

Unanticipated Success: Resident Facility Assistants

By John Michalewicz

In 2003, the University of Hartford created a program to provide better service response to routine problems in residential areas. This program used resident students focused on facility roles, similar to Resident Assistants (RAs) who focus on student-life roles. They were called “Resident Facility Assistants” or “RFAs.” In 2005, the university was awarded APPA’s Innovative and Effective Practices award for this program. Many articles have been written and presentations made about the genesis of the program and its effectiveness within the university and the campus community. Today, RFAs continue to service the campus, responding to our concerns in the resident halls, but now they also conduct monthly life-safety inspections and staff the service response desk throughout the day. The RFA program has grown from 15 to 18 positions and added two graduate interns. By all measures the program is successful—it meets and exceeds all plans and expectations. And students in the program now have a good, semester-long job.

TRAINING FOR NEW AND UNEXPECTED DUTIES

In recent times, another aspect of the program has become more prominent—what participation in the program does for the student. Normally students who are selected for the program have little or no experience related to the work they will be asked to do—changing many types of light bulbs, checking for tripped circuit breakers, unclogging sinks or toilets, lubricating locks, and dealing with bloodborne pathogens. Semiannual training sessions conducted by trade staff address these and many other situations RFAs may encounter during duty hours. They are also trained how to perform administrative tasks while staffing the service response desk: how to properly answer phones, deal with customers, collect needed information about the caller’s concerns, where to enter information into the CMMS (computerized maintenance management system), and how to forward

service requests to trades staff. RFAs are expected to maintain their grades, meet their duty schedule, attend biweekly 7:30 a.m. staff meetings, and fill out the RFA daily watch log. Like any other facilities staff members, their daily pace can be a little hectic at times.

As happens in any new job, new RFAs often question their ability to complete the seemingly endless number and types of problems that may arise on a duty night. New RFAs are paired with a seasoned RFA, but trepidation remains. However, working relationships soon develop, and the RFAs become a tightly knit group. The weeks pass quickly, and they learn by experience, cooperating with each other to complete their tasks.

THE REWARD OF PERSONAL ACHIEVEMENT

The RFAs find a sense of accomplishment as they realize they have overcome some of the things they found challenging at first. Their personal achievement is real and, while not directly measured, the results are quantifiable. Typically, they are expected to be timely, accurate, and able to communicate orally and in writing. They need to work with each other, ask questions, seek guidance when necessary, and stay with a task through completion. During the course of their assignments, they may interact with anyone on the facilities team, from custodians to the acting vice president, as well as students, parents, faculty, and staff members. They are the “first responders” to problems after hours and on weekends. Over-the-phone coaching is always available from various trade staff if needed—making their work a true team effort.

Over the course of a semester, the RFAs grow in knowledge, skill, and experience. With each additional semester they become more seasoned. As a result, they come to understand the significant role they and their group play in supporting the university community. The unintended consequence of working as an RFA is a level of personal development that equips them for greater roles as they move into life after college.

HIGH VALUE ON BOTH SIDES

The RFA program has evolved since it began in 2003. The conditions that were the RFAs' prime focus then have been well under control for many years, creating opportunities for them to contribute in other ways. Today's program has a strong customer-service emphasis. RFAs now interact with customers, dealing with the regular work of the Facilities Department. Their after-hours responsibilities include performing life-safety inspections and reviewing closed work orders to ensure that their work was completed properly.

The value of the RFA program for the institution is high. Its value for the participant is also high. Virtually all graduating RFAs have moved directly into a job. Their experiences have prepared them in ways they did not realize. There are several instances when an RFA has interviewed for one position, and following the interview process, has been hired at a higher-level position.

The university is always happy to receive feedback from students. These notes highlight the program's effect on student development:

"The career skills I picked up included basic office experience and some facilities management. The two years of office work on my resume helped me get many temp jobs over the summer, and my special experience with facilities helped me land a job in the facilities department at Princeton University. Over 200 hopefuls applied for the job, many with years of administrative experience, but I was the only one with a facilities background, and that was the key to winning the position. I am thriving at my new job, and the director of facilities, who recently transferred from being the director of a different department, will often look to me to ask me what I know from my experience. I would not be where I am without the RFA program!" —Dana, RFA 2011-13

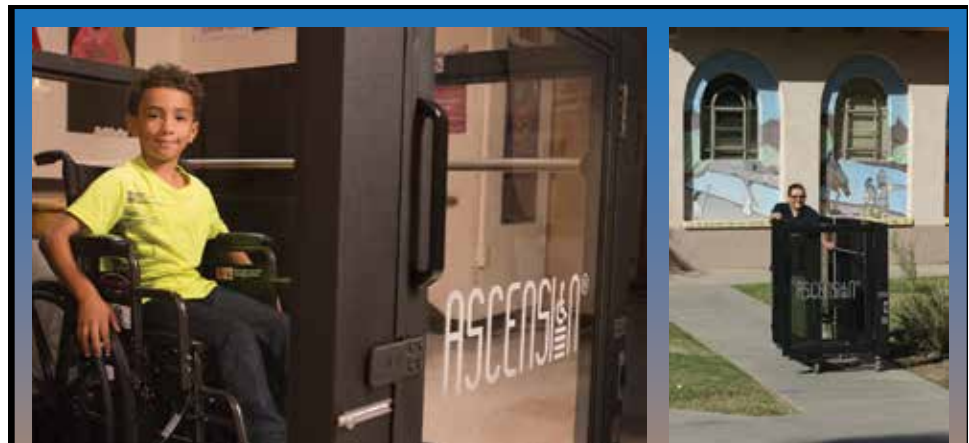
"Obviously any RFAs who go through the program benefit from the information they learn while in the program. But the bigger picture is that having RFAs helps educate the student body. If a plumber or electrician shows up to your door, students expect them to just fix the problem. If a student shows up to

fix the problem, I think the other students are more likely to pay attention to how an RFA fixes things, because clearly it's probably something they are capable of doing in the future (plunging a toilet, changing a bulb, and other simple tasks). For the non-simple tasks that RFAs deal with, that gives the program credit and respect."

—Dave, RFA 2003-06

Since the program's beginning in 2003, 132 students (64 men and 68 women) served as RFAs, with academic majors ranging from engineering, architecture, and business to musical theater, vocal performance, and physical therapy. All 132 completed their major and graduated. Most will recount a story similar to those of Dana and Dave. This program gives a new meaning to the notion of "providing for the greater good of all." ☺

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