitutions of already established RHAs throughout the state (which you can request from the school itself or any FARH State Board Director). Also, it is helpful to establish a first draft and then continue revising the statutes, taking into consideration all viewpoints rather than trying to write the entire document from scratch within the committee in one sitting. Remember, compromise will be necessary.

## **Available Resources**

### *State Associations*

One of the best resources available to your developing RHA is the Florida Association of Residence Halls (FARH). FARH hosts a three-day-long leadership conference in February and a day-long mini-conference in October. These conferences allow RHAs from around the state to come together and discuss the issues their organizations are faced with and to attend program sessions on ways to provide recognition for student leaders, conflict resolution, publicity ideas, and other such leadership development skills which members of any RHA, especially one developing, could use. Mini-FARH, however, is limited to RHA executive boards and NCCs so they can all form more cooperative relationships and share their knowledge with one another on a more intimate level.

Affiliating to FARH also provides access to the FARH constitution, policy guide, and a phone list so that newer RHAs have other, more established RHAs to rely on for support and resources. The FARH Associate Director for Recruitment and Retention is a board member whose purposes are to recruitment and development of RHAs. This individual can be your greatest link and resource for your school to the FARH family.

### *Regional Associations*

The South Atlantic Affiliate of College and University Residence Halls (SAACURH) is a regional association unifying the southeastern United States. Much like FARH, it provides the RHAs from this region of the country an opportunity to support one another and discuss common issues facing their organizations. They also host a conference in November that provides program sessions, roundtables, and teambuilding sessions to help RHAs obtain information and resources from a larger pool. The SAACURH Executive Committee (SEC) also has individuals who can provide information and resources from a regional level.

### *National Associations*

The National Association of College and University Residence Halls (NACURH) is the national organization unifying RHAs across the nation under the same purpose. They have a conference in May with programming sessions and opportunities for establishing regional unity and pride. The largest resource available for newer RHAs is the National Information Center (NIC), which is essentially the NACURH headquarters. The NIC houses the Resource File Index (RFI), which has thousands of ideas and reports of programs and activities hosted by RHAs across the nation. For example, if your RHA needs ideas about alcohol awareness programs, they can contact the NIC and order reports and ideas they have on file.

## **Final Thoughts**

After you establish your Residence Hall Associations, you may still have a multitude of questions on how, for instance, to create a successful RHA. I recommend reading the *Developing RHA President's Training Manual*.

Creating a new organization from scratch can be extremely challenging; there are countless things to consider just establishing a sturdy foundation. But by simply taking the time to read this manual, you have proven your patience and dedication to make a strong RHA on your campus a reality. One of the great things about an RHA is that it provides so much experience for student leaders. It is not a coincidence that residence hall leaders are some of the most charismatic and energetic individuals you may ever meet (as is apparent at conferences). RHAs are different on each campus, and the challenge facing new RHA leaders is to combine the knowledge they obtain from other RHAs while still making decisions beneficial to their unique campus.

Please remember that FARH, SAACURH, NACURH, and other RHAs are willing and able to lend you a hand in whatever way necessary. If you have any questions about the resources available to you or have further questions about any of the ideas outlined in this manual, do not hesitate to contact the current FARH Associate Director for Recruitment and Retention.

Try to keep a positive and energetic attitude despite all the odds you may face, and good luck with the establishment of your Residence Hall Association.